

6-12-2008

# Learning, Living, and Leaving the Closet: Making Gay Identity Relational

Tony E. Adams  
*University of South Florida*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

---

## Scholar Commons Citation

Adams, Tony E., "Learning, Living, and Leaving the Closet: Making Gay Identity Relational" (2008). *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*.  
<https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/109>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [scholarcommons@usf.edu](mailto:scholarcommons@usf.edu).

Learning, Living, and Leaving the Closet:  
Making Gay Identity Relational

by

Tony E. Adams

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Communication  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Arthur P. Bochner, Ph.D.  
Kenneth N. Cissna, Ph.D.  
Marcy Chvasta, Ph.D.  
Carolyn Ellis, Ph.D.  
Charles Guignon, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:  
June 12, 2008

Keywords: Sexuality, Gay Men, Coming Out, Autoethnography, Narrative Inquiry,  
Interpersonal Communication, Family Communication

© Copyright 2008 Tony E. Adams

## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Preface	iv
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: The Importance of the Closet	11
Chapter Three: Method	27
Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry	27
Epiphanies	34
Procedures	35
Life Story Interviews	35
Gay Life Writings	42
Autoethnographic Data Sets	47
Analyzing the Data	50
Representing the Data	52
Chapter Four: Learning the Closet	57
Chapter Five: Living the Closet	104
Chapter Six: Leaving the Closet	139
Chapter Seven: Making Identity Relational	183
Revisiting Us, Four Years Later	202
Chapter Eight: Gay Dilemmas, Reflections, and Criticisms	207
The “Double-Bind of Gay Identity”	211
Changing Conditions of the Closet	223
Making Coming Out Relational	232
Epilogue	239
References	245
About the Author	End Page

Learning, Living, and Leaving the Closet:  
Making Gay Identity Relational

Tony E. Adams

ABSTRACT

Gay identity is inextricably tied to the metaphor of the closet. This tie is best exemplified by the act of “coming out of the closet,” an act when a person discloses a gay identity to another, an act of self-identification and confession that others can motivate but never force, an act typically thought of as necessary, dangerous, and consequential, and an act often viewed as a discrete, linear process. Gay identity is also frequently framed as a self-contained trait thus making coming out a one-sided, personal affair.

In this project, I use autoethnography and narrative inquiry, life story interviews of four gay men, life writings by gay men, mass mediated accounts of the closet, and my personal experience to describe three epiphanies—interactional moments that significantly change the trajectory of a person’s life—of gay identity: (1) “Learning the Closet,” a moment when a person first becomes familiar with the metaphorical space; (2) “Living the Closet,” a moment when a person *privately* acknowledges a gay identity but *publicly* discounts this identity by saying and acting as if it does not exist; and (3) “Leaving the Closet,” a moment when a person discloses gay identity to others. I conclude by describing the “double-bind of gay identity”—the dilemma that forms when a person cannot escape the closet—and argue that once a person identifies as gay, the

closet becomes a formative influence on her/his life; a gay person can never live outside of the metaphorical space again, can never live as an out gay person everywhere.

I also use a relational perspective to understand how gay identity and the disclosure of this identity implicate others in a gay person's social network. A relational perspective removes gay identity it from the individualistic realm and situates it among beings-in-interaction. In so doing, the experience of the closet becomes removed from the exclusive burden of the self-contained gay person to one in which coming out becomes a shared responsibility by all individuals involved in a relationship.

## Preface

To my supporters, advocates, and friends from Southern Illinois University:  
Ahmet Atay, Nilanjana Bardhan, Jay Brower, Amy Darnell, Brad Gangnon, Jonny Gray,  
Chris McRae, Ron Pelias, Sandy Pensoneau-Conway, Amy Pinney, Adrienne  
Viramontes, John Warren.

To my supporters, advocates, and friends from the University of South Florida  
and Tampa: Wendy Adams, Marielana Bartesaghi, Korrie Bauman, Elizabeth Bell,  
Laura Bergeron, Robin Boylorn, David Brunnell, Sara Dykins Callahan, Liz Edgecomb,  
Christine Grogan, Antoine Hardy, Andrew Herrmann, Stacy Holman Jones, Jane  
Jorgenson, Ashley Kincaid, Yvonne Kline, Linda Levitt, Wren Colker Levitt, Cara  
Mackie, Sebastian Melo, Derick Miller, Jeanine Minge, Seven Mitchell, Mark Neumann,  
Mike Nicholas, David Payne, Steve Phalen, Ally Rhodes, Emily Ryalls, Steve Schoen,  
Rachel Silverman, Fred Steier, Jillian Tullis Owen, Tim Willis.

And to my supporters, advocates, and friends in other places: Christopher  
Birdsong, Craig Rich.

To those that keep me organized: Keysha Williams, Sheri Plummer, Anne  
Copeland.

To those that keep me gay-ly sane: Ric Ashcraft, Lucas Mehl, George Garrett,  
and Lane Thompson.

To Nikki Neuman for teaching me how to write.

To Lenore Langsdorf for having faith in me.

To Rachel Dubrofsky for amazing feedback on most all of my work . . . and for keeping me out past my bedtime.

To Michael Levan for being a wise mentor and an honest friend.

To Keith Berry, who has continued to walk with me through my master's program, my doctoral program, and whom I hope will continue to walk with me throughout life.

To Michael Rome, for being there for me and my mother. You are a blessing.

To Ken Cissna for professional guidance and the willingness to support my work.

To Charles Guignon for encouraging me to tell my story.

To Carolyn Ellis for the blunt-but-compassionate criticism that makes my work grow, for teaching me about ethics, about relating, and for the always-present enthusiasm when talking about my research, enthusiasm that makes me feel smart and worthwhile.

To Marcy Chvasta who I first met as an undergraduate at Southern Illinois University (SIU) in 1999, who helped me get into the master's program at SIU in 2001, who helped me get into this program in 2004, and who provides me with unconditional love and support. I hope I'll always be your kiddo.

To Art Bochner, my guide who never lets me fall, who pushes me to take risks, who cares just as much about my well-being as the work I produce, who calms me when I become an emotional mess, and who teaches me about being a better person. I hope I make you proud.

To Brett Aldridge who I miss more and more each day and who makes much of this dissertation possible.

And to my mother who keeps me grounded. I hope that I make you proud, too.

## Chapter One: Introduction

### *A love story assembled from primary sources*

A Hallmark card: two white dogs occupy the front, facing each other, trying to interlock jaws. A comic bubble emerges from one of the mouths. “I lick you. I mean, I LIKE you,” it reads followed by an inside inscription of “Okay, both” and a personal message: “Baby, have a happy end of the semester. I love you!! Phish kissee.♥ Brett”

\*\*\*\*

“Phish kissee”: a term of endearment that Brett and I made after adopting a Beta fish named Alexander, Alexander Prettifish. Brett and I would often exchange fish kisses, an act modeled after what the two of us thought phish kissees would look and feel like. “Kiss-kiss-kiss-kiss-kiss” using cupped, touching mouths would be an adequate linguistic representation.

\*\*\*\*

A yellow Post-it note posted on my office desk: “Phish Kissee to a boy who has a thesis.” I defended my Master’s thesis today. It included a dedication to Brett:

Thank you for your remarkable presence this past year. I hope that, at least in some form or another, you will always remain in my life. And thank you for understanding when it came to my school-related stuff. I may have been busy, but I thought of you often. (Adams, 2003, p. ii)



A dedication to me, from Brett, in his Master's thesis, a project he completed a year after mine, a month after moving away from each other, twenty months before his death.

To Tony, my closest friend and unfailing support: who has taught me that love may adapt and evolve in disconcerting ways . . . but may also, from time to time, escape intact, if not quite unscathed. (Aldridge, 2004, p. iii)

\*\*\*\*

Another note: "Good morning and good morning. Fish kissee and fish kissee."

A card for my 24<sup>th</sup> birthday. The front has an image of an ornately dressed Asian woman surrounded by an array of flowers, the inside filled with a personal message:

Happy Birthday. I love you and hope you have a good day and year, you dirty old man!! I hope you'll let me take you out for a birthday dinner tonight or later this week.

Have a happy, happy day.

Happy Birthday to you!

Happy Birthday to you!

etc. etc.

♥ Brett

A note posted, again, on my desk: "Hello Tony. I am writing a paper and became afraid that my brain might explode so I thought I'd write you a little note. Here it is. Brett."

Another yellow Post-it: "Thank you darling!!"

And another: "Fish kissee."

And another: “Hello from Brett A. Fish kisse. Fish kisse. Fish kisse.”

And another: “Darling, I went home. Call me there when you get here.”

\*\*\*\*

A note with relational code: “Who is a pumpkin?” followed by “Who is?” followed by “Who?” followed by “♥.” While I regretfully forget the origin of “pumpkin,” I remember that it was an intimate term that I’ll never use on or around anyone ever again.

“Tony, I am in the Kleinau [theatre], or as the French call it, Le Kleinau,” another note reads. “Come find me and we will have talking. ♥ B”

I can tell a lot about a person by the language she or he uses. Brett: Creative, energetic, and bursting with love, note after note after note after note.

\*\*\*\*

*A love story assembled from memory.*

Brett’s desk is behind mine. Backs facing each other, the two of us exchange comments about his first time teaching and his first time in graduate school and comments about my second year teaching and my second year in the same graduate program. I find Brett fun and attractive but never think I’d like him because I’m insecure (and didn’t think he’d like me) and fear rejection (so I never make the first move). Furthermore, I know that a friend of mine likes him and I don’t want to interfere. I’m also interested in another guy who’s not interested in me, a man I often talk about with Brett, my back-faced colleague. Positioned in this way, I do not see the face of a person I upset with my talk: Brett liked me but never said so; he was insecure and feared rejection; he knew I liked someone else and didn’t want to interfere.

\*\*\*\*

I arrange a dinner with the guy I like and his best friend, not a date just a friendly meeting. I tell Brett that he's welcome to come. He says he'd like to and that he'd drive. In his purple Pontiac Sunfire, I notice unwrapped needles strewn about the floor. "I'm diabetic," Brett says. "Cool" I say, not knowing what diabetes is or why diabetes has any relation to the needles on the floor.

\*\*\*\*

"Brett slipped into a diabetic coma one night . . . He had talked to some friends earlier that day and felt fine." (Joshua, 2006)<sup>1</sup>

\*\*\*\*

At the restaurant I sit next to the guy I like who doesn't like me. Brett and the guy's best friend sit on the opposite side of the table. Everyone eats chips and salsa and rice and beans and Brett pulls out a needle, inserts it into a bottle of clear liquid, then into his upper arm. "I'm diabetic," he says to the others as he wipes a drop of blood from the quickly-pierced skin.

The dinner ends and nothing progresses with the guy I like. He refuses to date even though I continuously probe him about dating. Brett and his friend pretend they do not hear me get rejected. Feeling foolish and insecure, I try to stay friends, believing that friendship is "better than nothing" though I do hope he'll change his mind and realize that the two of us would be good together. I say "bye" to the guy and his friend, then get into the purple car and hope that Brett had a decent time, hope that he doesn't find me silly, hope that he won't quit talking with me.

---

<sup>1</sup> I received Joshua's permission to use his words in this project.

\*\*\*\*

The next day at the office Brett greets me with a nervous “Hi.”

“Hope you had fun last night,” I say.

He replies with a “Yes, I did” followed by a “Would you go on a date with me?”

An ambivalent “sure” comes from my mouth, shocked he would ask after the previous night’s affair, shocked that he, a fun and attractive person would find me, Mr. Insecurity, attractive.

“I’ve wanted to ask you for the past month,” Brett continues, “but you always talked about the other guy and I didn’t want to interfere. Being insecure,” he says, “I didn’t want to feel rejected.”

\*\*\*\*

A date at Garfield’s, a restaurant. While looking at the menu, the two of us realize that we’re both vegetarian and should’ve gone to a veggie-friendly place. We also realize that the two of us aren’t there for the food. The meeting is about being and talking together, seeing if we are compatible, seeing if Brett is likable, seeing if he finds me likable, seeing if I can quit thinking about the other guy I like. When the food arrives, Brett takes out a needle, fills it with insulin, and inserts it into his upper thigh. This time the shot does not draw blood and I try to fathom how inserting a needle into your body feels. The date goes well and ends with a brief kiss. At school the next day I ask if he’d like another date and he responds with “yes.” So we go on another, and continue being together, often, for the next year and a half.

\*\*\*\*

“I had sex with another man,” Brett says upon entering our apartment. I look at him, quickly, and then laugh. I think, hope, he’s kidding. “I promised that I’d always be honest with you,” he continues. “It happened last week when you weren’t home.”

\*\*\*\*

I know Brett’s home tonight in his room listening to Judy Garland, k. d. lang, or *The Mikado* soundtrack. At the gay bar across the street I’m on the prowl for an attractive man to make him jealous, to flaunt my guy-catching abilities. After a few drinks a victim is spotted and invited to stay the night. I lie to the victim by saying I live with a friend who I’ve never been attracted to and with whom I’ve never been intimate. The victim agrees to stay. On entering the apartment, the two of us move towards my room, a move interrupted by Brett opening his bedroom door to apologize for hurting me and to wish me a good night. But he sees my guest and slams the door without saying anything. I’ve won. He says nothing for a few weeks. I feel sad, ashamed, and immature. Some victory.

\*\*\*\*

“Brett slipped into a diabetic coma one night . . . He had talked to some friends earlier that day and felt fine.” (Joshua, 2006)

\*\*\*\*

Brett’s the guy I lived with when I came out to my father. Brett and I moved in together a month before my dad called to ask about my sexuality.

“I heard a rumor about you,” my dad says. I become nervous. “I heard that you’re living with a guy. In fact, not just living with, but *fucking* this guy. Is this true?”

“Weeelllll,” I stutter, “no, it’s not true. Who would say something like that?”

“That doesn’t matter. I’m just glad it ain’t,” he says.

“Yeah, me too father. That’s silly. I’ll talk to you soon.” The conversation ends.

Prior to this conversation I never thought I would tell my dad that I fit—and did not fit—particular labels, that is, gay and straight respectively. I planned to live my life not informing my father of significant others such as Brett or my same-sex desire. I feared being disowned and hated and did not feel I could deal with my father’s response.

“Call him back,” Brett pleads. “This is your chance.”

Here was Brett, a person who came into my life, loving me, teaching me the value of openness, giving me the strength to do what I never imagined doing before. I called dad back.

“Hello,” he answers in an upbeat, much happier tone.

“Yeah, dad, it’s me. I just wanted to tell you that it’s true—I am living with a guy, my boyfriend in fact. Sorry to burst your bubble.”

I hear nothing, so I decide to lie to make the situation better by telling my father that his recently deceased mother, my grandmother, knew about my same-sex desire. “And grandma knew about my sexuality and my boyfriend, but she thought it would be best if I didn’t tell you. She was always fine with it, but realized, as did I, that you would not accept it. Sorry if I’m a disappointment.”

Silence, but soon a stuttered response: “Shheee knneww?”

“Yeah, she did father.”

“Well,” he utters more fluently, “I guess I’ll call you soon.”

“Bye, dad. Take care.”

My dad doesn’t speak to me for six months.

\*\*\*\*

After a year of living together, Brett decides to try to act on Broadway and I decide to pursue my doctorate. We separate geographically but remain close emotionally.

\*\*\*\*

“Ttt-ony?” I hear when I answer the phone.

“Yes?”

“It’s Adrienne. I can’t believe I’m the one to tell you . . . I’m so sorry, but . . .”

“What’s the matter?” I ask.

“Brett’s dead,” she says. “His sister just called me. You should call her.”

Adrienne and I hang up and I call Brett’s sister.

“Hi, Sarah?” I ask, unsure of her name. “This is Tony Adams. I lived with Brett in Carbondale,”

“I’ve heard about you” she says through tears. “Brett died last night of diabetes. I’ve been calling people listed in his cell phone. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to have to tell you this.”

\*\*\*\*

“[Brett] had talked to some friends earlier that day and felt fine.” (Joshua, 2006)

\*\*\*\*

Brett’s family—individuals I never met—told Adrienne and me that Brett died of juvenile diabetes, a condition he had since his early teens. Later, two of Brett’s friends tell me that on the weekend prior to his death, Brett told his dad that he fit—and did not fit—particular social labels, that is, gay and straight respectively. Brett not only had diabetes, but had also told me about a history of attempted suicide.

Brett was 29. Before our relationship, he lived with a man for four years. Since he lived near his parents, I *assumed* he had come out to his family, assumed he told them he was gay. But prior conversations with Brett re-play in my head:

“Are you ‘out’ to your family?” I ask.

“They know,” he responds.

*and*

“How do your parents feel about your sexuality?” I ask.

“We don’t talk about it,” he responds.

*and*

“I’d like to meet your family,” I say.

“Maybe one day,” he suggests.

Brett never told me he had *said* anything to his family about his sexuality. He only said “they know,” nothing more. What did “they know” mean? I wonder.

\*\*\*\*

I struggle with Brett’s absence in my life. When he first died, I would call his cell phone and hear “Hi. This is Brett. Leave your name and number. I’ll get back to you soon. Bye.” Now when I call I hear “The number you have reached . . .” His service has ended. Soon, someone else will have his number.

What caused Brett’s death? The simple explanation is Brett died of diabetes. I don’t want to believe his death had something to do with coming out to his father.

\*\*\*\*

Brett helped me overcome the most important disclosure of my life: telling my father that I am attracted to men, that I identify as gay. I envied Brett’s apparent openness



and ability to tackle the world without much regret, his courage and confidence about saying, knowing, *who* he loved. A pillar of strength, he made me feel strong too. To think that Brett may have died after telling his father that he found men attractive, that he identified as gay, makes me ill.

\*\*\*\*

I will never know if Brett killed himself. His obituary says his was a diabetes-related death. I could contact his family and ask if diabetes really was the cause, but this could make for unnecessary, painful controversy. Even if they confirmed the diabetes story, I know an alternative story exists, the suicide story. Besides, why would they tell me? Besides, Brett is dead. I miss him. Besides, nothing will bring him back.

\*\*\*\*

A year after Brett's death I have a dream. In it, I see Minneapolis, San Francisco, and Carbondale, Illinois, familiar places all mixed together. I'm standing somewhere in a medium-sized, hilly downtown, the ground covered with snow. A man walks past me. "Brett," I say and he looks. I run to him, he casually walks toward me. "I'm okay," he says, and then tells me that he's really not dead but that he had to change his name. I wake but force myself back to sleep. I dream again, the setting is the same but without snow, without Brett. "Have you seen Brett," I ask a stranger on the street, but she doesn't answer. "Brett!" I yell, and get no response. I wake.

## Chapter Two: The Importance of the Closet

Brett's death motivates me to write about the closet, the literal and metaphorical "origin of gay identity" (Urbach, 1996, p. 69; see also Betsky, 1997), and about coming out of the closet, the "most canonical expression of being gay" (Perez, 2005, p. 177; see also Kong, Mahoney & Plummer, 2002). Gay identity is defined by and synonymous with the closet, and once a person self-identifies as gay, the closet becomes, according to Sedgwick (1990), a "fundamental feature of social life" (p. 68); the gay person can never live outside of the closet again.

Brett's death motivates me to demonstrate that the closet is not a "natural" or "inevitable" fact of life (Hacking, 1999, p. 12), to suggest that life in the closet "need not be as it is," is not "determined by the nature of things," and should be "radically transformed" (Hacking, 1999, p. 6). I write to show how the closet suffocates, to make new descriptions and "new possibilities for action" of the closet possible (Hacking, 1990, p. 81), to "reconstruct" closet-realities in "life-enhancing ways" (Conquergood, 1986, p. 40). The closet is a powerful social construction in need of reform.

Brett's death motivates me to write about aspects of the closet not addressed by coming out research such as how a person enters a closet—to come out one must first go in—the relationality of closet life, and the connection between timing and disclosure in a gay person's life. Contrary to the opinion of some writers who minimize these experiences (Jolly, 2001, Seidman, 2002; Seidman, Meeks & Traschen, 1999; Signorile,

2007), I want to investigate whether the closet still manifests itself in a variety of painful ways. In my experience, there are detrimental consequences for coming out.

Brett's death motivates me to make implicit norms of sexuality explicit, to call attention to harmful interpersonal practices. It is when norms and practices are made known that they can then be talked about, negotiated, and changed (Berlant, 1997; Bornstein, 1994; Garfinkel, 1967).

Brett's death motivates me to describe the workings of the closet, a contribution that I hope will reduce the all too frequent suicides among the gay population (Russell & Bohan, 2006; Bornstein, 2006; Goltz, 2007).

Brett's death motivates me to write for individuals who believe they are "truly good for nothing" (Lorde, 1984, p. 168), for people like Jonathan Reynolds, a 15-year-old boy regularly teased about possibly being gay who positioned himself on railroad tracks in the path of an oncoming train; a boy who, lying face-up against one rail with his feet against the other, held his cell phone above his head and text-messaged his family and friends to tell them that they are not to blame for his death. "Tell everyone that this is for anybody who eva [*sic*] said anything bad about me," he wrote to his father and to Sam, his 14-year-old sister.

I do have feelings too. Blame the people who were horrible and unjust [*sic*] 2 me. This is because of them, I am human just like them . . . None of you blame urself [*sic*] mum, dad, Sam and the rest of my family. This is not because of you. (cited in de Bruxelles, 2007).

Brett's death motivates me to write for relationships fractured from the disclosure of same-sex desire and/or gay identity, relationships that change when a person moves

from one category to another, when a paradigm shifts that alters “every aspect of [a] life narrative” (Couser, 1997, p. 64; see also Garrick, 1997; Kuhn, 1996), a shift that “retroactively” revises the past (Hacking, 1995, p. 249), and for individuals relationally ostracized from others because of this change, persons who are banned by peers, kicked out of homes, disregarded.

Brett’s death motivates me to write for people like James, a friend who quit going home because of his mother’s reaction to his gay identity.

“I haven’t been to my parents’ house since 1990,” he says. “I came out to my mom in 1988 and she totally freaked out.”

“Did she say you couldn’t come to their house?” I ask.

“No, but the first few times I visited after coming out she made me use paper cups and paper plates and plastic silverware. She kept my food in a separate space in the kitchen and I wasn’t allowed to eat off of any of the regular dishes.”

“Because you said you were gay?”

“Yeah. She equated being gay with having AIDS and AIDS, she thought, was contagious. But the AIDS epidemic was strong at the time so I somewhat understood her reaction.”

“Then you stopped visiting?”

“No, I stopped when she started following me into the bathroom to spray Lysol disinfectant on everything I touched. I felt contaminating.”

Brett’s death motivates me to write for the same-sex couple who told me that when they stopped at the border of Canada and the United States, they were accused of kidnapping their son, accused of trying to smuggle him across the border because they

were gay, accused of being pedophiles, and for the gay man who told his sister and her husband that he and his partner would gladly watch their kids if they wanted to travel somewhere for their wedding anniversary. The husband responded by first accusing the gay men of being pedophiles, saying, “If you think I'd let you two perverts look after my kids, you're sicker than I thought” (Burnie, 2008). Gays with children: a potentially-disgusting mix.

Brett's death motivates me to write for individuals who live in or move to the United States but are unable to help make a partner a citizen or bring a partner of the same-sex.

Brett's death motivates me to write for persons who come out after weeks or months or years of (heterosexual) marriage, and who must then negotiate not only their sexuality but also the spouse's feelings of betrayal (Grever, 2001; Pearson, 1986). “The grief experience of straight spouses who learn of their husbands' or wives' homosexuality cannot be minimized,” Duffey (2006) writes.

Few marry without the hope of enjoying long-lasting, supportive, passionate love. Learning that a spouse is gay places the straight spouse in a difficult position. A person must consider which loss is more palatable: staying married to a spouse who may love you deeply but who ultimately feels attraction and romantic love toward others or undergoing the grief experience involved in divorcing and releasing all that comes with it. (p. 90)

Brett's death motivates me to write for children who knew their parents as heterosexual but then negotiated a parent's seemingly-new gay identity. “I just found out my dad was gay,” a former student says in an email to me.

I was wondering if you have some time to talk. He was “outed” having an affair with a man. He’s still married to my mother but they have separated. A lot of people in my family do not know. I know he feels ashamed, scared, and worried. I want to help him know that it’s okay. I hate that he feels he must hide his feelings. I understand his apprehension and will respect his privacy, but I am afraid the secrecy and shame will hurt him more. I know it hurts me.

Brett’s death motivates me to write for a person unable to be at the bedside of a loved one because her/his relationship with the partner is unsanctioned by hospital authorities and most state and federal laws.

Brett’s death motivates me to write for people like Mark, a man individual dying from AIDS-related conditions. Jacquard (2007) writes of being Mark’s home health care worker. Mark’s family abandoned him during the time of his illness. When they did see him on their once-a-year visits, Jacquard says she found herself “saying ‘gay’ repeatedly in an effort to desensitize them” (p. 22). At his side near death, she called his mother and sister one last time.

“What should I say?” his mother asked several times.

“He’s your son,” Jacquard said. “Tell him that you love him, and anything else you need to say will come to you.”

To the best of her ability, Jacquard wanted Mark to hear that the people he only saw once a year did care. But “by that time, I was all that Mark saw,” she writes (p. 22).

Imagine those last few words, a forced telephone conversation, a last, embodied interaction tarnished by a person being of a particular kind and others being scared of this kind.

Brett's death motivates me to write about the sources of invalidation of gay identity such as the conversation I overheard at a church gathering, one in which a distressed gay man talked about how his mother did not want him and his partner at the family reunion. The couple attended the reunion the past five years but the mother called to say that the family did not want the two of them around. The family did not want to validate the same-sex relationship (see Lim-Hing, 1990/91).

Brett's death motivates me to write for people like Ricky, a gay high school student who, on arriving at a football game, hears shouts of "'What the fuck is that fag doing here?' 'That fag has no right to be here'" (Pascoe, 2007, p. 68). The shouters proceed to throw bottles, rocks, and ketchup at him.

Brett's death motivates me to write to combat misogyny among gay male communities, the demeaning of women in gay men's language (Jones, 2007), and gay men's obliviousness to all forms of oppression, not just oppression based on sexuality (Tillmann-Healy, 2005).

Brett's death motivates me to write to combat homophobia—the fear and hatred of homosexuals—like that observed by John Ray, a Professor at Montana Tech (Butte). Ray sent a campus-wide email criticizing the negative responses he observed to a campus-wide showing of the same-sex love film *Brokeback Mountain*. He received the following email response:

SHUT THE [FUCK] UP....PLEASE STOP SENDING THESE STUPID  
EMAILS. GET A SHRINK IF YOU NEED SOMEONE TO COMMUNICATE  
WITH. WE DON'T CARE!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I SWEAR TO GOD...I WILL FIND

WHERE YOU LIVE AND BEAT YOU IF YOU KEEP SENDING THESE  
DUMB EMAILS OUT TO EVERYONE. (cited in Emeigh, 2006)

Concerned for his safety, Ray informed the police of this potential threat, but may have learned that speaking against the fear and hatred projected towards a kind of people can, in itself, become a taboo practice.

Brett's death motivates me to write to combat hate, the hatred of gay people but also the hatred of straights. Consider discourse from the "I hate straights" campaign targeted to gays:

Don't be fooled, straight people own the world and the only reason you have been spared is you're smart, lucky, or a fighter. Straight people have a privilege that allows them to do whatever they please and fuck without fear. But not only do they live a life free of fear; they flaunt their freedom in my face. (Queers, p. 1; Berlant, 1997)

Or consider a daughter and father's visit to a gay male bar. A waiter asks the daughter to leave since the bar adheres to a "men-only policy." "[I]f a homosexual was refused service," she complains to a reporter, "[I] would be the first to stand up for his rights" (CBC News, 2007). Or consider another exclusionary example: The Peel Hotel in Melbourne Australia won the right to exclude heterosexuals and lesbians. This exclusion rests upon keeping out both a kind of sexuality (male and female heterosexuals) and a kind of sex (females, as a lesbian identity often suggests). The owner, Tom McFeely, wants to provide "gay men with an environment where they could freely express their sexuality" because there was a problem with heterosexuals and lesbians coming to the venue and making gay men "feel like zoo exhibits." It is assumed that a safe environment



will develop at the exclusion of others. “It’s a very sad day when two friends, regardless of their sexuality, can’t go into a venue and dance together” (McFeely, cited in Miletic, 2007).

Brett’s death motivates me to write, like E. Lynn Harris (2003), hoping that by “sharing my experience [I] will give hope to others who are learning to deal with their ‘difference.’ I want them to know that they don’t have to live their lives in a permanent ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ existence” (p. 6).

Brett’s death motivates me to write to make amends, to work to be a more compassionate person, to engage in a constructive conversation with a status quo that privileges and normalizes heterosexuality. “To forgive,” Pelias (2004) writes, “is to recognize the messiness of being human and to position ourselves to be forgiven of our own human foibles. All of our mistakes have company. The more we learn to accept, the less there is to forgive” (p. 163). I write to recognize and accept my messiness, to tell and share stories to atone for my past (Couser, 1997), to help relationships I’ve abandoned to heal, to apologize to people I’ve taken for granted and to those I wished harm. I write to love, to better acknowledge my responsibility to and for others (Cornell, 2007), to realize my “mutuality” (Miike, 2007, p. 275). I write to make known and help appease human suffering, to live with an “eye for social justice” (Pelias, 2007a, p. 49). I write not just about the person I am and have been but also about the person I want to be.

Brett’s death motivates me to write for myself. I’m a gay man. I’ve lived in and out of the closet. I perpetually negotiate coming out.

\*\*\*\*

I started this dissertation more than a decade ago when I began hating myself for hating gays, for calling others faggots and sissies and fairies, for laughing at the boy in high school who hung himself for thinking he was gay, for not being phased by the religion teacher's son who suffocated himself inside the family car, because as some rumors had it, he was gay too. I experienced other sources of guilt and shame:

I remember recording an episode of *Beverly Hills 90210* with Brian Austin Green in tight white boxer briefs, replaying the scene over and over again until the tape quit working.

I remember waking at 4:30 weekday mornings to watch a man on an exercise program who sometimes wore spandex, highlighting his bulge. I would mute the sound on the television so my mother wouldn't hear and felt depressed on weekends when the show wasn't on.

I remember going to Walgreen's with my grandmother and sneaking off to the magazine rack. There, I hid an issue of *Men's Health*, a magazine with a plethora of shirtless men, inside *Sports Illustrated for Kids*. When my grandmother found me in the magazine aisle, she said she'd buy the *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, but I adamantly refused, knowing that she'd find my *Men's Health* tucked away between the pages.

I remember finding my mom's *Playgirl* that she kept hidden under her bed, enjoying that I no longer had to look at underwear models in the JCPenney's catalog, making sure that each time I looked at the magazine I would do so slowly, turning each page with care. I would replace the magazine just as my mother had it: cover-side up, title toward headboard.

\*\*\*\*

I started this dissertation in 2001 when I embraced the possibility that I was attracted to men and began to identify as gay. This shift altered every aspect of my life narrative. New narratives became possible, gay narratives that didn't occur to me and weren't available to me prior to being named, identified, and categorized as gay (Hacking, 1990; Rosenhan, 1984). When I embraced the label "gay," my life trajectory changed in significant psychological, relational, and material ways. I often woke to onslaughts of despair. I quit talking to many members of my family. I isolated myself from close friends. I engaged in reckless acts that put my health at risk. I acted carelessly and felt alienated.

During this time, I began graduate school at Southern Illinois University. I undertook research that culminated in "Two's Company: Living the Gay Life 'Straightly'" (Adams, 2002) and "Apparently I'm a 'Homo-Phoney': Being Accused of Being 'Straight'" (Adams, 2003), projects that outlined my struggles to identify and accept myself as gay. Subsequently, I wrote "I Hate Being Gay" (Adams, 2004) a text that outlined characteristics of internalized homophobia, a self-inflicted fear and hatred made possible by recognizing and embracing a same-sex sexual identity.

After completing my M.A., I started the doctoral program at the University of South Florida. There, I wrote "Speaking for Others" (Adams, 2005), "Seeking Father" (Adams, 2006a), "About Self-Hatred" (Adams, 2006b), and "Mothers, Faggots, and Uncontestable Experience" (Adams, in press), projects that centered on connections between gay identity and social interaction.

Thus, I arrive at this dissertation, a project inspired by Brett's death and informed by my experiences with same-sex desire and gay identity.

\*\*\*\*

I ground this project about gay identity and the metaphorical closet on seven premises gleaned from the literature and research on gay life.

First, *gay identity is a contentious identity*. Individuals who identify as gay often are targets of physical violence—referred to as “hate crimes”—solely for claiming this identity or being perceived as gay (de Bruxelles, 2007; Kis & Finley, 2007; Pascoe, 2007). Same-sex partnerships are not recognized as a legitimate kind of coupling in a variety of contexts (governments, hospitals, families, etc.), and many gay persons, shunned from their homes for identifying as gay, must work to create chosen families for support (Berzon, 2002; Cory, 1951). In the United States, institutions like the military (Brouwer, 2004; Butler, 1997a; Madhani, 2007) and the educational system (Graves, 2007; Gust, 2007; Gust & Warren, 2008; Jenkins, 1994; Jennings, 1994; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Kirk, 2008; McIntosh, 2007; Meyer, 2005; Shallenberger, 1991; Taylor, 1994) require a gay person to vigilantly regulate and/or remain silent about her/his same-sex desire. Same-sex relationships are often absent from or disregarded in mundane conversation (Feigenbaum, 2007; Glave, 2005; Van Gelder, 1998), and a variety of religions position gays and the “gay lifestyle” as immoral and disgusting (Bennett, 2003; Brouwer and Hess, 2007; Chávez, 2004; Cobb, 2005; Garrick, 2001; Minkowitz, 1995; Moon, 2002; Rodriguez, 2000). Gay identity can indeed be contentious.

Second, *gay identity is inextricably tied to the metaphor of the closet* (Betsky, 1997; Urbach, 1996, p. 69). This tie is best exemplified by the phrase “coming out of the closet,” the act where a person discloses a gay identity to another (Butler, 1997a; Gagné, Tewksbury, and McGaughey, 1997; Gross, 1991; Kong et. al., 2002; Perez, 2005).

Third, *coming out is necessary when gay identity and same-sex desire are conceived of as invisible phenomena accessible only by way of confession* (Burgess, 2005; Foucault, 1978; Nicholas, 2004). While the act of gender inversion—when a person’s gendered appearance differs from her/his sex assignment (based on biological, physical criteria)—is assumed to be indicative of homosexuality (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Beam, 2005; Bell, 2006; Bockting, 1999; Clatterbaugh, 1997; Clayborne, 1974; Cory, 1951; Davidson, 1985; Escoffier, 2003; Frank, 1993; Gagné et. al., 1997; Halberstam, 2005; Halley, 1989; Hom, 1995; Hopkins, 1998; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; La Pastina, 2006; Meyer, 1995; Meyerowitz, 2002; Padva, 2004; Pascoe, 2007; Perry & Ballard-Reich, 2004; Phellas, 2005; Pronger, 1998; Seidman, 2002; Shakespeare, 1999; Stanley, 1974; Stein, 2004; Walker, 1993), coming out only happens when a person says “I am gay” (Butler, 1991; Chirrey, 2003; Fuss, 1991; Kailey, 2005; Minson, 1981; Shugart, 2005). In other words, a man who dresses as woman is not considered to have “come out” (see Bloom, 2002).

Fourth, *the closet draws its meaning only in relation to heteronormative contexts*. These contexts position individuals as straight until proven gay (Butler, 1991; Garrick, 2001; Shallenberger, 1991; Solis, 2007), and value heterosexuality more than homosexuality (Butler, 1993, 1999; Foster, 2008; Yep, 2003). In homo-normative contexts like gay pride parades or gay bars, however, coming out is irrelevant; gayness is often assumed.

Fifth, *coming out can be a dangerous act*. Contrary to the opinion of some writers (Jolly, 2001, Seidman, 2002; Seidman et. al., 1999; Signorile, 2007), disclosing a gay identity can motivate humiliation, disgrace, violence, and social rejection (Adams, in

press; Clatterbaugh, 1997; Cory, 1951; Frank, 1993; Glave, 2005; Hom, 1995; Johnson, 2004; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Lim-Hing, 1990/91; McLean, 2007; Mosher, 2001; Pascoe, 2007). Depending on a gay person's previous secretive behaviors, she or he may also be prone to charges of deception and manipulation (Downs, 2005; Saylor, 1992). The dangerous characteristics of coming out often correlate with the potential for suicide, an act prevalent among gay persons and people who question their heterosexuality (Russell and Bohan, 2006; Bornstein, 2006; Goltz, 2007).

Sixth, *coming out is conceived of as a necessary act*. Disclosing a gay identity is framed as healthy (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, Visscher, 1996; Downs, 2005; McLean, 2007; Phellas, 2005; Seidman et al., 1999; Seidman, 2002), mature (Rust, 1993), and politically beneficial (Burgess, 2005; Chee, 2006; Corrigan & Matthews, 2003; Dow, 2001; Gregory, 2004; Gross, 1991; Kirk, 2008; Rasmussen, 2004; Shugart, 2003; Signorile, 1990, 2007). Not disclosing is thus framed as unhealthy, immature, and politically ineffective as well as an act of silence indicative of internalized homophobia and self-hatred (Fone, 2000; Hopcke, 1993, 1995; Meyer & Dean, 1998; Yep, 2003).

Seventh, *coming out is conceived of as both a discrete, linear process with a definitive end* (Gagné et al., 1997; Kus, 1985; McDonald, 1982; Rust, 1993) *and an inescapable, ever-present "life-shaping" process* (Seidman, 2002, p. 8; Berzon, 2002; Butler, 1991; Halley, 1989; Garrick, 1997; Plummer, 1995; Sedgwick, 1990; Shakespeare, 1999; Urbach, 1996).

Notwithstanding these seven premises of gay identity and the closet, three limitations of this identity construction and metaphor must be mentioned. First, *gay identity and the narrative of coming out are not universal phenomena*. Rather, they

signify a Eurocentric understanding of sexuality and same-sex experience (Jolly, 2001; Kong et. al., 2002; Labi, 2007; La Pastina, 2006; Lee, 2003; Phellas, 2005). This understanding assumes that individuals who engage in same-sex sex acts must be gay or, at the very least, bisexual.

Second, *gay identity and the closet metaphor have come to be descriptive of white same-sex experience and white same-sex challenges* (Anzaldúa, 1991; Boykin, 2005; Fung, 1996; Johnson, 2001; Halberstam, 2005; Henderson, 2001; King, 2005; Lee, 2003; Perez, 2005; Ross, 2005; Yep, 2007). In the United States marriage equality is often positioned as one, if not the, most pressing issue for gay individuals. However, same-sex marriage is often the most pressing issue for privileged (often white) gay persons, not necessarily *all* gay persons. Though same-sex marriage receives a significant amount of attention, there are plenty of other important issues overshadowed, even disregarded, because of the focus on marriage, issues like racism, homophobia in non-white communities, immigration, and homelessness.

Third, *gay identity and the closet metaphor are often male-biased and misogynistic* (Halberstam, 2005; Jones, 2007; Tillmann-Healy, 2005). For instance, “gay” is a word that can be used as a general, neutral descriptor of both men and women (for example, “gay marriage”) and a word used to distinguish men and male experience (for example, “gays and lesbians”; Hubert, 1999).<sup>2</sup> Lesbians—gay women—are also excluded from definitions of sex (acts) and sexuality, particularly when sex is conceived of as something that only occurs when an (original, at birth) penis penetrates a vagina *and/or*

---

<sup>2</sup> The website [www.gay.com](http://www.gay.com) is the epitome of gay male bias. Even though the word “gay” is used, the website predominantly caters to men and male experience. The dual usage of gay is similar to how the generic “he” functions: “He” was/is used as a term to generally describe both men and women but also a term specific to men.

when a penis ejaculates, two criteria that exclude any possibility of female-female sexual relations (Butler, 1991; Frye, 1983; Johnston, 1975). “I was never in danger of being thrown in jail for practicing sodomy,” Creet (1991), a woman, writes. “Not surprisingly, what constitutes homosexual sex in the public eye has always hung on the penis” (p. 29).<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, some people believe that men can only be gay if they assume a passive, penetrated role in sex. In this usage, a gay label does not apply to active, masculine penetrators. A man who “has sex with another man has little to do with ‘gayness,’” Labi (2007) writes. “The act may fulfill a desire or a need, but it doesn’t constitute an identity” (p. 74). It is “being a bottom” that is “shameful” as bottoming “means playing a woman’s role” (p. 78). This criterion speaks to the masculine, misogynistic biases of gay identity, specifically how “playing a woman’s role” is positioned as shameful (see Frank, 1993); as Halberstam (2005) observes, gay men experience shame from “being feminized in some way and against their will” (p. 226). Gay male shame can thus originate from devaluing the feminine.

\*\*\*\*

Gay identity is a contentious identity inextricably tied to the metaphor of the closet. Coming out is necessary when gay identity is invisible, and is an act relevant for heteronormative contexts. Coming out is a dangerous act but also one usually perceived

---

<sup>3</sup> Sex is often defined as an act where a penis penetrates a vagina and/or an act that involves an ejaculating penis. These criteria make it impossible for women to have sex with each other as female-female sex acts often do not consist of penis-vagina penetration or ejaculating penises (Frye, 1983). Heterosexuality and penile ejaculation are key criteria for sex, the latter criterion best observed in the discourse of the Monica Lewinsky-Bill Clinton affair: It was Clinton’s ejaculation on Monica’s dress that signified “sexual relations” happened; if the/his semen would not have been there, sex would not have occurred. In this project, however, I define sex (acts) as those that involve genital arousal, not necessarily acts motivating orgasm or acts contingent upon penises and vaginas.



to be necessary. And coming out is conceived of as both a discrete, linear process, and a process that does not and cannot end.

These premises direct me toward new questions about gay identity and the closet. For instance, how do people discover and enter the closet (if one comes out, one must have gone in)? Once in the closet, how do persons conceive of coming out? How does coming into the closet, living in the closet, and coming out of the closet influence a gay person's relationships with other people? Many of the preceding premises frame gay identity as a self-contained trait detached from others and the disclosure of this identity as a one-sided affair. How do gay persons navigate the dangerous but necessary act of coming out? And how do gay individuals negotiate coming out as both a discrete and linear process and one that never ends?

These questions speak to my goals for this project. First, I plan to examine epiphanies of gay identity, defining moments that, once they happen, significantly change the trajectory of a gay person's life. Second, I want to better understand the relationality of gay identity, specifically how this identity and metaphor implicate others in one's social network and reflexively act back on the gay person. A relational view removes gay identity from the strictly personal and individualistic realm and situates it as an encounter between beings-in-interaction.

### Chapter Three: Method

In this chapter, I provide an overview of autoethnography and narrative inquiry, the methods I use to investigate gay identity and the lived experience of the closet. I then define my use of epiphanies and their relationship to gay identity, and detail the procedures I used to conduct research for this project. I conclude by describing how I worked with my data and how I represent my findings.

#### *Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry*

My research uses the methodological tools of autoethnography and narrative inquiry to make sense of gay identity, sexuality, and interaction. Autoethnography, broadly conceived, calls a person to use her or himself, reflexively, as a lens to view larger social systems in an attempt to connect personal, particular experience with cultural, general experience. Narrative inquiry, broadly conceived, considers stories important ways to conceive of and (re)present experience. While sometimes viewed as disparate genres, autoethnography and narrative inquiry are similar: Both weave together “life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation,” refuse “closure and categorization,” realize “words matter,” and create texts designed to “change the world” (Holman-Jones, 2005, p. 764). Autoethnography and narrative also allow me to write for audiences that traditional academic research excludes, a move that can make important and practical change possible (Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 1995a; Goodall, 2004, 2006).

Autoethnography is a research method that uses analytical tools and systematic analysis to understand the personal, the mundane, and the practical. It is a method of

documenting (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnographers adhere to the logic that “self-criticism is essentially social criticism” (Mead, 1962, p. 255), and believe “*What is most personal is most general*” (Rogers, 1989a, p. 27, original in italics). The “very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others,” Butler (2005, p. 21) writes, are “social in character,” but also terms through which our “‘singular’ stories are told” (see Delany, 1999; Meininger, 2005; Spry, 2001). Similarly, Atkinson (2007) argues that “each individual life experience is simultaneously in some ways like no one else’s (unique), in some ways like some others’, and in some ways like everyone else’s (universal)” (p. 231). As an autoethnographer, I embrace the assumption that in speaking for and about myself, about my experience, I speak for and about others, about cultural experience. Culture flows through me.

Autoethnography is a method for doing both *autobiography* and *ethnography*. When a person writes an autobiography, she or he retrospectively and selectively writes episodes from her/his life. However, an autobiographer usually does not live through these experiences in order to make them a part of her/his autobiography; the autobiographer relies on memory, interviews with others, and texts such as photographs, journals, and recordings (Goodall, 2006).

Ethnographers—persons who study, represent, and are defined by their relationship to a culture—describe the lived experience of a group of people (Brodkey, 1987). Ethnography, as a method, is “flexible and unstructured” (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005, p. 329); it does not adhere to strict, definitive criteria (Deegan, 2001; Goodall, 2001; Van Maanen, 1988). The primary goal of ethnographic research

is always the same, regardless of the particular project: The researcher must incorporate multiple disparate stories into a single coherent narrative that is, in all major ways, true to them all, providing original insights unavailable to the individuals involved in any one story, but which become apparent when the set is viewed as a whole. (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005, p. 329)

An ethnographer works to make the “strange” aspects of a group familiar for “insiders” (members of the culture) and “outsiders” (Maso, 2001). This is accomplished by writing “thick descriptions” of cultural happenings, descriptions designed to facilitate cultural understanding (Geertz, 1973, p. 10).

Ethnographers immerse themselves in a cultural field in order to participate, observe, and document their travel, talks, and tribulations with members of the group they are studying. Ethnographers interview these members, participate in and observe cultural events and rituals (Geertz, 1973; Makagon, 2004), examine members’ ways of speaking and relating (Ellis, 1986, 1995b; Lindquist, 2002; Philipsen, 1972, 1975, 1976), and analyze cultural artifacts like clothing, architecture, and texts like books, movies, and photographs (Borchard, 1996; Goodall, 2006; Neumann, 1999). An ethnographer does not apply pre-determined, sense-making structures to members’ experiences, but allows her/his findings to emerge from her/his fieldwork (Jorgenson, 2002).

Critical ethnographers, however, do not just describe the experiences of a group; they also evaluate these experiences. Critical ethnography is “conventional ethnography with a political purpose,” an approach that facilitates “social consciousness and societal change,” aids “emancipatory goals,” and negates “repressive” cultural influences (Thomas, 1993; p. 4; see also Conquergood, 1991; Horner, 2002; Tillmann-Healy, 2005).

While description itself can be a critical act, some ethnographers specifically intend their research to be critical, that is, to motivate cultural change and transformation (Ellis, 2007a; Denzin, 2004; Pineau, 2000; Rambo, 2007; Ronai, 1995, 1996)

Autoethnography combines aspects of autobiography and ethnography. As an autoethnographer, I include experiences that at the time I experienced them I did not know I might use. I see “everything as material” (Lamott, 1994, p. 136) and, to borrow a phrase from Lenore Langsdorf, I believe “it’s all research” (personal communication).

In this study, I treat many of my lived experiences as meaningful, valuable phenomena that I can use in my research. I attend to mundane conversations I have in classrooms, my office, at bars, and with family and friends. I try to pay close attention to the billboards I pass while driving on the interstate and examine the internet sites I visit. I attend to my embodied sensations, and collect birthday cards, post-it notes, photographs, stickers, and recordings, texts colored with traces of others. I save interesting news stories and journal articles, and constantly analyze the meanings of song lyrics, television shows, radio programs, and movies. I try to remember and document important, profound, contradictory, and painful conversations, feelings, and events such as when a former student told me that his parents disowned him after saying he was gay, and when another student sought advice for responding to her father’s coming out, and when a third student told me that she was scared to tell her parents about the woman she’s loved for five years, and when one of my best friends said his mother hasn’t acknowledged his same-sex desire twelve years after he came out, and when a stranger in a bar told me about the pains of having to come out to his son, and when a high school friend told me that he doesn’t know how to quit the ex-gay therapy he’s been in for almost six years, therapy

designed to “cure” his “homosexual disease,” therapy paid for and required of him by his parents. I document these interactions on cocktail napkins, in files of email conversation, and/or by journaling, and I use them as data in my search to understand how people make sense of gay identity.

Moreover, as a *critical* autoethnographer, I interpret and evaluate the lived experiences of gay men. The desire for social change motivates much of this project. I want to improve the experience of being gay in the United States, and humanize the experience of the metaphorical closet.

Ethnographers have traditionally conceived of culture in terms of people located in a geographical space, an area known as the field (Buzard, 2003). However, gay culture is not confined or restricted to space. A few gay-related physical fields—for example, gay-oriented living spaces (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Delany, 1999; Kirby & Hay, 1997; Levine, 1979), bars (Corey, 1996; Slavin, 2004), bathhouses (Bain & Nash, 2007; Berry, 2007; Styles, 1979), AIDS-related facilities (Cherry, 1996), classrooms (Gust & Warren, 2008; Meyer, 2005; Pascoe, 2007), softball fields (Tillmann-Healy, 2001)—do exist, and it may be possible to study gay-themed events like gay pride parades (Herrell, 1992; Johnston, 2005; Kates & Belk, 2001), but gay experience is not confined to these.<sup>4</sup>

Often, gay has been defined as a culture constituted by same-sex desire (Bolton, 1995; Ginsberg, 1974; Lee, 1979) and trauma (Cornell, 2007; Cvetkovich, 2003; Downs, 2005; Halberstam, 2005; Perez, 2005; Sedgwick, 2003). Desire and trauma, however,

---

<sup>4</sup> The lack of gay physical space perpetuates the idea that gay is not a culture, or should not be treated as one. I remember one of my professors in graduate school, a professor who studied intercultural communication, argue vigilantly that gay is not a culture. The assumption that gay is not a culture can also be noted in Yep’s “My Three Cultures” (1998). Yep, a gay man, does not consider gay one of his three cultural groups. I thank Keith Berry for informing me of this essay.

typically lack any definitive, visible characteristics, making it difficult to know when one is or is not immersed in gay culture. An alternative is to view gay as a cultural group with particular ways of speaking and relating (Hayes, 1976; Jones, 2007; Leap, 1996; Nicholas, 2004), and permeated by a variety of culture-specific discourses such as coming out of the closet (Brown, 2000; Sedgwick, 1990; Urbach, 1996). Thus, in this dissertation, I attend ethnographically to the discourse of same-sex desire and trauma, ways that gay persons speak, relate, and negotiate the closet, and texts that explicitly describe and evaluate gay experience.

Narrative inquiry focuses on writing stories that can be “evaluated in terms of their uses, functions and the role they play in personal and cultural life” (Plummer, 2001, p. 401). Instead of direct-relation-to-external-events truth, the truth often adhered to by historians and scientists (Gaddis, 2002; White, 1980), narrative inquiry strives for narrative, pragmatic truth, truth that values what narratives *do* for us as writers, audiences, and, more generally, as humans. As Bochner (2002) says, “it is not the ‘facts’ themselves that one tries to redeem through narrative tellings, but rather an articulation of the significance and meaning of one’s experiences” (p. 86; see Bochner & Ellis, 2006). Coles (1989) and Frank (1995) emphasize how narrative inquiry encourages readers to think *with* stories rather than think *about* them, and, in writing, to try to “teach a lesson in living” (Mandel, 1968, p. 221). The importance of a narrative rests upon what it *does* for others (Couser, 1997; Goodall, 2004; Kvale, 2002) and what it reveals about cultural selves (Hampl, 1999).

Narrative inquiry also works to identify canonical cultural stories and demonstrate how these stories influence people (Andrews, 2002; Bruner, 1991; Butler, 1997b; Frank,

1993). Canonical stories are conventional, authoritative, and difficult-to-resist scripts for living, “projective” storylines that “plot” how “ideal social selves” should live in order to meaningfully contribute to society (Tololyan, 1987, p. 218). Identifying and questioning canonical stories allows people to conceive of taken-for-granted experience in innovative ways, fathom cultural change, and better understand personal responsibility and human agency (Bochner, 2001, 2002; Pelias, 2007b, 2008).<sup>5</sup>

Autoethnographers and narrative researchers believe that stories function as “equipment for living” (Burke, 1974, p. 293; Brummett, 1984; Frank, 1995; Knight, 1990; Tololyan, 1987) and can provide a ground for social action (Ellis, 2002; Pineau, 2000). Stories are important because they simultaneously *represent* and *constitute* lives (Gannon, 2006; Greenspan, 1992, 1998; Ricoeur, 1986).

The *representational* function of personal narrative texts allows readers to witness “the horror of it all” (Denzin, 2004, p. 140; Bochner, 2002; Ellis, 1993, 2007a), gain access to information not seen on “after school specials and movies of the week” (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005, p. 312), and resist the “domination and authority of canonical stories” (Bochner and Ellis, 2006, p. 120; Adams, 2006; Allison, 1996; Berry, 2007; Boylorn, 2006; Jago, 2002; Rambo, 2007; Ronai, 1995, 1996).

The *constitutive* function of personal narrative shatters and re-stories past experiences to make better, more hopeful experiences possible (Parry, 1991; Richardson,

---

<sup>5</sup>While he does not use the word “canonical,” Coles’ (1989) describes how he challenged dominant psychological stories, specifically the story of valuing of “theory” more than “story.” Similarly, Frank (1995) deals with ways that patients can negotiate commonly heard tales about what it means to be a patient (and, by default, what it means to be a doctor), and provides ways to re-make deviant illness narratives into empowering, positive, and normalizing stories.



2001) and allows authors and audiences to become the stories told (Bruner, 1986; Couser, 1997; Denzin, 1989, 1998; Plummer, 2001).

The “double gesture” of a personal narrative—its representational and constitutive function—may textually “imprison” a life (Shepherd, 2005, p. 50; Ellis, 1986, 1995b, 2007b; Jones, 1997, 2002; Wolcott, 2002; Wyatt, 2005, in press), but can also make “discovery” and “self-constitution” possible (Schrag, 1997, p. 16).

### *Epiphanies*

Epiphanies are “interactional moments and experiences that leave marks on people’s lives” (Denzin, 1989, p. 70; Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Ellis, 1993); “transformative” events that alter relationships (Baxter & Pittman, 2001, p. 4); “milestone” occurrences that shift relational development (Rust, 1993, p. 52; McDonald, 1982); frequently remembered moments that motivate a person’s life to proceed in significant, unexpected ways (Couser, 1997); and times of existential crises that, like “broken tools” (Heidegger, 1962) and “breaches” (Garfinkel, 1967), force individuals to attend to experience. Epiphanies happen when “typical and typifying ways of thinking and acting” become upset and unsettled (Zaner, 2004, p. 65), and are events after which life never seems quite the same.

Epiphanies are important because they disrupt, reveal, and rub against relational assumptions. They shed light on ways people negotiate “intense situations” and deal with the “effects that linger—recollections, memories, images, feelings—long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished” (Bochner, 1984, p. 595). Epiphanies are also self-claimed phenomena: one person may consider an experience transformative while another may not.

In this dissertation, I use life story interviews, life writings by gay men, mass mediated accounts of gay identity, and my own experience to identify and understand epiphanies associated with gay identity and the metaphorical closet. I work to outline assumptions of this identity and metaphor, asking questions such as “What might epiphanies and turning points specific to gay identity suggest about the lived experience of sexuality?” “How does claiming a gay identity implicate others?” and “What communication strategies would allow gay individuals to better navigate relational strife?”

### *Procedures*

I conducted life story interviews with four gay men and analyzed memoirs written by three gay men. I also analyzed four anthologies of gay life writing and a variety of mass mediated accounts of gay identity. Also, I examined my own experience of publicly—and sometimes not so publicly—identifying as a gay man. In this section, I detail the procedures I followed.

### *Life Story Interviews*

Life stories provide insight into how people make sense of their lives at the moment of sharing. “A person’s life story, the one he or she chooses to tell others”

Atkinson (2007) writes, is what is

most important to him or her and is what gives us, the casual reader as well as the researcher, the clearest sense of the person’s subjective understanding of his or her lived experience, his or her life as a whole. (p. 233)

The purpose of life story research is to excavate the “internal coherence” of a person’s story rather than seek “external criteria of truth or validity” (Atkinson, 2002, p. 135). The life story is

atheoretical in that people do not tell their own story based on a preconceived theory. As individuals, we experience the world not as scientists, through a theoretical lens, but as persons who are trying to give meaning to our own unique or universal lived experiences. (Atkinson, 2007, p. 234)

In studying and sharing life stories we can learn about ourselves, purge our burdens, and validate the meaning of our experiences, helping others see life in innovative ways.

In “Life as Narrative” (1986), Bruner provides one way of doing life story research. Bruner is interested in “how people tell the stories of their lives” (p. 22).

Believing that lived experience is best described through story, he conducted life story interviews with a family of four: a father, a mother, a son, a daughter. He first asked each person to tell her/his life story in about half an hour, and then spent another half hour to ask each about how she or he constructed her/his story. Bruner concludes by suggesting that the patterns in the form of a story influence the structure of lived experience, forming an inextricable connection between the stories a person tells and the life she or he lives.

Like Bruner (1986), I conducted life story interviews with four self-identified gay men.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Bruner, however, I was interested in both the form and content of each story, particularly how each man constructed his life but also what he said about his life.

---

<sup>6</sup> The Institutional Review Board at the University of South Florida approved my plan for these interviews on May 14, 2007.

Each of my life story interviews consisted of three meetings. In the first meeting, I asked each man to record his life story in thirty minutes. To help with the recording, I gave each participant an instruction sheet with the following prompts:

1. Tell about significant life-changing moments you have experienced. These are moments after which your life never seemed the same, moments after which your life felt different. These are moments about which you may have worried, moments that happened unexpectedly and without your control, moments for which you could not prepare for or predict.
2. Tell about what happened *before* each moment: Could you prepare for this moment? How did you interact with other people before this moment? How did people react to you before this moment?
3. Tell about the thoughts, feelings, and experiences you had *during* each moment: How did you feel *while* this moment happened? How did you interact with people during this moment?
4. Tell about the thoughts, feelings, and experiences *after* these moments. How did you view yourself? How did you think this moment would impact your future? How did other people respond to you after this moment?

I was present for two of the four initial meetings. I planned to be absent, but two of my interviewees were uncomfortable blindly speaking into a recorder without my guidance. I encouraged the other two interviewees to return their recorded life stories to me at their convenience.

In the second and third meetings, I formulated comments and questions based on information shared in the first interview. These comments included my responses to each

man's life, areas that needed greater specification, and/or topics the men did not discuss but, based on my knowledge of them, I felt had impacted their lives. For instance, if I knew that a man's gay identity influenced his experiences but the man did not explicitly discuss this influence, I inquired into his thoughts about gay identity as well as why he left it out of his story.

I used interactive interviewing in the second and third meetings (Ellis, Kiesinger & Tillmann-Healy, 1997). Interactive interviews are best used for getting an "in-depth and intimate understanding of people's experiences with emotionally charged and sensitive topics" (p. 121). Interactive interviews usually occur with friends and/or acquaintances and with people who all have personal experience with the topics being discussed. Interactive interviews are collaborative endeavors between researchers and participants, endeavors in which researchers and participants probe each other, together, about issues that transpire in the conversation. Interactive interviews usually consist of multiple interview sessions, and are firmly situated within the context of emerging interpersonal relationships (unlike interviews among strangers).

I conducted interactive interviews with gay men to get in-depth accounts of gay experience. All of my interviewees were friends and acquaintances, and all of us also had personal experience with the topics discussed. Many of the interviewees, two in particular, interviewed me about my significant life-changing moments related to gay identity and same-sex desire. Initially, I had not planned to be interviewed for this project or to engage in interactive interviews, but I welcomed the opportunities when they arose. The conversational nature of the second and third meetings allowed me to verbally, not just textually, respond to my own thoughts and questions. In so doing, I learned about

myself, specifically about painful issues that I may not be ready to tell and areas that I need to better understand for myself. I felt as if we, as gay men talking together in these interviews, were engaged in a shared enterprise.

In one of the interviews, a participant began to interrogate me about painful, personal issues relating to my childhood. I quickly became angry, nervous, and upset with myself and with the interviewee. I even tried to end the conversation saying that I didn't want to talk about my issues anymore. But he continued to ask questions and inform me of my abnormalities to the point where I started crying and he laughing. I do not believe interviews should make such unwanted and intense discomfort possible, and, as a researcher, I know that I would not berate another person about obviously-sensitive issues. Our heated conversation ended my relationship with the participant. Nevertheless, I include some of this troublesome interview at the end of chapter six.

I transcribed each interview within one week of its occurrence, typing interviewees' words as recorded. I eliminated fillers like "uh" and "um" and repeated phrases that seemed unnecessary. For example, if a person said "I think," paused, and then said "I think" again I did not include both phrases. I produced more than 120 pages of transcript.

This was my first time conducting life story interviews. As such, I encountered a few unexpected concerns. First, I need to be more strict and forthright with collecting the initial life story. For instance, while I planned to be absent when participants recorded their initial stories, two participants were uncomfortable recounting their life on tape without my presence. If I do not want to be present during the first recording, then I need

to create other forms of guidance. And while I allowed the other two participants to return the initial story at their convenience, I did not receive one story for eight months.

Second, I found the task of asking others to record their story without being present difficult. I prefer to arrange meetings with people, ask open-ended questions, and maintain some control over the conversation while still allowing our conversation to proceed in unanticipated directions. I recognize that one purpose of life story research is to abandon such control—and this is a purpose I value—but I didn't think that, as a researcher, abandoning a significant amount of control would be so challenging.

Here, I introduce my participants. I use pseudonyms for each.

*Dave*, an able-bodied white man, was my first boyfriend. Born in Tennessee in 1976, he is a spiritual person though does not speak of a religious affiliation. Dave has attended college periodically, but due to financial strains has not completed a degree. I met Dave at a bar in October 2001. We dated until early January 2002. Dave and I lost contact for about a year, but have since maintained a strong friendship.

While our relationship as a couple lasted only a few months, Dave occupies a significant presence in my life. His comforting demeanor allowed me to learn about myself sexually. Dave specifically taught me how to masturbate. Even though I was 22, I had not done so. I attribute this to my naiveté about male anatomy and sexuality, but also to a Catholic upbringing that emphasized the sinfulness of a man who “wasted his seed.” I mention my learning experience with Dave because it occupies a significant part of our relationship; he frequently reminds me and tells others that he taught me about masturbation.

*Michael* is an able-bodied white man in his early-40s. I met him at the University of South Florida. A significant influence on Michael is Catholicism; most of his life has been connected to the church. He even graduated from seminary, which is where he met his partner of more than a decade. Michael continues to work for the Catholic Church, producing documentaries and educational videos about religion.

Michael frightened me when I first met him in a graduate school seminar on Postmodern Rhetoric, a course where he regularly spoke about the rhetoric of Catholicism. I considered Michael a masculine man, a trait that made me think, stereotypically, that he was heterosexual, and a trait that, when coupled with his affiliation with Catholicism, a religion often marked as anti-gay, made me think, stereotypically, that he didn't like gay people. I didn't speak to him during the first few weeks of the seminar. I feared what he might say or do to me, and I did not want to be lectured on why my relationships with men were wrong. While I regretfully acted on these stereotypes, I adhered to them out of safety. A few weeks into the course, Michael told another classmate that he had a male partner, and, knowing of my hesitancy toward him, the classmate told me. Michael and I then began to cultivate a great friendship.

*Seth* was born in 1986 in Colombia, South America. He migrated to the United States, with his mother and sister during his mid-teens. I met him in January 2007 in Tampa, Florida at a Starbucks where he worked part-time and where I went to study. Seth is currently a student at the University of South Florida and Hillsborough Community College. He identifies as Hispanic, Catholic, and is able-bodied.

Soon after we first met, Seth and I regularly ate lunch with each other. In June 2007 I traveled with him and his boyfriend to a concert in Atlanta, Georgia, and, in July, I



traveled with them to Chicago. While Seth and I do not see each other often, primarily due to my change in workload and his transfer from one Starbucks to another, we still visit with each other about once every few weeks. My lack of fondness for his boyfriend has also decreased our time together.

*Tyler* is Seth's boyfriend. He is an able-bodied white man, in his mid-20s, who identifies as part-Catholic and part-Jewish. Tyler is a counselor/therapist at an elementary school for individuals with behavioral disorders, and is working part-time on a doctoral degree in education. I have never interacted with Tyler without Seth being present.

I believe Tyler has some contempt for me, though nothing has ever been said. He argues with most everything I say, ridicules my writing projects, and regularly accuses me of having an abusive, abnormal childhood. I have never seen him interact with others in a similar way. These negative acts motivated me to subtly probe Seth for information about Tyler's thoughts about me. Seth once said that Tyler asked him if he found me attractive. When Seth said he told Tyler that he did, I remarked that that this may make Tyler feel jealous or insecure. I feel that Tyler prefers that Seth and I not be friends.

### *Gay Life Writings*

I mentioned earlier that texts, particularly life stories, both represent *and* constitute an individual's life (Bruner, 1986; Couser, 1997; Denzin, 1989, 1998). "The life story is both story that is told and story that is lived," Atkinson (2007) writes. "Sometimes the telling can involve living, and sometimes the living can involve telling" (p. 238). While life texts are selective representations of experience and are not strictly lives as lived (Bochner, 2002; Bochner & Ellis, 1995; Fisher, 1984; Meininger, 2005; Nelson, 2001; Plummer, 2001), they are important because they constitute an author's

life *and* the lives of readers, particularly those that use texts as “equipment for living” (Burke, 1974, p. 293). Life texts written by gay men thus represent patterns of gay culture and existentially constitute experiences of this culture.

In this dissertation, I analyze three life texts—memoirs—written by gay men, four anthologies of gay life writing, and a variety of mass-mediated texts that speak to gay identity and coming out interactions. Similar to my interviews, I analyze both the form and content of each life text, focusing specifically on how each gay man constructed his life but also what he said about it.

In my initial search of gay life writing, I found approximately forty book-length autobiographies and memoirs. Most, however, were quite specialized, addressing issues such as living with HIV, gay adoption, military experience, and same-sex fidelity. Only a few texts addressed a significant temporal slice of sexual identity negotiation, (for example, a story across childhood, adolescence, adulthood, etc.). For this reason, I chose the following texts: Bernard Cooper’s *Truth Serum* (1996), Kenny Fries’ *Body, Remember: A Memoir* (2003), and E. Lynn Harris’ *What Becomes of the Brokenhearted: A Memoir* (2004).

Bernard Cooper’s memoir, *Truth Serum* (1996), centers on his attempts to change his same-sex desire. Born an only child to a Jewish mother and father in 1951, Cooper writes about his strained relationship with his father, a lawyer, and his physically-close but emotionally-distant relationship with his mother, a housewife. He tells of ways he negotiated his same-sex desire in grade school, high school, and college, and of the mundane experiences that best characterize his family such as his mother’s desire to obsessively fill a freezer with meat, his intimate relationship with a woman, his father’s

interracial dating excursion, and the moment he told his father that he was gay. Cooper's story climaxes in 1974 when he begins to take a prescribed "truth serum," a mixture of sodium pentothol and Ritalin designed to "numb" his same-sex inhibitions (p. 98). Paradoxically, however, this serum encourages Cooper to embrace these inhibitions. The story continues with Cooper's failing attempt to achieve a muscular, well-toned, gym body, a body that speaks to a stereotypical gay aesthetic; he concludes with a description of his partnering with and caring for a person living with HIV.

Kenny Fries' memoir, *Body, Remember* (1997), describes his experiences being gay, disabled, and Jewish. Born in Brooklyn in 1960 to a father who was a butcher, a housewife mother, and a slightly-older brother, Fries emerged with smaller-than-average legs and three-toed feet. Because of innumerable surgeries throughout his childhood, his legs also possess a variety of scars. Fries says his parents supported him in most anything he wanted to do, and never treated him differently for being disabled. They didn't treat him differently for being gay, either. Such acceptance is reflected in his father's comment "I wonder if you'll have problems with women because of your legs and will turn to men" (p. 44), and a question posed by Fries: "Was it because of my disability that my parents so readily accepted my homosexuality?" (p. 195) While Fries' able-bodied brother is gay as well, he does not discuss his parents' acceptance of his brother's sexuality or, with the exception of a mutual sexual experience during his youth, his relationship to the gay sibling.

E. Lynn Harris' memoir, *What Becomes of the Brokenhearted* (2003), describes his experiences being Black and gay. Born in 1955 in racially-tense Little Rock, Arkansas, he emerged as an only child in a poor family. Harris writes of his struggles

with an abusive step-father and an absent biological father, and his close connections with his grandmother, aunt, and an always-working mother. He writes of constantly praying to God to change his same-sex desire, what I, as a reader, perceived as the most disturbing characteristic of Harris' life. For instance, he believes this disgust damaged many of his relationships, forced him to hide from his sexuality, and made regular bouts of depression, loneliness, thoughts of suicide, and alcoholism possible. Harris uses his memoir to write himself into in a safe and accepting space, and, in so doing, try to help others avoid a "don't ask, don't tell" existence (p. 6).

In addition to these longer works, I also examined four compilations of gay experience: Nancy and Casey Adair's *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1978), John Preston's *A Member of the Family: Gay Men Write About their Families* (1992), Robert Trachtenberg's *When I Knew* (2005), and Ted Gideonse and Rob Williams' *From Boys to Men: Gay Men Write about Growing Up* (2006). In each of these, persons write about ways that gay identity can affect social interaction.

*Word is Out* (Adair & Adair, 1978) is a collection of 24 interviews conducted with lesbians and gay men. It is based on the documentary film by the same name, and includes transcripts of each interview. The interviews focus on gay experience in the United States, particularly in contexts like high school, the family, and the workplace. Because of the scope of my dissertation, I focused only on the interviews with gay men.

*A Member of the Family* (Preston, 1992) is a collection of 26 stories written by gay men. Each focuses on the relationship a gay man has with his family, and addresses topics like regret about not telling a family sooner about a gay identity, the moment of coming out to another, and how relationships can change after coming out.

*When I Knew* (Trachtenberg, 2005) is a collection of 85 short life stories about lesbians and gay men recalling the time they first learned about their same-sex desire and talking about this desire with others. It includes a variety of noteworthy individuals such as the co-creators of *Will & Grace*, and is a work intended for a mass, popular audience.

*From Boys to Men* (Gideonse & Williams, 2006) is a collection of 21 stories written by gay men. Most focus on a gay man's experience during the first twenty years of his life. This collection is unique because it focuses on childhood and adolescent experiences of same-sex desire, not on the canonical experience of coming out, current experiences being gay, or relationships a gay man has with others post-disclosure.

In addition to life writings of gay men, I also analyzed mass mediated texts that explicitly discuss gay identity and same-sex desire, texts like gay-themed publications, newspaper or magazine articles, popular internet websites (for example, gay.com), Dan Savage's *Savage Love Podcast*,<sup>7</sup> an audio relationship-advice program, television programs like *Will and Grace*, and films such as *Sordid Lives* (Shores, 2000), *Another Gay Movie* (Adams & Stephens, 2006), and *For the Bible Tells Me So* (Karlsruhe, 2007).

I recognize that many of these texts, limited by time and space, rely on canonical scripts of gay life experience to tell a story, and that producers select and manipulate content in order to conform to particular genres (comedy, sex-advice column, documentary, etc.) and media (radio, television, newspaper, etc.), but these observations notwithstanding, mass-mediated representations of gay identity and coming out—even those considered “fictional”—emphasize canonical scripts about what gay identity and coming out are or should be, and how gay-related interactions may feel. What makes

---

<sup>7</sup> A Podcast is a free, internet audio broadcast. The broadcast uses “Pod” in the title because it is designed to work with MP3 players like iPods.

these representations and scripts important is that they can inform (live, real) social interaction, a premise that grounds media and cultural studies research (see Berger, 1972; Brummett, 1985; Burke, 1974; Davis, 1997; Dow, 2001; Funkhouser and Shaw, 1990; Fürsich, 2002; Langsdorf, 1994; McLuhan, 1964; Radway, 1984). Art imitates life, but life also imitates art.

Moreover, the act of coming out to another is a difficult situation to observe physically. Researchers of gay identity must thus rely on self-reports about coming out. Consider Tyler's (an interviewee) observation about coming out:

My boyfriend [Seth] wanted me to be there when he talked [that is, came out] to his mom. I told him that would be unfair for her. With me there, she would be unable to express herself like she would want to. Without me, she could do whatever she wanted. If she wanted to scream she could scream. If she wanted to cuss she could cuss. (personal interview, 2007)

Coming out, as an act of disclosure, is rarely witnessed by "outsiders." Sometimes an individual may ask another to witness the event, as Tyler's boyfriend asked him, but immediate observation, especially by a researcher, is nearly impossible. And like Tyler observes, being present around significant disclosures may also show disrespect for the disclosure's addressee, further complicating the encounter.

Self-reports of interaction, however, can be limiting (Bochner, 1989; Soukup, 1992). They do not allow a researcher to observe the relationality of interaction or the natural aspects of a self-disclosure (in other words, the characteristics of an act that would have occurred regardless of and unhindered by the researcher's presence). This is another reason why I find mass-mediated representations of gay identity and self-

disclosure important: albeit constructed and possibly fictional, they situate the disclosure of gay identity *in a relationship* and thus represent, for audiences, how people relating negotiate self-disclosure and constitute, for audiences, how disclosure can and should work.

### *Autoethnographic Data Sets*

As a self-identified gay man, I have participated in gay culture for almost a decade. It was not until graduate school, however, that I became educated as an ethnographer and autoethnographer. Thus, I have systemically observed and reflected on gay culture only within the past few years.

My observations of gay culture stem autoethnographically from three data sets: personal experience, my participation in physical sites that privilege gay discourse, and informal interviews I conducted with gay men and lesbians.

I make my gay identity known most everywhere. I identify as gay in most of the classes I teach. Most of my family members know that I desire men, and I openly discuss my same-sex relationships with strangers. I own a hat, a shirt, and a box of checks, all of which possess the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) logo, a logo that consists of a yellow equal sign housed within a blue square and a logo that belongs to one of the largest, U.S.-based organizations that addresses lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) concerns. I use the logo to mark my everyday, mundane body, to show others who know of this logo that I am, at the very least, LGBTQ-friendly, to get recognized by others as possessing an LGBT and/or Q-friendly identity, to breed connection and make identification possible.

I mention these ways of making my gay identity known in order to illustrate why there have been so many situations when individuals who identify as gay, or who struggle to identify as gay, have contacted me for advice on coming out and on ways to embrace a gay identity positively. These individuals knew that I self-identified as gay and assumed that I could understand their experience; they considered me safe with their information. For example, there was the person interviewing me for a job who told me that he was gay but no one else at his university knew; and the student who wrote in a course paper that she knows she likes women but refuses to talk about it; and the high school acquaintance emailing me for advice on coming out to others. He found out my sexual orientation on [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com), an internet networking site. These individuals shared their secrets with me, trusting that I would not ridicule them or out them to others. My gay identity, and my public embrace of this identity, has granted me access to unique conversations.

I include and treat these informal and voluntary conversations as data in this dissertation. While these data are gathered unsystematically and serendipitously, I believe they have a ring of truth and urgency lacking in other more organized and intentional efforts to gather data for my research.

I also consider these particular situations part and parcel of my embrace of autoethnographic methodology: they are a part of my lived experience as teacher, mentor, and friend to other gay men. The situations speak about an identity often not discussed in common, normalizing ways, and the situations repeated in these stories distinguish the experience of gay individuals from the experiences of other “kinds” of people. The situations are ones I frequently experience, and ones that speak to the



secrecy, fear, and isolation experienced by many gay men. They are an important and crucial part of my project.

My observations of gay culture stem from my participation in a variety of sites that privilege discussions of gay identity and same-sex desire as well. For instance, I often visited bars, restaurants, and coffee shops that attract a predominantly gay clientele. I have taught the class “Communication, Gender, and Identity” thirteen times. This junior-senior level course focuses on ways that identity, specifically the identities of sex, gender, and sexuality, influence interaction. I regularly encountered conversations about gay identity in these sites, and recorded these conversations on napkins, post-it notes, audio recorders, and legal writing pads. Immediately upon leaving these sites, often within one week, I would use these fieldnotes to write more elaborate, detailed stories of the experiences I witnessed.

My observations of gay culture also stem from informal interviews. In March 2003 and March 2006, I conducted interviews with seven of my gay friends about their experiences with homophobia, a fear and hatred of homosexuals. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, and I recorded all responses via audio recorder. I did not use a pre-determined set of questions for these interviews, but often started conversations with “How do you define homophobia?” “What is your relation to homophobia?” and/or “Have you ever experienced homophobia?” I allowed conversations to proceed in impromptu, organic ways. I did not transcribe these interviews, but created narratives based on each interviewee’s experience within one week of our interview. I then asked each interviewee to comment on my narrative of her or his experience, and incorporated their comments into my interpretation. I use pseudonyms for these persons in this project.

### *Analyzing the Data*

Before writing this dissertation, I first engaged in an “analysis of narrative” (Bochner, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1995), an inductive approach toward interpreting my personal experience and understanding the stories I heard or read about from gay men that I had used in previous projects. I engaged in “initial coding” of my experience and these stories, a process in which I looked for patterns across my preliminary data sets (Charmaz, 1983). I then analyzed these patterns to observe themes—repeated words, phrases, storylines, and topics of discussion—present across the experiential and storied accounts. Initially, I observed three major themes—epiphanies—of gay identity: (1) an individual’s initial awareness of same-sex attraction, (2) an individual’s first same-sex sexual experience, and (3) coming out, a period when an individual publicly identifies as gay or lesbian. I used these themes to organize my original formulation of this project.

Then, I began my dissertation research by conducting life story interviews with and analyzing life stories written by gay men. I engaged in “focused coding,” a process in which I see how my initial codes relate to larger amounts of data (Charmaz, 1983). In these new data sets, I noticed that a man’s initial awareness of same sex attraction and his first same-sex sexual experience are closely related themes, common storylines without any clear, temporal boundaries. Consequently, I noticed another theme of gay identity, specifically a period between a person’s awareness of same-sex desire and his move to come out of the closet. These observations motivated me to change two of my initial epiphanies to (1) the time of “learning the closet,” a period that often includes an initial awareness of same-sex desire and first same-sex experiences, and (2) the time of “living the closet,” a period that often includes secretive same-sex experiences and an initial

embrace of a gay identity. I structure this dissertation around these two themes as well as the third theme, the time of “leaving the closet.”

Furthermore, I noticed that for some gay men, these epiphanies occur, or at least are narrated, in a linear way. A gay person does not “come out” before she or he embraces a gay identity, before she or he is aware of same-sex desire, or before her/his first same-sex sexual experience.<sup>8</sup> I have thus organized my project both thematically and temporally.

I also noticed several minor themes for each major theme. For instance, I noticed seven common topics of discussion when individuals spoke of discovering the existence of the closet. I observed five characteristics of the time of living in the closet, and three significant time-influenced storylines of coming out. I use these minor themes to organize my three major themes, and I begin each minor theme with interviewees’ commentary followed by stories written by gay men. I conclude each theme with my experience, informal conversations, and other sources that relate to the theme.

### *Representing the Data*

I use a variety of writing techniques to represent my themes. I use a “layered account” as a writing strategy to integrate existing research with my data, findings, and analysis (Ronai, 1992, 1995, 1996, 2002; Rambo, 2005). I use different points of view and characteristics of showing and telling (Adams, 2006a; Caulley, 2008; Ellis, 1993, 2004; Hampl, 1999; Lamott, 1994). I re-arrange sequences of events and change names

---

<sup>8</sup> I do not have any accounts of a gay person who came out before she or he had a same-sex sexual experience. I imagine that there are many gay persons who come out before intimate contact with a person of the same-sex, but I do not have any examples. A reason for this may be that a person who thinks she or he is gay may first want to confirm her/his same-sex desire, e.g., by engaging in a same-sex sexual act. This is purely hypothetical.

and places to “take pressure off” real individuals and organizations (Fine, 1993, p. 287; Richardson, 1992). I compress a significant amount of time into a single text, and I make decisions about the “emphasis, tone, syntax,” and “diction” when writing lived experiences (Mandel, 1968, p. 218). Also, I recreate conversations from memory and edit interview transcripts for readability.<sup>9</sup>

A layered account is a way of writing and representing experience that uses vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection (Ellis, 1991) to “invoke in the reader the emergent experience of ‘being’” (Ronai, 1992, p. 123). Similar to grounded theory, a layered account emphasizes the processual nature of research, showing how “data collection and analysis proceed simultaneously” (Charmaz, 1983, p. 110) and portraying existing research as a “source of *questions* and *comparisons*” rather than a “measure of truth” (p. 117). A layered account works to produce a “continuous dialectic of experience” (Ronai, 1995, p. 396), conceives of identity as an “emergent process” (Rambo, 2005, p. 583), and treats stories as important as theories, personal experience as important as traditional academic research, and evocative, concrete texts as important as abstract analysis (Ronai, 1995, 1996).

I use a layered account to represent my major and minor themes. Using vignettes, reflexivity, multiple voices, and introspection, I create a collage of texts that speak to experiences of gay identity and the closet. I include everything from newspaper and journal articles to interview data to personal experience, from television stories to internet radio broadcasts to autobiographical writings. I weave my literature review in with my

---

<sup>9</sup> I, along with three of my cohorts, elaborate on the ethics of many of these issues in “truth Troubles” (Tullis Owen, McRae, Adams, and Vitale, in press).

description and findings, and I choose not to separate story from theory, personal experience from research, practical application from abstract thought.

I use italics to tell my story of gay identity and the closet. I temporally and thematically organize my story around fieldwork observations, and I use asterisks to denote shifts between time and space, shifts from one persona to another, shifts across interviews, textual analyses, and personal experience, shifts across practicality and abstraction (Ronai, 1992). I use different points of view in my writing. Sometimes I use first-person to tell a story, typically when I have personally observed or lived through an interaction. I do so to present an intimate, immediate, and involving “eyewitness account” of a situation (Caulley, 2008, p. 442). Sometimes I use the second-person voice to bring you, the reader, into the scene, to actively witness, with me, the experience, to be a part of rather than distanced from the events. To be honest, I also use second-person for personal moments I am shameful to claim. Sometimes I use third-person to establish the context for an interaction, report my findings, and present what others say or write.

I use characteristics of showing and telling in my writing as well. Showing “brings readers into the scene” (Ellis, 2004, p. 142) most often through the use of conversation and active verbs. This allows readers to evocatively “experience an experience” (Ellis, 1993, p. 711). Telling, in contrast, positions the reader at a distance. Telling provides an overview of a situation rather than an evocative experience of it, and uses description that often lacks the immediacy of dialogue and sensuous engagement.

I find showing and telling to be effective and necessary writing strategies. I show events that feel evocate and emotionally-rich. Showing allows me, as a writer, to engage and re-experience a situation. Conversely, I tell about events that feel fragmented and

emotionally-empty, those in which my head takes priority over my heart, my thoughts over my feelings. Telling allows me, as a writer, to distance myself from a situation.

\*\*\*\*

In the next chapter, “Learning the Closet,” I describe the epiphanical moment before a gay person enters the metaphorical closet (as in, “coming out of the closet”), a time that often includes an individual’s initial awareness of same-sex desire and her/his first same-sex sexual experience.

In the fifth chapter, “Living the Closet,” I describe the epiphanical moment when a person lives in the closet, a time that often includes rampant secrecy and an initial embrace of a gay identity, and a time when a person *privately* acknowledges her/his gay identity but *publicly* discounts this identity by saying and acting *as if* it doesn’t exist. I illustrate how this abstract, metaphoric space can feel.

In chapter six, “Leaving the Closet,” I describe the epiphanical moment of coming out of the closet, a time when an individual verbally speaks of her/his gay identity or same-sex desire. I show how individuals try to control time by trying to predict “right” times to disclose and attempt to create ideal relational conditions. Then, I describe the moment of disclosure of gay identity and immediate responses to this disclosure.

In chapter seven, “Making Identity Relational,” I show how a relational perspective of coming out can look. In so doing, I establish a ground to conceive of gay identity as relational, thus displacing the idea that gay identity is a self-contained trait.

In the last chapter, “Gay Dilemmas, Reflections, and Criticisms,” I describe the double-bind of gay identity. I argue that when a person self-identifies as gay, the closet

becomes a permanent part of her/his life. The metaphorical space never disappears; coming out never ends. I conclude by discussing strategies to disrupt this double-bind.

## Chapter Four: Learning the Closet

I know my past by knowing my scars.  
Kenny Fries, *Body, Remember*

The signs were there, but when you don't know where you're going,  
you can't read them and the signs don't mean anything.  
Raymonde C. Green, "Signs"

A closet:

a "private room," an "inner chamber";

a "place of private devotion" and "secluded speculation";

a "private repository" of "curiosities";

a "small side-room";

as suggested by the phrase "skeleton in the closet": a "private or concealed trouble in one's house or circumstances, ever present, and ever liable to come into view";

a "hidden or secret place, retreat, recess";

a "den or lair of a wild beast" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, cited in Sedgwick, 1990, p. 65).

a "life-shaping condition" (Seidman, 2002, p. 8).

a "site of *interior* exclusion for that which has been deemed dirty" (Urbach, 1996, p. 66).

\*\*\*\*

"Coming out" of a closet:

a "developmental sequence" (McDonald, 1982, p. 47; see Rust, 1993);



an “observable and systematic life process” (Kus, 1985, p. 178);

an act “predicated upon family laundry, dirty linen, skeletons” (Rodriguez, cited in Betsky, 1997, p. 16);

an “acknowledgment of one's homosexuality, either to *oneself* or *publicly*” (my emphasis, Random House Unabridged Dictionary, cited on dictionary.com);

the “processes whereby gay men, lesbians, or bisexuals inform others of their sexual identity” (Gagné et. al., 1997, p. 478);

an “act of dangerous communication” which “infects its listener—immaculately—through the ear” (Butler, 1997a, p. 116).

\*\*\*\*

When a person is said to be “in the closet,” she or he possesses an always-there, wild-but-hidden, troubling secret. When a person chooses, or is forced, to leave the closet, a private space concealing a taboo curiosity, she or he makes known a marginal identity, unknown condition, devious desire. When a person fathoms coming out, she or he anticipates an-Other’s response since coming out is a communicative act implicating others (Butler, 1997a; Chirrey, 2003; Garrick, 2001; Mosher, 2001; Taylor, 2000). One can and does come out to oneself, but audiences occupy a significant presence in coming out processes as a person might—and sometimes must—expose a skeleton an-other may condemn.

However, if a person is said to have come out of the closet, then it must be assumed that this person earlier went into the closet—one must go in before one comes out. But how and why does a person enter the metaphorical space from which she or he

will later emerge? Is a person birthed into the abstract room? What conditions must be met before a person could ever come out?

If a person is said to come out of the closet by disclosing a secret, then she or he must have an awareness of this secret and must want to keep the secret before she or he can emerge from the closet lair, a place only made possible by an awareness of a marginal and deviant (secret) identity and/or desire. When a person is said to have come out as gay, it can be assumed the person is aware of and has disclosed her/his same-sex desire; she or he has claimed a gay identity and the marginal *and* deviant status associated with it. A person would not say she or he is or has been “in the closet” if she or he doesn’t know what a closet is or why she or he went into it in the first place.

But what if I don’t know or haven’t recognized my sexual desire as “gay?” If I have no idea of what gay means or have never encountered the concept of same-sex desire, would I be able or likely to describe my experience as “in the closet?” Can a person come out without having known why she or he has gone in? Does a closet only form via hindsight, a reconstructed looking-back?

In this chapter, I highlight conditions of closet formation as they relate to same-sex desire and gay identity. Sedgwick (1990) calls the closet the “fundamental feature of social life” for gay people (p. 68), but does not focus on the lived experiences that precede gay closeting. I portray what life might look and feel like prior to the closet, a portrayal of how and why an individual may first recognize and then enter the hidden, secretive lair. In so doing, I hope to complement and critique canonical discourses of the closet by showing that the closet metaphor only provides one way to conceive of same-

sex desire and gay identity, that life can and does exist before ever being able to go in or come out.

\*\*\*\*

*It is 1986. I am seven years old. My mother and father erect one of those large, car-sized satellite discs in our yard. Living in the Illinois countryside ten miles from town we no longer need “rabbit ear” antennas to receive TV. The satellite gives us more than two channels. There isn’t static interference with Sesame Street or Mr. Rogers, and my mom can watch Scarecrow and Mrs. King without having to stand by the television and continually adjust the receptors.*

*The satellite also introduces content from previously-foreign spaces: News from Nevada; prayer from Pennsylvania; and well-endowed-naked-white-dudes-from-I-don’t-know-where. It is with the dudes I begin.*

*As an only child I have the privilege of having my own bedroom. My parents rarely enter the space unless they need dirty laundry or want to check the status of my mess. I can shut my door without worry of interruption. With the introduction of the new satellite, I acquire my own television and satellite receiver, thus expanding my sphere of privacy.*

*One night I retreat to my bedroom to watch TV before going to sleep.*

*“Goodnight,” I say to dad and mom, then kiss mom on the cheek.*

*“Night,” dad responds.*

*“Love you,” mom replies.*

*I walk to the end of the hallway and enter my room. I climb into bed, click on the television with the box-sized remote, and begin to surf the plethora of channels now occupying my personal space. Disney, MTV, TBS, and WGN. I stop at HBO.*

*A row of eight guys stand in a dimly-lit black room with their dicks—big, eight-to-nine inch dicks—dangling. Sculpted bodies from hours of gym work, each man has a six pack of abs complemented by bulging biceps. I stare at the submissive, standing men who seem to be awaiting inspection.*

*I remember the program lacked a narrator and dialogue. Maybe I muted the TV so my parents wouldn't hear the program I enjoyed. A clothed man approached each unclothed guy, fondled his cock-and-balls, and asked him to cough. Maybe I was watching a medical documentary. I remember each nude man becoming erect in response to the clothed fondler. Maybe this was a show on how to be a male doctor, on what men should do to other men so that they can heal and be well. But then the clothed man put each erect penis in his mouth, though not all at once. The men engaged in an eight-man orgy until every man got off, released his load, fired his "money shot." The way I remember it, there was caressing, spanking, sucking, and fucking, but I am not sure of the details.*

*I remember that my mouth was moist and drooling when suddenly the bedroom door opened.*

*"What the fuck are you watching?" my father screams.*

*"Turn that shit off!" he screams again.*

*My father approaches the television and unplugs it. He begins to say something, but stops and stares at me with large, angry eyes. He resumes yelling fuck-this and fuck-*

*that, grabs my wrist, drags me into the bathroom. Uncertain of how I should respond or why my father is reacting in this way, I start to cry and hope his tantrum and my terror will soon end.*

*In the bathroom, my father removes his belt and pulls down my pajama pants. He takes his waist-whip and spanks my ass as hard as he can. I wail. He spanks again. I scream. He engages in rigorous same-sex discipline, but this intimate same-sex contact has a different meaning than the contact I observed on the HBO-naked-man show. My father isn't trying to be kinky or incestuous. He's showing me that I must learn from this beating, not take pleasure from it. My ass receives its first lesson about same-sex desire.*

*The spanking ends and father does not apologize. My eyes burn from crying, my ass sore and bruised, my mouth dried from yelling. I return to bed and quickly fall asleep.*

*"Boys should not look at other boys," father says to me the next morning on the way to school. "Boys get pleasure from looking at girls, not boys." I nod and pretend to understand. "Boys are disgusting, Tony. You must like girls."*

*"Yes, father."*

*"You're still allowed to watch TV," he says, knowing I will better monitor its content, better monitor myself. I never again stray from Disney, MTV, TBS, or WGN, and my father and I never again speak of this incident.*

*In a few years, when I am ten, my parents install cable television, limiting the amount and type of channels we receive. They remove the car-sized satellite from our yard, the only material trace of my first same-sex experience. Father shows me Santa Comes Twice, a heterosexual porn film, and tells me about the need for condoms and the*

*importance of boy-girl intercourse. I live with a father who cultivates opposite-sex desire in his son.*

\*\*\*\*

In his memoir, Kenny Fries (1997) describes the first time anyone used “gay” to describe his feelings. During spring break his first year of college, he visits Helen, a family friend. When he enters her apartment, she immediately asks: ““You’re gay, right?”” Fries wonders why Helen thought he was gay, but recalls being “relieved by Helen uttering this word.” “I don’t know if I’m gay,” he tells her, but adds that he “might be in love with [a man]” (p. 44).

In his memoir, E. Lynn Harris (2003) says that he “felt different” as a “young boy,” but did not know why: “As a child I only knew that if it wasn’t my color, then what could it be?” (p. 4). Melissa, a person I interviewed in an earlier project, echoes Harris’ experience, saying

I have known since I was young that I was different, but I did not have a word to put with that difference. In high school, I realized that the word I needed to put with that difference is gay. I then realized the word I needed to put with that difference is lesbian. (cited in Adams, 2006b)

\*\*\*\*

I identified as a “boy,” “white,” and “catholic” long before I identified as gay. I also was exposed to the terms “straight” and “heterosexual” well before I knew of “gay” or “homosexual.” I had not learned the meanings of any of those terms until my late teens. I am not suggesting that my same-sex desire did not exist prior to knowing these

latter categories, but rather that my identification with a gay label could not happen if I did not have the label (McDonald, 1982; Meyer, 1995). Delany (1999) observes:

anyone who self-identifies as gay must have been interpellated, at some point, as gay by some individual or social speech or text to which he or she responded, “He/she/it/they must mean me.” That is the door opening. Without it, nobody can say proudly, “I *am* gay!” Without it, nobody can think guiltily and in horror, “Oh my God, I’m gay!” Without it, one cannot remember idly or in passing, “Well, I’m gay.” (p. 191)

Furthermore, when a person is situated in a heteronormative culture, one that privileges opposite-sexed desires and heterosexual identities and positions individuals as straight until proven gay, then individuals do not learn about same-sex desire or gay identity until later in life (Elizur & Ziv, 2001; Gross, 1991; Hayes, 1976; Kus, 1985; Lee, 1979; Maurer, 2000; Meyer & Dean, 1998; Padva, 2004; Seidman, 2002; Shakespeare, 1999; Sloop, 2004; Solis, 2007). “Our first crushes, first infatuations, and first broken hearts,” Williams & Gideonse (2006) write, “are among the most profound moments of our adolescences, because they are often frustratingly silent and solitary experiences” (p. ix). These moments are silent and solitary because gay youth are “typically born into environments that offer very limited experience with other members of the subculture” (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992, p. 356). Hopcke (1995) agrees, noting that

the incipient gay or lesbian child is all too often raised within a family unit that is at odds with his or her personality and in which little mirroring is provided that could confirm, much less affirm or celebrate, their affectional and sexual orientation. (p. 128)

If discussions of same-sex desire and gay identity do occur, they typically happen during the teenage years. And when individuals learn to appropriate non-hetero categories and their accompanying cultural scripts, they appear to embrace a new identity and/or desire that, coupled with heteronormative assumptions, make this identity and/or desire seem like a choice. In other words, if heterosexuality is assumed to be “normal” and “natural,” as an identity and/or desire that happens *without* an individual’s choosing (Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1978; Hopkins, 1998), then a person who is *not* heterosexual can seem to intentionally (and selfishly) go against nature.

While it may seem obvious, a person cannot identify as gay if she or he does not know what gay is or means. If coming out of the closet means disclosing a gay identity, then a person who does not identify himself as gay cannot go in or come out. Yes, a person may recognize that she or he is attracted to individuals of the same-sex before she or he can claim a gay label, but this does not mean that a person will know to say “I am gay.”

Thus, a condition of the closet: *An individual must be aware of and have the language and ability to describe her/his identity or desire as gay.*

\*\*\*\*

*It’s 1992. I am twelve years old. I take four Bud Lights from the refrigerator and put them in my backpack. I don’t know what beer tastes like, but I know that it makes people feel funny. I also know that feeling funny can induce impairment, a condition where a funny individual loses rational control, and I enjoy knowing that others will do funny things after feeling funny with beer.*

*“Can I stay the night at Aaron’s?” I ask mom.*



*“I suppose,” she replies. “Need a ride?”*

*“No, I can walk.”*

*I arrive at Aaron’s and take my backpack into his room. We play Nintendo and Frisbee with his dog, then listen to the most recent New Kids on the Block album. I wait until his parents go to sleep before telling him of the beer.*

*“You want a Bud Light?” I ask.*

*“You have beer?” he replies.*

*“Yeah, stole it from my parents.”*

*I open a beer, take a taste, and find it is warm, bitter, and disgusting. I take another sip.*

*“This is horrible,” I say. “I’m not drinking anymore.”*

*“I’ll take it,” Aaron replies.*

*I hand him the can. He finishes it in a matter of seconds.*

*“Can I have another?” he asks.*

*“Sure,” I say. “Impressive,” I think.*

*Aaron chugs beer number two, downs the third, then the fourth.*

*“Let’s get naked,” Aaron suggests.*

*“Ummm, okay,” I reply. “Then what?”*

*“Nothing, but we’ll be more comfortable without clothes.”*

*Aaron quickly removes his battered t-shirt, jeans, and boxers. I remove my running shorts, Sting t-shirt, and white briefs. Aaron approaches me and takes my dick in his hand. I grab his and we get hard together. He begins to suck. I reciprocate. He tells*

*me not to tell. I tell him not to tell, either. We climb into bed and continue to touch each other's body. "This feels good," I think as I dose off to sleep.*

\*\*\*\*

With a few exceptions, I do not remember people saying, "You're heterosexual, Tony" or that I should be. Rather, I remember people asking "if I had a girlfriend" and if I found a particular woman attractive. I remember learning what passes as "love" by observing (heterosexual) relationships in movies, books, and families. I remember catholic school health class where I learned how penises and vaginas fit together, each being the (only) complement to the other, the essence of womanhood being the possession of a vagina able to be "penetrated adequately" by a penis (Bloom, 2002, p. 120; see Bordo, 1998; Frye, 1983; Garfinkel, 1967; Greenberg, 2002; Padva, 2004; Bryant, 2005; Pronger, 1998; Sloop, 2004), a genital inter-connection that Fausto-Sterling (1995) calls the "true mark of heterosexuality" (p. 132). Although I don't remember hearing explicit disregard for same-sex desire, I do remember many of the priests telling me one should "not waste his seed," a mantra that condemned sex outside of marriage and non-procreative acts such as masturbation and same-sex intimacy.

A condition of the closet: *When a person recognizes that an identity or desire possesses a marginal status in that it is not practiced or validated by the majority of a population.*<sup>10</sup>

\*\*\*\*

---

<sup>10</sup> Marginality is, of course, contextual, and just because an identity or desire is marginal does not imply that it is unworthy or bad. Examples of marginal identities and/or desires in the United States could include persons with hobbies, non-dominant but still accepted religious sects (e.g., Mormonism, Judaism), and persons in wheelchairs as many spaces accommodate, but do not privilege, wheelchair use.

*Ben often stays the night. We're both 13 but I'm jealous that Ben's approaching puberty faster than me. He has a goatee, underarm hair, and a deep voice. He has pubic hair and an often-erect penis. And I enviously admire his escapades with newly pubescent girls.*

*When Ben stays the night, we sleep in the same bed, a closeness I appreciate. When I think he's asleep, I'll lift his t-shirt to stare at his emergent belly hair, his trim and toned stomach. I'm always cautious as I don't want to wake him with my touch. If he flinches or wakes, I pretend I'm asleep. When I expose his belly, I deem my work a success.*

*I try to disassemble Ben's belt, then his jeans, slowly raising the latching button ever so slightly, trying to remove the metal peg from its corresponding cloth notch subtly. When I finish opening his jeans and then expose his underwear, I deem my work a success.*

*While it's easy to unbutton and unzip Ben's jeans—he typically wears a size bigger than his waist—maneuvering his underwear is more difficult. Unbutton, unzip, spread jean flaps open, wait a minute before touching briefs.*

*I pull out a mini-flashlight and shine it on his crotch. Through his white underwear I see the outline of a half-erect dick, one bigger than mine. I then steer his dick through the opening of the briefs by widening the opening slowly and nudging his cock through the hole. My prodding often erects his cock fully, thus making it easier to slide the dick through the slip. And when I expose his dick, I deem my work a success.*

*I shine the light on Ben's face. He's smiling, but acts as if he's immersed in deep sleep. I stroke his cock, making it big and hard. I enjoy looking at it, touching it. I get*

*erect, too. I arrive at a point where I'm unsure of what to do with my penis or his, so I go to sleep. I decide against reassembling his clothes and allow him to do so the next morning. Ben and I quit sleeping together after a few of these excursions. We quit speaking, too.*

\*\*\*\*

On the opening page of *They Stand Apart* (1955), a book that attempts to outline the immoral qualities of gays, Rees and Usill ask, “Can nothing be done to cut out this cancer from the souls of men?” (citing an English High Court Judge, p. vii). The cancer Rees and Usill refer to is homosexuality, a “cancer of the soul’, a ‘twist in the mind’, a ‘bodily affliction’, or a commixture of them all” (p. xi). In response to the debate over homosexual identity as a choice or as something innate, Rees and Usill (1955) ask, “Are those who indulge in these corroding [homosexual] practices to be pitied as the victims of a disease or punished as criminals who have broken both the legal and moral codes of law?” (p. xii).

In the same book, Hailsham (1955) frames homosexuality as a significant “moral and social issue,” equating it with heroin addiction. He conceives of “homosexual practices” as “contagious, incurable, and self-perpetuating” (p. 24), and believes that same-sex intercourse is an “unnatural activity of the sexual organs” (p. 30). Thus, he argues, homosexuality and homosexual acts must be eligible for “criminal and social sanctions” (p. 31).

While these dated sentiments may sound absurd, remnants of such beliefs still infiltrate many facets of society. Michael, an interviewee for this project, recalls learning the negative side of gay identity:

I grew up in a town of about 10,000. There were a handful of people that I had any sense were gay. It was a huge secret. I knew that the gay people in town were considered oddities, drastically unusual people like circus freaks, curiosities, and oddly human-like. I got this sense about how these people were considered, and I didn't want to do or say anything that would put myself in the category of circus freak. (personal interview, 2007)

Or consider the time Bernard Cooper (1996) asked his mother what a "fag" was. He says she "turned from the stove, flew at me, and grabbed me by the shoulders," asking "Did someone call you that?" "Not me," he responded. "Oh," she replied, "loosening her grip." Cooper says his mother was "visibly relieved," but still did not tell him about fags (p. 6).

E. Lynn Harris (2003) speaks about first realizing the negative potential of same-sex desire:

[Donald and I] met behind a baseball field near my house. After small talk, we had sex in his car, a small Chevy Vega, which he had driven from the field into a nearby alley. When we finished, I felt excited, but Donald wore a look of disgust. I asked him if everything was alright.

He looked at me and shouted, 'You goddamn faggot,' then he started beating me unmercifully with his large fists. Every time I tried to escape his car, his fists pounded my face . . . . Suddenly this psycho stopped beating me, spit in my face, and then leaned over me, opened the door, and kicked me with the heel of his shoe out of his car into the cold rain. On the graveled alley I saw blood on my hands. My nose was bleeding. But I didn't think about the pain of his fists. All

I could think about was Donald spitting in my face. It was devastating. No one had ever done that to me. It was like he was saying to me, “You don’t deserve to be a human being. You’re lower than low. You ain’t shit” . . . .

I snuck back into my house soaking wet. I knew I had to change my life before somebody killed me—or I killed myself. (pp. 88-89)

Lane Thompson, a friend, also speaks to the negative qualities of gay identity and same-sex desire on his Myspace.com webpage:

I grew up plagued by the knowledge that I liked boys. I hated it and I wanted to be normal so badly. I was convinced there was something very wrong with me and I could not imagine disappointing my family so terribly. How could I be so vile? Everything I ever heard about gay people was foul and loathsome. How could these people be so despicable and dare show their faces? I have been trying to accept myself ever since.

A BBC News reporter reports that some people living in Iraq fear being killed because of a gay identity. “I don’t want to be gay anymore,” an interviewee says. “When I go out to buy bread, I’m afraid. When the doorbell rings, I think that they have come for me” (McDonough, 2006).

In anticipation of the 2006 World Pride Parade in Jerusalem, religious groups distribute flyers promising NIS (Israeli New Shekel) 20000—\$4,766.45 as of March 9, 2007—to “anyone who brings about the death of one of the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah” (Sela, 2006). Unlike gay killers in Iraq, Jerusalem gay killers earn money for cleansing a space of gays. Parade officials cancel the parade.

In Kampala, Uganda, Sheikh Ramathan Shaban Mubajje has suggested to the President that “gays be rounded up and marooned on an island” until they die. “If they die,” he says, “then we shall have no more homosexuals in the country” (365gay.com, 2007).

In Idaho, a Post Falls business owner uses a marquee for social justice: “Ped[ophiles] queers fags your [*sic*] in Idaho now...” (cited in Brodwater, 2006). Jim Valentine doesn’t want queers and fags in his community. He makes his desire known to passing drivers.

In Oklahoma, State Representative Sally Kern considers homosexuality a “bigger threat” to the security of the United States than “terrorism” or “Islam” (Michels, 2008).

Former professional basketball player, public figure, and role model Tim Hardaway expresses his dislike of gay people. “I hate gay people,” he says, “so I let it be known. I don't like gay people and I don't like to be around gay people. I am homophobic. I don't like [gay]. It shouldn't be in the world or in the United States” (cited in Winderman, 2007). National Basketball Association—NBA—officials quickly distance themselves from Hardaway’s comments, condemn his language, and ban him from NBA-related appearances. A few days later, Hardaway tries to retract his comments, saying he doesn’t “hate gay people,” is “good hearted,” and believes “hate” was a bad word to use (Associated Press, 2007). But one is reminded of a capital-T Truth of communication: utterances are irreversible.

“Reparative therapy”—therapy that tries to convert gays to straights—is still quite popular (Bennett, 2003; Cloud, 2005), and many gay individuals have “Doctor Phobia,” a refusal to disclose their sexuality to health care providers out of fear that these providers

will provide unnecessary medicines, treatments, and (de)moralizing lectures (B. Adams, 2004; Gust, 2004). Many gay individuals thus do not receive adequate health services.

March 12, 2007. Washington, DC. General Peter Pace, former chairperson of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, calls homosexuality “immoral” and believes military officials must prosecute “homosexual acts” (Madhani, 2007).

March 16, 2007. Louisville, Kentucky. Reverend Albert Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, argued that it is “biblically justified” to biologically alter fetuses to cure non-heterosexual sexualities (Lindenberger, 2007).

March 19, 2007. Bartow, Florida. William David Brown Jr. and Joseph Bearden stab Ryan Keith Skipper twenty times. Officials designate the crime as hate, saying that Brown and Bearden stabbed Skipper because he was gay (Kis & Finley, 2007).

The belief in the “cancerous” and “unnatural” nature of homosexuality still exists, but manifests itself in more insidious ways.

A condition of the closet: *When a person recognizes that an identity or desire possesses a devalued status in that it is condemned by many members of a population.* Value is, of course, contextual, but when an identity or desire is devalued, it is often considered unworthy or bad. A person who aligns with the devalued identity and/or desire may thus feel shameful, different, and guilty (Armesto & Weisman, 2001; Ellis, 1998; Goffman, 1963; Solis, 2007; Shallenberger, 1991). And, as Burgess (2005) observes, “an identity that requires outing” is one “typically thought to be undesirable, or aberrant” (p. 128).

\*\*\*\*



*I am fifteen years old. I have a friend named Chad. He's been named "Homecoming King" twice, "Prom King," once. He's a fellow classmate and golfing peer. He can grow a beard overnight, and has been nominated as one of the five sexiest men in high school.*

*"Want to stay the night Friday?" I ask Chad during a round of golf. "I have some beer."*

*"Sounds cool," he says.*

*I can't believe he agreed. We're not close friends, only golf acquaintances. I find him attractive, desirable, but I'm unsure of what my attraction is, what it means, or how I can explain it to others.*

*"How 'bout I come over after golf practice?" he asks.*

*"Cool," I reply.*

*On Friday, we arrive at my house. We watch television, talk about our upcoming homecoming dates, and wait for my mom to go to bed. When we think she's asleep, I pull out the warm beer. We climb out my bedroom window and begin to drink.*

*I'm still disgusted by warm beer, but I can now force myself to drink two cans. Chad drinks three quickly. When we finish the drinks, we return to my room and climb into bed.*

*"Let's play a game of truth or dare," he says.*

*"Fine," I respond, unsure how to play.*

*"Truth or dare," he asks.*

*"Dare," I reply.*

*"I dare you . . . to take off your clothes, everything except your underwear."*

*“I, um, can’t do that,” I say.*

*“You must,” he demands. “It’s a dare.”*

*I comply, climb out of bed, and strip to my black briefs. I climb into bed again.*

*“Your turn,” I say. “Truth or dare?”*

*“Dare.”*

*“I dare you . . . to do five naked jumping jacks.”*

*Without hesitation, Chad climbs out of bed. He removes his shirt, revealing patches of hair, and unbuttons his belt. He simultaneously pulls off his jeans and grey briefs, revealing a semi-erect penis, and begins to jump up and down.*

*“One,” he whispers, up and down.*

*“Two.”*

*“Three.”*

*“Four.”*

*“Five.”*

*“Your turn,” he says without reaching for his clothes. “Truth or dare?”*

*“Dare,” I say.*

*“I dare you . . . to let me suck your dick.”*

*I hesitate to respond.*

*“You must,” he demands. “It’s a dare.”*

*“Sure,” I say while removing my briefs. “But I’ve never...”*

*“Shhhh....” he interrupts.*

*Chad climbs into bed, tells me to roll on my back, and places his arms on my chest near my shoulders. He looks at my face, dick, face, and then slowly caresses my now-erect penis. It feels good in his mouth. I feel comfortable with him, with us.*

*But Chad only teases my dick. He licks it for a minute or two, then says he's tired. He climbs out of bed, puts on his briefs, and then climbs next to me. The next day, Saturday, we wake without mentioning the night before. My mom drives him home.*

*"Faggot!" Chad yells at me in the school hallway. It is Monday morning, two days after our now-silenced rendezvous. Unsure of what's happening, I see him approach me.*

*"What?"*

*"You're nothing but a cocksucker," he says while slamming me into a locker.*

*"What are you talking about?"*

*"Shut the fuck up, fucking queer."*

*Chad quickly departs, leaving a small audience staring my way.*

\*\*\*\*

"Can you think of an example of when you first learned about the taboo-ness of homosexuality?" I ask Dave during an interview.

"Yeah, I remember watching a [heterosexual] sex scene on HBO," Dave replies. "I was 5 or 6. My mom said 'Don't look at her breasts, don't look at her breasts.' But the entire time I was looking at the guy's chest. By telling me not to look, I somehow knew that I should've been looking. But I didn't care to. I liked the guy's chest."

"But wait—she told you to *not* look at a woman's breasts," I say. "This seems to make heterosexual desire taboo, not homosexual desire"

“Yeah, but she didn’t think of homosexuality,” he says. “Everyone was heterosexual to her. So she assumed I was heterosexual, but because of my age she didn’t think I should look at breasts. Ironically, what she didn’t want me to look at was what she wanted me to look at.”

“What if she asked if you were looking at his chest? What would you have said?”

“I would have lied because I felt dirty. I felt shame like ‘I shouldn’t be looking at him. It isn’t right.’” (personal interview, 2007)

Michael, an interviewee, remembers being silent about his same-sex desire because he knew that it could “get him into trouble”:

I remember going to a dance in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and dancing with a girl. I found it kind of appealing. But I noticed that I got much more excited thinking about the guys. I didn’t know what to make of that. Towards the end of 7<sup>th</sup> grade, certainly by 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and more certainly during my freshman year of high school, I realized that I still liked being around girls enough, but my interests became focused on boys. While it was still fun to dance with a girl, this did not carry enough weight to counteract my clearly-becoming erotic interest in guys. But I knew that my attraction to guys was something I didn’t want to talk about with anybody. I had to keep it hidden. (personal interview, 2 September 2008)

Raymond Green, a contributor to the collection *From Boys to Men* (2006), remembers that

being a faggot was not just a harsh word but a status associated with so much negativity in the eyes of my family, peers, and the media that it was something that I just knew there was no possibility of me being. (p. 60)

In *For the Bible Tells Me So* (Karlslake, 2007), a documentary about homosexuality and the bible, Episcopalian Bishop Gene Robinson recalls his fear of talking about feeling “different”:

I think it was about 7<sup>th</sup> grade. And some friends some how got a hold of a *Playboy* magazine. And I realized that these pictures were apparently doing things for these others guys that they weren't doing for me. And the second thing that I realized was that I better not show or say that these weren't doing anything for me. I was always familiar with what the Bible said. Anyone who was thought to be “that way” was an abomination before God.

Foucault (1978) argues that when “sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression” (p. 6; see also Bell, 1999; Corey & Nakayama, 1997; Gingrich-Philbrook, 1998; Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992; Lim-Hing, 1990/91; Owen, 2003). Greenspan (1992) makes a similar observation about the stories of Holocaust survivors: “Not only were survivors not heard, but the very act of recounting risked stigma” (p. 150). If a person wishes to speak about a marginal, devalued, and often silenced identity and/or desire, she or he must first break the silence (a breach of social order), acknowledge, prove, and critique the existence of this silence (another breach), and then speak about the repressed, prohibited topic (breach, again).

In heteronormative situations, heterosexuality *implicitly* informs these situations and is often never *explicitly* discussed. This makes it difficult for persons to discuss and critique heteronormativity because they must first break the silence around sexuality (a

breach of social order), acknowledge, prove, and critique the existence of this silence (another breach), and then speak of a repressed, prohibited sexuality (breach, again).

Heteronormativity manifests itself in situations where I am still asked “if I have a girlfriend.” This is not a question of “Are you heterosexual?” but the implicit assumption is that I am heterosexual or that I at least desire women. But if I respond with “I am gay” and implicitly suggest that I do not or would not have a girlfriend, I not only disrupt a silent assumption of sexuality, but also make sexuality explicit and introduce a possibly marginal and devalued sexuality into the conversation. As such, the other may respond defensively with “I didn’t *ask* if you were gay or straight. I asked if you had a girlfriend.” Such a response is what was—and was not—asked.

A condition of the closet: *When a person realizes that a marginal, devalued identity and/or desire may encounter negative criticism from others if discussed.* Speaking about the identity and/or desire is a taboo act, and, as such, may motivate a person to be silent; she or he recognizes a need to hide (in the closet).

\*\*\*\*

*Sarah, 23. Tony, 19. Acquaintances.*

*Sarah, Jehovah’s Witness. Tony, Catholic.*

*“Will you be my date for the company Christmas party?”, she asks.*

*“You don’t celebrate Christmas,” he responds.*

*“I want to this year. I’ll pay for everything.”*

*“I suppose,” he replies.*

*“We’ll make it romantic,” she suggests. He pretends not to hear.*

*Sarah RSVPs for the party and makes hotel reservations. Tony finds a fake I.D.*

*Sarah tells her parents she must work one weekend. Tony tells work he needs a weekend off.*

*Sarah buys a size 6 dress, black heels, fake pearl necklace. Sarah buys Tony a black sport coat, matching pants, a yellow shirt, goldenrod tie, pair of black loafers, belt. Tony enjoys the free clothes. "Souvenirs," he thinks.*

*At the party Sarah and Tony drink double-shot Strawberry Daiquiris, before dinner and during dinner. After dinner they switch to beer. Sarah becomes comfortable with Tony. Tony knows he should please Sarah. Hands slide along each other's body. Fingers move into spaces taboo in public places. Sarah touches out of pleasure, Tony obligation. They decide to leave the party early, both knowing the touching will continue at the hotel with Sarah trying to restrain herself, Tony hoping she will pass out.*

*The couple enters the room and moves toward the bed. The oversized comforter is quickly removed as they slide onto the unscented, starched-white sheets. Making out begins, slobbery, sloppy kisses shared by both. Tony is drunk, Sarah drunker.*

*"I wann-you innn me," Sarah slurs.*

*"Now?" Tony asks, worrying about the impossibility of an erection. "Are you sure?"*

*"Yeah, I'm surrre. I wann-you innn me!" she demands.*

*The kissing continues as each prepares for a more intimate connection. Tony removes Sarah's daisy-yellow dress, then his belt, pants, and button-up shirt. Sarah removes her bra and underwear, then pulls Tony's boxers down to his knees. She grabs his limp dick.*

*"Whatzzz the matterrr?" Sarah asks.*

*“Nothing,” Tony responds. “Nervous and drunk.”*

*Tony finishes removing his underwear and grabs the condom from the nightstand. He’s unsure of how it arrived there as he didn’t pack protection. He climbs on top of Sarah, sits up and on the top of his feet. He hovers over Sarah and stares at her naked, drunk, stimulated body. He then looks to his smooth chest, belly, and cock and wonders how he will slide the protective device over the un-aroused penis.*

*“Whazzz the matterrr?” Sarah asks.*

*“Nothing!” Tony responds. “I’m getting ready. Be patient!”*

*“I wann-you in me!” she replies.*

*Tony places the condom wrapper between his teeth. He tries to open it while simultaneously steering clear of touching, licking, spermicide. Success. He unfolds the condom and tries to slide it onto his still-limp dick. He stares at Sarah who is much calmer compared to a few minutes ago.*

*“She’s hot,” he tells himself, trying to get aroused.*

*“I want to be inside her now!” Nothing.*

*“I want to fuck her hard, real hard. She wants it and so do I.”*

*Minutes pass. The penis doesn’t move.*

*“Whazzz the matterrr?” Sarah asks. “Doan-you think-I’m prrretty?”*

*“Of course I do,” he responds.*

*Minutes pass. The penis, still.*

*“Sarah is a man I want to fuck,” Tony thinks. “Like John Stamos or Mario Lopez or Jason Priestly. Mark Wahlberg in his tight and bulging Calvin Klein’s.”*

*An erection begins.*



*“This man is hot,” he continues to fantasize, “and he’s hot for me. Look at his six pack, bulging cock, and firm balls. He smells like beer, cigarettes, man-sweat.”*

*An erection continues.*

*“I’m straddling this man’s dick and it feels good, tight. He knows how to move and he likes it rough. He wants my dick in him now!”*

*An erection, hard and steady.*

*“Are you ready!” Tony asks Sarah. “I want to fuck you, now!”*

*“Yea-Iwanyou...” she mumbles in a single phrase.*

*Tony inserts his cock between her legs. “It’s in,” he tells himself and begins to slowly thrust. “Mmmmm...” Sarah whispers, nearly passed out from the alcohol. Tony hears and immediately pulls out. “Mmmmm...” she whispers again. He sees she’s falling asleep and decides not to continue.*

*Tony slowly climbs out of bed, not wanting to wake Sarah. He rinses off his penis in the sink, disposes of the condom, and puts on his boxers. He climbs into bed, snuggles against Sarah’s back, and drapes his arm across her revealed breasts and stomach.*

*The next morning Sarah wakes Tony as she climbs out of bed. She smiles at him, says she has a headache, tells him they must checkout by 11. He gets up, showers, and packs. Sarah and Tony talk little on the way home, neither of them discussing the night before or realizing that this will be the last time they speak.*

\*\*\*\*

Earlier I told how Dave, one of my participants, hid his fascination with a bare-chested man from his mother. Michael, another participant, mentioned that his “attraction to guys” was something he could keep hidden and not have to talk about with anyone.

And Bishop Gene Robinson realized that he “better not show or say” that naked women “weren’t doing anything” for him, that is, to keep this lack of interest a secret (cited in Karlake, 2007).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a secret as something “kept or meant to be kept private, unknown, or hidden”; a “thing known only to a few”; and something “concealed” and “classified,” “confidential” and “undercover” (p. 753). If a secret were known, then it wouldn’t be a secret; the definition of secret rests upon an assumption of inaccessibility and intentional deception (Simmel, 1964). Thus, if coming out of the closet is about revealing a secret identity and/or desire, then there is an assumption that this identity and/or desire is not readily accessible by others.

Sexuality is an identity steeped in desire, not an identity steeped in appearance or (visible) “material conditions” (Phelan, 1993, p. 5; Shallenberger, 1991); if it were readily, easily visible, then coming out would be unnecessary. Sexuality is a self-claimed identity that lacks an excess of visual signs, and is less visible and easier to conceal than identities like gender, race, and age. For instance, I often make attributions of gender based on a person’s appearance and subsequently interact with the person *as* a woman, man, and/or transgender. While some people think, or act as if, they possess “gaydar,” the “totally unscientific sixth sense that many people rely on to tell if [someone] is gay or straight” (Colman, 2005, p. 9.1; Burgess, 2005; Johnson, 2001; Nicholas, 2004), their assessments of sexuality, and my own, are never as certain as their classifications about gender. “For it is one of the misfortunes and pleasures of gay life,” Scott (1994, p. 302) writes, “that the imposed invisibility of homosexuality creates an obsession with identifying who is and who isn’t, a practice engaged in to finer and finer degrees of

exactness.” Notwithstanding the existence of the legendary gaydar, assessments of sexuality and same-sex desire necessarily are uncertain and fraught with unreliability and error (Bennett, 2006).

Gender inversion—the idea that a person’s gender (appearance) differs from her/his sex (biological, physical criteria)—has been used, however, often erroneously as a sign of homosexuality.<sup>11</sup> Hopkins (1998) observes, “boys who *act* ‘femininely’ get classified as ‘sissies,’ ‘homos,’ or ‘faggots’” and girls who “are assertive, *play* rugby, or are unconcerned with cosmetics” often get “categorized as ‘tomboys,’ ‘butches,’ ‘dykes,’ or ‘ballbreakers’” (p. 44, my emphasis; see Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Bell, 2006; Bloom, 2002; Bockting, 1999; Clatterbaugh, 1997; Clayborne, 1974; Cory, 1951; Davidson, 1987; Escoffier, 2003; Frank, 1993; Gagné et. al., 1997; Halberstam, 2005; Halley, 1989; Hom, 1995; Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; La Pastina, 2006; Meyer, 1995; Padva, 2004; Pascoe, 2007; Perry & Ballard-Reich, 2004; Pronger, 1998; Seidman, 2002; Stanley, 1974). The attributions of gayness stemming from gendered performances also perpetuate the myth that gay men are women trapped in men’s bodies (Christian, 2005; Hailsham, 1955; Hunter, 1992; Rüling, 2006; Solis, 2007; Ulrichs, 2006). Moreover, the practice of basing attributions of a person’s sexuality to the person’s gender performances not only ties (invisible) sexuality to the (visible) body but also makes surveillance and regulation possible (Foucault, 1978; Hacking, 1990; McIntosh, 1968; Walker, 1993).

Consider, for example, the title and lyrics of the same-sex love song “Cowboys are Secretly Frequently (Fond of Each Other)” (Sublette, 1981). The title and lyrics equate gender inversion with same-sex desire, most notably in phrases like “inside every

---

<sup>11</sup> If gender inversion is a sign of homosexuality, then by default gender conformity—the aligning of a person’s sex and gender—is a sign of heterosexuality.

man there's a feminine," "inside every lady there's a deep manly voice loud and clear," "inside every cowboy there's a lady who'd love to slip out," and "when you talk to a cowboy don't treat him like he was a sister."

Or consider comments about sex, gender inversion, and sexuality made by Matt Hunt, a member of the social networking website Myspace.com:

i [*sic*] wish it would be realized that being gay does not automatically mean being feminine. it'd be nice to see less of the flamboyant, asshole, drug queens prancing around, and more men that actually act like men. keep the pitch of your voice down, and stop walking like you're bowlegged—its pissing society off. (Hunt, 2007)

Matt expresses disdain for males (sex) who do not act like men (gender), and directs this toward gay individuals who, even though they are men (sex), may act feminine (gender).

The "harassment and the discrimination" of lesbians and gay men, Kailey (2005) writes, is often based on "*perceived* sexual orientation—perceived through that person's gender presentation" (p. 94). But sexuality, as an identity steeped in desire, is much more complex, inaccessible, and secretive than these performance-based attributions suggest.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> I would also say that *any* manipulation of sex and gender can cast a person as non-heterosexual, even if gender inversion does not occur. I mentioned that if a person feels as if her/his sex does not match her/his gender, she or he may undergo sex reassignment surgery. This could be considered a form of *sex* inversion, an act that might mark this person as "trans-sexual" or "trans-gender." But even though such an act does not signal a person's desire for another of the same-sex, her/his trans-identity, a sex- and gender-based identity, is often lumped with categories of sexuality, *not* with categories of sex and gender. The most poignant example of this is the use of "GLBTQ." The identities of trans-gender and trans-sexual have *no explicit relation* to the sexualities of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or queer, but are often categorized with and thus considered a kind of sexuality.

A condition of the closet: *Gay identity or desire must be aurally, visually, and physically inaccessible.* When a person realizes that she or he possesses something not easily known or revealed to others, this person realizes that she or he harbors a secret.

\*\*\*\*

Gender inversion and gender conformity, however, make sexuality contingent upon the enactment and achievement of two other categories: sex and gender. Sex, gender, and sexuality are interrelated categories, and thus any discussion about gay identity must include a discussion of sex and gender; as Seidman (2002) observes, “managing gender [and sex] has been and still is at the heart of managing sexual identity” (p. 49; Butler, 1996; Meyerowitz, 2002; Sedgwick, 1990; Shively & De Cecco, 1977; Stein, 2004). Jackson (2006) agrees, believing that “we recognize someone as male or female before we make any assumptions about heterosexuality or homosexuality.” The “homosexual/heterosexual distinction,” she writes, “depends upon socially meaningful gender [and sex] categories, on being able to ‘see’ two men or two women as ‘the same’ and a man and a woman as ‘different’” (p. 113).

Consider, for instance, an interview between Howard Stern and the bald, tattoo-covered, muscular and mustached porn star Buck Angel (Stern, 2006). Buck identifies as a “man with a vagina,” but Stern tries to invalidate Buck’s claim to a “man” identity. “If you have a vagina you’re a woman,” Stern remarks, though he uses “he” to describe Buck during much of the interview. It is only when Stern actively thinks about Buck’s vagina that Buck gets classified as a woman. Buck’s male-gendered body conflicts with his female-sexed body, and while Buck argues that a vagina does not make a person a

woman (gender), Stern argues that Buck's vagina (sex) trumps and disqualifies Buck's claim to be a man (gender).<sup>13</sup>

To complicate the situation, some of Stern's cast label Buck "gay," though they never explain why. What makes Buck gay (or straight)? Is sexuality based on Buck's gender or sex? If sexuality rests upon his (masculine) gender and he is physically (sexually) attracted to other individuals who perform and identify as men (gender), then this same-gender coupling may cast Buck as gay. If sexuality rests upon Buck's (masculine) gender and his attraction to other individuals who embrace a feminine, female appearance (gender), however, then Buck would be considered "straight." If sexuality rests upon Buck's (female) sex *and* his attraction to other individuals with female sex criteria, then Buck would appear to be a lesbian. However, if sexuality rests upon Buck's (female) sex, his vagina, and his attraction to other individuals with male sex criteria, the penis, then this may cast him as straight. Interestingly, bisexuality is never discussed as a possibility. While I contend that gay identity, at least for biological males, rests upon sex, not gender, I acknowledge that sexuality becomes increasingly complicated when a person's sex and gender conflict.

The United States Air Force acknowledged that it tried to find a way to make a "chemical that would cause enemy soldiers to become gay" and thus "irresistibly attractive to one another" causing their military units to fail (Hammond, cited in Anonymous, 2007). While Pentagon officials "quickly dismissed" the plan, it illustrates a variety of assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality. First, the plan assumed that "enemy soldiers" are of the same sex, most likely males. Second, by saying that the

---

<sup>13</sup> To see Buck Angel, visit [www.BuckAngel.com](http://www.BuckAngel.com).

chemical will increase same-sex attraction the plan assumed that all of the enemy soldiers are heterosexual.<sup>14</sup> Third, the plan assumed, or perpetuated the assumption that individuals of same-sex desire will be unable to control themselves; they will become irresistibly-attracted-to-each-other, in short, sex-addicts.<sup>15</sup>

Another example is a story that Melissa, a friend, a masculine female, told me in a previous project:

October, 1999. Minneapolis, Minnesota. My friends and I go to our favorite bar for happy hour. I walk in, sit down, and order a pitcher of Hamm's. I soon had to go to the restroom. At that time, I had no fear of public facilities.

I get up, walk past the crowded bar, and go into the woman's restroom. I notice a lady primping herself in the mirror. She was wearing black boots, tight jeans, and a black form-fitting shirt. She had a beautiful body, long dark hair, and green eyes. I glanced at her quickly because I did not want her to know that I was looking. In the mirror I saw her stop primping, cock her head to the side, and look at me.

---

<sup>14</sup> These assumptions make each other possible. The goal of the gay chemical is to make enemy soldiers attracted to each other. If the soldiers consisted of both men and women and if they were heterosexual, then they would already be attracted to each other, possibly causing their unit to fail. And turning a co-ed unit of soldiers gay would be just as futile: instead of men coupling with women and women coupling with men, men would couple with men and women with women. Thus, in order for the chemical to work enemy soldiers must be (a) of one sex and (b) heterosexual, that is, not already attracted to each other.

<sup>15</sup> The use of a gay bomb may seem absurd, but there is another instance when a gay bomb metaphor was used in a similar way. In 1955, Arthur Guy Mathews wanted newspapers across the United States to run headline "'EXTRA, EXTRA! COMMUNISTS ARE NOW CONVERTING AMERICAN YOUTH TO HOMOSEXUALITY TO DEFEAT US FROM WITHIN!'" This conversion, similar to the purpose of the aforementioned gay bomb, would make the new homosexuals "'shriek, scream, cry and break down into hysterical states of psychoses when they are called upon to carry arms to defend our shores from the enemy.'" The goal of homosexual conversion was to make youth "physically weak," and, as such, was considered by Mathews as "Stalin's Atom Bomb" (cited in Johnson, 2004, p. 37). Unlike the more recent gay bomb, this bomb assumes that men who become gay become feminized and are thus made weak and helpless, a homophobic *and* misogynistic assumption.

I then went into the stall. I heard her wash her hands and leave. I got a weird vibe from her, like she didn't know what gender I was. I felt that she wanted to ask if I was in the right restroom. I came out of the stall and went to the sink to wash my hands when the restroom door opened. I looked in the mirror and saw a guy standing behind me. I then saw the girl walk in behind him. I remember thinking that this was not a good situation.

I quickly grabbed paper towels, dried my hands, and tried to reach for the door but the guy grabbed my hand, swung me around, and smashed my head. That's all I remember. I woke up sitting in the stall with my head wedged half on the toilet, half off. My hands were covered in blood. My friends came in the restroom after hearing the guy tell the owner that he didn't understand why "dykes" were allowed in the bar.

I was taken to the hospital. A police officer came and asked if I would like to press charges. I said no. I was not ready for my family to find out about my sexuality. I was so scared and continue to fear public restrooms. (cited in Adams, 2006b)

Melissa's story introduces a situation where sex, gender, and sexuality collide. Based on her assigned sex (female), she decided to use the "woman's restroom." Once there, Melissa noticed a woman suspiciously look at her as if she were in the wrong bathroom; her "masculine" gender seemed to conflict with the sex she claimed, demonstrated by the act of walking into a woman's restroom. At this point, Melissa's gender ambiguity may have motivated discomfort. Based on gender, the woman in the bathroom may have assumed that Melissa belonged in the men's restroom. However,



when the man who assaulted Melissa left the restroom, he said that he “didn’t understand why ‘dykes’ were allowed in the bar.” Instead of being thought of as male, the man assumed Melissa was a “dyke”—a term, derogatory in this case, that describes a (usually masculine) woman who is attracted to other women—based on her gender inversion: her gender seemed to differ from her sex claim (again, emphasized by Melissa walking into the women’s restroom) and, as such, an attribution of sexuality (“dyke”) was made based upon a sex-gender conflict.

I consider “sex” the “socially agreed upon *biological* criteria for classifying persons as females or males” (West & Fenstermaker, 1987, p. 127, my emphasis; Davidson, 1987; Greenberg, 2000). Biological criteria often include a person’s internal chromosomes and reproductive organs, and her/his external genitalia. Genitalia, however, often play a more significant role in sex assignment when compared to a person’s chromosomes and reproductive organs (Garfinkel, 1967). The emphasis on genitalia as determinant of sex is visually-motivated and visually-biased: a person is classified as a particular kind of sexed person based on what can be *seen* most easily; chromosomes and reproductive organs can only be seen by a special few (but are assumed by most untrained observers to align with an individual’s genitalia). If I had a penis and a scrotum (marks of male genitalia), untrained others (such as non-medical professionals) may assume that I also possessed male chromosomes and male reproductive organs.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Intersexed individuals question this assumption. A few examples of intersexed bodies include persons who possess an enlarged clitoris that can be stimulated and able to penetrate a body, or persons who have an external vagina and internal testes (or vice versa), or persons who develop characteristics of vaginas and penises and physically develop characteristics of males and females (Coventry, 2000; Fausto-Sterling, 1993, 2000; Greenberg, 2002).

Moreover, sex can also be defined in two ways: sex-at-birth and sex-after-[sex/genital reassignment]-surgery (see Greenberg, 2000).

Sex as a category is complicated by the related category of gender. I consider gender the enactment of “*socially* agreed upon” criteria for classifying persons as male or female, man or woman, masculine or feminine (West & Fenstermaker, 1987, p. 127, my emphasis). Gender is assumed to be “congruent with genital configuration” (Gagné et. al., p. 479), what Sloop (2004) calls the “genitalia-equals-gender” equation (p. 131). Gender is an ambiguous abstraction never physically or psychically actualized (Gingrich-Philbrook, 1998; Gelber, 1997), an “ephemeral, contextual, and complicated” identity (Hopkins, 1998, p. 54) that is “continually constituted and reconstituted” through embodied, mundane practices (Glenn, 2000, p. 5; Butler, 1990). If gender is done wrong, if it does not match a person’s assumed and assigned sex, she or he may experience or become open to criticism, punishment, and physical harm (Garfinkel, 1967).

Sex assignment often influences a person’s gender assignment; for example, a person designated at birth as male (sex, often determined by the presence of a penis) usually is encouraged to be masculine (gender). Here, sex, the physical and biological, can influence gender, the social and psychological. However, gender assignment also influences a person’s sex assignment. If I see a woman (gender) walking across campus, I may perceive this woman to be female (sex).

Furthermore, a person’s self-claimed gender assignment can be used to modify her/his sex assignment. For example, a person designated at birth as male (sex) but who feels and acts female (gender) may choose to undergo *sex* re-assignment surgery (not *gender* re-assignment surgery). Here, gender, the social and psychological, can influence

one's self attributions about her/his "true" sex, the physical and biological person she or he should be.

I define sexuality in terms of a person's *sex* and attraction to an-other's *sex* (Butler, 2004; Cory, 1951; Ginsberg, 1974; Sedgwick, 1990, 1993; Somerville, 1994). However, sexuality becomes complicated when sex can be defined in two ways: sex-at-birth and sex-after-surgery. A male (sex-at-birth) attracted to a female (sex-after-surgery) may be considered heterosexual whereas if the man had been attracted to the person before surgery, he may be classified as gay.

A further complication: When a person has sex-reassignment-surgery but is still considered her/his sex-at-birth. Consider, for example, the legal case *Littleton v. Prange* (1999). Christie Littleton was born male (sex) and underwent sex reassignment surgery, an act that allowed her to change her name from Lee to Christie, allowed her to change her birth certificate from "male" to "female," and allowed her to marry a man, a heterosexual consummation further classifying her a woman as same-sex marriages were still illegal in Texas. Seven years after their marriage Jonathon, her husband, died because of medical error. Christie filed a suit against the doctors, but the defense argued that Christie was and will always be a man because of her original sex-at-birth and thus had no right to marry a man. The defense won the argument, invalidating Christie's marriage to Jonathan (Greenberg, 2000).

Sexuality has also been defined in terms of a person's gender and attraction toward another's gender (Adam, 2000; Boykin, 2005; Elizur & Ziv, 2001; Glave, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Padva, 2004; Patterson, 2000; Ross, 2005; Sedgwick, 1990), but sexuality-defined-in-terms-of-gender suggests that a feminine man coupled with a

masculine man could pass as a heterosexual couple. In most contexts, however, gender-gender coupling is not considered indicative of sexuality. For example, in most U.S. legal settings, a same-sex, opposite-gendered couple could not marry as they would still be considered a same-*sex* couple.

In this project, I study the experiences of biologically-sexed, sex-at-birth gay men (“bio-men”), not transsexual, sex-after-surgery, gay men (“trans-men”). When I refer to “gay men” in this project, I am referring to bio-men who are physically/sexually attracted to other bio-men. I believe that trans-men are men (gender) and that trans-men can be gay, but I assume that a trans-man’s experience of gay identity, an experience often intertwined with a sex/gender change, is different from that of a bio-man’s experience of gay identity, particularly because he does not have to navigate a sex/gender change. In other words, trans-men may have to negotiate coming out processes similar to gay bio-men, but unlike gay bio-men, they must also attend to ways sex re-assignment surgery affects sexual identity and desire.

\*\*\*\*

*Amy has bubbling energy, a bright smile, and, based upon the oversized brown backpack, seems dedicated to school. Like me, she’s in her first semester at Southern Illinois University, and, like me, she has completed two years at her local community college. I am nineteen years old.*

*During the first weeks of the semester, Amy and I arrive early to class, each awaiting the other. Always, we converse until the professor approaches the podium. Expectantly, we leave together, each speaking of forthcoming days, exchanging phone numbers, making plans.*

*“I just ended a three-year relationship,” Amy says, making the conditions possible for a potential date. I think she likes me, but I’m not sure. Maybe her flirting is an act of politeness, not interest. She hasn’t asked me out, nor has she mentioned any interest in a romantic affair.*

*“Want to go to dinner?” I eventually ask, feeling confident but fearing rejection.*

*“Sounds fun,” she says. I gleam.*

*I think I like Amy. She’s smart, attractive, and motivated. I think we would connect well. “I can and should date a woman,” I tell myself. “And Amy is perfect.”*

*We dine at Lonestar Steakhouse. In a few days we dine again at Applebees, and then at Quatros Pizzeria. In a few weeks, we watch, or try to watch, Shakespeare in Love. It is during the watching of this movie where first kisses are exchanged, kisses that, for me, feel meaningless.*

*“Will you stay the night?” she asks, an offer I refuse.*

*“Can’t. I have class in the morning.”*

*“Will you stay the night?” she asks in class the next day.*

*“Can’t. I must work.”*

*“Will you stay the night?” she asks a few days later.*

*“Can’t. I’m going out with friends.”*

*We repeat our dining cycle one more time: Lonestar, Applebees, Quatros. We kiss before and after each meal, but never are alone together again.*

\*\*\*\*

The majority of Bernard Cooper’s *Truth Serum* (1996) focuses on his attempt to change his same-sex desire. “I became the scientist of my own desire,” he writes,

plotting ways to change my yearning for boys into a yearning for girls. I had enough evidence to believe that any habit, regardless of how compulsive, how deeply ingrained, could be broken once and for all: the plastic cigarette my mother purchased at the Thrifty pharmacy (one end was red to approximate an ember, the other tan like a filter tip) was designed to wean her from the real thing. To change a behavior required self-analysis, cold resolve, and the substitution of one thing for another: plastic, say, for tobacco. Could I also find a substitute for [my same-sex feelings]? What I needed to do, I figured, was kiss a girl and learn to like it. (pp. 6-7)

Cooper continues, saying he “had gotten to the point where I would try almost anything in order to change, from praying to giving up masturbation” (p. 54). “To be homosexual,” he writes, “was to invite ostracism and ridicule, and I would have done just about anything to escape my need to masturbate to images of men. I bargained with myself, made promises not to, devised equations of abstinence and reward” (p. 67).

E. Lynn Harris (2003) makes a similar observation:

I don’t recall the exact day I discovered I was gay or different. When I was young I always felt that it was something that only God and I knew. That was our little secret and made me feel closer to Him. Still, being gay was the one thing about me that I prayed constantly that God would change. He didn’t. (p. 4)

“I realized that my [same-sex] urges were getting stronger,” Pozyki, a contributor to the collection *From Boys to Men* (2006), writes.

[S]o I found the phone number of a ministry that claimed they could help people stop being homosexual. I was assigned a counselor who would meet and pray

with me once a week until I became heterosexual, which I hoped would take no more than a month or two. (p. 95)

McGinty (2006), a contributor to the same collection, writes of similar feelings. At the age of sixteen, he remembers, I had to “admit to myself that these [same-sex] feelings are never going away, and that one day I am going to hurt someone I care about unless I stop pretending they will” (p. 284).

When I first recognized my same-sex desire, I believed it would change as long as I tried to get aroused by women. When I started to realize, however, the permanency of this desire, or that if I wanted to change it I might have to undergo years and decades of (harmful) repression and therapy, I started to embrace the desire and its corresponding labels. An acknowledgment of my desire’s permanency did not push me into the closet but did serve as a condition for its possibility.

\*\*\*\*

Foucault (1978) writes that “Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy into a kind of interior androgyny. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (p. 43; Bell, 2006; Chirrey, 2003; Lee, 1979; McIntosh, 1968; Meyer, 1995; Seidman, 2002; Somerville, 1994; Weeks, 1996). It is this transposition from being a *temporary* aberration to being a species, a kind of person, that Fuss (1991) says “marks the moment of the homosexual’s disappearance—into the closet” (p. 4).

If coming out of the closet is an act that requires others to attend to a person being of a particular kind (Chirrey, 2003), if the saying “I am gay” is a statement of being (Cornell, 2007), then a person can only experience the closet when she or he becomes

aware of the enduring identity and/or desire. A person acknowledges that her/his identity and/or desire may exist for a substantial amount of time or take a significant amount of work to change; same-sex “tendencies” become more than one time affairs. When a person begins to *recognize* and then *embrace* the stability of same-sex desire, recognize the desire as not a temporary aberration but rather something that will not change, then it becomes necessary for her or him to identify *as* gay. If a person believes an identity or desire will not endure, then she or he may allow time to pass believing that change could occur.

A condition of the closet: *When a person acknowledges that her/his identity and/or desire will continue for an indeterminate amount of time, perhaps forever, or will, at the very least, take a significant amount of work to change.* If such a perception of stability does not endure, then she or he may allow time to pass, knowing that her/his devalued kind of being may change, hopefully for the better.

\*\*\*\*

*“Another pitcher please,” I say. “Bud Light.” The bartender takes and fills the empty container. As I wait, I see a woman staring my way. Our eyes connect and we exchange smiles.*

*“Four dollars, please,” the bartender says. I give him a five, take the pitcher, and return to my friends on the other side of the bar. From the corner of my eye I see the woman watch my return.*

*When my friends and I finish the beer, I notice the woman still looking at me. I decide to approach her.*

*“Hi, I’m Tony.”*



*“Beth. Nice to meet you.”*

*“We’ve been exchanging glances all night,” I say. “Thought I should introduce myself.”*

*“Glad you did,” she replies.*

*Beth separates from her friends, I separate from mine. We get another pitcher of beer and our own table. We exchange stories, finish the pitcher, then get another. We flirt, touch, and prepare for the next move: an outside-of-bar date, one-night sleepover, or both. We decide on a sleepover at my apartment, a place within walking distance of the bar.*

*The alcohol allows me to think I can intimately perform for Beth. “She’s cute,” I tell myself. “I know I can be attracted to her.”*

*When we arrive in my room, we climb into bed. Beth’s skin smells like beer; her hair, stale cigarette. We sloppily kiss and cuddle. I remove her shirt; she removes mine. Pants follow. I begin touching her breasts unsure of what I am supposed to do to or with them. She places her hand in my boxers and begins touching, stroking my dick. No response.*

*“I guess I’ve had too much to drink,” I say.*

*“That’s okay,” she replies. “We’ll wait until morning.”*

*The next morning I hope she forgets the “let’s wait until morning” comment. She seems to forget and I’m thankful.*

*Beth and I date for six months, but spend most of our time together drunk. On most occasions, alcohol allowed me to think I could sexually perform for Beth. “She’s*

*cute,” I would tell myself. “I know I can be attracted to her.” But I also knew the buzz could also serve as an excuse for not being able to perform.*

*“I guess I’ve had too much to drink,” I’d say most every night.*

*“That’s okay,” she’d reply. “We’ll wait until morning.”*

\*\*\*\*

I have been arguing that gay, as a kind of person possessing particular desires, is a difficult kind of person to observe; it is hard to connect same-sex sexual desires, as constitutive of this identity, to physical bodies (Butler, 1991; Fuss, 1991; Foucault, 1978). A person who engages in same-sex sexual acts or who desires others of the same-sex does not necessarily identify as gay or feel that she or he should identify as such (Adam, 2000). “The mark of the true sexual deviant was the conscious inversion of gender norms—such as men wearing flamboyant clothing, using make-up, and displaying exaggerated mannerisms,” Johnson (2004) writes. It was not necessarily “sexual contact with individuals of the same sex” (p. 162). In places like the United States it was not until the 1950s that “the *sex* of one’s sexual partner was increasingly more determinative of one’s status than was one’s self-presentation or role,” regardless of whether he was “insertive or receptive” (p. 163). Even now, however, some men may only identify as gay if they assume a passive, penetrated, “feminine” role in sex (Labi, 2007; La Pastina, 2006; Meyer, 1995; Phellas, 2005; Ross, 2005; Shakespeare, 1999). And there are men who engage in *all* same-sex sexual acts who do not self-identify as gay such as those working in the porn industry (Escoffier, 2003; Seidman et al., 1999) and those who consider themselves on the “down low” (Boykin, 2005; King, 2005; González, 2007; Phillips, 2005). My interviewees, along with Berzon (2002), Cooper (1996), Fries (1997),

and Harris (2003), all speak about a time of participating in same-sex sexual acts without or before identifying as gay.

This is a reason why gayness—and sexuality in general—makes some people uncomfortable: being invisible, it must be pinned down and negotiated in discourse; it lacks physical, observable qualities. I can say I am gay today, say I am straight tomorrow, and say I am bisexual the next, and there will be no physical traces of my transition.

As such, sexuality is a self-claimed identity. The closet—a metaphor relevant to and made possible by gay identity—can thus only exist when a person identifies as gay. The discourse of the closet does not necessarily apply to people *others* identify as gay. I could say that “X is gay,” but my claim would not push X into the closet. I may think that X is gay, or will be someday, or is lying to her or himself and others, but if X does not identify as gay, then X cannot come out of the closet; coming out is predicated on disclosure of an acknowledged gay identity.

I arrive to the seventh—and most important—condition of the closet: *A person must self-identify as gay*. If a person does not believe she or he is gay, then the closet has little relevance.

\*\*\*\*

Before a person can come out of a closet, she or he must first go into a closet. In this chapter, I highlighted seven conditions necessary for a gay identity and the closet to exist: a person must (1) have the language of “gay” and know about this kind of person; recognize that gay identity and/or desire possesses a (2) *marginal* and a (3) *devalued* status; realize that gay identity and/or desire (4) may encounter negative criticism from others *when discussed*; know (5) she or he harbors a secret, that gay identity and/or desire

is not readily, easily accessible; realize that her/his gay identity and/or desire will (6) not go away on demand; and (7) *self-identify* as gay.

When these conditions are met, then an individual discovers the existence of the closet, a space where a door can be closed or opened, a space where coming out becomes possible, sometimes necessary, always problematic. I describe this space in the next chapter. I also argue that once these conditions are met, once an individual identifies as gay, then she or he can never live outside of closet discourse again; the metaphor remains a formative influence on her/his life. I will return to this idea in the last two chapters.

\*\*\*\*

*I am twenty-two. Christina is my best friend of seven years and is seven years my senior. Our “intimate” relationship begins in January. It ends in May. During our time together my same-sex desire emerges, solidifies, and hurts.*

*“We should date,” Christina suggests. “We have fun together.”*

*“Sounds nice,” I say, “but we live three hours apart.”*

*“I’ll come to see you every weekend,” she replies.*

*“You’d do that?” I ask. “Convenient,” I think.*

*“For you I would,” she says.*

*We couple. As planned, Christina visits every weekend. During our time together, we relax and watch television, go to dinner, movies, and sometimes karaoke though she doesn’t like to sing. Beyond the casual kiss, we’re never intimate. I know I am not attracted to her, but feel as though I should be.*

*“Why haven’t we tried to have sex yet?” she asks after a few months.*

*“I’ve been too busy,” I reply. “And I’d like to wait until we’re married.”*

*“We could be more intimate, though.”*

*“I suppose, but I think we’re fine.”*

*I do want to be intimate, but she doesn’t excite me. When we make out, I try to force an erection, to pass as attracted-to-her. I don’t want Christina to feel unattractive.*

*Two months into the relationship, I begin to realize, then acknowledge to myself, that I am sexually, relationally, intimately stimulated by men. But I do not have gay friends. The few people whom I think of as gay are people I’ve learned I should ridicule, those I call fairies, queers, faggots, dykes, disgusting human beings who can never get married, have kids, live meaningful lives, or stay free of sexually transmitted disease. The people I think of as gay are nothing but cock-sucking scum of the earth, immoral creatures not worthy of life, beings destined for hell. The people I think of as gay are people I despise—and resemble.*

*Five months into this uncertain and turbulent relationship, I think about appropriate ways of ending us. I think about the possibility of making our relationship work, forcefully getting married and having kids with Christina, while privately envisioning my love, lust, and desire for men. I think about talking with Christina about my same sex desire, but then think that she cannot understand something that I don’t understand myself. My desire feels too new, weird, and disappointing.*

*“I don’t like you anymore,” I tell Christina on the phone. “You’re overbearing. I’m not attracted to you, either.”*

*“What? Why are you saying this?” she asks.*

*“I don’t like you. You’re boring. You’re ugly. You’re mean.”*

*She remains silent, and I think I hear her begin to cry.*

*“We’re not compatible,” I demand.*

*“Whyy are you saying this!” she whines. “I love you, Tony!”*

*“But I don’t love you. Never have, never will. Don’t call me either.”*

*She hangs up the phone. I do not call her back. I feel guilty and relieved.*

\*\*\*\*

*Christina is the last woman with whom I give off the impression of heterosexuality. After her, I quit deceiving myself. Instead, I retreat to Wyoming to work at a resort without a phone, without email, without contact with family and friends. I retreat into uncertainty, confusion, despair, and shame. Working as a bartender, I retreat into alcohol, a medium for suppressing my same-sex desire, a substance that allows me to continually suppress my feelings every night until morning. I retreat into the closet.*

## Chapter Five: Living the Closet

Closets are a place of death.  
Mel White, *For the Bible Tells Me So* (Karslake, 2007)

*“Today’s my last day,” you say to your boss of two years. “I’m leaving for Wyoming tomorrow. Sorry if this puts you in a bind. I need to leave.”*

*“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” she asks.*

*“I didn’t know sooner.”*

*Your retreat to a Wyoming resort is made possible by completing an online application one Thursday afternoon, passing a phone interview on Friday, and telling friends and family on Saturday of the newly-acquired bartending job—an abrupt decision to move more than 1500 miles, a reckless and sudden separation from others without much concern for their feelings.*

*“Here’s the rent for three months,” you say to your roommate, and hand him cash. “I’m leaving for Wyoming.”*

*“Why?” he asks, amazed by the money, intrigued with your plans.*

*“Because I want to. Don’t ask stupid questions.”*

\*\*\*\*

*The resort is located two miles east of the east entrance of Yellowstone National Park. There is a restaurant, gift shop, bar, horse stables, and gas station on the property along with a house once occupied by Buffalo Bill Cody, approximately thirty guest houses, and male/female, rent-free living quarters for the employees. You share a room*

*with four guys, occupying the bottom of a two-tiered bunk. There is one shower, cleaned not too often, and your peers, other employees, prepare breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day of every year. Most of the workers have made careers working at the resort, many having been there for ten, fifteen and sometimes twenty years. They treat you as an invasive stranger, summer help who will be gone soon.*

*These others also distrust you. Many used to live on the street and had to work to secure lodging and food. Then they see you, someone who has never lived on the street, never worried about sleeping and eating arrangements. You're an outsider, they believe, or a temporary insider, you believe, who will try to become, seem, or act as a permanent, sincere, and serious worker who cares about them. You do this by saying that you'll stay in contact if and when you leave, but know, secretly and silently, that when you're gone and when you refuse contact that their bitterness towards outsiders will only increase. Their bitterness is justified, you think, but you care only about yourself.*

\*\*\*\*

Michael narrates a time between “acknowledging his same-sex attraction” and “explicitly disclosing” his gay identity to others. “It was the time between 14 and 21,” he says.

By my freshman year of high school I knew who I was attracted to, but I didn't admit to my attraction until much later. It was admitting to someone else that I was gay that I believed was a big deal. My sexuality was my private lot to deal with. And so I never explicitly said I was gay until much later. (personal interview, 2007)



Seth describes a time when he privately embraced his same-sex desire but acted as if it did not exist. “Nothing felt normal,” he says.

Everything was pre-planned. I felt like an actor. Nothing felt real because I was hiding my sexuality and my relationships. I had to isolate a lot of people. I felt like I was in a very cold fridge, a freezer. I couldn’t socialize because it was too unnatural. It was kind of like being a puppet. I was a puppet. (personal interview, 2007)

In his memoir, E. Lynn Harris (2003) describes a time when he initially embraced same-sex desire but did not speak to others about it:

It didn’t matter how many girls I dated or how many lies I told. My infatuations with men were going to cause major problems for me . . . I felt a great deal of shame. I was convinced that if anyone found out about my feelings for men I would be laughed off campus by the other black students. I guess it would have been easier if I was just looking for sex, but I wanted love. (p. 105)

In *For the Bible Tells Me So* (Karlslake, 2007), a documentary about homosexuality and religion, Reverend Mel White observes that

Closets are a place of death. So many gay people are forced to live in two different realities: the world where they are pretending and then that closet world where they have these fears and feelings of guilt and anger and shame.

In this chapter, I describe the epiphanical moment of living in the closet, a time when a person *privately* acknowledges a “contested social identity” but *publicly* discounts this identity by saying and acting *as if* the identity doesn’t exist (Seidman et. al., 1999, p. 9; Downs, 2005; Gross, 1991; Rasmussen, 2004).

Life in the closet is a time when a person tries to present her or himself as straight for others, a time of “deception and duplicity,” a time where an individual hides her/his “homosexuality in the most important areas of life, with family, friends, and at work” (Seidman, 2002, p. 25), a time where an individual “closely monitors his or her speech, emotional expression, and behavior in order to avoid unwanted suspicion” (pp. 30-31), and a time when a gay person becomes a “very good liar” (Harris, 2003, p. 100).

Life in the closet is a time when an individual comes out to oneself but not necessarily, or intentionally, to others (Chirrey, 2003; Lazerson, 1981; Shakespeare, 1999), a time when “same-sex childhood fantasies or close friendships” often become retrospectively reinterpreted as “early evidence of homosexuality” (Rust, 1993, p. 54).

Life in the closet is a time when a gay identity is disclosed through “coded gestures” (Urbach, 1996, p. 63), a time of “ventriloquism,” a continuous learning of “how to pass for straight,” a “mouthing” of “other’s stories in the absence” of one’s own (Monette, cited in Plummer, 1995, p. 84).

Life in the closet is a time when a person “carefully selects the books” she or he reads, becomes increasingly guarded about her/his friends, and may “join a hostile conversation” about gay individuals (Cory, 1951, p. 247), a time that cultivates and advocates for moments of extreme selfishness, a time indicative of “shame, denial, and self-hatred” (Phellas, 2005, p. 79), a time perceived as reckless, traumatic, and unhealthy (Brown, 2000; Signorile, 2007), a time when the “fear of revealing one’s sexual identity becomes a focus in the life of a gay man; violence keeps gay men in the closet” (Clatterbaugh, 1997, p. 142).

\*\*\*\*

*A heroin addict shares your room, a man who says he's 35 but is easily mistaken for 50, a man who has worked at the resort for twelve years, a man whose veins burst through the skin of his nostrils and whose rotting teeth perpetually fall out. He says he'll get fake teeth if possible, which will serve as insignia of a drug habit you pretend to understand, but don't. He often asks for rides to town to buy Pabst Blue Ribbon, pornography, and heroin. You usually comply. You don't really care about him or his life. Let him enjoy himself, you think, but know his body will soon fail, unable to sustain the drug habit that controls him, an addiction you enable.*

*"Why won't you speak to me?" an ex-girlfriend asks in a letter. "What did I do to hurt you?" she continues. "Why won't you call?" You trash the note and prepare for work.*

*A co-worker gives you a gift, a small bottle an inch-and-a-half in diameter with a small ship inside. The ship-in-the-bottle appeals to you; it speaks to your isolation, uncertainty, enclosing suffocation. He gives you the bottle because you engage him; you listen, react, and exude concern. You know you don't mean it, the attention you pay him is superficial. Others disregard him because they're tired of listening to him reminisce about a failed thirty-year marriage and the despair he expresses about his estranged kids. You feel guilty about taking the ship-in-the-bottle, one of his few possessions, because you know you won't talk to him after you leave. But you take it anyway.*

\*\*\*\*

An email from a high school friend: Knowing that I identified as gay, he asked if I had "tips" for "coming out." He wanted to learn how to "not feel bad about myself anymore." Recently, he quit a six-year period of reparative therapy, which tries to make

gay people straight or at least unable to act upon same-sex desires. His parents required and funded the therapy. His embrace of a “gay” label called into question who he is and/or should be.

Hacking (1990) contends that “new categories of people” create new ontologies (p. 70). Using “labeling theory,” a theory assuming that “social reality is conditioned, stabilized, or even created by the labels we apply to people, actions, and communities” (p. 74), he notes that the activities in which we engage are “intimately connected to our descriptions” (p. 80). Similar to Hacking, Rosenhan (1984) believes that labels work like self-fulfilling prophecies: self-perception can be conditioned by labels other people apply to us; it is difficult not to see yourself the ways others do.

McIntosh (1968) directly applies labeling theory to socially-marginal and socially-devalued populations. She argues that labeling people in marginal and devalued ways “operates in two ways as a mechanism of social control” (p. 183). First, labeling provides a “clear-cut, publicized, and recognizable threshold between permissible and impermissible behavior” (p. 183). Second, labeling segregates individuals from others, making it possible to “contain” deviant practices and self-justifications within a “relatively narrow group” (p. 183; see also Foucault, 1978). Lorde (1984) agrees, noting that a label and its corresponding evaluation can encourage one to dislike and hate persons aligning with a devalued label. “Gay” works as one of these labels.

\*\*\*\*

*You receive a Federal Express envelope in need of a signature, the right hand corner marked with \$18.00 of postage. “I’m not sure what happened to us” an ex-girlfriend writes in the letter. “I’m not sure why we’ve grown distant. I apologize if I*

*scared you. Will you please call? I miss you. I love you. I only want the best for you.”*  
*You quit reading, and throw it away. You miss the ex-girlfriend, your friend, and know you hurt her. But you’re not ready to discuss your same-sex desire.*

*Your boss is a gay man. Being the first self-identified gay person you’ve ever met, you wonder why he’s lived at the resort for eight years. You begin to embrace a familiar stereotype: He must be “sick” with HIV or AIDS (at this point both are the same). He has retreated to Wyoming to die an isolating and isolated death away from his New Orleans family and friends, away from anyone who knew him before he came out as gay and got sick. Throughout the summer this stereotyped sickness becomes your reality as you worry he’s contagious and wonder what to do if he touches, kisses, and tries to fuck you while you sleep, because you’ve heard gay people sometimes fuck sleeping men. Or maybe that is what you’d like to do to sleeping men. You’ll worry more about your boss if he tells you that you’re cute, and asks you to stay the night, a gesture you perceive as gay code for wanting to fuck. A few weeks later, he does. In a drunken haze you politely refuse, but he asks again. You react abrasively, saying that you aren’t gay and don’t identify with that word or have any desire for male relations, a lie of course. You’d like to amplify this abrasiveness by telling him that even if you were gay you wouldn’t touch his sick body because he’s a gross, less-than-human being who did one wonderful thing by not disgracing his family and friends, choosing to live isolated in Wyoming instead.*

\*\*\*\*

Often, trauma is considered a defining characteristic of gay identity (Cvetkovich, 2003; Halberstam, 2005; Sedgwick, 2003). “If there is any characteristic of homosexual

life that has been instrumental in the development of homogenous group traits,” Cory (1951) writes, “it is probably the pretense and the mask” (p. 97).

Tyler says that gay culture maintains itself on people who feel “disenfranchised” and “need to survive” (personal interview, 2007). Downs (2005) argues that gay men are “emotionally disabled by an environment that taught us we were unacceptable, not ‘real’ men and therefore, shameful” (p. 21), men that, in the words of Lorde (1984), absorb “loathing as a natural state” (p. 156). Gay becomes not just a kind of person bound by same-sex desire, but also a kind of person bound by and immersed in shame and the affiliated traumatic experience of identifying as gay.

Life in the closet: an epiphany; a turning point during which gay trauma is felt most severely; a time when a person privately embraces a gay label; a time when shame takes hold; a time when internalized homophobia becomes lived experience.

\*\*\*\*

*You begin to miss family and friends but know you can't speak about missing them because you're one of the few employees at the resort who has others to miss, others who care and shower you with love. Feeling confused and alone you decide to leave the resort forever one random Monday morning at 2 a.m., after finishing work, after securing the evening's cash and locking the bar, after gathering clothes from the room you shared with four guys.*

*The bottled-ship gift man stops you at the door. He asks if you've "had a good night" to which you reply "yes" and that you're "getting something in your car" to which he replies, compassionately, "watch out for the bison, bears, and moose" because they'll "charge, hit, and kill people during the dark hours of morning." "Thanks," you*

*say. You say nothing of leaving or that you'll never see him again. It's easy to end relationships this way—by avoidance—which concerns you, but you act as if you don't care. When you arrive at the car, you still see the man sitting on the front step of the building. You enter the vehicle, turn on its headlights, and drive away without ever saying bye. You never want to be contacted by anyone at the resort, or by friends and family you've successfully managed to avoid these last few months.*

*You struggle in your relationships with others. You don't want to be lonely any longer but are fearful to speak about your same-sex desire. You're unsure of how to embrace your gay identity; you dwell in feelings of confusion. You also don't like your abrasiveness with others, your lack of care about them, and your lack of like for yourself, but do not know how to escape the situation you're in.*

\*\*\*\*

Tyler describes how the normalization of heterosexuality—and thus the abnormalization of homosexuality—can motivate self-dislike:

I find that a lot of individuals internally battle with being gay. They tell themselves, “I want to live that normal life. I want the house with the picket fence and the dog and the family and I want people to wave at me when I walk down the streets and I want that life that has been painted for me, but I can't have that.”  
(personal interview, 2007)

Melissa, an interviewee from an earlier project, agrees:

There are people that identify as heterosexual because that is what you're supposed to be. You are not supposed to be gay. You are not supposed to deviate from the idea of having 2.5 kids, a dog named Spot, a house, a husband, kids,

whatever. Individuals internalize these ideas. There are so many people out there living in a fairy tale world, a world that says you have to be straight in order to make it. I don't think such a belief legitimizes homosexuality. (cited in Adams, 2006b)

\*\*\*\*

Homophobia is defined as the “hatred or fear of homosexuals” (*Oxford*, 2001, p. 387; Kielwasser and Wolf, 1992).<sup>17</sup> Internalized homophobia is defined as “the gay person’s direction of negative social attitudes toward the self,” an act that can motivate “internal conflicts and poor self-regard” (Meyer & Dean, 1998; p. 161; Yep, 2003). As Cory (1951) observes, “A person cannot live in an atmosphere of universal rejection, of widespread pretense, of a social world that jokes and sneers at every turn without a fundamental influence on his personality” (p. 12); Lorde (1984) agrees, noting, “To grow up metabolizing hatred like daily bread means that eventually every human interaction becomes tainted with the negative passion and intensity of its by-products—anger and cruelty” (p. 152).

Internalized homophobia can also “lead to an unfortunate curtailment of social and emotional life” (Hopcke, 1993, p. 70). Wayne, another friend and gay man who has “been out” since 1977, feels the “curtailment of social and emotional life” that Hopcke describes. As a fitness enthusiast, he deals with curtailment every time he visits the local gym, a place not conducive to gay people.

---

<sup>17</sup> Even though homophobia possesses the homo- prefix, I believe that homophobia involves a fear and hatred of all non-heterosexual individuals, not just homosexuals. In other words, bisexuals and queers can also experience homophobia, and while transgender-ism and transsexual-ism do not involve issues of sexuality per se—e.g., one can identify as transsexual *and* heterosexual—homophobia can also affect these individuals especially when trans-individuals are discursively grouped under the “sexuality” category, e.g., LGBTQ. Homophobia does not just involve a fear of homosexuals; it can also describe a fear or hatred of individuals who “disrupt” mainstream conventions of sex, gender, and sexuality.



“I’m totally open and out at the gym,” he says. “Now I don’t ‘flaunt’ my sexuality around the place, but I do have my rainbow sticker on my car and a large pink triangle tattooed on my upper arm. If anyone asks, I’m happy to tell them.”

“Does this affect your interactions with others at the gym?” I ask.

“Yeah. It affects me because I feel that I cannot go up to other individuals and have a ‘regular’ conversation with them. I’m not sure if I am going to slip and do something gay or out of the ordinary—whatever that may be—since they may freak out.<sup>18</sup> I wish there was a gay gym in the area, but I don’t think that’ll happen anytime soon” (cited in Adams, 2004).

Relational constraints reside beneath the surface of this conversation. Gay persons may work towards being “totally open” yet must refrain from “flaunting” sexuality. Furthermore, Will believes that gay men should maintain “ordinary” [read: heterosexual] appearances or risk being ostracized. And, for him, it seems that gay-friendly spaces, or at least desires for them, become important visions since such spaces provide opportunities for gay people to avoid worrying about whether they would “slip” into non-hetero behaviors and thereby “freak” out people.

Pain and inhibited interaction are definable features usually associated with internalized homophobia. Based on my interviews, observations in the field, and my lived experience, I argue that internalized homophobia grows out of life in the closet, when a gay person engages in an intentional and intense use of hiding practices, acts of omission, and lies, extreme bouts of selfishness, and risky or reckless sexual activities. I describe

---

<sup>18</sup> Hyde (1980) argues that “the more ‘anxious or fearful’ persons are about engaging in a given communication situation, the less likely they will perform in a way that society deems ‘acceptable’” (p. 140).

the lived experience of these practices, acts, lies, bouts, and activities in detail throughout this chapter.

\*\*\*\*

“I’d like to move to New York,” Dana says. “But if I move Camille would move with me. And this means that I’d have to tell my parents about us.”

“You haven’t told them?” I ask.

“No.”

“But the two of you have been together for three years,” I say.

“I know but we tell a lot of people that we’re only friends. I’m scared of how my parents would react. I don’t want to be kicked out of the house. I don’t want them to cut me off financially. I don’t want them to hate me.”

“Then why do you have to tell them? Why not keep the relationship a secret?”

“They’d think it’s weird if Camille and I moved to New York together, and it’s difficult knowing that those I love do not know who I love. What happens if I die? What if I am remembered to have never dated, never loved? What would Camille do? Come to my funeral and tell others that she was just a good friend? I’ve already had to face my death once. I can’t think about my life, my death, without Camille.”

I met Dana in one of my classes. She is someone I consider a “pillar of strength,” someone who withstands significant turmoil but exudes self-confidence, someone who makes being fun and has fun being. When Dana was 22, she was informed that her kidneys were failing and that she would die if a transplant didn’t happen. Dana’s mom gave her a kidney.

“That’s something many 22-year-olds don’t experience,” I say.

“I know,” she responds. “I had to plan my funeral. I had to think about dying. And now I’m scared to tell my parents that I’m dating a woman.”

A tear runs down her cheek.

“I could die on the way home,” she continues. “My kidney could fail again. My funeral would happen but the people closest to me would not know about my love for Camille, our love for each other.”

Dana’s situation directly speaks to living in the closet—a time when a person privately embraces a gay identity and/or same-sex desire but publicly denies the possibility of this identity and/or desire. Living in the closet is a persistently vulnerable experience, one when a self-identified gay person is more likely to conceal her/his “feelings and erect a façade” (Henry, 1965, p. 101). It is a time when a person keeps secrets, engages in hiding practices, omits information, and tells a surplus of lies.

Seth also speaks of the pain of shrouding same-sex desire. “My first boyfriend was Nicholas,” he says.

We met in school and we were fourteen. But this was a big secret. You could never tell anyone at that age. It was taboo, one of the biggest taboos. At the same time I remember dating girls to hide. But this was a big mistake. I ended up hurting Nicholas and causing more pain in me. (personal interview, 2007)

\*\*\*\*

“I can’t, to this day, imagine what childhood would have been like without the need for secrecy, and the constant vigilance secrecy requires,” Bernard Cooper (1996) writes.

The elaborate strategies, psychic acrobatics . . . . Every day you await disgrace. You look for an ally and do not find one, because to find one would mean you had told. You pretend to be a person you are not, then worry that your pretense is obvious, as vulnerable to taunts as the secret itself. In a desperate attempt at self-protection, you shrink yourself down to nearly nothing, and still you are there, as closed as stone. (p. 70)

\*\*\*\*

A scene from the novel *Brokeback Mountain*: Alma, Ennis's wife, asks Ennis to "use rubbers" during sex because she dreads another pregnancy. Ennis refuses and says he'd happily leave her alone if she "didn't want any more of his kids." Elma responds, under her breath, with "I'd have em if you'd support em," and under the breath of that breath, with "what you like to do don't make too many babies" (Proulx, 1999, p. 269). Elma has suspicions that Ennis is attracted to men and is having sex with another man, but Ennis continues to aggressively hide his attraction to men, a veil of secrecy, relationally manifest.

Secrecy takes its toll on the secretive person and her/his close, personal others. As Simmel (1964) observes, "For even where one of the two does not notice the existence of a secret, the behavior of the concealer, and hence the whole relationship, is certainly modified by it" (p. 330).

\*\*\*\*

*"Watch me pee," a female stranger demands. You are 22.*

*"Okay," you reply. You're drunk at a party and easily oblige but you don't have any desire to watch.*

*When finished, she makes another request: "Now I want to watch you."*

*"Okay," you oblige since you're at a party, drunk, but you don't have any desire to watch her watch you pee.*

*"Drive me to the liquor store," she says when you finish.*

*"Okay," you say, believing you aren't too drunk to drive as long as someone else thinks you can drive well.*

*"Whadd'ya like?" she abruptly asks in the car. "Boys or girls?"*

*"Girls," you say after a slight pause. On the ten minute trip, she asks about likes and dislikes, attractions and turn-offs, desires and disgusts, and you realize you should figuratively take a few steps back, assemble relational walls, deploy dishonest comments. You don't want her to think you're interested in an intimate relationship, and you lie and dodge questions and make up answers about seeing someone, a girlfriend who couldn't attend the party.*

*"Want to suck my nipple?" she asks on the drive back to the party. "I just got it pierced."*

*"Okay," you reply. You're drunk and easily oblige but don't have any desire to suck.*

*She reveals her large, pale breasts and puts a hand on the back of your head, moves it through your hair, and then pulls you towards an exposed nipple. You lick and suck, unsure of what to do, disliking what's happening, enjoying that you're making a story to tell heterosexual friends about the sexy woman who demanded you lick and suck her pierced breasts. Your desire to remain secret about your desire makes for a "mockery of pleasure" (Lawrence, 1914, p. 9), allowing you to participate in an*

*undesirable, intimate affair that will upon ending immerse you in an agony of irritation because you engaged in an intimate act you didn't like or want to do, an agony of torment because you engaged in an act that may have suggested you like this person in an intimate kind of way, an agony of misery because you still refuse to speak of your same-sex desire and took advantage of this person only to make a story to tell friends whom you don't really want to impress by seeming to be a person you are not.*

*After a few moans she pushes your head towards the other breast, and you continue to lick and suck, pretending you enjoy it, attempting to pass as straight, trying to garner pleasure from watching her receive pleasure from your tongue, mouth, and teeth. After a few minutes, she removes the hand from the back of your head, a gesture that implies you can stop.*

\*\*\*\*

Consider how Tyler re-names himself for two kinds of people, those he perceives as friendly and those about whom he's uncertain:

My first name is Tyler and my middle name is James. When I meet people that may have a problem with my sexuality, I introduce myself as Tyler. But when I meet people that I don't think will have a problem with my sexuality, I introduce myself as James. That way I can keep the world straight. If somebody says "Hey James" I know they're friendly. If somebody says Tyler, I'm not sure. (personal interview, 2007)

Tyler shows a hyper-awareness of regulating who he meets and who might know of his gay identity through the mundane use and alteration of his name.

Or consider how Seth engages in an exhaustive self-monitoring of his body in order to try to achieve a masculine-and-thus-assumed-heterosexual male identity:

When I was 15, 16, 17, I remember how important it was to learn the correct way to hold my hands. You wanted to look straight and not look radical. I would imitate students sitting next to me to see how they would sit and how they would hold their hands and how they would talk. I would try to grasp that voice, the deepness. I felt like I looked mechanical. Nothing came out natural. I soon said “Fuck! This is killing me!” I hate having to sit a certain way, act a certain way to be accepted and so people wouldn’t doubt my sexuality.” I think a part of all this imitating still haunts me. (personal interview, 2007)

Or consider E. Lynn Harris’ (2003) description of the “straight act” he put on for his friend Brad, an act where he told Brad that he was “going to Jamaica” with “Maria” and not “Mario” (p. 181), and the time he told his aunt about being in a relationship with Andre, telling her, however, that “Andre was female” (p. 142). Harris (2003) also credits his need to be an overachiever to his need of hiding same-sex desire:

I realize it was the beginning of a period in my life where I attempted to overachieve so people wouldn’t notice the differences about me that I was beginning to hear loud and clear in my heart. Even though I wasn’t having sex with anyone, I thought about it all the time, and most of my thoughts were about men. (p. 56)

Or consider how Tim, a participant from an earlier project, describes life in the closet:

Kids are terrible. They call people names and do all kinds of mean shit, especially if you went to a small school like mine. Kids just pick out certain people, label them, and go from there. I was the person who called others names. I was the worst. I was also the one who was sneaking around engaging in same-sex experiences behind everyone's backs. To this day, there are still 2-3 people I know that I used to call "faggot." Most of them are now good friends. They haven't been mean to me even though they should be. They should call me a lot of things now. (cited in Adams, 2004)

These observations suggest that life in the closet is a time where it becomes difficult for a person to maintain a "consistent account" of oneself (Rust, 1993, p. 55), to be the "self-same" person across multiple interactions (Garfinkel, 1967).

\*\*\*\*

*An ambiguously-headlined email from the Navy Reserve: "Leading a double life can be a good thing." How did the Navy get my email address, the address of a self-identified gay man? Does the Navy want me to support and believe in the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, a policy that mandates I replace same-sexed desire with a public and rampant opposite-sexed front? Why is the Navy using the canonical "double life" phrase, a phrase that implies issues of authenticity in embodied performance? Is the Navy condoning—even advocating for—intentional, interpersonal deceit?*

\*\*\*\*

"I lied about not only my sexuality but about almost everything else as well," E. Lynn Harris says about the time between privately embracing his same-sex desire but



publicly disconfirming it. “I told so many mistruths that it became hard to remember what I’d said originally” (p. 100).

As Jeffrey, an interviewee in Downs’ (2005) project about positively being gay in the United States, observes,

I’ve been lying to everyone for most of my life. I lied to Tom, my best friend in high school, when he asked me if I was queer. I lied to every girlfriend who I used to prove to myself that I wasn’t gay. I lied to my parents about who I was dating, what my life was really like, or even when I would get married. I’ve lied to my employers, my doctor, and even the priest at my parents’ church by playing like I was straight. I’ve lied to every lover I’ve had about being monogamous when I wasn’t. I guess I sound like some kind of monster, but I’m really not. (p. 127)

George, an interviewee in Phellas’ (2005) study of how gay men in Cyprus negotiate sexuality, agrees with Jeffrey, saying that telling his parents “‘white lies,’” is a way of “‘keeping them happy and keeping [himself] happy’” (p. 71).

Sometimes, however, explicit lies may not be told, but instead information is omitted. As Dave says,

Anytime I got a sexual urge, anytime I felt a romantic feeling toward a man, I felt an extreme wave of guilt and aloneness. And I would lie when I would sit with my mom who asks about a girlfriend and say, “I’m not seeing anyone right now.” I guess I wasn’t lying but rather omitting a truth. I felt isolated because I couldn’t share my life with the people I loved. (personal interview, 2007)

These responses suggest that life in the closet is a time when lies accumulate like snow on a snowball rolling down a hill, a time of “I’m not seeing anyone” lies and “He’s my

friend from school” secrets. These practices, acts, and lies become increasingly complicated when feelings of guilt and shame accumulate.

\*\*\*\*

*A drive to meet Charles, a person who finds you attractive and asks you to spend the night, a man you drive two hours to see for eleven hours. He’s a person with whom you can maintain your local anonymity. You haven’t discussed your same-sex desire with anyone.*

*You meet and eat and drink at Houlihan’s restaurant and then go to a club to drink and dance and talk about things not too important. While never explicit, the two of you know you’re there for one-time sex, not to embark on a future together. You leave the bar and drive to his apartment, both of you drunk and unsure of what will happen next. There you kiss, but when he tries to engage you sexually, first, by placing his hand and then his mouth on your semi-erect cock, you get nervous and lose your erection. You blame it on alcohol, and ask to reserve intimate acts until morning. Feeling sick from drinking too much you wake before him, use the bathroom, and leave without saying bye, or thanks, or “talk to you later.”*

\*\*\*\*

“If a relationship has to be a secret, you shouldn’t be in it”: A common cliché decorating internet pages, newspaper advice columns, and self-help books, a simple and creative cliché that positions secretive relationships as disruptive, never justified, and morally questionable.

\*\*\*\*

*“I’ll be back in the morning,” you say to your roommate. “I’m staying with a friend.”*

*“Okay,” he says without question.*

*You make the trip to Alex’s three times a week for two months, trips few others know about, trips to see an 18-year old runaway you met online, a man who lives with one of his internet friends. Alex doesn’t have a driver’s license or a car or a job and spends most days in chat rooms or walking around the 300-person town where he lives. In a few months, Alex secretly and silently runs away again. Rumors say he moved back to his parents’ home in Alaska, his name wasn’t Alex, and he was younger than 18.*

*A typical trip to Alex’s involves arriving to his house around 9 p.m. and leaving early the next day to make an 8 a.m. teaching obligation. Most of the time is spent lying on a queen-sized bed that resides in a musty room, a time of touching and talking and listening to K’s Choice’s “Not an Addict,” a song on continuous repeat. You find sleeping next to Alex comfortable but sometimes wake restlessly to watch his white tanked-top body and young-but-worn, slightly-bearded face sleep.*

*The two of you still kiss and continue to sleep in the same bed together, but the onset of mononucleosis (a.k.a. mono) prohibits you from seeing Alex for a few weeks. When your health improves, he’ll have moved someplace else with someone else he met online and he’ll disconnect all of his internet chat accounts and email addresses. You can’t discuss your grief with anyone as you don’t have any close friends, especially close gay friends, and your closest straight friends do not know of the trips and times you stayed with Alex.*

\*\*\*\*

E. Lynn Harris (2003) says he had “no interest in being friends with someone” who was like him (gay), primarily because he did not like himself (being gay), and didn’t think he could or would like other gays (p. 111). Diane, an interviewee from an early project, describes the isolation motivated by same-sex desire. “I lived with Dana for more than four years,” she says.

Dana helped care for my two children, assisted with my business, and provided much needed support after my divorce. One day we had a cookout for our lesbian friends. During the cookout, I remember peering towards the wooden privacy fence in our back yard and noticing a teenage boy, one of my daughter’s classmates, staring at me and my friends from over the top of it. When he saw me see him he jumped back onto his side. I wondered how long he had been there and if he may have seen women kiss and hug and talk about each other. My kids knew about me and my friends but most others did not.

When my daughter went to school the following week, students laughed at her. The neighbor had spread the news about me and my friends, and my daughter was harassed for having two moms. The harassment worsened over the next few months. It pained me to watch my daughter lose friends over my relationship, to see her constantly walk through the door with tears on her face, to hear her ask if she could transfer schools. I started to dislike my lesbian shadow.

I ended my relationship with Dana and moved to another town. I’ve only dated one woman since. My daughter and I never speak about my sexuality and I try to keep my desire hidden. It’s painful to repress my feelings, but I must keep secrets. I love my daughter. (cited in Adams, 2004)

\*\*\*\*

Gay individuals may isolate themselves from others to hide their sexuality, but may also steer clear of other gay individuals out of a fear that they may be cast as gay-by-association (see Boyd, 2006; Cory, 1951; Garfinkel, 1967; Lorde, 1984). As Lee (1979) observes,

if a young homosexual became aware of others like himself through the medium of heterosexual culture, the stigmatized portrait of 'homosexual' was so repulsive (pansy, fairy, dyke, faggot, queer, lezzie, homo) that many individuals denied their commonality with such stereotypes, and many still do, forcing their continued separation from the gay community. (p. 193)

Mike, an interviewee in Phellas' (2005) project, says,

[Before I came out] I tried to stay away from gay people. For a while I dated a woman to convince myself and the people around me that I was heterosexual. If I was with friends and homosexuality was brought up I would be the first one to criticize gay people. (p. 72)

Life in the closet usually is a time of isolation for a person beginning to privately embrace a gay identity. This embrace may motivate a person to move away from significant others (parents, friends, employers, etc.) so that these others can remember her or him in "positive" (read: heterosexual) ways (Bell & Valentine, 1995). As Goffman (1963) observes, "maintaining physical distance" allows a person to "restrict the tendency of others to build up a personal identification of him" (p. 99).

Isolation can also take the form of reclusive, interpersonal acts. A gay person choosing the "safety of solitude" rather than the "danger of social encounters" (Goffman,

1967, p. 39). “A prominent function of shame,” Garfinkel (1956) writes, “is that of preserving the ego from further onslaughts by withdrawing entirely its contact with the outside” (p. 421). Suicide is the most extreme form of isolation, and can happen when a person chooses to “face and accept destruction” rather than experience “anxiety and the loss of self-esteem” (Leary, 1957, p. 15).

\*\*\*\*

*“Stay in bed,” he says. “I’ll be back in a few hours.” You like sleeping in his bed and enjoy being around him but find him too good for you, too sexuality active, too comfortable with men, too gay. When he returns he takes you to a small, isolated waterfall, a place where he kisses you and where you kiss him, a place where you think you’re being watched. With the exception of skin-tight white boxer briefs, he removes his clothes and asks you to remove yours, a request adamantly refused after looking at and admiring his smooth, toned body. You know the work he does to maintain it and wish you had his discipline but then feel uncomfortable looking lustfully at a man, not a woman, a man who likes you, who cares, whose heart you’ll soon break. In a few weeks you’ll meet another man you like, or think you like, and tell this beautiful, caring man that you don’t want to see him anymore because he’s too gay and likes to please you too much and doesn’t worry about what others think about men dating, loving, men. You still do.*

\*\*\*\*

“When kids in high school learned I was gay, they started threatening me,” Dave says. “I had one semester left. I stayed as long as I could but soon couldn’t handle the threats.”

“What type of threats?” I ask.

“The most significant one was at the beginning of my last semester,” he says, “three days after we returned from Christmas break. A bunch of football players pulled a gun on me.”

“A gun?”

“Yeah. After school they surrounded me at my car and held it to my forehead and said ‘You need to get out of this school or you’re going to go out in a body bag.’ If I had made my sexuality public by going to the police I would’ve been outted to everyone. I couldn’t do that. I was scared.”

“But you were already outted at school . . .”

“Yeah, but I did not want my extended family and my grandparents to be ridiculed about my sexuality. I knew it could happen. I didn’t want them to start getting hate mail. This is why I believe that once gay people get comfortable with sexuality, we become selfish. When we’re not comfortable, we accommodate everyone else.”

“That’s an interesting belief,” I say. “So how did you respond to the gun incident?”

“I went to the guidance counselor to see if I could transfer schools. I had one semester left. Academically, I was in the top 20 of my 1200-person class. And I didn’t care if I graduated with my friends because many weren’t my friends anymore.”

“How did the counselor respond?”

“She said ‘Dave you’re being dramatic.’ She said you’ve only got one semester left. I said ‘I will be dead. Let somebody stick a gun to your temple.’ Then she said I could go to the police, which wasn’t an option.”

“This is intimidating,” I say, “especially for being . . . 18?”

“Yeah, I just turned 18. I wasn’t thinking of anyone but my family. I left the counselor’s office thinking that I didn’t have the support necessary to transfer schools and so I went to the administrative office and asked for a withdrawal form. I quit school. But this made for an additional problem that I’ve never told anyone about. My entire family was so proud of me for being in the top 20 of my class and that I was going to be the first person to go to college. I had a full ride to Austin Peay University. But now all they knew was that I had a semester of high school left and I quit. What a disappointment. Many of them even said ‘I’m so disappointed in you, why couldn’t you finish?’ My parents didn’t tell my relatives that they already kicked me out of the house for being gay or that I had a gun pulled on me at school. All a lot of my family knew was that I quit just because.”

“Do they still talk about this?”

“Yeah, and it’s been more than a decade. I was going to be the one to go to college and to make something of myself and do something that wasn’t manual labor or something that wasn’t a job just for paying bills. When I was no longer the one, the focus shifted to my younger brother. He became the person and still the only one to have graduated from college. I was very happy to see him graduate high school and graduate college but it was supposed to be me. I have a difficult time talking about this with anyone.”

“I can’t believe this entire situation rests upon a disclosure of sexuality,” I say.

“I know. When gay people begin to get comfortable with their sexuality, they’re often perceived as selfish,” he says. “When they’re not comfortable, they accommodate everyone else. This was me being selfless again, never telling anyone the reason why I



had to quit high school. I couldn't. Talking about the gun incident would include talking about being gay. For many years, my relationship with my family all but died because I couldn't be honest with them. Even if I came out to them, I still think that being gay would've been my fault. I'd rather be a disappointment for not finishing school."

\*\*\*\*

Talking with others you like but never talking about who you like to love. Selfless it is to never speak of your same-sex desire solely out of concern for others (Feigenbaum, 2007; Glave, 2005; Van Gelder, 1995). But one day you dislike the selflessness and make your desire a topic of talk. "That's fine with me," a friend says, "but I can't speak to you anymore." You realize the more you talk about "it," the more you hear the latter part of the sentence. You devise a solution: Become selfless again and tell the newly estranged friend that you've "changed your mind" and that you were going through a "phase." Though you know these comments are lies, you want to improve the relationship, an improvement made possible by discursively making visible one type of desire and making invisible another. Life in the closet, a time of conflict between "love and respect for another" and "love and respect of yourself" (Fries, 1997, p. 93)

\*\*\*\*

*You create a picture-free personal ad on Yahoo.com. Sex: male. Age: 22. Race: white. Height: 5'6". Weight: 160 lbs. Attracted to: women and men. Best Attributes: personality, teeth, ability to drink alcohol.*

*"Nick," a 24-year-old, 5'8", 160 lb., white, heterosexual, employed-by-the-Navy male whose best attributes include his body, eyes, and sense of humor, responds by*

*asking if you'd like to meet. Excited that a man takes an interest in your profile, you agree to meet Nick that night.*

*"It's great to meet you," you say upon meeting Nick. "I like your apartment" comes next, followed by, "Will my beer fit in your fridge?" Though nervous, he seems nice and safe. He's attractive too.*

*The two of you sit on separate sides of the worn leather couch and prepare to watch an Austin Powers film. "Can I get you a beer?" he asks. "Sure," you respond. You match each other beer for beer: If Nick gets a beer, you do too; if you get one, so does he.*

*"Want to stay the night?" he asks after ten beers. You know he knows your response, knows you cannot drive, knows you've been staring at him all night.*

*"Yeah," you say.*

*"Want to sleep in my bed?" he asks. You know he knows your response, knows you will say the bed is better than the couch, knows that you want to touch him.*

*"Yeah," you say.*

*In the bedroom you move in and out of a drunken haze, forgetting where you are, realizing that you're going to touch and get touched by Nick, worried about the hangover you'll have tomorrow. The next morning you still feel intoxicated, shifting in and out of pleasure and disgust, in and out of confusion and comfort, in and out of worry and excitement. You wake realizing that you've stayed with and are lying next to a stranger you first call Nate and who asks if you want to get "fucked again." The "again" makes you nervous as it implies someone fucked you once already but you say "sure" because you can't remember being fucked and you want to remember how being fucked feels.*

*Nick applies what you'll soon learn is lube, a substance that eases access to intimate body parts. He climbs on top of you, lifts your legs in the air, forcefully thrusts his condom-less, lubed-penis into your now-lubed ass. It hurts, but you think pain must be necessary and unavoidable. After a few minutes, Nick quits thrusting and a warm substance glazes the inside of your ass.*

*"You're tight," he says as sweat pours down his head.*

*"Thanks," you reply, unsure if "tight" is a complement or a complaint.*

*You climb out of bed, put on your clothes, and take some aspirin. You wander through the apartment, notice the amount of beer consumed, and worry about the lack of sexual protection. You overcome this dissonance by believing that Nick is safe because he is nice and would not want to transmit disease. "I'll chat with you soon" you say to which he replies "okay" but the two of you never meet again.*

\*\*\*\*

*Wednesdays and Sundays: ritual visits to the town's only gay bar, disregarding Thursday and Monday obligations. You drink to get drunk as alcohol makes confident flirting possible. Drinks of choice: Triple-shot screwdrivers (three shots of vodka with remainder of glass filled with orange juice) and Long-Island Iced Teas (one shot of Tequila, Vodka, Rum, and Gin with remainder of glass filled with Coca-Cola). There is logic in ordering the triple screwdriver: if you ordered a typical screwdriver you'd only get one shot, but if you ordered a Long Island, you'd get four; the alcohol in one triple is therefore comparable to the alcohol in one Long Island.*

*A goal most evenings, never spoken of, often assumed, explicitly denied: find an attractive man with whom to spend the night, never at your place, always at his.*

*Depending on the amount of alcohol consumed, standards of attractiveness vary, standards not often realized until the next morning. If in the morning you find the man next to you unattractive, you make the waking encounter the last interaction. If he mentions the possibility of a relationship, you abruptly say it was nice meeting and that you must go to work. He gives his phone number but you refuse to give yours. You leave by saying that you might see him at the bar on a Wednesday or a Sunday, passively implying that a sleeping together will never happen again.*

*But if in the morning you find your sleep-mate attractive, you ask to see him later that day and evening and the next day and the next day's evening too. You hope a relationship might develop, but it is here where he says it was nice meeting and that he must go to work. He never offers a phone number but you aggressively give yours, and he says that he may see you again on a Wednesday or a Sunday night, indirectly implying that a sleep together will not happen again.*

\*\*\*\*

“With each man I met there came a moment—as he undid his shirt, as his breathing quickened, as a look of expectancy claimed his face—when he endeared himself by being alive beside me,” Bernard Cooper (1996) writes. “I’m embarrassed to admit it now, but there also came moments of great disappointment when I never saw the man again, or saw him again and realized that we had nothing but sexual attraction in common” (p. 131).

\*\*\*\*

*Reckless acts made possible by life in the metaphorical closet: intentional, interpersonal deceit; a lack of concern about one's sexual practices and protections;*

*unhealthy, dangerous and intentional, other-inflicted harm; perpetual bouts of despair, uncertainty, sadness.*

*Reckless acts: The many nights of driving home drunk, falsely believing in your sobriety, swerving over the middle, yellow-dotted highway line, avoiding honking cars and construction cones and frightened deer, hitting and destroying a stop sign with your car and leaving the scene of the collision only to have the police call you the next day to say that your license plate was found at the once stop-signed intersection.*

*Reckless acts: Going home with someone whose name you don't know but who you think likes you, believing your intimate interaction is promising and will progress into something more than just a one-time going home but then waking the next day, to a person who, if found unattractive, will be avoided in the coming days and weeks, making conditions possible for an other's feelings of inadequacy.*

*Reckless acts: Not responding to letters and calls from family and friends, not because you're scared to tell them that you're gay (you assume they've already heard) or because you're scared to talk about your current same-sex relationship (you assume they don't care), but because you feel like never wanting to talk to them again.*

*Reckless acts: Lying to friends and family, refusing to see them out of a selfish desire to get drunk and then drive because you'd rather spend the night with another man, any man.*

*Reckless acts: Not showing up to a college class you're teaching because you've decided to spend the night with a stranger, or arriving to teach unprepared as you woke only fifteen minutes before class begins.*

*Reckless acts: Having sex in a bathtub in the room next to where your roommate sleeps, a person you disregard by choosing selfishly to fuck two others, a person to whom you only came out to the previous week, a person who, before you, did not know any gays. But you still decide to have bathroom sex over and over again without much care, occupying the bathroom with the men until 4 a.m. and then apologizing to your roommate the next morning when the three of you come down the stairway and meet him in the kitchen. "No problem," he says but you sense that he is uncomfortable and angry and regrets living with a gay man.*

*Reckless acts: Refusing to visit a doctor to okay your health, to see if you've contracted any STDs, to learn what gay men risk by not getting regular checkups (B. Adams, 2004; Gust, 2004). Reckless is refusing to acknowledge that you've had unprotected anal sex once (maybe twice) without regret (it felt good!), refusing to believe you've had protected anal sex five (maybe ten) times, refusing to talk about the ten (maybe twenty) blow jobs you've given, refusing to say that you've kissed at least twenty (maybe forty) men. Reckless is not sharing this history with the guy you meet tonight, the guy who adds to your number of same-sex kisses and the oral sex count. Since he's nice and since you find him attractive, he adds to your anal sex count too, and, depending on the level of intoxication, you may allow the sex to go unprotected.*

\*\*\*\*

Life in the closet: a time of confusion, fear, isolation, secrecy, loneliness, interrelated feelings that rub against each other, feelings a closeted individual moves within and between, eliminates and strengthens, perpetuates, dislikes, a time when you question support masked by a label of unconditional love, support based on others

knowing you *as* or wanting you to *be* a particular kind of person, support garnered from appearing and professing a desire for the opposite sex innumerable times, support that has-always-but-now-only-maybe allows you to feel secure and relaxed.

Life in the closet: a time when you feel confusion and fear like a fly perpetually buzzing near your ear, a creature that, no matter how hard you gesture, won't fly away, confusion that wonders whether others will dislike you if you choose to talk about why you're confused, confusion like a carrot dangling from a string on a stick you're carrying, a carrot that keeps moving, never settling, unable to be grabbed, processed, devoured, confusion that feels like the taste of a familiar-but-unidentifiable substance, an ingredient whose name literally and figuratively rests upon the tip of your tongue.

Life in the closet: a time when isolation and secrecy and loneliness begin because your confusion becomes identified, talked about, and discussed, a time when support changes, a time when one intentionally retreats from friends and family out of fear. It is a time when isolation descends: You secretly and silently acknowledge your same-sex desire but continue to ask opposite-sexed persons on dates, planting intimate relational seeds in another with whom you'll never couple regardless of how nice she is or how much you find her attractive or how much you lie and try. A time when isolation teases: You selectively acknowledge same-sex desire but refuse to date someone of the same-sex even though you still meet and kiss and fuck them and then abruptly, without reason, end contact, motivating them to cry, scream, and say the "go fuck yourself" line. You understand his hurt but selfishly take care of yourself so that you aren't the person that has to tell another to go fuck himself.

Life in the closet: a time when a gay identity is privately embraced, a time when a gay label begins to take hold on an individual, a time when trauma—“internalized homophobia”—is most prone to be lived, noticeable in an individual’s intentional and aggressive use of hiding practices, acts of omission, and lies, in bouts of selfish- and selfless-ness, and in an engagement in reckless acts. While these practices, acts, lies, and bouts may be simultaneously necessary and harmful, a gay person, when she or he begins to come out and disclose her/his identity and/or desire, becomes accountable for these practices, acts, lies, and bouts thus making for complicated, relational situations and possible assessments of manipulation and deceit. I discuss these complications and assessments in the next two chapters.

\*\*\*\*

*Thanksgiving morning, 7 a.m. Your cell phone rings. You scramble through the comforter on the foreign bed and try to locate the buzzing device. The guy next to you moans a moan that suggests he’s angry and wants to return to sleep.*

*“Hello,” you say in a quiet, raspy voice.*

*“What time are you coming home?” the woman, your mother, asks.*

*“I’m not,” you say, then continue with a lie. “I have too much work.”*

*“Where are you?” she asks.*

*“At home, sleeping.”*

*“Why aren’t you coming home?” she continues. “I haven’t seen you in months.”*

*“I have to work,” you say, but know you’ll spend the day with your boyfriend.*

*“But you’ve never missed Thanksgiving.”*

*“I know but I have too much work.”*



*“Are you gay?” she asks, and you become nervous.*

*“Ummm . . . no. Why?”*

*“Have you ever tried to be gay?” she continues.*

*“Ummm . . . no! Why are you asking these questions?”*

*”Just wondering. You’ve been distant the last few months. I miss you.”*

*”I’m busy mom, that’s all. I’m not gay. I promise.”*

*Not prepared to talk about your desire for men you retreat, comfortably,  
knowingly, into promise after promise, lie after lie.*

## Chapter Six: Leaving the Closet

*March 2003. Amy, my first girlfriend, the one I met four years earlier in college, finds my email address on the internet.*

*Hi Tony!*

*This is Amy—it's been a long time. How are you?*

*I'm married to a wonderful man. We're getting ready to have our first child.*

*Are you married? Seeing anyone special? Children?*

*Write back soon. I can't wait to hear from you!*

*I am glad to hear from Amy. We didn't end terribly but we didn't start well either.*

*Hi Amy! This is Tony—we haven't talked in three years!*

*And "Wow!" about the marriage and the child.*

*I'm in school finishing my master's. I'm not married and I don't have children but I am seeing this great guy. (Yes, a guy.) His name is Brett.*

*Where do you live? We should meet. I'd like to meet your family.*

*Write back soon.*

*A week passes. No response.*

*When I come out to another person, I often feel paranoid, wondering how the other will react, how our relationship will be affected.*

*I send Amy another message. "Hi Amy! I hope you're well. I was wondering if you received my last message. If not, let me know and I'll send it again."*

*Two weeks pass without response. I begin to doubt the possibility of a friendship. Did I say something offensive? Maybe she is shocked that I am dating a guy. Maybe she thinks I am immoral. Maybe this wasn't the right time to come out. Maybe she feels betrayed by me—did she feel used? I send another message. "Hi Amy. I was wondering about your lack of response. Did I offend you? I hope not. I apologize if I did."*

*I never get a reply. I do not write again.*

\*\*\*\*

In this chapter, I examine the time of coming out, the time a person speaks to others about her/his gay identity and/or same-sex desire. I first show how individuals try to predict "right" times to disclose, try to create ideal relational conditions, and try to control time. I then describe the time of disclosure and immediate responses to this disclosure. I conclude by illustrating how and why coming out never ends. It is always ongoing, and, as such, encompasses coming out's temporal and relational qualities. In other words, when coming out never ends, neither does a desire to predict, create and control time. New situations make for new times to come out, new searches for right times, new worries about others, new reactions to respond to and remember.

\*\*\*\*

*June 2003. I see Beth, my second girlfriend, the one I met at a bar, three years prior, the woman with whom I spent most of my time drunk. She's working in a Gap clothing store. I'm looking at the clearance rack in the back when I notice her from a distance, in the front, folding women's polo shirts, not being too attentive to the store's clientele. I hesitate, unsure of how to proceed: Do I approach her? Does she hate me? Do I tell her that I like men? Does she think she's unattractive because I wasn't attracted*

*to her? I decide to leave and avoid possible conflict, but as I exit she glances at me. Our eyes connect and I see a look of confusion and ambivalence. I wonder if who she sees is me, wonder if she thinks that I want to meet with her, wonder if she wonders why I am invading her space. She doesn't smile or frown or wave or quit folding. I exit the store but immediately glance at her through the storefront glass. She continues to work, uninterrupted, never looking outside, never acknowledging that we ever crossed paths.*

\*\*\*\*

Tyler describes coming out as a time when a gay person can say “I am gay and it does not feel dirty or icky or strange or odd,” a time when a gay person is “comfortable with his sexuality, and a time when

if you told your parents and they were to disown you it wouldn't matter, if you told your boss and he or she fired you it wouldn't matter, if you told a friend and she or he were to leave you it wouldn't matter. (personal interview, 2007)

Coming out is a time when a person is comfortable revealing a gay identity, a time when others' reactions do not carry the weight they once did, but also a time when a gay person still worries about facing the “hard truth” about some people. “There are those people who you have admiration for and love dearly, who are amazing people,” Tyler continues,

but you have to come to the realization that they're going to be okay with your sexuality and that they're going to live up to that amazing person, or that they won't handle it very well. That can really degrade your view of that person. It's like you're rooting for the person to say and do the right thing, accept it, but for some people it's not that easy. (personal interview, 2007)

Coming out is a time when gay identity is introduced and discussed, a time that can consist of “contempt, tolerance, and fear of loss of approval” (Burgess, 2005, p. 129), and a time of “sacrifice and danger” that can promote “hostility, rejection, and even violence from family, friends, and total strangers” (Gross, 1991, p. 374). Coming out is a time when a gay person undergoes for others a “paradigm shift” by discursively transitioning from one community (straight) to another (gay; see Kuhn, 1996; Garrick, 1997). Coming out is an event that dramatically reshapes life; post-disclosure, life never feels quite the same again (Plummer, 1995, p. 84). “Coming out under any circumstances is an uncertain business,” Taylor (2000) writes. “No matter who you’re coming out to and no matter what you already know about them, there is no way to predict how anyone will respond to this disclosure” (pp. 69-70).

\*\*\*\*

Heteronormativity (often implicitly) privileges opposite-sex desire and frames individuals as “heterosexual unless *stated* otherwise” (Solis, 2007, p. 128, my emphasis); heteronormative situations are epitomized by the claim, “‘If you hadn’t *said* you are gay, I wouldn’t have even guessed’” (Gust & Warren, 2008, p. 125, my emphasis). Heteronormativity makes it necessary for individuals who do not identify as heterosexual to disrupt the assumption of heterosexuality and make their non-heterosexuality known (Garrick, 2001; Shallenberger, 1991).

However, when a person comes out, when a person speaks of her/his same-sex desire to another, she or he disrupts the assumption that she or he was heterosexual, makes sexuality discursively explicit, and introduces a possibly taboo sexual identity into the conversation. Similar to Bochner’s (1984) observation about disclosures in marriage,

coming out is an act of self-disclosure that runs the risk of producing “mistrust, dislike, and other negative impressions” as it “violates rules of proper conduct” (p. 606).

Furthermore, if life in the closet consists of intentional and intense use of hiding practices, acts of omission, lies, bouts of selfishness, and a participation in reckless acts, then coming out can reveal the presence of these practices, lies, bouts, and acts. This can frame a gay person as manipulative and deceptive, motivating her or him to experience humiliation, ascriptions of immaturity, and social disgrace (Goffman, 1959; Cory, 1951; Chirrey, 2003; Phellas, 2005). Saylor (1992), in a coming out letter to his mother, writes

I don't think I have ever lied when asked a direct question. But I am guilty of being secretive and closed with you. That has caused its own problems. I don't like the distance it has created, and I know you don't. (p. 64).

By coming out, he continues, “the burden of evasion was off me; there was no longer a secret about *why* I was secretive” (p. 67). While Saylor's example epitomizes Simmel's (1964) observation that “The secret contains a tension that is dissolved in the moment of its revelation” (p. 333), new tensions emerge when a gay person comes out. The person is obliged to negotiate a history of secrecy and evasion, manipulation and deception.

Hence a gay person feels a need to try to predict, create, and control the environment in which self-disclosure happens. As Henry (1965) suggests, “the self must perceive *when* to emerge and *how* to do it, for if it comes forth too soon and too vigorously, the lethal properties of the environment—of any environment—will kill it” (p. 105).

\*\*\*\*

*September 2003. I try to contact Christina, my third girlfriend, the woman with whom I began to embrace my same-sex desire, the person I regretfully called boring and ugly and mean. Before we, or I, ended the relationship, we had been close friends for more than seven years. I still have her email address and assume that she hasn't changed it in our two years of not speaking.*

*Hi Christina.*

*You're probably shocked that I'm writing you. You also may be shocked by the content of this letter. I had to write it. I wish I wrote sooner.*

*I'm gay. I have been attracted to men for a while but I never embraced my attraction. I tried to wish it away but realized it wasn't that easy. I'm telling you this because I want you to know that you did nothing wrong when we dated. My frustrations stemmed from my confusion. You're a wonderful, loving, intelligent and attractive individual whom I cherish and miss very much. I apologize for any hurt I caused.*

*I know this could be the last contact I have with Christina especially if she is angered by my writing or upset about my sexuality. Based on the experience with Amy, I write knowing this and thus try to predict and control the possibility of no response.*

*I realize that you may not respond to this letter. I realize that you might hate me. I understand any response you have. I just want you to know that you're a great person. I'm sorry for my actions. I'm sorry for not writing.*

*A prompt reply from Christina:*

*Tony, I could never hate you. Even if we haven't talked in a few years, you're still one of my best friends. I'm glad you wrote. During and after our*

*relationship I was hurt. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't. But after a few months, I began thinking about how you turned into a completely different person, something like a monster. I didn't know you the last few months. You'd get mad at everything. You forgot how to laugh. I miss you.*

*She concludes with "I miss you" and our friendship resumes. I feel validated, thankful, and relieved.*

\*\*\*\*

Brett's death may have been motivated by *telling* his father that he was gay. Brett possessed many stereotypical gay characteristics. He enjoyed theatre, had a graceful and sarcastic demeanor, and was infatuated with Judy Garland. People may have assumed Brett was or could be gay prior to his disclosure, but this does not necessarily mean that Brett was out to them or even that they identified Brett as gay.

Brett lived with a man for four years. I assumed that he had *told* his family that he was gay but when I asked "Are you out to your family?" he responded with an ambiguous "They know." When I asked "How do your parents feel about your sexuality?" he responded with "We don't talk about it." None of these comments suggest that Brett ever *said* anything about his gay identity, but rather that he thought individuals who paid any attention to his stereotypically gay interests and performances would have known. But he never said that he *told* his parents he self-identified as gay. My lack of knowledge of Brett's parents' knowledge of his gay identity further adds to the possibility that something might have happened when Brett said "I am gay" to his father.

Brett's father also never saw his autobiographical solo show "Best Face Forward," a performance that explicitly addressed being gay. The absence of his father is



important, especially since he never allowed me, a boyfriend and a good friend for several years, to meet his dad. “I’d like to meet your family,” I would often say, but he would flippantly respond, “Maybe one day.”

Dave shared with me the story of coming out to his mother. At the time, she worked third shift. She came home one evening and found his boyfriend staying the night at their house. Dave was shirtless when she came home, and decided to put on the nearest shirt quickly. But he accidentally put it on inside out with the tag facing the front. He believed his mom noticed the tag, and thus assumed his shirt had been off prior to her arrival. This mistake, Dave believes, is what motivated his mom to *ask* about his gay identity two days later when she called and asked him to pick her up from a bar.

“But mom,” he said, “I’ve got school in the morning. Can’t you just stay the night with a friend, then come home tomorrow?”

“What’s the matter?” she replied. “Got somebody there?”

Even though his mom may have found it weird that a boy was staying over at their house with Dave, this did not suggest that he was gay. Or she may have assumed that he was gay, but it was not until he said something that his gay identity was revealed; it wasn’t confirmed until she got into his car.

“Tell me it’s not true,” she said.

When Dave didn’t respond to a direct confrontation of his sexuality, his non-response served as an act of self-validation, a moment of coming out that motivated his mom to scream and kick the windshield and, later that evening, send him to the hospital with a concussion.

Dave's mother may have thought that he was gay after abruptly coming home from work, but did not react to him as gay until *he* validated the possibility two days later. Why didn't Dave's mother get angry when she first noticed him and his boyfriend? Why did she *ask* about Dave's sexuality rather than assume he liked men? Confirmation—a *self*-validation of gay identity—was necessary.

Consider a scene in the film *Sordid Lives* (Shores, 2000). A mother describes attending a homosexual theatre production in which her son was an actor. As viewers, we are taken into the production she describes, a performance of six naked men on a stage who come together to form three couples. Each man gently caresses the other and we see the mother squirm in the audience. But for the mother, her son's participation in this same-sex theatre production—and her witnessing of it—does not definitively mark his body as gay or imply, for her, that he self-identifies as gay. Throughout the film she denies others' attributions of her son's homosexuality, and only discusses the son's gay identity *when he says something* about it. Until he says so, he has not come out to her.

And consider the commentary from a *Savage Love* sex-advice internet broadcast (Savage, 2007b). Dan Savage, the host, receives a call from a man whose parents are married but whose mother may be a lesbian.

“How is it that you know your mother is a lesbian?” he asks.

“I had actually known the woman she's seeing before she did,” the caller responds. “I came from a very small town and there is a small gay clique. And she was one of them I met through another friend. You know, you kind of just pick up on things. I would walk down to the basement and there they would be, not doing ‘that,’ but not doing what friends do.”

“And this has been going on all of your life?” Dan continues.

“I’ve mostly known for the last five or six years,” the caller replies.

“Are you and your mother honest with each about the fact that she’s a lesbian?”

Dan asks. “Does she acknowledge that she is a lesbian? Has she *outed* herself to you?”

“No,” says the caller. “She admitted once that she had an affair, but [said] she was kind of drunk and stoned at the time.”

“It’s not like your mother has said ‘Hey, I’m a lesbian. I’m with this woman, but don’t tell your father?’” Dan asks again.

“Yeah,” the caller replies.

“So this is all you reading into this situation,” Dan says. “And you may be reading it exactly right.”

The caller responds with “I want mom to come out and say ‘Look! I’m gay. And I’m going to go live with this woman I love!’” (Savage, 2007b, my emphasis)

Dan implies that the caller’s mom has only come out when something is *said* and put into discourse, not necessarily when something is done such as engaging in a same-sex love affair.

These examples illustrate why a person must *self-identify*, explicitly, as gay; people must confess a gay identity in order to come out. Coming out is not necessarily relevant for people who engage in same-sex acts or people who *others* identify as gay. Contrary to Jandt and Darsey’s (1981) argument that “coming out for a lesbian or gay man may mean a debut, where an individual, for the first time, publicly identified herself or himself as a homosexual by an action, such as going to a gay bar” (p. 15), I argue that doing something like going to a gay bar does not mark a person as publicly gay, publicly

out. Coming out requires *saying* something, not necessarily engaging in stereotypically gay acts; a statement of gayness and/or of same-sex desire must occur (Chirrey, 2003).<sup>19</sup>

I mentioned earlier that some men may only consider themselves gay if they engage in passive, penetrated roles in same-sex sex acts (La Pastina, 2006; Meyer, 1995; Phellas, 2005; Shakespeare, 1999). A man may only feel that he is gay if he engages in the gender-inversion role of “bottoming.” A man who penetrates need not identify as gay and, if he doesn’t, he will not have to worry about coming out.

However, even bottoming may not encourage a person to feel or identify as gay. As Escoffier (2003) observes, a majority of men who have sex with men in the pornography industry identify as heterosexual even though they may be penetrated. In the context of porn, same-sex acts in particular positions may still not indicate a person’s sexuality (especially when influences like money exist). Thus, a person must say something about her/his gay identity and/or same-sex desire in order to come out; engaging in same-sex sex acts doesn’t necessarily mark her or him as gay.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> The “don’t ask, don’t tell discharge policy” for homosexuals in the United States military complicates the coming-out-is-saying-something claim:

Sexual orientation will not be a bar to service unless manifested by homosexual conduct. The military will discharge members *who engage in homosexual conduct*, which is defined as a homosexual act, a *statement* that the member is homosexual or bisexual, or a marriage or attempted marriage to someone of the same gender. (Pentagon, cited in Anonymous, 1993, p. A16, my emphasis)

A man engaging in (ambiguously defined) “homosexual conduct” may out himself by engaging in this conduct; regardless of self-identification; his embodied, stereotypical, gay-related practices in a military context might constitute him as gay and thus worthy of discharge (see Butler, 1997a; Halley, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, when I say that a person comes out, I am saying that she or he makes a claim about same-sex desire and desire for others with similar *genitalia*. Coming out is not a claim about same-*gender* desire—desire for another who embodies masculinity or femininity—nor is it desire for an individual with similar chromosomes and reproductive organs. When I, a man (sex), say “I am gay,” I am saying “I sexually desire someone with similar genitalia,” a criterion of sex. I am not saying “I desire someone with similar internal organs and chromosomes,” also sex criteria, nor am I expressing my desire for masculine or feminine beings, a claim about gender, not sex. I conceive of coming out, a disclosure of gay identity, as a desire for same-sex genital relations. See “Discovering the Existence of the Closet” (Chapter 4, pp. 84-92).

I am not saying that others do not influence a person's outing process, or that if a person is not out others will assume this person is straight. But coming out can only make sense when gay identity is self-claimed, confessed, personally made public (Shugart, 2005). As Foucault (1978) says, sexuality is "elusive by nature; its energy and its mechanism escaped observation, and its causal power was partly clandestine;" sexuality must thus appear "through the labor of a confession" (p. 66). Coming out is a "linguistic act that offers up the promise of a transparent revelation of sexuality" (Butler, 1991, p. 15) that puts one "inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible" (Fuss, 1991, p. 4). Coming out is based on the premise that "'speaking' one's identity is the most appropriate form of 'knowing' it" (Minson, 1981, p. 21). I can say that (I think) another person is gay, but I cannot say this person is out until she or he validates my claim discursively. Coming out is an act of self-identification and confession, one that others can motivate but never force. This chapter thus focuses on a gay individual's *self*-disclosure of sexuality and the relationality of this disclosure. I am not focused on the relational dynamics of others trying to out an individual (Signorile, 1990).

\*\*\*\*

*You planned to come out at dinner but that didn't happen.*

*"Can we go for a walk," you ask.*

*"Sure," she says.*

*After a few minutes fear hasn't diminished but you know you must act. You don't want her, a special friend, to hear from someone else.*

*"I have to tell you something." She stops.*

*You lean towards her ear, nervously gesturing that it's a secret, unable to say the "I am gay" words loud and proud because they still sound disgusting to you. So you whisper "I am gay."*

*She smiles.*

*"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" she asks.*

*"I was scared."*

*The walk continues and you're relieved. A burden, released. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?" she'll ask again. "You knew I'd be fine."*

*"I didn't know that."*

\*\*\*\*

"As a teacher, I'm uncomfortable with students knowing that I am gay in the first week of class," Michael says.

But halfway through a semester, I don't care if they know. There's always a certain amount of calculation, of prediction, every time you come out. I think that most people have a good indication of how people will react to their coming out. I knew my mother would go ballistic, be an emotional mess for a while, sort it out and then be fine. I knew my dad would be uncomfortable, but would very quickly do alright because he had to. Whatever emotion was going on he would just eat or bury it and deal with it on his own. He didn't want to be the asshole guy that is not open-minded. I knew that's how it would go. I predicted this to friends before it happened. (personal interview, 2007)

"There's always a right time to come out and you have to feel the environment for when that right time is," Tyler suggests.

You have to get a sixth sense about who is going to take it better than others. In some ways it's also about getting the right people on your side which may seem manipulative. But if you know others already support you then the process is a lot easier. It would be unfair to come out to someone if they will not have time to deal with it. It would also be unfair if you don't think they'll react. This is something I told my boyfriend. He wanted me to be there with him when he came out to his mom. I told him that would be unfair to her. With me there she could not express herself how she wanted. With just him, she had the ability to do what she wanted. If she wanted to scream, she could scream. If she wanted to cuss, she could cuss. I think that when a person comes out, he or she needs to worry about how the other person is going to feel. (personal interview, 2007)

Falconi (2006), a reporter for *The Daily Mississippian*, argues that

A critical component of coming out is all in the timing. While the Thanksgiving turkey is being carved, for example, may not be the best time to blurt out "Mom, Dad, I'm gay!" as you reach for the cranberry sauce. Awkward! Rather, choosing just the right time and setting to discuss your sexual orientation with those most important to you is crucial in feeling secure in getting out of the closet.

"I 'came out' to my father during a violent thunderstorm that knocked out our power," Keith Berry (2003) writes in his doctoral dissertation on identity constitution.

In the dark, with my dad sitting in his chair, and me sitting across the room on the couch, I stumbled through a *rehearsed* paragraph in which I told him that I was gay. I said many difficult things, including my not wanting to disappoint him, not wanting him to feel responsible, and that I did not choose to be gay. Such gay

coming-out clichés! He told me that he knew I was gay, stood up, stumbled with his severely damaged knees across the dark room, and told me, “You’re my son. I love you and will always love you.” (p. 119, my emphasis)

Like most significant self-disclosures, a gay person will often try to predict “right” times to disclose, try to create ideal relational conditions, and try to control the time to come out; she or he will “test the waters” (McLean, 2007; p. 161). It is the rampant contempt, hostility, and possible violence that stem from the disclosure of a gay identity that make the disclosure unique. The need to predict, create, and control time is thus a need for safety and protection.

\*\*\*\*

Brett: We need to talk.

Father: About what?

Brett: Me.

Father: I don’t want to talk about you.

Brett: I’m tired of lying.

Father: I don’t want to talk . . .

Brett: I’m gay.

Father: [No response.]

Brett: Dad?

Father: You disgust me.

[A few hours pass.]

Brett’s roommate: [Telephones father.] Your son’s unconscious.

Father: I talked with him a few hours ago.



Brett's roommate: The paramedics are here.

Father: He'll be fine.

Brett's roommate: He's dead.

\*\*\*\*

"[Brett] had talked to some friends earlier that day and felt fine" (Joshua, 2006)

\*\*\*\*

"Barefoot Ron," a contributor to the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gay (PFLAG) website, offers "gentle wisdom" to parents when responding to a child's coming out:

PARENTS: Don't underestimate for a minute how important it is for you to be supportive to your gay/lesbian child especially, in the *first few minutes* AFTER they come out to you. Yes, those *first few minutes* are very important and will always be remembered. (Barefoot, n.d., my emphasis)

Suzanne Westenhoefer (2005), a lesbian comedian, argues similarly that it is those "*first five minutes* in coming out to your friends or acquaintances that are really the hardest" (cited in Human Rights Campaign, 2005, p. 23, my emphasis).

A caller on Dan Savage's *Savage Love* sex-advice Podcast tells Dan that he was "inspired" by the previous week's broadcast featuring a Catholic mother's response to her son who came out (Savage, 2007a). The caller tells Dan that the story motivated him to come out to his conservative Christian parents. His parents, however, reacted much differently, more negatively, than the Catholic mother. The caller, dumbfounded by his parents' response, called Dan for advice. Consider Dan's response:

You were partly inspired to come out to your parents after listening to the Podcast where the Catholic mom read a letter that she wrote about supporting her son and being there for him. You have to remember that that Catholic mom didn't write that letter *11 minutes* after her son came out to her." (my emphasis, Savage, 2007a)

Those first minutes: sometimes awkward, often scarring.

\*\*\*\*

*"Mom, I'm gay."*

*Silence. One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand . . .*

*An expressionless face faces you. A mild frown forms.*

*Those first few minutes . . .*

*"It's just a phase," she replies. "I was also confused at 22."*

*"I don't think so, mom."*

*One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three . . .*

*"You're too young to know," she says.*

*"But I don't think so, mom."*

*One one-thousand, two . . .*

*"Mom?"*

*Those first few minutes, how important they are.*

\*\*\*\*

*A call from dad.*

*"I heard a rumor about you," he says. You become nervous. "I heard that you're living with a guy. In fact, not just living with, but fucking this guy. Is this true?"*

*One one-thousand, two one-thousand . . .*

*“Weeeelllll,” you stutter, “no, it’s not true. Who would say something like that?”*

*“That doesn’t matter,” he abruptly suggests. “I’m just glad it ain’t.”*

*“Yeah, me too father. That’s silly. I’ll talk to you soon.” The conversation ends.*

*One one-thousand . . .*

*Ten one-thousand . . .*

*Thirty one-thousand . . .*

*You call dad back.*

*“Hello,” he answers in an upbeat, much happier tone.*

*“Yeah, dad, it’s me. I just wanted to tell you that it’s true—I am living with a guy, my boyfriend in fact. Sorry to burst your bubble.”*

*Those first few minutes . . .*

*You hear nothing so you decide to make the situation better by making up a lie, telling him that his recently deceased mother, your grandmother, knew about your same-sex desire.*

*“And grandma knew about my sexuality and my boyfriend but she thought it would be best if I didn’t tell you. She was always fine with it, but realized, as did I, that you would not accept it. Sorry if I’m a disappointment.”*

*One . . .*

*“Shheee knneww?” he stutters.*

*“Yeah, she did father.”*

*“Well,” he utters more fluently, “I guess I’ll call you soon.”*

*“Bye, dad. Take care.”*

*Silence, the next six months.*

*Those first few minutes, the next six months: sometimes awkward, often scarring.*

\*\*\*\*

Dave recalls coming out to his father:

One night after my senior year of high school started, my dad and I were watching a comedian on TV. The comedian made a gay joke and started laughing. My dad started laughing too. I looked at him and said, “You know that’s not funny” and he said, “Yeah it was” and I said, “No it’s not. Your son’s gay.” He looked at me and said, “Are you sure?” and I said, “Yeah, I’m sure” and he said, “I’m okay with it. I still love you.” I thought all was fine as he only became a little distant for a couple of days. But three days later, when I returned home from school, I found my stuff on his front porch. He met me at the front door and said “I’m sorry but I’m not okay with you being gay. God made Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve and I can’t have you in my life anymore.” He then slammed the door.  
(personal interview, 2007)

Seth recalls his mom’s reaction after he came out: “She cried a lot. She had the same emotion of losing somebody very important. I made her understand that I’m still the same person, and she then came to support me” (personal interview, 2007).

Tyler recalls coming out to his mom at the age of 13: “I was with my mom at a Smoothie King in Chelsea, New York. I said ‘I’ll have a pineapple passion, mom I’m gay, to go please.’ And she said ‘I’ll have the same, I always knew, to go please’  
(personal interview, 2007).

\*\*\*\*

“I came out to my parents on the phone,” Kenny Fries (1997) recalls. “When I asked them why they were silent my mother asked: ‘What do you want us to do, jump out the window?’” (p. 132).

David, an interviewee in Nancy and Casey Adair’s *Word is Out* (1981), recalls coming out to his father:

I asked him if he was ready for a very heavy conversation. And he said, “Yeah, let me grab a cigarette.” I told him to grab the whole pack! “This will be a very heavy conversation.” So he brought the whole pack and sat down and was smoking a cigarette. I told him that it was very important for me to be open with people who are important in my life and that what I had to tell him, I was telling him because I wanted to be open; I didn’t want my life to be a secret. I wanted him to understand me and what I was doing. What I was telling him shouldn’t upset him, even though it probably would. And I said “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you for months, but I’ve sort of been putting it off. I’m gay.” *And he didn’t blink!* He said, “Have you always been gay?” I said, “Always.” And then—it really didn’t seem to phase him—he asked some very logical questions.” (p. 138, my emphasis)

Kevin Williamson, an interviewee in Robert Trachtenberg’s *When I Knew* (2005), tells about coming out to his father:

The fisherman, fifty-one, sits in his recliner in front of the television, flipping the remote, the volume blaring. Across the room, on the couch, sits his son, twenty-seven, staring at him; anxious, something on his mind. After several false starts and what seems like an eternity, the son speaks.

Son (quietly): Dad, I'm gay.

The fisherman hits the mute on the remote. The room goes silent. A long, agonizing moment. For the son, the world has stopped. He stares at his father, waiting for a response. Anything—the silence is maddening.

Fisherman: I figured it was that.

His son is confused.

Son: You figured *what* was that?

More silence.

Fisherman: Why we never talk.

Both men sit there, staring at the muted television.

Fade to black. (Williamson, 2005, p. 49).

Karel Boulery, another interviewee in Robert Trachtenberg's (2005) project, recalls coming out to his mother:

My mom picked me up from school in our Oldsmobile Cutlass that smoked when you stepped on the gas. Anyway, as she drove, we made small talk. Then, at the front of the house, sitting in the car, I turned to her and said "Mom, I know you probably know already, but I'm gay. It's not a phase. It's just me. And I'm happy about it . . ."

She looked at me, and then smiled. I was waiting for the hysteria I had heard about. But instead, she said, "Well, if you ever get Burt Reynolds, he's mine first." (Boulery, 2005, p. 35)

\*\*\*\*

In *For the Bible Tells Me So* (Karslake, 2007), a documentary about religion and homosexuality, Phil Reitan remembers his reaction to his son's coming out:

When Jake came out I was home. And he was crying and told me that he was gay. It hit me so hard I felt like I just had a death. Or like somebody had kicked me in the stomach and just it took all the wind out of me. And it didn't go away. It was that way for months. It was the type of thing that you couldn't have 15 seconds of the day that you didn't think about it. I had so many dreams for Jake. Somehow, they were instantly shattered in my mind.

A father recalls his reaction to his son's coming out: "I remember my first words: 'What can I do to change that?'" (cited in Aoki, 2005, p. 40).

Musician Rufus Wainwright recalls his parents' lack of acceptance upon first coming out. They were "pretty upset" initially, he says.

But that has changed drastically. Now they're fine with it. They did have some cause for concern—maybe because it was 1987 and it was really a period where, from their perspective, if one was gay, one was dead with AIDS and everything. So, I think they were just scared out of their minds. (cited in Hughes, 2007, p. 9)

Lim-Hing (1990/91) recalls coming out to her mother:

"Mom," I said hesitantly, "you know I'm gay, don't you?" I couldn't say the word "lesbian" to my mother. She began with a remark on how as a child I didn't play with dolls, which is untrue. I had a couple of favorite G.I. Joes, but I didn't argue the point.

“I never talk about things you children don’t talk about first,” she then said, letting me know that she already knew. Then she said that she would always love me, and that if I was happy it was alright with her. (p. 20)

Interviewing parents about their gay children, Hom (1995) found two significant temporal themes: (1) the “attitudes of parents before disclosure/discovery [of a gay identity]” and (2) the “attitudes and *reactions* of parents after disclosure/discovery” (p. 37, my emphasis).

The act of coming out and others’ reactions to this act—those immediate seconds, minutes, hours, and days—are significant, often-scarring moments in a person’s life, moments perpetually remembered and narrated.

\*\*\*\*

*A coming out, a disconfirmation:*

*“Mom, I’m gay.”*

*“No you aren’t. It’s just a phase.”*

*Telling others about your coming out, a disconfirmation reframed six months later:*

*“How did your mom respond when you told her you’re gay?”*

*“She responded fine. She wasn’t upset.”*

*Telling others about your coming out, a disconfirmation reframed after two years:*

*“How did your mom respond when you told her you’re gay?”*

*“She said she always knew. She was thankfully supportive.”*

*“Time and memory are true artists,” Dewey (1936) writes. “[T]hey remould reality nearer to the heart’s desire” (p. 104). Bochner (2007) agrees, noting that*



*“memory is, in part, a response to what inspires [a person’s] recollections” (p. 198).*

*Time and memory can remold an unwanted response, each time to better resemble desire, each time to alleviate pain, each time to forget the act of remolding.*

\*\*\*\*

Michael told me the story of coming out to this father:

At 24, I made a pact with myself about coming out to my parents. I decided that I had no need to impose my sexuality on my parents. I wasn’t going to say anything when I was in their home, in their world. I didn’t need to come storming in as gay. But I also decided that I wasn’t going to change my home, my world to accommodate them. I wasn’t going to straighten up the house if they came for a visit.

One day, I get a call from my dad saying that he was coming to visit. I was like, “Fuck!” I knew what the implications were. My dad was coming to stay with John and me. I told him to meet me at work and we’d go to dinner.

My father was someone I respected a lot. I was convinced that my father would deal with my sexuality well, but there was always a risk that he might not. If he had totally rejected me, I’m not sure how I would’ve dealt with it. I felt bad for him and for myself. On an intellectual level, I was not ashamed at being gay, but on an emotional level I somewhat was.

So my father meets me at work and I plan to come out at dinner. I wasn’t going to come out to my father at my work because I wasn’t out at work. I was nervous the entire ride to dinner, but I didn’t want to come out during the ride

because I thought dinner would be more relaxed. I also knew that we would be in public so he couldn't totally freak out.

Dinner moves along and I realized that I wasn't going to do it. I couldn't. I decide to come out at desert. Our pie arrives. We eat the pie. But I don't come out to him. Ironically, it felt weird being in public surrounded by strangers. I knew that I had to say something to my father when we were alone.

We get in the car and we're heading to my house. I know that John's going to be there and I vowed to myself to tell my father before we arrive. We're about ten minutes away. I knew I had to do something. In retrospect, I think my postponement was my way of backing myself into doing something that I knew I wouldn't have normally done.

"Dad, there's something I need to tell you," I said. "I need to tell you that I'm gay."

Pause, pause, pause.

"Well, I don't take that as good," he said.

Pause, pause, pause.

I continued: "I needed to tell you because when we get to the house John's going to be there. He's my partner. We live together. I know this is springing a lot on you all of a sudden. If you're uncomfortable and need to stay at a motel, if you need to get out of the situation, that's understandable."

"No, no, no," he goes. "I'll be fine."

"Okay," I said.

I knew that ideologically my dad's quite liberal and I knew that he was trapped in having to deal with this. He likes to think of himself as open-minded and progressive.

“Just don't tell your mother,” he says after a few moments. “It'll kill her.”

“Okay,” I responded.

Pause, pause, pause.

“This car is front wheel drive, isn't it?” he adds, a non-sequitur.

“Yeah, it is,” I replied. (personal interview, 2007)

\*\*\*\*

At a bar predominantly occupied by gay men, I see Scott, a former student who I knew identified as heterosexual a few years ago.

“Scott!” I say. I walk to him and we exchange hugs. I then look at his face, and with my eyes nonverbally ask, “What brings you here?” He accurately interprets my nonverbal.

“A lot has changed since you last saw me,” he says. “A lot.”

“Everything alright?” I ask.

“Yeah, sort of. I broke up with my girlfriend. And . . . And today I came out to my parents. They told me that I could no longer live with them. They kicked me out of the house.”

I offer condolences and support, and tell him to give them time.

I see Scott again in a few weeks and ask, “So . . . how are the parents?”

“We haven't talked,” he says. “I tried to go to their house, but they wouldn't let me in.”

I offer condolences and support, but sense that his hope has started to fade.

“They just need more time,” I reply, “hopefully.”

\*\*\*\*

Consider a scene from *Will and Grace*.

Jack: Mom, I have something that I want to say to you. I’ve kept this from you for a long time and that is wrong because that makes it seem like I’m ashamed of something I’m not ashamed of. I want you to know who I am because I am proud of who I am. Mom, are you wearing Chloe? [Laughter to relieve tension.] Mom, I’m gay.

Mom: Oh. [Assumes a sad facial expression.]

Grace: Judith, it’s okay. So he’s gay. He’s still the same little boy who gave you highlights for the first time. [Laughter.]

Karen: Honey, I think you’re missing the silver lining here. When you’re old and in diapers a gay son will know how to keep you away from chiffon and backlighting. [Laughter.]

Jack: Mom, I’m sorry to disappoint you but this is who I am.

Mom: You could never disappoint me. I just want you to be happy.

In eight years of the show, 186 episodes, this is the *only* episode where Jack’s mother physically appears. From a production standpoint, this suggests that Jack’s coming out and the reaction to his coming out are *the* defining moments in the (gay) son-mother relationship. Her lack of re-appearance may also suggest that coming out is the only important, memorable connection between them.

\*\*\*\*

*“I’m attracted to men,” you say.*

*“It’s just a phase,” someone remarks.*

*“What a waste,” says another. You’ve not felt like a waste before.*

*“Have you tried sex with a woman?” someone asks, a negation doubting your desire.*

\*\*\*\*

A coming out experience featured in the comedy *Another Gay Movie* (Adams & Stephens, 2006). The scene: A son dressed in a flashy blue jump suit enters his house after spending the night with a man. He approaches his mother who is playing somber music on the piano.

Son: Mom?

Mother: I didn’t hear you. You didn’t come home. What’s going on?

Son: I think . . . I like guys.

[Four second pause. The mother maintains what at first looks like a sad expression.]

Mother: Duh! What took you so long?

The movie jumps to the next scene with mother and son watching his childhood films.

The mother says that his like of Madonna and an early swoosh in his gait (an instance of gender inversion) made her think that he would be attracted to men. What makes these scenes interesting is that, being a comedy, they are made to be humorous, out of the ordinary, atypical. And what makes these scenes interesting is that they emphasize (1) the moment of coming out and (2) reactions to this moment.

\*\*\*\*

Coming out is viral: I'd tell one person who'd tell three others who'd tell three more. Disclosures of gayness make for interesting gossip as they often end a heterosexual assumption. But it was—and still sometimes is—easier to allow someone else to tell others of my sexuality especially those I fear might harm or reject me. This would allow me to avoid possibly painful and scarring reactions as those first few minutes would happen without my direct, embodied observation.

I do not suggest, however, that negative reactions are eliminated by a person who tells others about an-other's gay identity. Consider Dave's story:

We were in the bleachers, in the band, all in uniform. It was a Friday night. I heard my ex-girlfriend tell a group of her friends that I was gay. I heard her say it, the phrase hovering above and spreading throughout the bleachers. I'm not exaggerating. I've never seen anything spread like that before. Within a minute every head of every member of the band turned toward me. I felt like I was in a bad dream and that this can't be happening. But instead of nodding and telling her that she's just pissed that she can't get on my jock anymore, I didn't deny her claim. I grabbed my stuff, got up, and ran back to the band room. It felt like I was on fire. I couldn't think. I couldn't do anything. I quickly got dressed and went home. Not one of my friends called that weekend and, come Monday, people started calling me "faggot" everywhere, all day long. My life in high school was over. It was never the same. (personal interview, 2007)

\*\*\*\*

Bernard Cooper (1996) describes his fear of telling his father that he identified as gay. “It had taken me thirty years to achieve even a modicum of intimacy with the man,” he writes,

and I didn’t want to risk a setback. It wasn’t as if I was keeping my sexual orientation a secret from everyone; I’d told relatives, coworkers, friends. But my father was a man who whistled at waitresses, flirted with bank tellers, his head swiveling like a radar dish toward the nearest pair of breasts and hips. Ever since I was a child my father reminded me of the cartoon wolf whose ears shoot steam, whose eyes pop out on springs, whose tongue unfurls like a party favor whenever he sees a curvaceous dame. As far as my father was concerned, desire for women fueled the world, compelled every man without exception . . . was a force as essential as gravity. I didn’t want to disappoint him. (p. 168)

Cooper’s fear foreshadows the time of coming out:

“Let me ask you something,” said my father. “I get this feeling—I’m not sure how to say it—that something isn’t right. That you’re keeping something from me. We don’t talk much, I grant you that. But maybe now’s the time.”

My heart was pounding. I’d been thoroughly disarmed by his interpretation of world events, his minefield of non sequiturs, and I wasn’t prepared for a serious discussion. I switched off the gas. The red jet sputtered. When I turned around, my father was staring at his outstretched leg. “So?” he said.

“You mean Brian?”

“Whatever you want to tell me, tell me.”

“You like him, don’t you?”

“What’s not to like.”

“He’s been my lover for a long time. He makes me happy. We have a home.” Each declaration was a stone in my throat. “I hope you understand. I hope this doesn’t come between us.”

“Look,” said my father without skipping a beat, “you’re lucky to have someone. And he’s lucky to have you, too. It’s no one’s business anyway. What the hell else am I going to say?” (Cooper, 1996, p. 176)

I want to emphasize three aspects of Cooper’s (1996) description. First, Cooper’s father, speculating that he was “keeping something” from him, invites Cooper to *tell him* what this something is. As I mentioned earlier, coming out requires saying something; inferences about a person’s gayness do not constitute a person as gay. Second, Cooper recalls his father’s *immediate* reaction to his coming out: “without skipping a beat.” Third, Cooper introduces a sentiment that fuels a dilemma of coming out: “It’s no one’s business anyway.” Whose business is a gay identity? A gay person’s intimate circle? Strangers?

A gay person who believes that “it’s no one’s business” becomes increasingly accountable for being manipulative and deceptive as she or he never speaks of her/his “secret.” A person who believes that “it’s no one’s business” reinforces the belief that sex (acts) and desire should not be introduced into everyday conversation. A person who believes that “it’s no one’s business” must similarly believe that all relationships are “no one’s business” or else she or he adheres to a double standard; opposite-sexed



relationships are okay to discuss but same-sex ones must remain silent, and a standard that speaks to Pierce's (2007) description of a bigot:

[When a] bigot sees gay people holding hands in public, they say the gays are pushing their lifestyle on any observers, whereas when heterosexuals hold hands in public, it is sweet. For the bigot there are two ways of being affectionate in public, one for normal people and one for those who are contaminated by gayness. (p. 18)

A person who believes that "it's no one's business" also reinforces the "interpersonal strain" that heteronormativity makes possible, a strain that suggests "it's fine that you're [gay or] a lesbian, just don't make me really think about it" (Feigenbaum, 2007, p. 7, original in italics), and a strain that is often "replicated, reinforced, and reflected by the attitudes, behaviors, and practices of even our best-intentioned allies" (p. 7). "You [a man] have never told them how it makes you feel when, thinking nothing of it, she refers to him as 'Honey,' he to her as 'Sweetie,'" Glave (2005) writes, "but both of them swiftly close their faces and cringe when you do the same, in their presence, with him" (pp. 121-22).

\*\*\*\*

*"I have to tell you something," you say to your roommate of four years. He turns from watching TV and stares your way. "I'm gay."*

*"I started to think so," he replies, "because of that man you introduced me to last week."*

*"That's my boyfriend," you say not thinking that the casual deployment of "boyfriend" might make him uncomfortable.*

*“I’m okay with it,” he responds and you’re relieved. “But if my girlfriend didn’t have so many gay friends, I don’t think I’d be as comfortable.” You’re relieved again.*

\*\*\*\*

Dave: I tell a lot of people that I had a rough time coming out. It wasn’t easy. I’ve been on my own since my mom found out right after I turned 17.

Tony: How did she find out?

Dave: She caught me and my boyfriend. I didn’t have the choice to tell her.

Tony: How did she catch you?

Dave: My mom worked third shift. When she was at work, my boyfriend would spend the night. We would set an alarm just before she’d get home. One night we’re in the living room making out, shirts off. I hear her car pull into the driveway. I knew it was her car because she had a muffler with a hole in it and it would make an unmistakable sound. I was like “Holy Shit! That’s my mother!” My boyfriend ran into the bathroom. He accidentally left his shirt and vest on the couch, but I don’t think she saw them. I ran to the dryer to find a shirt. She came in and asked “What’s going on? Why are you still up?” I told her that Jeff and I were watching TV.

Tony: But why did she come home?

Dave: She ran home for lunch or something. It was weird. She never came home.

Tony: Did she know Jeff?

Dave: Yeah, she met him a couple of times. Anyways, my mom leaves and I’m like “Oh my God, that was too close.” But then Jeff comes out of the bathroom, looks at me, and busts out laughing. “What the fuck is it?” I asked. “Dave,” he says, “look down.” My shirt was on inside-out and backwards. I rushed to put something on and didn’t pay

attention. The shirt tag was hanging in front of my neck and I knew I was screwed. But my mom waited two days to say anything.

Tony: What happened? Was she angry?

Dave: At the time my mother liked to drink. Two days after she caught me and Jeff she called me at 3 a.m. and asked if I could pick her up from a bar. But I said “Mom, I’ve got school in the morning. Can’t you just stay the night with a friend then come home tomorrow? And she replies, “What’s the matter? Got somebody there?” That’s when I knew she knew. She gave me a concussion when she got home.

Tony: A what?

Dave: A concussion. She gave me a concussion that night. She also broke her elbow. We both went to the hospital.

Tony: Wait, you picked her up from the bar?

Dave: Yeah. She started getting angry in the car when she said “Tell me it’s not true” and I didn’t respond.

Tony: Did you know what she was talking about?

Dave: Yeah, there was no hiding . . . this is difficult to talk about. The situation felt very surreal. When I didn’t respond, my mom started screaming and kicking the windshield. I was like, “Oh my God, I can’t have this” and I felt like I got to a point where there was nothing I could do but sit back and wait to see what happens. When we got into the house, I got into a fetal position in the corner of the dining room and just started rocking, back and forth. She’s screaming and cussing at me the whole time while throwing everything that wasn’t tied down at my head. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t say anything. I felt like it was what I deserved. Her reaction was what I had

feared my entire life and now it was happening. At the time, I felt like I was dying, not physically, but emotionally. There's nothing I could do. The last thing I remember was her pushing her elbow through the sliding glass door. I woke up in the hospital. She told the doctors I fell and hit my head. (personal interview, Dave, 2007)

\*\*\*\*

Dave speaks of another event, one that occurred twelve years after his brutal fight with his mother. She came to visit him, when he had pneumonia, a visit that required her to drive almost four hours, an unplanned visit to see him for one of the six nights he'd spend in the hospital. During her stay, a female nurse walked into the room, "an attractive woman," his mother observed. When the nurse walked out, she asked her son if he "saw a wedding ring."

"No, mom. Why would I notice?"

"Because it's natural to notice," she replies. "It's natural for a man to notice if a woman is married because if she's not wearing a ring that means she's available."

"Mom, gay men don't notice these things."

"I didn't know you were gay," she says.

A pause fills the room, blood pressures rise.

"I've got a headache," she says after a few seconds. "I need to eat. I don't want to discuss this anymore." She leaves abruptly and angrily. The son remains confused. He told his mother that he was gay twelve years ago, eight years ago, five years ago, and again last year. (personal interview, 2007)

\*\*\*\*

"I don't think I could say that I'm completely out," Tyler says.

My partner and I are not “lovey-dovey” everywhere we go. Coming out is a process you do over and over again. Most people don’t walk into rooms wearing “Hi, I’m gay” t-shirts. A straight person doesn’t walk into a room and say “I’m straight.” So what does being out mean? Am I out right now? Am I out at home in my living room? Am I out when I put on a gay t-shirt and go to a gay pride parade? I don’t know. If someone asks me, am I going to deny it? No. Am I necessarily going to come forward with the information? Not necessarily. I work in a career in which people ask me a lot of questions about family. Often there is a need to express my status, my lifestyle, so that they understand. It’s appropriate. But I don’t walk into a bank and say I’d like to make a deposit and that I’m gay. At that point it’s not necessary. It’s not that I’m not out. But my sexuality is not necessary information for that place, that environment. (personal interview, 2007)

Signorile (1990) asks: “How many people must one confide in to be ‘out of the closet?’” (p. 40) Is one out only when her/his gay identity and/or same-sex desire gets acknowledged? What happens when a gay identity and same-sex desire do not get mentioned? Does a *lack* of talk about this identity and/or desire suggest a lack of acceptance (Cory, 1951; Glave, 2005)?

When a person embraces a gay identity, she or he can never come out completely, definitively reveal her/his gay identity once and for all. A gay person, once gay, can never escape the closet; coming out is always ongoing. “Being ‘out’ always depends to some extent on being ‘in,’” Butler (1991) writes. Being out “gains its meaning only within that polarity” thus making it necessary for a person to “produce the closet again and again in order to maintain [her or himself] as ‘out’” (p. 16). However, if coming out

does not end, then neither does a desire to predict, create, and control time. There are always new moments of disclosure and reactions to the disclosure to be encountered. New situations make for new times to come out, new searches for right times, new worries about others.

\*\*\*\*

*A father telephones his son. The son answers.*

*Father: I heard a rumor about you. [Son gets nervous.] I heard that you're living with a guy. In fact, not just living with, but fucking this guy. Is this true?*

*Two seconds pass.*

*Son: Weeelllll . . . No, it's not true. Who would say something like that?*

*Father [abruptly]: That doesn't matter. I'm just glad it ain't.*

*Son: Yeah, me too father. That's silly. I'll talk to you soon.*

*The conversation ends. The son re-telephones his father. The father answers.*

*Father [upbeat, happy]: Hello.*

*Son: Yeah, dad, it's me. I just wanted to tell you that it's true—I am living with a guy, my boyfriend in fact. Sorry to burst your bubble.*

*The conversation continues for a few more seconds.*

*Six months pass and the father and son do not speak.*

\*\*\*\*

*A trip to a bar, the first time a father and son interact, face-to-face, in six months.*

*Father [looking at server]: Look at her. Isn't she hot?*

*Two seconds pass.*

*Son: She looks nice.*

*Thirty seconds pass.*

*Father [nervously looking around]: Look at these hot women. Aren't they attractive?*

*Son: I find men attractive.*

*Father [abruptly]: I don't understand how. Especially living around all of these women.*

*The father changes the topic of conversation and tries to engage a "tactful blindness" (Goffman, 1967, p. 18). They do not discuss men, women, or attractiveness anymore that evening. Six months pass with the father and son phoning once a week.*

\*\*\*\*

*A face-to-face interaction, six months after the father and son's last face-to-face.*

*Father [looking at son]: Vegas was amazing. One night I got drunk at this exclusive club where women walked around topless. You would have liked it.*

*Son: Why would I have liked it?*

*Father [hesitates and looks away from son]: Uh...*

*Two seconds pass.*

*Son: I told you that I find men attractive.*

*The father tactfully changes the topic of conversation. They remain blind to discussing men, women, or attractiveness anymore that night. Six months pass with the father and son phoning once a week.*

\*\*\*\*

*The son telephones his father. The father answers.*

*Son [anxious]: I can't wait for you to meet my boyfriend. He's very nice.*

*The father changes the topic of conversation without much tact. Implicitly, they ban themselves from discussing men, women or attractiveness forever.*

\*\*\*\*

Rust (1993), a sociologist, conceives of coming out as a “developmental process” with a “beginning stage and an end stage, connected to each other by a series of intermediate and sequential steps” (p. 52; Gagné et al., 1997; Kus, 1985). “Regression,” she writes, occurs when an individual moves back in the developmental process. If an individual never reaches the end stage of coming out—which, I believe, does not exist—then an attribution of “immaturity” can occur (p. 52).

Phellas (2005) describes the assumed importance of “being out” and the assumed trauma of “staying in”:

Disclosing one’s sexual orientation is thought to be [a] ubiquitously positive experience that creates self-acceptance and confidence through repeated practice. In fact, for gay men and lesbians, *not* making public pronouncements about their sexual orientation is presumed to be negative and less than healthy psychologically and is characterised by negative terms, such as living double lives, hiding, being in the closet, and being closeted. Living double lives or being closeted is presumed to indicate shame, denial, and self-hatred. (p. 79, my emphasis; see Cole et. al., 1996)

McDonald (1982) claims that “not everyone completes the coming out process” (p. 54). His claim assumes that some people do.

And Burgess (2005) believes a gay person can “escape” the closet as long as she or he openly identifies as gay and/or lesbian (p. 139). Openly, and perpetually identifying



as gay and/or lesbian, however, would seem to suggest that people would, in the words of Tyler, have to “walk into rooms wearing ‘Hi, I’m gay’ t-shirts.”

“Where heterosexuality is presumed,” Urbach (1996) writes, “coming out can never be accomplished once and for all.” He further adds that “the sustenance of gay identity (where straight identity is presumed) depends on continuous acts of declaration” (p. 69). The coming out process never ends, and completing the process is impossible; “outness” is a matter of degree that changes with context (Chirrey, 2003, p. 28) and new “disclosure challenges” always exist (Berzon, 2002, p. 171; Butler, 1991; Garrick, 1997; Plummer, 1995; Shakespeare, 1999). Halley (1989) observes:

because the assumption of heterosexuality applies in virtually every social interaction—from the encounter of teacher with student, salesperson with shopper, mother with daughter, Supreme Court Justice with clerk—even the most forthright and fearless gay man or lesbian cannot “come out” once and for all in a single public disclosure; as she moves from one social setting to another, she will have to come out afresh or acquiesce in the assignment to her of a nonreferential public identity. (p. 947)

Eve Sedgwick (1990) agrees, noting that

the deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption means that . . . people find new walls springing up around them . . . every encounter with a new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new . . . requisitions of secrecy or disclosure. (p. 68)

In my words, new times to figure out when to disclose.

A paradox of coming out: If a person isn't perpetually out, she or he may be perceived as self-hating, immature, and insecure. If a person is perpetually out, she or he may be perceived as aggressive, awkward, and self-centered. Thus, individuals who identify as gay often simultaneously live in and outside of a closet, perpetually try to create, predict, and control environments for coming out, constantly receive and remember reactions to gay disclosure, continually find it necessary to remind others of their same-sex desire, and must prepare for accusations that one lives, has lived, and is living a lie as well as accusations that she or he is immature, has regressed, and is self-hating. As Burgess (2005) says, "coming out is important, but it doesn't signal the end of the struggle" (p. 126).

\*\*\*\*

Gay identity is inextricably tied to the metaphor of the closet. This tie is best exemplified by the phrase "coming out of the closet," an act where a person discloses a gay identity and same-sex desire for another, an act of self-identification and confession that others can motivate but never force, and an act relevant for heteronormative contexts.

Gay identity is also inextricably tied to time. Disclosing a gay identity—coming out—is a time that can consist of fear, danger, hostility, rejection and violence. It is a time that can reveal a gay person's intentional and intense use of hiding practices, acts of omission, and lies, extreme bouts of selfishness, and a participation in reckless acts, all of which can position her or him as manipulative and deceptive. A need thus develops for a gay person to find right times to disclose. The act of coming out and others' reactions to this act—those immediate seconds, minutes, hours, and days—are significant, epiphanic,

often-scarring times in a person's life, ones that will be perpetually remembered and narrated. And coming out is conceived of as both a discrete, linear process with an end time as well as a process that never ends.

But what happens when coming out is a time of danger but also an act conceived of as necessary, healthy, mature, and politically beneficial? Consequently, what happens when not coming out—being silent—is framed as unhealthy, immature, and politically ineffective? And what happens when coming out of the closet is framed as both a discrete, linear process with a definitive end and a never-ending endeavor? I return to these dilemmas in the last chapter.

\*\*\*\*

*In a stale-cigarette smelling hotel room in Chicago, I sat on my bed and they sat on theirs, asking me about my past, probing me about my desires. The conversation started well, but then proceeded into uncharted territory, one individual telling me that my childhood was not “normal” and the other not saying a word. I became defensive, unsure how to respond.*

*“Someone who has had your childhood doesn't come out of it without any sexual deviances,” an acquaintance, a gay man, a therapist-in-training, says to me after talking about this project and its relevance to my life. “You must have a large amount of deviances. An affinity for bathhouses? A pornography addiction? One night stands? Lots of masturbation? Do you masturbate so much that you can't get in a relationship?”*

*“I think my two longest relationships went well,” I say defensively.*

*“That doesn’t answer my question,” he responds. “You must have sexual deviances. You didn’t have a successful childhood as far as how a person should develop. A human being should progress differently. You didn’t have a normal childhood.”*

*“I don’t like your use of ‘normal,’” I reply.*

*“Normal in the psychological sense,” he says. “Normal is what the masses do as compared to what an individual does. You didn’t have a normal childhood. Your childhood was abusive.”*

*“I don’t think it was abusive,” I reply. “And I don’t feel abnormal.”*

*“Being shown pornography at an early age is abusive. Your parents should’ve been arrested. You’re watching something to make your desires align correctly.”*

*“I think many of us are steered clear of same-sex desire. This is just one of many examples of how this happened in my life.”*

*“But you may have psychological trauma. You were being forced to watch straight pornography in order to align yourself correctly. This isn’t a parent reprimanding a child because they’re watching inappropriate material. This is a parent reprimanding a child for watching the right material. That’s abusive.”*

*“This happens to many children in the United States.”*

*“That doesn’t mean it’s not abusive,” he says. “Don’t you have animosity toward your childhood?”*

*“No, I don’t. I enjoyed my childhood. For the most part, I got along with my parents. Even if I could stir up some animosity, I don’t feel a need to reframe or change my memory of it.”*

*“I guess that’s just one way to cope with an abnormal life.”*

\*\*\*\*

An attempt to understand the closet, how life in the closet feels, how a label you claim, an identity, influences your interactions with others. An attempt to show others' manifestations of same-sex desire, their successes and failures, ways they relate. An attempt to escape unnecessary relational burdens that hover, harm, kill. But new others emerge, others who grant you new burdens, others who deem your closet negotiations abnormal, others who deem you an unworthy failure, others who try to kill hope.

## Chapter Seven: Making Identity Relational

I believe we [have] been strangers from a very early time on . . . I feel certain today that even in the first, formative, walking and talking years, when Dad *was trying*, I was pulling away.

—Ronald Forsythe, from *Sons on Fathers: A Book of Men's Writing*

I could never prove any better as a son than he had been as a father.

—Arthur P. Bochner, “It’s About Time”

*My mom always told me that I’d either be gay or marry a black woman. From sixteen on, I heard her say this every time I found myself in a duel with my father, every time I informed her of my hatred towards that man, every time I wished him dead.*

*My mom always told me that I’d either be gay or marry a black woman. Not that I had articulated my desire for one or the other, but she knew of my father’s two main fears: having a fag in the family or having a son in an inter-raced relationship. My mom realized I’d do everything in my power to spite him.*

*My mom always told me that I’d either be gay or marry a black woman, a statement that became actualized when I came out to her at 22. Her response: “I told you so.”*

\*\*\*\*

*I’m often asked how long I’ve known that I’ve been gay. That depends: I’ve known that I’ve been attracted to men since an early age but I didn’t know that I fit the category “gay” until the latter part of my teens. And while I do not believe that my gayness was ever a choice, this framing by my mother and my constant desire to spite my father makes it appear as such. My story’s not just about being gay, though. It’s a story*

*about the troubling relationship that separates me from my father, my father from me. It's a story of sexuality and sport, of gayness and hegemonic masculinity, of a fag and his golf clubs. It's a story of love and hate.*

\*\*\*\*

In this chapter, I shift the experience of the closet from the exclusive burden of the self-contained gay person to one in which coming out is a shared relational responsibility. Specifically, I illustrate how a relational perspective reframes my relationship with my father.

A relational perspective conceives of interaction as a co-constitutive endeavor where all individuals affect each other (Bateson, 2000; Bochner, 1997, 2004; Gergen, 2000; Yerby, 1995). A relational perspective treats interaction as a “jointly authored, incomplete, and historically situated” affair (Bochner & Ellis, 1995, p. 204), a “slippery” process “constantly on the dynamic edge between order and disorder, sameness and difference, repetition and newness, linearity and cyclicity” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 69). A relational perspective assumes that people, together, make the experience of a relationship possible (Foster, 2001; Henry, 1965; Pelias, 2002). A relational perspective views persons-in-interaction as interdependent, never-completely-predictable beings (Bochner, 1989; Miike, 2007); we are not “machines” (Soukup, 1992, p. 20).

A relational perspective posits that interpersonal conflicts are products of joint interaction. The responsibility for and/or origin of the conflict cannot be assigned to one particular individual; each person contributes. “When we define a problem as a problem of the couple rather than the fault of one of the persons in the relationship,” Bochner (2004) writes, “we don’t strip them of agency. Quite the contrary, we enhance their

agency by saying in effect, together you created this and together you can fix it” (p. 6).

Relational patterns continue until the persons involved acknowledge these patterns.

Relationships can be “repaired” only when all persons involved take “meaningful steps to accept responsibility without diverting blame” (Rogers, 1989b, p. 89).

For instance, my father and I *together* play a role in altering our relationship:

Neither of us “gets off the hook” and we’re both accountable. I used to blame him for our problems, but a relational perspective has allowed me to see ways we affect each other; blame disappears. I’m a victim, so is my father. I’m an oppressor, so is he. We victimize and oppress together, simultaneously hurting and being hurt while never deciding to quit. We practice stifling communicative patterns, and we’re both seeking love. Maybe we’re both *in* love.

\*\*\*\*

I’m stuck between two canonical narratives, one that says my father and I must try to work things out in order to fulfill our responsibilities as father and son (Pelias, 2002), and another that tells me to let go of our relationship, to realize that I can’t choose my relative. These narratives provide all-or-nothing scenarios that do not allow for negotiation or relationality. I could terminate our relationship, but something inside me won’t let go. Something important would be missing and lost if I chose to walk away and never looked back.

\*\*\*\*

### *Characters*

Father: “middle-age man who wants to say, ‘Son, come here.’”

Son: “mid-twenties man who wants to say, ‘Father, why?’”



Son: mid-twenties man who wants to say “Father, come here.”

Father: middle-age man who wants to say “Son, why?”

Mothers, sisters, aunts, grandparents, friends: “various ages, who constantly say, ‘I don’t know what to say’” (Pelias, 2002, p. 37).

*Extras*

Hegemonic masculinity: Culturally-dominant, stylized sets of repeated acts (Butler, 1990; Frank, 1993); a condition never physically or psychically actualized (Butler, 1999); the “ephemeral, contextual, and complicated” nuances of being a man (Hopkins, 1998, p. 54); a never-ending journey towards ever-changing ideals (Gelber, 1997).

Homophobia: The “hatred or fear of homosexuals” (Oxford, 2001, p. 387); a socially produced insidious force that infiltrates the most mundane of affairs; an embodied insecurity that waits for the most opportune moments to strike; often affiliated with and made possible by hegemonic masculinity.

Love: A feeling that transcends all categories; reciprocal; an action that puts both hegemonic masculinity and homophobia to shame; shared; an emotion that binds regardless of circumstance; mutual; a social construct (Jaggar, 1989).

\*\*\*\*

*I hear him laugh at my sarcasm. This doesn't happen much but he sometimes chuckles at what I say. I see his bright smile behind the laugh. His white teeth and dimpled face make it seem as though he has not a care in the world. I realize that I don't have fond memories of him or of us. Maybe I didn't care about our relationship. Maybe*

*unconsciously I tried to make it not work. Maybe I didn't learn how to like the same things. Maybe I forced myself away. Maybe we forced each other away.*

\*\*\*\*

*My father's father physically abused him and his mother. My father's father did not want a son or a daughter—especially one of each—so he treated them as though they didn't exist. My father's father taught my father to be emotionally cold with others, to hit people you love if necessary, and to have resentment towards children. My father loved his father.*

\*\*\*\*

*During high school, my father wanted to be a professional golfer. He played on the varsity team all four years and began working towards a potential golfing career. Once graduated, he signed on with the team at the local community college. After one year of play, his father forced him to quit. His father could no longer manage the family business and thus made my father put his dreams on hold.*

*After my first year of college, I asked my father if I could have the business. "No," he said and further justified his response: "I've been miserable for thirty years. The last thing I'd do is ask that of you."*

\*\*\*\*

*Once every year from the age of four until the age of eight I played with my father in the local father-son golf tournament. I can't remember playing in the event, but I do recall every ending: we, as a team, would drive the golf cart to the pro shop and walk inside. Every time a trophy would await us, engraved with both our names. Every time, I loved them—they were pretty.*

*I don't think we ever played well enough to win the father-son tourney. I imagine, however, that my father gave the organizer money in advance so that a trophy would await us upon finishing. My dad knew how much I liked them. And he was proud of me. So a trophy awaited us every time regardless of our performance on the course, regardless of our performance of father-son.*

\*\*\*\*

*A streak of my mom's hair dye became baked onto the wallpaper in the hallway. She didn't do it on purpose; my father threw her into the wall. Some of her color rubbed off leaving a black mark one foot in length. My eyes connected with my mother's tear-filled pupils. My father told me to go back to bed.*

\*\*\*\*

*At fourteen, I watched my father punch my mom in the face. She didn't know I was watching nor did he. As I peered through a window on a thirty degree, storm-filled night, I wondered if I should call the police. I wondered if I should step in to take a few blows for her. I wondered how a clenched fist hitting coffee stained teeth would feel. I wondered why my mom didn't have a towel to clean up her blood. I decided to go back to bed. A few months later they divorced.*

\*\*\*\*

*I decided to live with my mom. I transferred all of my belongings into her new residence. I don't remember the move, whether we rented a truck, how long it took, or my father's reactions. But I do remember the few items I left behind: a bed frame, an entertainment center, and five father-son golf trophies.*

*I cleared everything from my room at his house, everything except for those items. I never returned for them, either. I'm not sure why I left them. I guess my bed frame and entertainment center wouldn't fit in my new room, but I can't account for the trophies. Unconsciously, maybe this is when I started to rid my life of my father, when my dislike towards him began to root. I believe the presence of the trophies in a room absent everything else signifies the presence of a strained relationship, a relationship that would further become troubled and absent repair. I believe the trophies still remain on the shelf but, like our relationship, I imagine that they're covered with a layer of dust.*

\*\*\*\*

*Once I tried stealing baseball cards. I got arrested. My father picked me up at jail and took me to my mother. Upon entering her house, he slapped her across the face. He called her a "bitch" and a "worthless parent," and told me that he stopped her from having an abortion. I was an only child. Using this logic, he saved me. Using this logic, I should've worshipped him. Using this logic, he had a license to abuse my mother. Using this logic, my hatred for him intensified.<sup>21</sup>*

\*\*\*\*

*In high school a few years after the divorce, my father encouraged (forced) me to join the golf team. I had come to hate golf, but now it seemed like a mandatory requirement. The obligation soon became worse: my father encouraged (forced) me to get a job at the local golf course. Externally, I had to perform "golf lover." Internally, I cringed.*

---

<sup>21</sup> I have a half-sister. We share the same biological father, but not the same biological mother. My father married and divorced her mother before marrying mine. My sister and I never lived together. I interacted with her about once each month until I graduated from high school. Our interactions then became more frequent.

*Two years in a row I made it to the state golf tournament. By accident, though. The coach and my father were “buddy-buddy,” people who regularly did favors for each other, individuals who capitalized on the “rhetoric of connection” (Philipsen, 1975, p. 19). I made it to the state tournament twice, not because of who I was, but rather who my father was. I made it to the state tournament twice, an obligation I did not fulfill either time solely out of spite for my dad.*

*State tournament, year one: Two team members and I rode with the coach to the destined golf course. On this day, we left school early and thus missed lunch. On this day, I packed my own lunch, much to the amazement of my mother. On this day I packed it with bunches o’ healthy stuff: two cartons of milk, four cups of pudding, three cheese sticks. I’m not good at digesting dairy.*

*During the 40-minute car ride to the course, I devoured my lunch. My car mates didn’t notice anything awkward about its contents. A few hours later they would clearly remember.*

*Thirty minutes into the three-hour round of golf, my stomach started to speak. It grumbled and moaned; I smiled. Fifty minutes into the round my stomach maintained a steady stream of dialogue. Pain formed; I smiled. At one hour, I had to shit. My coach rushed me via golf cart to the bathroom where I remained for the rest of the event. I conceded from the tournament. I beat my dad.*

*State tournament, year two, less gruesome: The golf coach told me that I’d be going to the state tournament again. She also told me that she didn’t want a repeat performance. I pondered over being selected, my relationship with father, and how much I hated golf.*

*I decided to talk to her. Honestly. I asked her if our discussion could remain confidential. She agreed. I told her that I didn't like being on the golf team. She could tell. I said that my father forced me to play. She knew. She released me from the team, telling my father that my performance wasn't up to par. I broke his heart. I won again.*

\*\*\*\*

*Just like the son in Harry Chapin's song "The Cat's in the Cradle," I soon left for college, three hours away. The physical and psychical rift between me and my father only grew worse. He rarely called me. I rarely called him. During a good month, we would talk twice usually for no more than five minutes. We maintained this habit for a few years. At least until I told him that I was gay.*

\*\*\*\*

*"Here comes the cocksucker!" my father says as I enter the rehearsal dinner of my cousin's wedding. It's June of 2002 and I ain't "out" yet.*

*"Yeah, my hair's blond dad. It was an accident. The salon person messed. . ."*

*"You call that 'blond?'" That's not blond, that's 'gay blond!,'" he responds.*

*"Wow!" cries my cousin in response to my father's ruckus. "Now all you have to do is put an on a dress and you can be the 'family faggot!'"*

*"Thanks," I say as my self-esteem plummets.*

\*\*\*\*

*As far back as I can remember both my father and my cousin would call me a faggot, primarily because I didn't live up to their definitions of and criteria for "being a man." When I decided to tell them that I really was a faggot, chaos reigned.*

\*\*\*\*

*The first night in Las Vegas with my father. Post-dinner, 10 p.m.*

*We take a cab to a female strip club that celebrities frequent. Or that's what a concierge told my dad. Like most strip clubs, the inside is dark and filled with smoke. Techno music blares from the speakers. Chairs surround dance floors lined with human cages. We're quickly and flirtatiously approached by a clothed waitress asking for our drinks.*

*"Budweiser," father says.*

*"Bud Light," I respond.*

*A naked woman steps on our table. My father puts a dollar in his lap. She retrieves the bill. My dad gives me a dollar for my lap. She retrieves again. I take note of her smooth, strawberry-scented body. My father places a dollar in his lap.*

*"She's hot," I mouth to my dad. "Sure would like to have her in my room tonight!" I utter in my stock hyper-masculine voice I learned to use at strip clubs or when I watched heterosexual porn with friends. I know how to play straight and such gibberish is one way I play straight well.*

*"Oh yeah?" father responds. "That can be arranged . . ."*

*I pretend I don't hear and I pretend to look at the dancer's newly-revealed breasts. I know he thinks this is a good father-son bonding experience. I feel guilty for maintaining a hetero façade.*

*After an hour of stripper festivities we leave to check into the hotel. My father enjoyed the evening and I performed as though I did too.*

*Once we enter our room, dad's cell phone rings. A voice tells him that his mother, the person he's verbally abused his entire life, has fallen ill. He shows concern,*

*arranges to return home the next day, and then prepares for bed. Not concerned or sympathetic, I lie and say I am wide awake, a bit hungry, and want to see Vegas nightlife. He tells me to be safe and have fun. I leave.*

*I find a cab and head to the nearest gay bar. It feels weird leaving a female strip club with my father a few hours prior, hearing my grandmother is sick, and then venturing a place that will provide a same-sex experience and an alcoholic escape. But excitement takes over and any care I have diminishes. I arrive and order a drink.*

*“Bud Light,” I say while moving to the dance music.*

*“Bud Light,” I say while staring at a shirtless bartender.*

*“Bud Light,” I say while admiring exquisite drag queens.*

*I acquire a nice buzz. I meet a cute man to touch. I do not have to give him a dollar. We dance. He doesn't smell like strawberry. We kiss and exchange phone numbers that I know will never get used. He asks if I would like to stay the night with him, but suppressing my desire I return to father.*

\*\*\*\*

*I only came out to my father because my grandmother died.*

*We all make decisions in life. Sometimes on whims. Sometimes in pain. Or passion. Occasionally our decisions make no sense. Other times they do. We constantly rework them, swim with them, and delay coming up for air. I'm still working through this one. And I'm gasping.*

*“Your grandma has just been rushed into open heart surgery,” father says. It's a Monday in May 2003 and we just arrived to the Las Vegas Hilton. His cell phone rings. A*



*voice tells him that his mother, a person he's verbally abused his entire life, fell ill. I wonder how he feels.*

*"What? She only went to the doctor for a routine check-up," I respond. "Let's fly back."*

*"No. You stay. It's too expensive for you to come. I'll go back. You return, as planned, on Thursday."*

*"But . . ."*

*"Do it. She'll be fine. It's another false alarm she's brought on herself." At this moment, I thought I saw a tear. Grandma didn't make it through the night.*

*Two months pass and I hadn't talked with my father since grandma's funeral. He never made any effort to call me, nor I him. Until one day in July.*

*"Hello?" I answer my phone, the phone in the house I share with my boyfriend.*

*"Yeah Tony, it's your father."*

*"Oh, hey dad. How are . . ."*

*"Why haven't you called?" he asks.*

*"Well, the phone works both ways. And since it's long distance, and since you have more money than I do, and since you've only called me three times during my four year college career, I decided, this time, to leave that up to you."*

*"I heard a rumor about you," he pauses; I become nervous. "I heard that you're living with a guy. In fact, not just living with, but fucking this guy. Is this true?"*

*"Weeeelllll," I stutter, "no, it's not true. Who would say something like that?"*

*"That doesn't matter. I'm just glad it ain't."*

*"Yeah, me too father. That's silly. I'll talk to you soon." The conversation ends.*

*I realize that I can't do this any longer. I'm tired and I lied to my father. Guilt and depression devour me. I pick up the phone and call him back.*

*"Hello," he answers in an upbeat, much happier tone.*

*"Yeah, dad, it's me. I just wanted to tell you that it's true—I am living with a guy, my boyfriend in fact. Sorry to burst your bubble."*

*I hear nothing, so I decide to turn the truth I just shared into another lie, a lie involving my recently deceased grandmother, his recently deceased mother: "And grandma knew about my sexuality and my boyfriend but she thought it would be best if I didn't tell you. She was always fine with it, but realized, as did I, that you would not accept it. Sorry if I'm a disappointment."*

*Silence, but soon a stuttered response: "Shheee knneww?"*

*"Yeah, she did father."*

*"Well," he utters more fluently, "I guess I'll call you soon."*

*"Bye, dad. Take care."*

*I thought my guilt would end after my disclosure, but I soon realized that I'd used my father's mother and her corresponding death as a way to advance my "gay agenda." I wonder about the ethics of this decision, but then tell myself that it's already done. My dad refuses to speak to me for six months.*

\*\*\*\*

What cemeteries prove . . . is not that the dead are present but that they are gone.  
They are gone and, as yet, we aren't.  
—Philip Roth, *Patrimony*

*Two days before Christmas 2003, my (half-)sister and I visit my aunt, my father's only sibling, to discuss holiday activities. While sipping on coffee with the evening news*

*...serving as background noise, my aunt casually approaches the subject of father: my father, my sister's father, my aunt's brother. She tells us that she's been concerned about him ever since my grandmother's death earlier that year, and provides evidence for her feelings: father has spent a good portion of his savings, ventures to Las Vegas for a once-a-month prostitute binge, and hasn't had any concern about seeing a doctor in spite of recent health problems. My sister and I nod in agreement, express (superficial) concern, and attempt to move towards discussing another subject. My aunt doesn't budge—she remains focused on father.*

*“Do you know what I bought him for Christmas?” she asks, seeking to involve us in one of those never ending guessing games about something with which neither of us have much interest.*

*“No,” I respond, trying to end the game prematurely. “What can you buy for someone who has everything he wants—another airfare to Vegas or some golf balls?”*

*“His grave plot,” she remarks. “It's something that he'll need one day, hopefully not soon, but you never know. And I knew his children would not purchase it for him.”*

*At this point, this moment that implicated me and my sister, my father's only kids, I assumed a rather puzzled, probably annoyed look. I asked myself why my aunt would say such a thing, and I asked myself why I should be concerned about my father's death.*

*“Do you think that is our fault,” I respond irritably. “Do you think that either of us should assume responsibility for someone who has never expressed concern about our lives just because he is our father?”*

*My aunt, not appearing too happy or pleased with my rebuttal, glares at me with that look in her eye, you know, that evil look that says “one day such an attitude will*

*come back to haunt you, you little bastard,” and stands up to walk into the kitchen. The oven timer goes off, saving me from a potential argument; her apple pie was done.*

\*\*\*\*

*My father visited one year after his mother died. At the time, I lived in Carbondale, Illinois; he in Danville. The trip between the two places lasted a bit more than three hours. With Amtrak, however, one could avoid a long car ride.*

*Trains arrive at Carbondale twice each day, once at 9:30 in the evening and another at thirty minutes past midnight. Trains depart from Carbondale twice each day, once at three in the morning and another at 4:05 in the afternoon. During my five year stay in Carbondale my father came to visit three times. Each time he arrived on the 9:30 p.m. train. Each time he departed six hours later on the 3 a.m.*

*Three times my father came to visit. Three times he stayed a total of eighteen hours, that is if the trains were on time. Once he didn't arrive until midnight. Based on the train schedule, he left three hours later.*

*During his last visit we bonded. We bonded over a slip of his tongue, a slip that forced a taboo word through his beer covered lips, a slip that informed me of my father's love. We bonded over “cocksucker.”*

*We bonded over cocksucker: I became drawn towards my father for the first time in my life, experiencing feelings I never knew existed, enjoying his presence and feeling comfortable with a stranger whom I would recognize as my dad.*

*We bonded over cocksucker: After filling ourselves with beer, after discussing gay-related matters, and after allowing him to flirt with the young waitress.*

*We bonded over cocksucker: By intimately peering into each others' eyes, exchanging superficial words of compassion like "I'm glad you're my son" and "I'm glad you're my dad," and waiting until the other ran out of beer so the server could interrupt awkward silences that surfaced throughout the night.*

*We bonded over cocksucker.*

\*\*\*\*

*"It's good to see you father," I say after ordering a Bud Light from the twenty-year-old waitress who caught dad's attention.*

*"I'll have a Budweiser," he asks. "Yeah, it's good to see you too," he adds while perusing the woman's body, objectifying her breasts, her curves, her build. "I'm glad I came down before you moved to Florida."*

*"So how's the weather in Danville," I respond after a few minutes, a comment I chose to make even though I recognized that his town was only three hours away. The weather wasn't much different.*

*"Good and sunny," he remarks. "I've been able to play a lot of golf. But the course flooded a few weeks ago."*

*Silence.*

*"Have you been watching the Cardinals?" he asks.*

*"Nope. I don't watch . . ."*

*"Hey cutie—Budweiser!" he interrupts.*

*I follow: "Bud Light, please."*

*Silence.*

*"Is your mother going to move you?" he asks.*

*“Yup. She . . .”*

*“Hey cutie—Budweiser!” he interrupts.*

*I follow: “Bud Light, please.”*

*Silence.*

*“There’s this new show on HBO called Deadwood,” he says. “It’s really good. It’s a tough guy shoot-em-up show that features cowboys and men that don’t take any shit. They’re tough and they’re real men. It’s a good story.”*

*“I haven’t seen it,” I remark, hoping that the conversation will become more active. “I don’t have cable, but maybe it’ll come out on DVD.”*

*“Yeah, maybe,” he responds. “Hey cutie—Budweiser!”*

*I follow: “Bud Light, please.”*

*Silence.*

*“So how are you dealing with me being gay,” I probe, a question I never would have asked unless alcohol had engulfed me in its magic. I had been out to my father for one year, but neither of us had discussed my gay identity in each other’s presence.*

*“I love you and that’s what matters,” he responds; I choke on my beer. “You’re my son, and I wouldn’t change anything about you.”*

*Silence.*

*“I know the potential problems with homosexuality that exist in small towns like yours. I wanted to know how you were doing,” I say.*

*“Just fine,” he assures. “I’m proud of you. Hey cutie—Budweiser!”*

*I follow: “Bud Light, please.”*

\*\*\*\*

*I've heard that the "truth comes out with alcohol," truths such as how people feel and what bothers them in life. Following this theory, "hidden" emotions may surface when alcohol helps take off one's masks.*

*A truth of love leaked out of my father this evening, a truth I grasped like a baby does a stuffed bear, a truth that brought my dad back into my life. The truth surfaced when he reflected on the word "cocksucker," a taboo term used to devalue individuals who have done something wrong, a taken-for-granted word which often conceals, for most users, its gay, sexual connotations. But my father didn't take this term for granted. He showed his love, and displayed that he never wanted to hurt me, even with language.*

*"How's Rick?" I ask about a mutual friend of ours.*

*"Shit, he's a no good cocksucker," he responds. Before I add my two cents or ask why he's assumed such a negative position towards a once-upon-a-time friend, he continues: "Oh, I'm sorry. I don't want 'cocksucking' to offend you. I didn't mean it like that. I said it because all of the guys on Deadwood use it. I haven't thought about the word much until now."*

*"Whoa," I say to myself. My father, an individual with only a year of college, realized the power of names and how speech can act (Butler, 1997a). My father, an individual who has managed a restaurant in a small, Midwestern community reflected upon his communication, positioning himself as a phenomenon of investigation (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992). My father, an individual raised by an abusive father, transgressed the realm of hegemonic masculinity and homophobia, acting as a straight man inching towards his gay son while simultaneously making an apology that might cause him to*

*lose a portion of his manhood. My father, using one socially-taboo word, informed me of his love.*

*But I did not respond to his response. I did not thank him for his consideration, nor did I tell him of my love. Awkward talk continued to surface throughout the evening, and our being-together remained plagued with silence.*

*When the bar closed we decided to get something to eat. We started on an adventure to Steak N' Shake, our favorite restaurant. In the car, I turned on my CD player to find Winona Judd singing "I Want to Know What Love Is," a remake of the 80s classic. During the five minute trip, my dad sang with the words, sang as though they resonated with his body, and sang like nobody was watching. I wanted to ask what the lyrics meant to him. I wanted to ask, but did not want to interrupt. I liked hearing his voice. I liked hearing what I never heard before.*

\*\*\*\*

I'm stuck between two canonical narratives, one that says my father and I must try to work things out in order to fulfill our responsibilities as father and son, and another that tells me to let go of our relationship, to realize that I "can't choose my relatives" and thus view our interactions as a waste of time. These narratives provide all-or-nothing scenarios that do not allow for negotiation. I have thought of terminating our relationship, but I desire a more reciprocal exchange of love.

I have also come to experience our relationship using a relational perspective. The father-son experience is a co-constitutive endeavor, and neither of us "gets off the hook" when trying to repair our relationship. We're both accountable. I used to blame my father for *our* problems, but realize that both of us affect each other and make problems



together. I'm a victim, so is my father. I'm an oppressor, so is he. We victimize and oppress together, simultaneously hurting and being hurt while never deciding to quit. We practice stifling communicative patterns, and we're both seeking love. Maybe we're both *in love*.

\*\*\*\*

Before boarding the 3 a.m. train on his most recent visit, I sold father my golf clubs. He gave them to me seven years prior. I didn't need them anymore. I handed him the bag; he handed me the money. His aging eyes looked at the equipment with despair. My aging eyes looked at my equipment-free hands with glee. He told me he'd save them in case I changed my mind. I told him thanks, but no.

\*\*\*\*

*Revisiting us, four years later*

Since acknowledging ways that I might influence our relationship, I've noticed significant changes in how my father and I interact. For instance, I began calling my father more often than our previous once-a-week ritual and would talk to him for more than our typical few minutes. Motivated, I believe, by my effort, he began calling and talking to me more often, too. Currently, we talk two-three times each week often for ten minutes or more.

I also began—or rather forced myself—to talk about topics I previously considered off-limits, topics like race and racism, domestic abuse, and gay identity. Motivated, I believe, by my effort, my father and I no longer avoid these topics like we once did.

*June 2006*

My father started dating a woman of Indian descent, a woman darker-skinned than his usual light-skinned love-interests. To my knowledge, he had never dated anyone who wasn't overtly Caucasian. My father stepped out of his skin-colored comfort zone, seeming to become more comfortable liking and loving who *he* wants rather than liking and loving people others want him to like and love. Race is still an issue for my father, but I also believe that skin color has lessened on his hierarchy of concerns. As such, I would imagine that the possibility of my "marrying a black woman" wouldn't be as terrible as I assume it once was.

*December 2006*

"I've softened as I've aged," my dad says on the phone. He called to tell me about his frustrations with a family friend. "I know Tom dominates everyone, including his wife. That's not right, and that's probably why his kids don't speak to him. I think that's also why one of his sons cannot keep relationships with women. He dominates them."

I listen, wondering if dad ever recalls dominating—abusing—women. That's what I knew of him. Now he's telling me that domination is wrong, that he's softened. I wonder how I should, if ever, approach the topic of him dominating—abusing—my mom. I enjoy hearing his thoughts of softening, and encourage him to continue to have and to live these thoughts. I decide against talking to him about a painful event from my/our history.

*March 2007*

My father visits me in Tampa, Florida. He stays in my apartment for two nights, sleeping on the couch. A milestone achievement: he has never stayed a night in any place I've lived.

During the visit, I approach our coming out interaction four years prior.

“Dad,” I say, “remember when I told you that I was gay?”

“Yeah,” he responds. “You lived in Carbondale.”

“You called and said you heard that I was living with—*fucking*—a man.

Remember?”

“Yeah.”

“And I denied the rumor at first but then said it was true?”

“Yeah, I remember,” he says. “That was a difficult time.”

“That was a difficult time for me too,” I reply. “Even though we didn’t speak for a few months, I wanted to thank you for your response. You never told me I was bad. You didn’t physically harm me. You didn’t kick me out of the family. Some fathers respond to gay children in terrible, more drastic ways. Some force their children into therapy to change their same-sex desire. Some kick their children out of the family. Some children kill themselves because of their parents’ negative reactions. You didn’t do any of this and I appreciate that.”

“I heard you were gay a few days before I called,” he says. “I was upset that you hadn’t called in more than a month. I thought I had made you mad. I mentioned this to a friend and she said that you probably didn’t call because you were gay and were scared to tell me. I asked her why she thought you were gay. She said she heard a rumor that you were.”

“So you didn’t call me immediately after hearing I was gay?” I ask. “I assumed you did.”

“No. I first called Jack [a friend] whose son came out to him a few years prior. We met for dinner and I asked him, as a father, how he responded to a gay son. Jack said that at first he was upset and angry, but knew that he did and should still love and support his son. He told me that even though I may be angry, I should love and support you as best I could. The best that I could do was unfortunately to not speak to you for a few months.”<sup>22</sup>

By thanking my father, I get a glimpse of his processing of my gay identity, a glimpse of the person who I perceived to have reacted negatively to my coming out. I learn that he seemed to have made an effort to understand my same-sex desire, an effort that I cannot now disregard when thinking about our relationship. My father stifled his own anger and decided not to express it openly; he waited until he could better accept it. More importantly, however, I would have never learned of his processing had I not asked, had I not disrupted our typical pattern of being silent with each other about a potentially-contentious topic.

\*\*\*\*

I’m sure that my father and I will continue to healthily and painfully disagree on topics like race and racism, domestic abuse, and gay identity, but should I quit talking to him if I do not like his beliefs? Do I sacrifice my/our relationship because I find his thoughts problematic? On a larger scale, must I cut my ties with people with whom I disagree? I could, but would find myself living a very lonely existence. A relational perspective suggests that people, together, can learn and talk about contentious topics, together. A relational perspective encourages me to have uncomfortable conversations

---

<sup>22</sup> Before my father’s call, he and Jack had been estranged for many years. Hearing of my gayness, however, rekindled their connection. As of this writing, they maintain a strong friendship.

about uncomfortable topics, not remain silent about salient issues. A relational perspective values the ability to talk with another before one, both, or all people become unable to do so.

## Chapter Eight: Gay Dilemmas, Reflections, and Criticisms

*January 2005. I am an instructor of a Public Speaking course. The first assignment is a "Success Speech" designed for students to speak about a personal achievement. As I do with many assignments, I participate. I want to further introduce myself to the students as well as provide an example of how an outlined speech might sound. I decide to tell of my success with coming out to my father, my success of telling him that I was gay. Initially, I receive a positive response from the class, but a few days later I receive a call from the chairperson of my department.*

*"Tony, the President of the university called me today," he reports in a serious tone. "She told me that a student's parents complained about you 'being out' in the classroom."*

*"Who would complain about that?" I ask.*

*"The parents don't think that 'being gay' is a part of the 'university curriculum,'" he says. "The president seems to agree."*

*Frustrated, sad, and frightened, I respond: "I'm not going 'back in the closet.' I don't want to hide from students, especially in a speech on self-disclosure. What should I do?"*

*"You should be out in the classroom," he says, "but should rethink how you do it."*

*The conversation ends and I reflect upon the complaint against my claiming to be a particular kind of person. An identity I claimed threatened a student, a student who will*

*probably dislike my gay body, dislike me, for the remaining thirteen weeks of the semester. For the next few years, I remain closeted in courses where sexuality has no direct relation to course content. I fear losing my job.*

\*\*\*\*

When the conditions of the closet are met, then an individual enters a space where coming out becomes possible, sometimes necessary, but always problematic. Once a person identifies as gay, she or he can never live outside of a closet again, can never live as an out gay being everywhere. In this chapter, I outline the dilemmas that emerge when a person cannot escape the closet, dilemmas revealed by many of the stories I have shared in the previous chapters, dilemmas that I call the “double-bind of gay identity.” I then conceive of ways to alter the canonical closet experience and conclude with a call to make sexuality relational.

\*\*\*\*

*I arrive to an all-male-clientele salon. Dan introduces himself, and tells me that he is going to cut my hair. I find Dan quite masculine: he has a firm gait, deep voice, and a somewhat-disheveled, relaxed appearance. He guides me to his hair-cutting station. Throughout the cut, we talk about sports, politics, and where we're from.*

*“I'm from Illinois,” I say.*

*“Concord, North Carolina,” he responds. “I miss it.”*

*While I didn't initially think about his sexuality, seeing his masculine appearance and hearing how his misses small-town North Carolina motivates me to think that he is heterosexual. Stereotypes emerge: Gay men often do not miss rural areas and are rarely hyper-masculine. Though I study and teach about sex, gender, and sexuality, I still*

*cannot disband deeply entrenched assumptions. It doesn't help that the next part of our conversation is about women.*

*"You know what it's like working around hot women all day?" he asks as a female employee walks by.*

*I hesitate. Is he making an observation about the difficulties, or the benefits, of men and women working together in one space? Does he want me to comment on his "hot" statement and say that I would love to work around hot women? Because I just met Dan, I find it awkward to say "I am gay" and am not sexually attracted to hot women.*

*"Um, sure," I respond uncomfortably and ambiguously, assuming that he's asking if I know about men and women working together.*

*The conversation stops, and I sense that he is nearly finished with my hair.*

*"Want something to drink?" he asks.*

*"No thanks. I'm fine."*

*"Okay," he says. "I'll be right back. I have to get some water."*

*When he returns, I notice he has something in his lip. I look into the mirror and see him spit in a cup and realize that he has been chewing tobacco for most of my haircut. I cringe. He's hyper-masculine, misses the rural past of his youth, asks about hot women, and is chewing tobacco, another stereotypical, masculine, heterosexual act; I have never met a woman or a gay man who chews. These characteristics combine to make me nervous: As a gay person, hyper-masculine men scare me. They were the bullies in high school. They are the people I see bash gays. They are the people that I find most uncomfortable with the notion of same-sex desire.*

*He coats my neck with shaving cream and pulls out a straight-edged razor.*



*“So do you have a girlfriend?” he asks while caressing my neck with the sharp blade.*

*That damn question. He’s not asking if I am bisexual or gay, but is assuming that I am straight. How do I respond? He has a razor on my neck.*

*“Nope,” I say.*

\*\*\*\*

*I feel guilty for typifying Dan and clinging to unquestioned heterosexual assumptions and guilty for not speaking about my same-sex desire. Should I have come out to him? Should I have arrived to the salon and said “Hi, I’m Tony, I’m gay?” Should I have come out when he asked if I knew what working around “hot women” was like? Do I tell him that I am not attracted to women? Even though I am single, should I have pretended to have a boyfriend when he asked if I had a girlfriend? I could have lied, but would this have taken me off the hook of self-condemnation?*

*A few weeks later a friend of mine says he’s been dating Dan for a few months. I am amazed.*

*Assuming that Dan identifies as gay, I approach him the next time I am at the salon.*

*“Why didn’t you tell me that you were gay?” I ask.*

*“Why didn’t you tell me that you were gay?” he responds.*

*“At the time, I didn’t think it was appropriate,” I reply. “You scared me.”*

*“Sorry,” he says, “but I didn’t think telling you was appropriate either. I assumed you were straight.”*

\*\*\*\*

### *The “Double-Bind of Gay Identity”*

In heteronormative contexts, once a person self-identifies as gay, the closet becomes a formative, inescapable way of life, a metaphor she or he comes to live by (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). For gay people, the closet makes a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't existence possible, an existence akin to a Batesonian double-bind (Bateson, 2000).

Bateson (2000) argues that a double-bind exists when five conditions are met: (a) two or more people (b) participate in a “repeated experience” (c) in which a “primary negative injunction” makes whatever course of action punishable, (d) a situation in which a “secondary injunction” complicates the primary negative injunction, and (e) a situation in which a “tertiary negative injunction” prohibits a person from “escaping the field,” escape being in the double-bind (pp. 206-07).

The closet creates a double-bind for gay identity. The act of disclosing a gay identity to another is an act that occurs with two or more people. It is an act that gay persons repeat over and over again. There are punishments for a person, whether he chooses to come out or not (primary negative injunction), and punishments for a person who never comes to the end of coming out (secondary injunction). One cannot do neither; you either stay in or come out. Either way, a gay person risks trauma, rejection, and/or disconfirmation. And with the closet and gay identity being mutually constitutive, one cannot exist absent each other. Thus, as long a person identifies as gay, the closet occupies an inextricable part of her/his life; she or he cannot escape its field.

In a heteronormative context, a person is often assumed to be straight until proven gay. She or he must thus come out of the closet, *say* something about her/his gay identity.

However, coming out is a time of “sacrifice and danger,” a time when a gay person can experience “hostility, rejection, and even violence from family, friends, and total strangers” (Gross, 1991, p. 374). Such hostility, rejection, and violence may occur because another is disgusted by or doesn’t understand gayness, and/or it can be rooted in the discovery of the person’s hiding practices, lies, omissions of information, bouts of selfishness, and/or a participation in reckless acts.

Hiding practices, lies, omissions of information, bouts of selfishness, and participation in reckless acts occur most extremely when a person *privately* acknowledges a gay identity but *publicly* disconfirms this identity, the time of living the closet. However, a person who publicly confirms a gay identity most everywhere can still be held accountable for these practices, lies, omissions, bouts, and acts *regardless* of what she or he says or does. Furthermore, if coming out is a never-ending process as the research in this dissertation suggests, then a gay person’s existence still is constituted by the presence of hiding practices, lies, omissions of information, bouts of selfishness, and/or participation in reckless acts, an existence where she or he must always prepare for being regarded as manipulative, self-hating, and/or immature. Consider, for example, Dave’s recollection:

I would lie when I would sit with my mom who asks about a girlfriend and say “I’m not seeing anyone right now.” Well, I guess I wasn’t lying but rather omitting a truth. (personal interview, 2007)

And recall Tyler saying:

My first name is Tyler and my middle name is James. When I meet people that may have a problem with my sexuality, I introduce myself as Tyler. But when I

meet people that I don't think will have a problem with my sexuality, I introduce myself as James. That way I can keep the world straight. If somebody says "Hey James" I know they're friendly. If somebody says Tyler, I'm not sure. (personal interview, 2007)

E. Lynn Harris (2003) tells his friend that he is "going to Jamaica" with "Maria" and not "Mario" (p. 181). Harris also tells his aunt about being in a relationship with Andre, not mentioning, however, that Andre is male (p. 142).

"I can't, to this day, imagine what childhood would have been like without the need for secrecy, and the constant vigilance secrecy requires," Bernard Cooper (1996) writes.

The elaborate strategies, psychic acrobatics . . . . Every day you await disgrace. You look for an ally and do not find one, because to find one would mean you had told. You pretend to be a person you are not, then worry that your pretense is obvious, as vulnerable to taunts as the secret itself. In a desperate attempt at self-protection, you shrink yourself down to nearly nothing, and still you are there, as closed as stone. (p. 70)

Or consider Jeffrey's comments, an interviewee in Downs' (2005) project on self-hate:

I've been lying to everyone for most of my life. I lied to . . . my best friend in high school, when he asked me if I was queer. I lied to every girlfriend . . . I lied to my parents about who I was dating, what my life was really like, or even when I would get married. I've lied to my employers, my doctor, and even the priest at

my parents' church by playing like I was straight . . . . I guess I sound like some kind of monster, but I'm really not. (p. 127)

Life in the closet is a time of lies, acts of omission, and hiding practices, a time when a gay person may have less concern about her/his health and sexual practices, and a time when she or he may, without explanation, avoid contact with significant others.

While all of these acts may be used to avoid or deflect overt conflict, they make it possible for others to frame gay persons as deceptive, manipulative, and harmful if they do come out, and to suffer the trauma of guilt, self-hatred, and shame if they do not.

A dilemma forms: tell another you are gay in order to be open and honest but, in so doing, put yourself in an uncomfortable and potentially dangerous situation if the other fears, hates, or is disgusted by people; *or* choose not to tell to remain safe but in so doing know that you and others might hold you accountable for your lies, deceptions, and manipulations and that you risk even greater potential harm if your secret leaks out.

While not explicitly writing about coming out, Bochner (1984) argues that the dilemma of what to reveal and what to conceal confronts each party with the contradictory impulses to seek protection and to be open in order to perceive oneself as an equal partner in a cooperative venture for a presumably shared purpose. (Bochner, 1984, p. 589)

Disclosures of gay identity are “embedded in the history of past disclosures” (Bochner, 1984, p. 610), a past with a “fixedness that allows reinterpretation only up to certain limits” (Carr, 1986, p. 99). It is this first characteristic of coming out—*choosing to tell or not to tell*—that when coupled with the next two characteristics of coming out make a double-bind of gay identity possible.

\*\*\*\*

*I arrive at Evo's, one of my favorite fast-food restaurants. I place my order and take a seat. Since she's not busy, the cashier comes and sits at my table. I tell her that I'm moving to Chicago. She asks if I'm moving with my girlfriend.*

*I tell her "No, I'm single."*

*She responds with "You'll find a girl soon."*

*Should I tell this cashier, an acquaintance, that I'm gay? Do I say, "No, I'm not moving with my girlfriend or my boyfriend because I am single?" She did not ask if I was gay, bisexual, or straight, but assumed that I identified as straight and that I was in a relationship with a girl. I leave the restaurant filled with regret, guilt, and shame. Why couldn't, or didn't, I say that I liked men? Even though I believe that I am comfortable with my gay identity, these mundane situations are what make me question myself; they make coming out difficult. How do I find the right time to disclose to a person I only know from visiting in a restaurant? Do I say "I like men and wouldn't have a girlfriend" the next time I visit? How awkward would that be? After all, she didn't ask if I was gay or straight, only if I was moving with my girlfriend.*

\*\*\*\*

"As a teacher, I'm uncomfortable with students knowing that I am gay in the first week of class," Michael says.

But halfway through a semester, I don't care if they know. There's always a certain amount of calculation, of prediction, every time you come out.

Falconi (2006), a reporter for *The Daily Mississippian*, says

A critical component of coming out is all in the timing. While the Thanksgiving turkey is being carved, for example, may not be the best time to blurt out “Mom, Dad, I’m gay!” as you reach for the cranberry sauce. Awkward! Rather, choosing just the right time and setting to discuss your sexual orientation with those most important to you is crucial in feeling secure in getting out of the closet.

Tyler believes that

There’s always a right time to come out and you have to feel the environment for when that right time is. You have to get a sixth sense about who is going to take it better than others. In some ways it’s also about getting the right people on your side, which may seem manipulative. But if you know others already support you then the process is a lot easier. (personal interview, 2007)

Coming out can be dangerous. It is a time when a gay person introduces a marginal and possibly-devalued identity as a topic of conversation and the related topics of sex and same-sex desire, topics often repressed and prohibited in mundane conversation. Backlash against coming out can thus take the form of “Why must you tell everyone that you’re gay? I don’t tell everyone that I am straight!” “I don’t care about your [homo] sexuality or what you ‘are’ as long as you keep to yourself,” and “It’s your life. You choose how to live.”

A gay person, in order to claim her/his gay identity, must contradict rampant heteronormative assumptions, prepare for reactions against a marginal and devalued identity, and make sex and sexuality a topic of conversation. Coupled with my previous observation, she or he must also prepare to negotiate revealing a potential history of hiding practices, lies, omissions of information, bouts of selfishness, and participation in

reckless acts. To make matters worse, the longer one waits to disclose, the longer one lives in the closet, the longer one may build upon a history of deceptive practices, accumulating lies, omissions, bouts of selfishness, and reckless acts.

Thus, the gay person may develop a need to try to predict the “right” time to disclose, the ideal relational conditions under which to come out. It is this second characteristic of coming out—*the attempt to try to predict and develop ideal relational conditions*—that further complicates and expands the double-bind of gay identity.

\*\*\*\*

*“I fucked your mom, faggot!” someone screams at me from a passing car. It’s 10 p.m., and I’m walking on a residential street in Tampa, Florida.*

*I check my location: Morrison Avenue.*

*I take note of my surroundings: Any place to run?*

*I grab my cell phone to call the cops, but then wonder if I should or if it would be too late. What happens if the car stops and people jump out and approach me? In those few seconds could I dial 911, hit send, and then tell a dispatcher why I’m calling and identify my precise location?*

*I re-view my “OGTs,” my “Obviously Gay Traits,” stereotypical ideas about how gay men act. I’m casually dressed and have a fairly masculine gait. I haven’t shaven in a few days nor am I walking with another man or in a designated gay space. I make sure to work against gay stereotypes so that I might appear straight. I fear harm.*

*But then there is my sexuality: I identify as a “faggot” and, ironically, happen to be walking to a gay bar. I don’t think the man could have known either of these things,*



*but I decide I could lie for my safety. "I'm walking to the store," I'd say, followed by "Faggots are disgusting. I'm no faggot." (Adams, in press)*

\*\*\*\*

"Every time you get into a new situation," Michael says, there's the issue of negotiating disclosure. For example, at the beginning of one of my classes, a person asked me if I was married or if I had kids. I said "Well, I live with my partner." She responded with "Oh! I'm sorry that I presumed" and blah, blah, blah. It is awkward to point out to another person that her or his basic categories don't work. Coming out is a proactive act that always puts you at risk. Basic assumptions, like marriage, that are normal discourse for some people, matter-of-fact bits about their life that they take for granted, become moments of risk, again and again, for the rest of a gay person's life. Gay people live at risk. (personal interview, 2007)

Tyler, another interviewee, does not believe he is completely, definitively out. "My partner and I are not 'lovey-dovey' everywhere we go," he says. "Coming out is a process you do over and over again. Most people don't walk into rooms wearing 'Hi, I'm gay' t-shirts."

In this dissertation, I have argued, after Urbach (1996, p. 69), that coming out cannot be "accomplished once and for all." Outness is a matter of degree that changes with context (Chirrey, 2003, p. 28); new "disclosure challenges" always exist (Berzon, 2002, p. 171; Butler, 1991; Garrick, 1997; Plummer, 1995; Shakespeare, 1999).

Halley (1989), a legal scholar, argues that

because the assumption of heterosexuality applies in virtually every social interaction—from the encounter of teacher with student, salesperson with shopper, mother with daughter, Supreme Court Justice with clerk—even the most forthright and fearless gay man or lesbian cannot “come out” once and for all in a single public disclosure; as she moves from one social setting to another, she will have to come out afresh or acquiesce in the assignment to her of a nonreferential public identity. (p. 947)

Sedgwick (1990) agrees, noting that

the deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption means that . . . people find new walls springing up around them . . . every encounter with a new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new . . . requisitions of secrecy or disclosure.” (p. 68)

It is this characteristic of coming out—*the absence of an ending to the coming out process, the unending burden of making identity claims*—that when coupled with the previous two characteristics makes the primary negative injunction of gay identity possible and problematic: If coming out is a process done over and over again, then a gay person must immediately tell of her/his identity or risk eventually being considered deceptive; if coming out is a never-ending process then a gay person must perpetually try to predict ideal relational conditions to disclose while simultaneously prepare himself for ascriptions of being, or having been, manipulative; if coming out does not end, then a gay person exists within an uncomfortable, paradoxical, anxiety-ridden state in which new

situations perpetually arise that present new times to come out, new questions about whether the time is right, new worries about others' responses, new possibilities to suffer trauma or self-hatred.

I now introduce the secondary injunction that complicates the primary negative injunction: *you have to come out (completely) to be healthy*. If coming out is conceived as a “developmental process” with a “beginning stage and an end stage, connected to each other by a series of intermediate and sequential steps” (Rust, 1993, p. 52; Gagné et al., 1997; Kus, 1985), if it is assumed that people can complete the coming out process (McDonald, 1982), if it is believed that a gay person can “escape” the closet (Burgess, 2005, p. 139; Chee, 2006), then gay individuals who never reach the “end stage” of coming out, those who never complete the process, those who never escape the closet may be considered immature, dishonest, self-hating, regressed, or “less than healthy psychologically” (Phellas, 2005, p. 79; see also Cole et. al., 1996). Indeed, gay persons who remain “in” the closet are often perceived to be living “false, unhappy lives” (Seidman et al., 1999, p. 11).

“The idealization of coming out,” McLean (2007) observes, “constructs a binary of disclosure that positions coming out as ‘good,’ as it enables the healthy development of sexual identity, and positions non-disclosure as ‘bad’” (p. 154). Chee (2006) says that there is an “attitude of contempt for people who are closeted” (p. 114), and Rasmussen (2004) agrees, noting that gay people who

fail in their duty to come out may be marked as lacking . . . .When coming out discourses are privileged, the act of not coming out may be read as an abdication

of responsibility, or, the act of somebody who is disempowered or somehow ashamed of their inherent gayness. (pp. 145-46)

However, paradoxically, if coming out is a never-ending process, then a gay person will always be prone to ascriptions of immaturity, dishonesty, self-hatred, regression, or being unhealthy; they may always be moving towards some end, but can never arrive.

A constitutive, double-bind of gay identity forms: If a person isn't perpetually out, she or he may be perceived as deceptive, manipulative, and/or harmful, immature, dishonest, and/or self-hating; if a person is perpetually out, if she or he does decide to, as Tyler (2007) says, "walk into rooms wearing 'Hi, I'm gay' t-shirts," then she or he may be perceived as awkward, aggressive, and self-centered. Gay identity as situated within heteronormative contexts is constituted by and tangled in a circuit of damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't expectations.

In situations where either course of action a person takes may be considered problematic, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to talk about which course of action is more beneficial. Many people may say that a person should be aggressively out, but there will be just as many others who will disagree. Saying that a person should be aggressively out may also be reckless insofar as such advice can place the person at risk.

And even if (quite implausibly) a gay person has never engaged in lies, acts of omission, or hiding practices, bouts of selfishness, and/or reckless acts, I emphasize that she or he *always has the potential* to be accused of lying, hiding, omitting information, and/or not coming out soon enough. Individuals, once they identify as gay, reside in what Laing (1969) calls an "untenable position," a situation where her/his "feelings are denuded of validity" and "acts are stripped of their motives, intentions, and

consequences” regardless of what she or he says or does (p. 124), and a situation in which “compliance itself is not good enough” and “noncompliance is completely out of the question” (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974, p. 71).

For instance, unless students in the classes I teach explicitly ask about my sexuality, I do not publicly self-identify as gay until a few weeks into the semester. However, in so doing, I often receive charges of deception (You should’ve told us sooner.”), charges of being manipulative (“You planned this so that people might regret what they said earlier.”), and/or charges of being immature and self-hating (“Are you not comfortable identifying as gay?”). Like Michael, an interviewee, “I’m uncomfortable with students knowing that I am gay in the first week of class. But halfway through a semester, I don’t care if they know” (personal interview, 2007). I risk being self-serving and awkward coming out too early, but deceptive, manipulative, immature and self-hating if I come out too late. And definitions of early and late are ambiguous and relative; there is no metric to regulate coming out time.

I mentioned that gay culture is often defined in terms of two significant characteristics: same-sex desire and trauma. The double-bind introduces a third: gay persons are constituted by and share the experience of being tangled in the knot of coming-out processes, ones that create a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don’t existence. Coming out becomes synonymous with gay identity, and once a person identifies as gay, she is likely to be held accountable for the workings of the metaphorical space in which she or he (always) lives.

\*\*\*\*

*A new tenant, a man, moves into my apartment building. When we first meet, he asks what I do in Tampa.*

*“I’m in graduate school,” I say. “I read and write and teach.”*

*“What do you write about?” he asks.*

*Hesitantly, I respond with “I study how people talk about nature.”*

*Guilt subsumes me: I am scared to say that I study how “gay people interact with others.” I am not ready to come out to a person during our first meeting and, I assume that by saying that, some of the work that I do would frame me as gay. I could say “I study how sexuality can influence interaction,” but an intentional move to make my work vague seems dishonest.*

*But now when do I disclose? I’m sure I’ll talk with him again. Do I tell him at a later time that I write about gay identity? “Why didn’t you tell me that initially?” he might ask. Even if he doesn’t ask but only thinks such a sentiment, he may perceive me as hiding a shameful identity. The possibility always exists. And what I think he thinks is just as important as what he thinks . . . (Laing, 1969)*

\*\*\*\*

### *Changing Conditions of the Closet*

In this dissertation, one of my goals has been to show lived experiences of the metaphorical closet in order to make these epiphanies and experiences familiar for gay cultural insiders and outsiders. However, I do not believe that the closet is a natural or inevitable fact of life, or that the existence of the closet, and life in the closet, is “determined by the nature of things” (Hacking, 1999, p. 6). I believe that canonical stories of and reactions to coming out need to be “radically transformed,” and that the

double bind of gay identity “need not be as it is” (p. 6). As a *critical* autoethnographer, I thus envision ways experiences of the closet can and should change. In this section, I suggest how this can happen.

The first way experiences of the closet can change is to work to change the conditions and characteristics of the closet. This might include refuting another’s negative reaction to coming out, rebelling against an institution that promotes anti-gay practices, or by addressing issues of self-dislike among gay individuals. As a gay man, I may recognize that a reaction to coming out is often an influential, scarring memory in a relationship, and may thus try to work to re-frame the weight I place on this reaction. I might realize that there are other significant, hopefully more compassionate experiences that constitute the relationship, not just that of coming out. Or if, as a gay person, I recognize that I am more comfortable with hiding information about my past, isolating myself from others, or engaging in reckless acts, I may perpetually reconsider the necessities of hiding, isolating, and being reckless. Or I might recognize that, as a gay person, I reside in a double-bind of disclosure, and should thus focus less on the necessity to come out to others and more on how to negotiate the possibility of always being considered deceptive, manipulative, immature, dishonest, and/or self-hating.

However, when a double-bind exists, it is difficult to change the characteristics and conditions that make the bind possible. A person must “metacommunicate” if she or he wants to escape an interactional paradox (Bateson, 1951, 2000).

Metacommunication is “communicate about communication” (Bateson, 2000, p. 215; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). Metacommunication happens when people discuss ways they interpret each others’ messages, discuss their relationship, and discuss

how interpretation and relationship inextricably influence meaning-making processes. Metacommunication is about reflecting on the conditions that ground the content and relational aspects of interaction such as when my father and I reviewed and expanded on our conversation that occurred the day I came out.

Metacommunication is difficult, however, because persons often do not have the language or conceptual distance to reflect on the conditions of an experience (Bateson, 1951, 2000; Scott, 1991). This is why the conditions of closet, those I outlined in this project, are so important: They are the communication, the language, the conceptual framework constitutive of gay identity and coming out.

I previously highlighted seven conditions necessary for a the closet to exist: a person must (1) have the language of “gay” and know about this kind of person; recognize that gay identity and/or desire possesses a (2) *marginal* and a (3) *devalued* status; realize that gay identity and/or desire (4) may encounter negative criticism from others *when discussed*; know (5) she or he harbors a secret, that gay identity and/or desire is not readily, easily accessible; realize that her/his gay identity and/or desire will (6) not go away on demand; and (7) *self-identify* as gay. When these conditions are met, then an individual discovers the existence of the closet, a space where a door can be closed or opened, a space where coming out becomes possible, sometimes necessary, but always problematic. Changing these conditions can change the conceptual framework of the metaphorical space, specifically the experiences of living in the closet, the canonical coming out story, the double-bind of gay identity, and other patterns of interaction relevant to gay experience.



Some of these conditions are difficult to manipulate. For instance, it is not practical to quit using the language affiliated with gay culture. Efforts could be made to discuss gay culture earlier in a variety of settings (educational systems, families, etc.), but the condition of having the language to identify as gay and knowledge of gay culture is not necessarily a condition conducive to change. It is also difficult to change the culturally *marginal* status of gay identity: heterosexuals outnumber homosexuals in most contexts. And I do not believe that same-sex desire, a desire often constitutive of gay identity, can (or should) go away on demand.

Other conditions are more conducive to change. Most obviously, a person can rebel against homosexuality's culturally *devalued* status. However, more subtle ways include making sexuality and attraction a frequent topic of conversation, perpetually re-identifying sexuality in a variety of ways, and making gay identity and same-sex desire visible in mundane, unobtrusive ways. I will describe these three possibilities in detail.

In heteronormative contexts, heterosexuality is often never *explicitly* discussed; it is assumed (see Foster, 2008). I hear "Do you think he's gay?" far more often than "Do you think he's straight?" Thus, speaking about heterosexuality and opposite-sex desire in heteronormative contexts becomes an unnecessary form of discursive visibility (see Gator Gay-Straight Alliance, 2004; Jacobs, 2007; Skelton, 1997; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1994). Coming out as heterosexual makes heterosexuality something talked about rather than disregarded, unstated, and/or assumed. It is an act of "deliberate transgression" (Foucault, 1978, p. 6), a form of metacommunication that tacitly disrupts heterosexuality's silence in a variety of mundane contexts like the classroom, bank, or grocery store.

Coming out as straight can also expose the awkwardness in and preparation for disclosure. If coming out never ends, then the feeling of never being able to fully disclose one's heterosexuality may become tedious and tiresome. And since heterosexuality is often not discussed, a person identifying as heterosexuality may come across as awkward in that she or he speaks, unnecessarily, of an already assumed characteristic. I am not suggesting that coming out as heterosexual parallels a gay person's coming out, but if the conditions of the closet, two of which keep sexuality silent and secret, then a perpetual negotiation of coming out can work to desensitize discussions of devalued sexualities as well as emphasize sexuality's invisible status as a cultural identity.

I mentioned that the experience of the closet and the double bind of gay identity become possible when a person realizes that a gay identity is invisible *and* is self-claimed. Coming out is not necessarily relevant for people who engage in same-sex acts or for people others identify as gay. I am not saying that others do not influence a person's outing process or that if a person is not out others will assume this person is straight. But coming out only makes sense when sexuality, specifically gay identity, is self-claimed, and only necessary when the sexuality is not heterosexual. Manipulating these conditions can thus make for new relational possibilities.

For instance, I publicly identify as gay in most every course I teach. Once my coming out speech act happens, I sometimes have students, specifically "Evangelical Christians," set up a time, outside of class, to meet. They often do so in order to "save" me from my abnormal, sinful lifestyle. In the last four years, six Evangelicals have done this. I do not want to critique Evangelical Christian dogma or these individuals' attempts

to save me, but rather I emphasize one way that I try to counter their saving act by creating dissonance by way of self-identification.

The conversations often go something like this: “Why did you want to meet?” I’ll ask. “I want to talk with you about your gay lifestyle,” they’ll say. “I’m not gay,” I’ll respond. “You said you were,” they’ll reply. “I’m not right now,” I’ll answer.

While refusing to identify as gay may seem self-hating and not politically savvy, alternating sexuality via discourse can make some individuals question what sexuality is. Claiming and refusing a gay identity, an invisible and self-claimed identity, can facilitate dissonance; these acts become a kind of “confusion technique” (Watzlawick et. al., 1974, p. 101), ones where an individual must create new frames to escape the uncertainty. Thus far, none of the Evangelical Christians have challenged my perceived sexual fluidity.

In terms of religion, I also find it difficult to confront religious dogma directly. I’ve had conversations that go something like “Gays are sinful” with a retort of “I don’t think so.” A debate begins without any definitive conclusion, and an interactional stalemate forms. This is another reason why confusion, specifically the ability to manipulate sexuality’s self-claimed status, can break and remake and thus change canonical conceptual frames.

What does it say about sexuality if a person identifies as gay one day, bisexual the next and straight the following week? Why not emphasize the fluidity of sexuality by naming yourself differently? Even if you don’t feel straight, gay, and/or bisexual (to name a few possibilities), re-identifying can work as a social breach (Garfinkel, 1967), one that illustrates ways that sexuality, and assumptions of sexuality, operate in interaction and dilute sexual identity assumptions.

The closet comes to exist when a person realizes that she or he harbors a secret, that gay identity and/or desire is not readily, easily accessible; again, it is invisible. But when a person makes this secret perpetually known, then she or he may come across as socially awkward. Thus, another way to disrupt the secret condition of the closet is to make same-sex desire visible *without seeming to do so* using a variety of subtle, unobtrusive ways. Consider my experience in the checkout line of a grocery store.

A male customer ahead of me pays, grabs his bags, and walks away from the grocery bagger and the cashier. Upon his departure but out of hearing range, I hear the cashier tell the bagger that the former customer “was a flaming faggot.” Both begin to laugh as I move forward in the line.

The cashier begins to scan my groceries while the bagger bags. Both still laugh about the cashier’s flaming faggot remark and neither pay much attention to me.

The cashier soon says what I owe. While I usually pay for my groceries with a credit card, I decide, this time, to use a check, a check that has “Working for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Equal Rights” printed above the signature line. My move to pay by check will, I hope, force the cashier to ask for my ID in order to verify the check’s signature and therefore possibly see the printed text.

“May I see your ID?” he asks.

“Sure,” I respond as I innocently retrieve my wallet. I give him the ID. He looks at its signature and then compares it to the check. It is here where he pauses. I know that he’s reading the print above the signature line, and I know that he begins to know that I know he laughed at the flaming faggot that passed through the checkout line before me.

“Uh...thank you,” he says, followed by “I’m sorry for what I said about that man.”

“No problem,” I respond. “Thanks for your help.”

Based on his remark, I assumed the cashier was not a “flaming faggot.” I also assumed that the cashier didn’t think I was one—I don’t think he’d have made the remark if he did especially since he didn’t say flaming faggot in front of the man he called flaming. Unsure of how to approach the remark, I tried to conceive of ways to subtly make my secret readily, easily accessible. I wanted to unobtrusively come across as being a flaming faggot ally or a self-identified flaming faggot. In the space of interaction, I used my assumptions of the cashier’s identity, my assumptions of his assumptions about my identity, and my knowledge of desire being secret to make a point.

The disclosure of gay identity and reactions to this disclosure also occupy a significant presence in coming out situations. But why *this* moment and *these* reactions, especially when other moments and reactions exist? Why not discuss *current feelings of a relationship*? Why is it that when I talk about my father and me, I talk about coming out to him and his reaction? Why don’t I talk about the time my boyfriend and I ate at his restaurant? Why don’t I talk about how he sought advice from another father of a gay son on ways to respond to my gay disclosure? Why don’t I talk about his now frequent telephoning and visiting? Why don’t I talk about us feeling better together? Changing the conditions of the closet may also change the coming out situation, making it increasingly relational rather than strictly individualistic.

\*\*\*\*

*My ten year high school reunion approaches. It will be held in Danville, Illinois. At the time, I'm living in Tampa, Florida. A friend I haven't talked with since high school visits Tampa. He finds my phone number on the internet, calls, and asks me to dinner.*

*"You know I've come out since high school," I say during the meal.*

*"I heard you were gay from others," he replies. "I figured you'd tell me tonight."*

*The meal continues with talk about school, relationships, and all of the other significant happenings from the past ten years. He then asks about the reunion.*

*"You're coming, right?"*

*"No," I say with hesitation. "I'm too busy."*

*"What's the real reason?" he asks. "You're not that busy."*

*"I'm scared."*

*My graduating class was only 32 people. Everyone knew everyone. I tell my friend that, in high school, I intimately fooled around with one of our male classmates. I tell him that after the incident, the man called me a "cocksucker," a "fucking queer," and slammed me into a locker. I do not tell him the man's name, as my friend mentioned earlier in the evening that he is friends with the man I was speaking about. The man is now married and a police officer in the rural town, has a bad temper, and has told others that he's not too fond of me.*

*"I fear what could happen," I say.*

*"I'll protect you," he responds.*

*"Thanks, but I'd rather not put myself in the situation."*

*I'm fearful. Yes, my incident with the man happened ten years ago, but I'm still very leery. I am a man who often publicly identifies as gay. The other man is married.*

*Our "affair" is not a harmful secret for me. It is, however, potentially harmful for him.*

*As a person who has identified as gay for almost a decade, I still find myself fearful of rural settings, especially those where a possible foe has legal authority. I find myself fearful of the place where I was raised, the place where all of my relatives still live. I'd rather spare the possibility for injury than have a fun weekend with my graduating class. An embrace of gay identity, no matter how comfortable I am with the embrace, still motivates me to avoid others.*

\*\*\*\*

#### *Making Coming Out Relational*

I remember uttering the phrase "I am gay" to my father. He responded by not speaking to me for six months. When I told my mom that I found men attractive, she supported my attraction as long as I promised never to tell relatives. She feared they would abandon her for having a gay son. Thus, at family gatherings I entertain being asked if "I have a girlfriend" and justify why I am not married. In December 2005 my aunt did not want my partner and me in her house. She refused to have gays contaminating her space, and said she loved me but not my gay identity. Saying "I am gay" influenced my relationship with her too.

It is easy to criticize my father, mother, and aunt for their selfish, disheartening responses. It is easy to say that they oppress. It is easy to say that I am silenced in some familial contexts and should thus work to eliminate the silence by way of dialogue, debate, avoidance, or argument. However, individuals-in-relationships are not isolated

phenomena, and, while I may not like hearing another's response, I must work with and respect it. A person can have rational reasons (Shweder, 1986), from her/his perspective or worldview, to fear or dislike a gay person (Tillmann-Healy, 2001). As such, a gay person cannot necessarily expect or demand another to respond favorably to her/his coming out.

In this section, I try to reframe the canonical coming out story, an individualistic narrative that places a significant amount of burden on a gay person, in terms of a relational perspective, one that makes all individuals in a relationship accountable for relational burdens. Reframing, Watzlawick et. al. (1974) write, can change the “meaning attributed” to a situation and thereby change its consequences. Reframing “operates on the level of *metareality*” (p. 97) in an attempt to alter the “conceptual framework” of an event (p. 104). Reframing offers a “new definition” of the “same circumstance,” but does not disregard the material circumstances involved (p. 109)

As I have illustrated, coming out—and not coming out—are acts of self-disclosure that can create relational difficulties.<sup>23</sup> However, reframing the canonical coming out narrative—and, by default, gay identity—makes these difficulties *shared* difficulties, ones in which all persons involved in a relationship must negotiate *together*. A person's negative reaction to another person's gay disclosure is a reaction both individuals make possible. The gay person made the choice to disclose and may be perceived, by the other, to have made the choice to be a marginal, devalued kind of person. Thus, significant others privy to a gay disclosure may need support, especially if these others have a minimal amount of knowledge about gay people (Elizur & Ziv, 2001).

---

<sup>23</sup> Brown (2000) argues that not coming out—keeping silent about a gay identity—is a speech act even though nothing is actually spoken.



For instance, parents can “experience shame and guilt as a result of a child’s disclosure that he or she is gay”; they are often more concerned with “mentally undoing some aspect of themselves (‘If I had done this differently, then . . .’) rather than with trying to understand their child’s experience and responding empathically” (Armesto & Weisman, 2001, p. 148). Conversely, the other’s negative response—and a gay person’s perception that the other might respond negatively—may motivate a gay person to engage in a variety of self-condemning acts (telling secrets, lying, being reckless, etc.). A relational perspective of coming out considers audiences (disclosees) and gay disclosers as equally important (Mosher, 2001), thus making a negative response to a gay disclosure both justified *and* inexcusable.

Furthermore, when a person comes out, she or he also implicates people in the addressee’s intimate sphere; a closet is constructed around the addressee (Aoki, 2005; Hom, 1995; Seidman et. al., 1999). “When gay people in a homophobic society come out, perhaps especially to parents or spouses,” Sedgwick (1990) says,

it is with the consciousness of a potential for serious injury that is likely to go in *both* directions. The pathogenic secret itself . . . can circulate contagiously *as* a secret: a mother says that her adult child’s coming out of the closet with her has plunged her, in turn, into the closet in her conservative community. (p. 80)

For instance, when Lim-Hing (1990/91) came out to her family, many of her significant others quit sending her event invitations. They wanted to keep her gay identity secret from others. “This tolerance,” she writes, “curiously ambivalent, tells me that I’m still part of the family, but that being gay or having a gay person in the family is shameful” (p. 21).

“Identity by association”—the idea that we are particular kinds of people because of our relationships with other kinds of people—is another reason a person’s gayness may pose difficulties with others (Boyd, 2006; Aoki, 2005; Garfinkel, 1967; Taylor, 2000; Walker, 1993). A person in a relationship with someone who others consider “weird” may worry about whether these same others consider her or himself weird, too. A person who says “I have a gay friend” risks being perceived as gay and/or being condemned for associating with someone who is gay. A parent who says “I have a gay child” may be thought of as a bad parent.<sup>24</sup>

Identity-by-association provides further insight into coming out processes. A person does not necessarily come out when she or he discloses information about someone else. A person comes out when she or he is invested in the disclosure and is concerned about how another will respond. I may have a gay friend, but do not come out by saying “I have a gay friend.” I do, however, come out if I am invested in this utterance, if I worry that others may think of me as gay, or may condemn me for associating with a gay person, or may conceive of me as a bad parent if the gay person is my child. When a person comes out, she or he reveals potentially harmful information.

For instance, I lived the first twenty years of my life in Danville, Illinois, a rural town of 30,000 people. Generations of my family lived their lives in this town, and, with the exception of two distant cousins, all still remain. I visit this town approximately seven days each year, and I haven’t lived in Danville for almost a decade.

My father owns a restaurant in Danville, a business that has been in his family for more than 60 years. If my father believes that my coming out to individuals in the town

---

<sup>24</sup> I recognize that gay-as-a-negative-trait and gay-as-a-result-of-bad-parenting are also stories that need reframed, but for this project I am particularly interested in making gay identity relational.

will hurt his business, his livelihood, then how can I ethically invade his permanent space and make my sexuality visible, a sexuality that many individuals in Danville may still perceive as abnormal and disgusting? What allows me to jeopardize his business when I do not live in the area? Concealment, here, may be an act of “social obligation” (Henry, 1965, p. 100).

A relational perspective makes a gay person attentive to ways a disclosure of a gay identity can influence another. “I don’t necessarily think about how I’m going to take a person’s response to my coming out,” Tyler, an interviewee, says. “But I always think about how the other person is going to feel, how the other person is going to handle it, if the other person is going to be upset” (personal interviewee, 2007). A relational perspective of coming out must conceive of the process as an interpersonal rather than an individual endeavor, a process where a gay individual simultaneously tries to disrupt oppressive systems while expressing concern for potentially-oppressive others. Expressing concern for those we consider oppressors may run counter to progressive politics and may seem a bit dangerous for newly-out gay individuals, but a relational perspective encourages gay individuals to try to understand another even if such understanding might make us uncomfortable.

But can blame in a gay-straight relationship exist? When should a person take a stand? Can a relational perspective accommodate the double bind of gay identity? What happens if a gay man is empathic towards his loved ones, recognizing that they are in relationships together, but these significant others do not feel such togetherness and find his gay identity disgusting time after time? Should he continue to engage in an effort to accommodate their disgust while simultaneously try to make his feelings known? What

happens when a parent forces a gay child to undergo reparative therapy to change her/his gay identity because the child's gayness is a problem? What happens if the parents choose to no longer speak to this child if she or he doesn't work to change? Should the child still make an effort to respect them?

A relational perspective fails with coming out when a person's gayness is conceived of as a "problem." A gay person can take responsibility for knowing that another may conceive of her/his gayness as a problem, but to suggest that gayness is a problem and must somehow be "fixed" is unethical. While gayness may initially be conceived of as a problem, I do not believe that it can be conceived of as a problem forever. This has been done too often, and is an ascription that motivates a variety of harmful acts. A relational perspective does allow for initial, negative reactions to a gay child, but these reactions must cease eventually.

I also do not believe that a person should change her/his gayness and/or refrain from discussing her/his same-sex affairs with another forever. Hyde (2004) argues that "acknowledgement" is a "communicative behavior that grants attention to others and thereby makes room for them in our lives" (p. 63). "Offering positive acknowledgment," he says, "is a moral thing to do" (p. 63). Negative forms of acknowledgement like heterosexism, a valuing and privileging of heterosexuality, "expose people to [a] fate of social death" (p. 64). Embracing Hyde's call suggests that acknowledgement of a person's gayness, specially her/his relationships with same-sex others, is necessary. Otherwise, positive acknowledgment does not exist, with silence serving as a negative (speech) act.

What I have described of the closet has been focused primarily on a gay person's burdens. What I seek to accomplish, however, is to emphasize the co-constitutive qualities of relationships. All individuals play a role in the relationship: No one "gets off the hook" for reacting in a particular way and everyone's accountable to each other. Problems are shared problems, and all individuals in a relationship, gay and straight, are simultaneously victims and oppressors. The parents of a gay or lesbian person must thus understand their own ethical obligations and burdens, one being the obligation, and possible burden, of acknowledgment. Simultaneously, a person must understand, and allow, significant others to respond to her/his gay identity in a variety of ways.

Embracing a relational viewpoint treats all individuals involved as responsible for a relationship's conditions. A relational perspective justifies and rationalizes a negative reaction to a gay disclosure; ideally, blame disappears.

## Epilogue

August, 2003. A trip to see a Cher concert in Indianapolis, Indiana. An excuse to spend an evening out. An early birthday gift for Brett. A last trip before the break up and separation, a last trip together before his death.

Dinner at Buca di Beppos. Motivated by bright décor, a low ceiling, and a robust crowd, I feel an onslaught of anxiety midway through the meal. Having already ordered food, having already devoured most of the spinach-artichoke dip, having already watched him take his insulin shot, I decide to stand in the undecorated, less-peopled hallway.

While I stand, I stare at him staring at me, each smiling at each other, silently gesturing to him not to rush and to enjoy the food and to put my eggplant parmesan in a to-go box.

At the concert, I sit on the end of a row, Seat 1. Brett sits next to me in Seat 2. Seats 3 and 4 are occupied by a heterosexual couple and seats 5 and 6 contain two women, an assumed couple, too. At intermission, the man in Seat 3 leans to Brett. “Hey, there are two pretty ladies sitting next to the wife and me,” he says. “You two men should introduce yourselves.”

“They’re not our type,” Brett responds bluntly, then looks at me and laughs.

After the concert we begin the five-hour drive home. Talk of Cher occurs for the first 30 minutes but ceases when Brett, in the passenger seat, gets tired. I put my hand on his bare leg not covered by inked-stained shorts and I tell him to rest. He places his head on my shoulder and goes to sleep, a familiar and comfortable position we maintain for most of the trip.

\*\*\*\*

December, 2003. The intimate relationship ends. We decide to live together until he moves to Oklahoma, until I move to Florida.

\*\*\*\*

June, 2004. Brett leaves before me. It is the last time we'll see each other for a few months. He enters my room wearing his usual plaid green pajama pants and worn grey t-shirt, and climbs on my twin mattress. I turn on k.d. lang's *Drag* CD, one of his/our favorites, and then join him on the bed. Despite months of turmoil we peer into each others' eyes and begin to cry, a moment in which we intimately connect, again, and bond by holding, crying, talking, realizing we each could love and still love each other, something we both doubted.

"I'm going to miss you," I say.

"I already miss you," he replies.

We know we'll miss each other, know we love each other, know that we'll no longer be able to wheel Seymour, our potted tree, around to meet house guests, no longer be able to take comfort in pot-smoked-filled rooms, no longer be able to mutually care for a fish.

\*\*\*\*

October, 2004. Tampa, Florida. Brett, a two-hour layover at the airport. Tony, a two-hour break between teaching classes. A lunch at Pizza Hut.

\*\*\*\*

January, 2005. Springboro, Ohio. A night together at a Knights Inn. Though we telephoned often, this is the last time we see each other.

\*\*\*\*

March, 2006. A call from a friend to share the news.

“Brett’s dead,” she says through tears. “His sister just called me. You should call her.”

Our conversation ends, and I call the sister, a person I have never met. “Hi, Sarah? This is Tony Adams,” I say when she answers the phone. “I lived with Brett in Carbondale,” I add, strategically phrasing my words. I do not call Brett my ex-boyfriend as I am uncertain if he’s out to every member of his family. I retreat into the closet about our history, wanting to feel out the interaction before blurting “we dated,” wanting to find the right time to disclose, wanting to keep the sister on the phone and not encourage her to hang up. “You sick fuck,” I could hear her say. “My brother wasn’t gay.” It was a comment I feared and so “I lived with Brett in Carbondale” sufficed.

“I know,” she says. “I’ve heard about you.” I wonder what “heard about you” means, but I’m too scared to ask. She continues by describing how he died and what the doctors said, did, and tried to do. The details are a blur.

“I bought him a yellow pony, a plush pony no bigger than a hand,” I say nervously.

“I’ve seen it,” she replies. “I know the pony you’re talking about.”

“He used to call me ‘My Little Tony,’ a play off ‘My Little Pony.’ ‘My Little Tony,’ that’s what he’d say. Could I have it?”

“Of course,” she says. “I’ll send it to you next week.”

\*\*\*\*



“Brett slipped into a diabetic coma one night . . . He had talked to some friends earlier that day and felt fine.” (Joshua, 2006)

\*\*\*\*

The pony, the item that Brett took wherever he traveled, the only item I asked for when he died. “I know the pony you’re talking about,” his sister says. “I’ll send it to you next week.”

\*\*\*\*

I’m still waiting.

\*\*\*\*

I’d like to attend Brett’s funeral and see his body one last time, but before I book a flight, I hear the story of Brett coming out to his father from a mutual friend. And I think: What happens if family and friends refuse to speak of Brett’s same-sex desire and his past of intimately, passionately loving men? What happens if the family doesn’t know of this past? What happens if I arrive to the funeral and someone asks who I am?

I decide against attending. While funerals are typically for the survivors of death, I am concerned about becoming angry about choices made to celebrate Brett’s life, choices about his likes and dislikes, choices about his lovers and friends.

I also decide against attending out of concern for my safety. If Brett’s father reacted negatively to Brett’s coming out as the alternate story suggests, then I am scared of being a gay man, an ex-boyfriend, in his father’s presence. Furthermore, the funeral is in rural Oklahoma. Folk wisdom in some gay circles advises against visiting such settings. These places often cultivate harm; gay people move or live in them at heightened risk. I recall images of Matthew Shepard. I think about the story of *Brokeback*

*Mountain* (Proulx, 1999). I get noxious remembering my experiences of living most of my life in a suffocating, repressive rural area.

\*\*\*\*

I post an obituary on the Communication Research and Theory Network (CRTNET), a listserv of a community in which Brett played a significant part:

One must live in New York once if one wants to be a good actor," Brett often said. Thus he decided to temporarily leave university life and move. After receiving his M.A. from Southern Illinois University (May 2004) and after participating in Light Opera Oklahoma in his home region of Tulsa, Brett Aldridge ventured to The Big Apple. There, he successfully landed several acting opportunities and worked as a teacher with Kaplan.

Brett had quite a diverse fan base. I remember a love letter he received from someone who watched him in *The Mikado* at the University of Miami. "Someone has a crush on you," I said as I handed him the letter. He cleverly reminded me that this fan, Anna, was only 10.

Brett's home was on the stage, and he provided many of us with much needed pleasure and social criticism. Brett enjoyed his roles in *The Mikado* most, and in the Kleinau Theatre at Southern Illinois University (October 2-4, 2003) he performed his autobiographical solo show "Best Face Forward," a show that dealt with his negotiations of gay identity, interpersonal relationships, and intrapersonal conflict. This past year, Brett taught acting and theatre at Tulsa Community College. At the start of 2006, Brett said that he was ready for a doctoral program and a return to university life.

Brett Aldridge passed away on February 28, 2006. He was 29. (Adams, 2006c)

\*\*\*\*

I write for you Brett, someone who, according to entries on his online obituary, “loved without letting on that [he] loved” (Cole), could “take a stressful day, turn it 90 degrees, and help you to see the humor in it” (Alley-Young), and would sing Cher songs when it “got too quiet” (Prell).

\*\*\*\*

Death of a lover, a wake-up call, an event where life before and after seems surreal and never quite the same, an epiphany. Brett’s death, a year-and-a-half after our year-and-a-half together, makes new behaviors possible: Obsessively, I watch squirrels play in the tree outside my window. I walk, by myself, for hours, enjoying the ability to walk. I thank something, an energy, a higher being, that I can feel, experience, be. I sit with friends joyously, talk with others regularly, read emails gladly. I feel good about being connected with others, feel good about watching facial expressions, hearing voices, smelling familiar odors, touching soothing textures even if these expressions, voices, smells, and textures may be deemed unpopular or disgusting. New behaviors made possible by embodied privileges, made possible by a person I once loved and still love. Brett’s death: a motivation to being fun, to have fun being, a motivation to recognize that what you say may be the last thing you say, recognize that what you say matters.

\*\*\*\*

Just know you make me smile.

## References

- 365gaycom (2007a). Uganda Cleric Calls For Annihilation Of Gays. *365gay.com*. Accessed January 10, 2008 from <http://www.365gay.com/Newscon07/10/101507ug.htm>
- Adair, N., & Adair, C. (1978). *Word is out: Stories of some of our lives*. New York: Dell.
- Adam, B. D. (2000). Love and sex in constructing identity among men who have sex with men. *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies*, 5(4), 325-339.
- Adams, A. E. (2002, November). *Two's company: Living the gay life "straightly."* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Adams, A. E. (2003). *Packaged wilderness: Problematizing simulated- and televised-nature experience*. Unpublished master's thesis, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.
- Adams, B. (2004, August 31). Doctor phobia. *Advocate*, pp. 39-41.
- Adams, J. (Producer) & Stephens, T. (Director). (2006). *Another gay movie* [Motion picture]. United States: Luna Pictures.
- Adams, T. E. (2003, November). *Apparently I'm a "homo-phoney": Being accused of being "straight."* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Miami, FL.
- Adams, T. E. (2004). *I hate being gay*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Adams, T. E. (2005). Speaking for others: Finding the 'whos' of discourse. *Soundings*, 88, 331-345.
- Adams, T. E. (2006a). Seeking father: Relationally reframing a troubled love story. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12, 704-723.
- Adams, T. E. (2006b). *About self-hatred*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Adams, T. E. (2006c, March 16). Obituary: Brett Aldridge. Message posted to CRTNET electronic mailing list, archived at <http://lists.psu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0603&L=CRTNET&P=R4421>

- Adams, T. E. (in press). Mothers, faggots, and witnessing (un)contestable experience. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*.
- Aldridge, B. (2004). *Best face forward: The constitution of selves in autoperformance*. Unpublished master's thesis, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.
- Alley-Young, G. (2006, March 10). Untitled [Obituary guestbook entry]. Accessed September 1, 2007 from <http://www.legacy.com/TulsaWorld/GB/GuestbookView.aspx?PersonId=16918149&PageNo=3>
- Allison, D. (1996). *Two or three things I know for sure*. New York: Plume.
- Andrews, M. (2002). Introduction: Counter-narratives and the power to oppose. *Narrative Inquiry*, 12(1), 1-6.
- Anonymous. (1993, July 20). The Pentagon's new policy guidelines on homosexuals in the military. *New York Times*, p. A16.
- Anonymous. (2007, June 14). What's next, gay lasers? *Tampa Bay Times*, 14.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1991). To(o) queer the writer—Loca, escritora y chicana. In B. Warland (Ed.), *InVersions: Writings by dykes, queers, and lesbians* (pp. 249-263). Vancouver: Press Gang.
- Aoki, E. (2005). Coming out as “We 3”: Using personal ethnography and the case study to assess relational identity and parental support of gay male, three-partner relationships. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 1(2), 29-48.
- Armesto, J. C., & Weisman, A. G. (2001). Attributions and emotional reactions to the identity disclosure (“coming out”) of a homosexual child. *Family Process*, 40(2), 145-161.
- Associated Press. (2007a, February 18). “I don't hate gay people,” Hardaway now says. *MSNBC.com*. Retrieved March 9, 2007 from <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17160685/>
- Atkinson, R. (2002). The life story interview. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research* (pp. 121-140). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Atkinson, R. (2007). The life story interview as a bridge in narrative inquiry. In D. J. Clandinin (Ed.), *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry* (pp. 224-245). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Bain, A. L., & Nash, C. (2007). The Toronto Women's Bathhouse Raid: Querying queer identities in the courtroom. *Antipode*, 39(1), 17-34.
- Barefoot Ron (n.d.). Gentle Wisdom. Accessed March 2, 2007 from <http://www.pflag.com/pages/0021.html#intuition>
- Bateson, G. (1951). Information and codification: A philosophical approach. In J. Ruesch & G. Bateson (Eds.), *Communication: The social matrix of psychiatry* (pp. 168-211). New York: W.W. Norton.
- Bateson, G. (2000). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Battles, K., & Hilton-Morrow, W. (2002). Gay characters in conventional spaces: *Will and Grace* and the situation comedy genre. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 19(1), 87-105.
- Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1996). *Relating*. New York: Guilford.
- Baxter, L. A., & Pittman, G. (2001). Communicatively remembering turning points of relational development in heterosexual romantic relationships. *Communication Reports*, 14(1), 1-17.
- Bell, D. (2006). Cowboy love. In H. Campbell, M. M. Bell & M. Finney (Eds.), *Country boys: Masculinity and rural life* (pp. 163-180). University Park: Pennsylvania University Press.
- Bell, D., & Valentine, G. (1995). Queer country: Rural lesbian and gay lives. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 11(2), 113-122.
- Bell, E. (1999). Weddings and pornography: The cultural performance of sex. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 19(3), 173-195.
- Bennett, J. A. (2003). Love me gender: Normative homosexuality and 'ex-gay' performativity in reparative therapy narratives. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 23(4), 331-352.
- Bennett, J. A. (2006). In defense of gaydar: Reality television and the politics of the glance. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 23(5), 408-425.
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. New York: Penguin.
- Berlant, L. (1997). *The queen of America goes to Washington City*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Berry, K. (2003). *Emergent Identity: An Ethnographic Conversation on the Constitutive Making and Remaking of Researcher and "Speechie" Selves*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.
- Berry, K. (2007). Embracing the catastrophe: Gay body seeks acceptance. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(2), 259-281.
- Berzon, B. (2002). *Surviving madness: A therapist's own story*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Betsky, A. (1997). *Queer space: Architecture and same-sex desire*. New York: William Morrow and Company.
- Bloom, A. (2002). *Normal*. New York: Vintage.
- Bochner, A. P. (1984). The functions of human communication in interpersonal bonding. In C. C. Arnold & J. W. Bowers (Eds.), *Handbook of rhetorical and communication theory* (pp. 544-621). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bochner, A. P. (1989). Interpersonal Communication. In E. Barnouw (Ed.), *International Encyclopedia of Communications* (Vol. 2, pp. 336-340). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bochner, A. P. (1997). It's about time: Narrative and the divided self. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(4), 418-438.
- Bochner, A. P. (2001). Narrative's virtues. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(2), 131-157.
- Bochner, A. P. (2002). Perspectives on inquiry III: The moral of stories. In M. L. Knapp & J. A. Daly (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal communication* (3rd ed., pp. 73-101). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bochner, A. P. (2004, November 12). *Response to "Ethnography in Interpersonal Communication"*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL.
- Bochner, A. P. (2007). Notes toward an ethics of memory in autoethnographic inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & M. D. Giardina (Eds.), *Ethical futures in qualitative research: Decolonizing the politics of knowledge* (pp. 197-208). Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. (1992). Personal narrative as a social approach to interpersonal communication. *Communication Theory*, 2(2), 165-172.

- Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. (1995). Telling and living: Narrative co-construction and the practices of interpersonal relationships. In W. Leeds-Hurwitz (Ed.), *Social approaches to communication* (pp. 201-213). New York: Guilford.
- Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. S. (2006). Communication as autoethnography. In G. J. Shepherd, J. St. John & T. Striplas (Eds.), *Communication as... Perspectives on theory* (pp. 110-122). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bockting, W. O. (1999). From construction to context: Gender through the eyes of the transgendered. *Siecus Report*, 28(1), 3-7.
- Bolton, R. (1995). Tricks, friends, and lovers: Erotic encounters in the field. In D. Kulick & M. Willson (Eds.), *Taboo: Sex, identity, and erotic subjectivity in anthropological fieldwork* (pp. 140-167). New York: Routledge.
- Borchard, K. (1998). Between a hard rock and postmodernism: Opening the Hard Rock Hotel and Casino. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 27(2), 242-269.
- Bornstein, K. (1994). *Gender outlaw*. New York: Routledge.
- Bornstein, K. (2006). *Hello, cruel world*. New York: Seven Stories.
- Boulery, K. (2005). Untitled. In R. Trachtenberg (Ed.), *When I knew* (p. 35). New York: HarperCollins.
- Boyd, H. (2006). The wife. In J. A. Kane-DeMaios & V. L. Bullough (Eds.), *Crossing sexual boundaries: Transgender journeys, Uncharted paths* (pp. 179-192). Amherst, NY: Prometheus.
- Boykin, K. (2005). From beyond the down low: Sex and denial in Black America. In E. L. Harris (Ed.), *Freedom in this village: Twenty-five years of black gay men's writing* (pp. 331-346). New York: Carroll & Graf.
- Boylorn, R. M. (2006). E Pluribus Unum (out of many, one). *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(4), 651-680.
- Brodkey, L. (1987). Writing ethnographic narratives. *Written Communication*, 4(1), 25-50.
- Brodwater, T. (2006, October 20). Anti-gay sign goes up in Post Falls. *Spokesman Review*. Retrieved October 20, 2006 from <http://www.spokesmanreview.com/breaking/story.asp?ID=7701>
- Brown, M. P. (2000). *Closet space: Geographies of metaphor from the body to the globe*. New York: Routledge.



- Brouwer, D. C. (2004). Corps/corpse: The U.S. military and homosexuality. *Western Journal of Communication*, 68(4), 411-430.
- Brouwer, D. C., & Hess, A. (2007). Making sense of “God Hates Fags” and “Thank God for 9/11”: A thematic analysis of Milbloggers' responses to Reverend Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church. *Western Journal of Communication*, 71(1), 69-90.
- Brummett, B. (1984). Burke’s representative anecdote as a method in media criticism. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 1, 161-176.
- Bruner, J. (1986). Life as narrative. *Social Research*, 54, 11-32.
- Bruner, J. (1991). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 18(1), 1-21.
- Bryant, S. P. (2005). *Hung*. New York: Doubleday.
- Burgess, S. (2005). Did the Supreme Court out in *Bush v. Gore*? Queer theory on the performance of the politics of shame. *differences*, 16(1), 126-146.
- Burke, K. (1974). *The philosophy of literary form: Studies in symbolic action* (3 ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burnie, J. (2008, March 25). Why can't my family accept that I'm gay? *Daily Record*. Accessed March 25, 2008 from <http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/comment/columnists/lifestyle-columnists/joan-burnie/2008/03/25/why-can-t-my-family-accept-that-i-m-gay-86908-20362137/>
- Butler, J. (1990). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. In S.-E. Case (Ed.), *Performing feminisms: Feminist critical theory and theatre* (pp. 270-282). Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Butler, J. (1991). Imitation and gender insubordination. In D. Fuss (Ed.), *Inside/out: Lesbian theories, gay theories* (pp. 13-31). New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of “sex”*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1996). Gender as performance. In P. Osborne (Ed.), *A critical sense: Interviews with intellectuals* (pp. 109-125). New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1997a). *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. New York: Routledge.

- Butler, J. (1997b). *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Butler, J. (1999). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an account of oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Buzard, J. (2003). On auto-ethnographic authority. *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 16(1), 61-91.
- Carr, D. (1986). *Time, narrative, and history*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Caulley, D. N. (2008). Making qualitative research reports less boring: The techniques of writing creative nonfiction. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14(3), 424-449.
- CBC News. (2007, May 30). Montreal woman refused service at gay bar says rights violated. Accessed May 31, 2007 from <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/montreal/story/2007/05/30/qc-lestud.html?ref=rss>
- Charmaz, K. (1983). The grounded theory method: An explication and interpretation. In R. M. Emerson (Ed.), *Contemporary field research: A collection of readings* (pp. 109-125). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.
- Chávez, K. R. (2004). Beyond complicity: Coherence, queer theory, and the rhetoric of the 'Gay Christian Movement'. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 24(3/4), 255-275.
- Chee, A. (2006). Dick. In T. Gidonse & R. Williams (Eds.), *From boys to men: Gay men write about growing up* (pp. 103-118). New York: Carroll & Graf.
- Cherry, K. (1996). Ain't no grave deep enough. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 25(1), 22-57.
- Chirrey, D. A. (2003). "I hereby come out": What sort of speech act is coming out? *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 7(1), 24-37.
- Christian, T. Y. (2005). "Good cake": An ethnographic trilogy of life satisfaction among gay black men. *Men and Masculinities*, 8(2), 164-174.
- Clatterbaugh, K. C. (1997). *Contemporary perspectives on masculinity: Men, women, and politics in modern society* (2nd ed.). Boulder, Co: Westview Press.

- Clayborne, J. L. (1974). Modern black drama and the gay image. *College English*, 36(3), 381-384.
- Cloud, J. (2005, October 10). The battle over gay teens. *Time*, pp. 42-51.
- Cobb, M. (2005). Uncivil wrongs: Race, religion, hate, and incest in queer politics. *Social Text*, 23(3-4), 251-274.
- Cole, R. (2006, May 20). Untitled [Obituary guestbook entry]. Accessed September 1, 2007 from <http://www.legacy.com/TulsaWorld/GB/GuestbookView.aspx?PersonId=16918149&PageNo=1>
- Cole, S. W., Kemeny, M. E., Taylor, S. E., & Visscher, B. R. (1996). Elevated physical health risk among gay men who conceal their homosexual identity. *Health Psychology*, 15(4), 243-251.
- Coles, R. (1989). *The call of stories*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Colman, D. (2005, June 19). Gay or straight? Hard to tell. *New York Times*, p. 9.1.
- Conquergood, D. (1986). Between experience and meaning: Performance as a paradigm for meaningful action. In T. Colson (Ed.), *Renewal and revision: The future of interpretation* (pp. 26-59). Denton, TX: NB Omega Publication.
- Conquergood, D. (1991). Rethinking ethnography: Towards a critical cultural politics. *Communication Monographs*, 58, 179-194.
- Cooper, B. (1996). *Truth serum*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Corey, F. C. (1996). Performing sexualities in an Irish pub. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 16(2), 146-160.
- Corey, F. C., & Nakayama, T. K. (1997). Sextext. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 17(1), 58-68.
- Cornell, D. (2007). The shadow of heterosexuality. *Hypatia*, 22(1), 229-242.
- Corrigan, P. W., & Matthews, A. K. (2003). Stigma and disclosure: Implications for coming out of the closet. *Journal of Mental Health*, 12(3), 235-248.
- Cory, D. W. (1951). *The homosexual in America*. New York: Greenberg.
- Coventry, M. (2000, October/November). Making the cut. *Ms.*, 10, 52-60.

- Couser, G. T. (1997). *Recovering bodies: Illness, disability, and life writing*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Creet, J. (1991). Lesbian sex/gay sex: What's the difference? *Out/look*, 11, 29-34.
- Cvetkovich, A. (2003). *An archive of feelings: Trauma, sexuality, and lesbian public culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Davidson, A. I. (1985). Sex and the emergence of sexuality. *Critical Inquiry*, 14(1), 16-48.
- Davis, S. G. (1997). *Spectacular nature: Corporate culture and the Sea World experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- de Bruxelles, S. (2007, June 2). Boy, 15, lay down in front of train after gay taunts. Accessed June 10, 2007 from <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article1873278.ece>
- Deegan, M. J. (2001). The Chicago School of Ethnography. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of Ethnography* (pp. 11-25). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Delany, S. R. (1999). *Times Square red, Times Square blue*. New York: New York University Press.
- Denzin, N. K. (1989). *Interpretive biography*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K. (1998). The new ethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 27(3), 405-415.
- Denzin, N. K. (2004). The war on culture, the war on truth. *Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies*, 4(2), 137-142.
- Dewey, J. (1936). *Reconstruction in philosophy*. New York: H. Holt and Company.
- Dictionary.com. (n.d.). Coming out. Retrieved March 23, 2007 from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/coming%20out>
- Dow, B. J. (2001). *Ellen*, television, and the politics of gay and lesbian visibility. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 18(2), 123-140.
- Downs, A. (2005). *The velvet rage: Overcoming the pain of growing up gay in a straight man's world*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus.

- Duffey, T. (2006). When a spouse comes out: As told from a straight spouse's point of view. *The Family Journal*, 14(1), 88-91.
- Elizur, Y., & Ziv, M. (2001). Family support and acceptance, gay male identity formation, and psychological adjustment: A path model. *Family Process*, 40(2), 125-144.
- Ellis, C. (1986). *Fisher folk: Two communities on Chesapeake Bay*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Ellis, C. (1991). Sociological introspection and emotional experience. *Symbolic Interaction*, 14(1), 23-50.
- Ellis, C. (1993). "THERE ARE SURVIVORS": Telling a story of a sudden death. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 34(4), 711-730.
- Ellis, C. (1995a). *Final negotiations: A story of love, loss, and chronic illness*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Ellis, C. (1995b). Emotional and ethical quagmires in returning to the field. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 24(1), 68-98.
- Ellis, C. (1998). "I hate my voice": Coming to terms with minor bodily stigmas. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 39(4), 517-537.
- Ellis, C. (2002). Being real: Moving inward toward social change. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 15(4), 399-406.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Ellis, C. (2007a). Katrina and the cat: Responding to society's expendables. *Cultural Studies & Critical Methodologies*, 7(2), 188-201.
- Ellis, C. (2007b). Telling secrets, revealing lives: Relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(1), 3-29.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 733-768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ellis, C., & Flaherty, M. G. (1992). An agenda for the interpretation of lived experience. In C. Ellis & M. G. Flaherty (Eds.), *Investigating subjectivity: Research on lived experience* (pp. 1-13). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

- Ellis, C., Kiesinger, C. E., & Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (1997). Interactive interviewing: Talking about emotional experience. In R. Hertz (Ed.), *Reflexivity and voice* (pp. 119-149). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Emeigh, J. G. (2006, April 13). Tech prof reports threat to police. *The Montana Standard*. Retrieved April 15, 2006 from <http://www.mtstandard.com/articles/2006/04/13/newsbutte/hjjdjfigjcfjjj.txt>
- Escoffier, J. (2003). Gay-for-pay: Straight men and the making of gay pornography. *Qualitative Sociology*, 26(4), 531-555.
- Falconi, V. (2006, October 11). The importance of coming out. *Daily Mississippian*. Accessed April 21, 2007 from <http://media.www.thedmonline.com/media/storage/paper876/news/2006/10/11/Opinion/The-Importance.Of.Coming.Out-2342761.shtml>
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (1993). The five sexes: Why male and female are not enough. *The Sciences*, (33)2, 20-24.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (1995). How to build a man. In M. Berger, B. Wallis & S. Watson (Eds.), *Constructing masculinity* (pp. 127-134). New York: Routledge.
- Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). The five sexes, revisited. *The Sciences*, 40(4), 18-23.
- Feigenbaum, E. F. (2007). Heterosexual privilege: The political and the personal. *Hypatia*, 22(1), 1-9.
- Fine, G. A. (1993). Ten lies of ethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 22(3), 267-294.
- Fisher, W. R. (1984). Narration as human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communication Monographs*, 51(1), 1-22.
- Fone, B. (2000). *Homophobia: A history*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Forsythe, R. (1992). Untitled. In R. Keyes (Ed.), *Sons on fathers: A book of men's writing* (pp. 167-179). New York: HarperCollins.
- Foster, E. (2008). Commitment, communication, and contending with Heteronormativity: An invitation to greater reflexivity in Interpersonal Research. *Southern Communication Journal*, 73(1), 84-101.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: Volume 1* (R. Hurley, Trans.). New York: Vintage.

- Frank, A. W. (1995). *The wounded storyteller*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Frank, B. (1993). Straight/strait jackets for masculinity: Educating for 'real' men. *Atlantis*, 18(1-2), 47-59.
- Fries, K. (1997). *Body, remember*. New York: Dutton.
- Frye, M. (1983). *The politics of reality: Essays in feminist theory*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press.
- Fung, R. (1996). Looking for my penis: The eroticized Asian in gay video porn. In R. Leong (Ed.), *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of gay and lesbian experience* (pp. 181-198). New York: Routledge.
- Funkhouser, G. R., & Shaw, E. F. (1990). How synthetic experience shapes social reality. *Journal of Communication*, 40(2), 75-87.
- Fürsich, E. (2002). Packaging culture: The potential and limitations of travel programs on global television. *Communication Quarterly*, 50(2), 204-226.
- Fuss, D. (1991). Inside/out. In D. Fuss (Ed.), *Inside/out: Lesbian theories, gay theories* (pp. 1-10). New York: Routledge.
- Gaddis, J. L. (2002). *The landscape of history*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gagné, P., Tewksbury, R., & McGaughey, D. (1997). Coming out and crossing over: Identity formation and proclamation in a transgender community. *Gender & Society*, 11(4), 478-508.
- Gannon, S. (2006). The (im)possibilities of writing the self-writing: French Poststructuralist theory and autoethnography. *Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies*, 6(4), 474-495.
- Garfinkel, H. (1956). Conditions of successful degradation ceremonies. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 61(5), 420-424.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Garrick, D. A. (1997). Ritual self-disclosure in the coming-out process. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 11(2), 1-19.
- Garrick, D. A. (2001). Performances of self-disclosure: A personal history. *The Drama Review*, 45(4), 94-105.

- Gator Gay-Straight Alliance. (2004). I think I might be straight. Accessed December 1, 2007 from [http://grove.ufl.edu/~ggsa/pdf\\_docs/straightbrochure.pdf](http://grove.ufl.edu/~ggsa/pdf_docs/straightbrochure.pdf)
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gelber, S. M. (1997). Do-it yourself: Constructing, repairing and maintaining domestic masculinity. *American Quarterly*, 49(1), 66-112.
- Gergen, K. J. (2000). *The saturated self: Dilemmas of identity in contemporary life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gideonse, T., & Williams, R. (2006). *From boys to men: Gay men write about growing up*. New York: Carroll & Graf.
- Gingrich-Philbrook, C. (1998). Disciplinary vision as gender violation: The stigmatized masculine voice of performance studies. *Communication Theory*, 8(2), 203-220.
- Gingrich-Philbrook, C. (2005). Autoethnography's family values: Easy access to compulsory experiences. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 25(4), 297-314.
- Ginsberg, A. (1974). Gay Sunshine Interview. *College English*, 36(3), 392-400.
- Glave, T. (2005). *Words to Our Now: Imagination and Dissent*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Glenn, E. N. (2000). The social construction and institutionalization of gender and race. In M. M. Ferree, J. Lorber & B. B. Hess (Eds.), *Revisioning gender* (pp. 3-43). Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction Ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.
- Goltz, D. B. (2007). Laughing at absence: *Instinct* magazine and the hyper-masculine gay future? *Western Journal of Communication*, 71(2), 93-113.
- González, M. A. (2007). Latinos on da down low: The limitations of sexual identity in public health. *Latino Studies*, 5(1), 25-52.
- Goodall, H. L. (2001). *Writing the new ethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.



- Goodall, H. L. J. (2004). Narrative ethnography as applied communication research. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 32(3), 185-194.
- Goodall, H. L. (2006). *A need to know: The clandestine history of a CIA family*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Graves, K. (2007). Doing the Public's Business: Florida's Purge of Gay and Lesbian Teachers, 1959-1964. *Educational Studies*, 41(1), 7-32.
- Green, R. C. (2006). Signs. In T. Gideonse & R. Williams (Eds.), *From boys to men: Gay men write about growing up* (pp. 57-68). New York: Carroll & Graf.
- Greenberg, J. A. (2000). When is a man a man, and when is a woman a woman? *Florida Law Review*, 52, 745-768.
- Greenberg, J. A. (2002). Definitional dilemmas: Male or female? Black or white? The law's failure to recognize intersexuals and multiracials In T. Lester (Ed.), *Gender nonconformity, race, and sexuality* (pp. 102-124). Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Greenspan, H. (1992). Lives as texts: Symptoms as modes of recounting in the life histories of Holocaust survivors. In G. C. Rosenwald (Ed.), *Storied lives: The cultural politics of self-understanding* (pp. 145-164). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Greenspan, H. (1998). *On listening to Holocaust survivors: Recounting and life history*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Gregory, M. R. (2004). Being out, speaking out: Vulnerability and classroom inquiry. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*, 2(2), 53-64.
- Grever, C. (2001). *My husband is gay*. Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press.
- Gross, L. (1991). The contested closet: The ethics and politics of outing. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 8(3), 352-388.
- Gust, S. W. (2004, April 3). "A case history" from A Consideration of Ethics and Gay Men's Health Care. Performance presented at the annual meeting of the Central States Communication Association Convention, Cleveland, OH.
- Gust, S. W. (2007). "Look out for the football players and the frat boys": Autoethnographic reflections of a gay teacher in a gay curricular experience. *Educational Studies*, 41(1), 43-60.

- Gust, S. W., & Warren, J. T. (2008). Naming our sexual and sexualized bodies in the classroom: And the important stuff that comes after the colon. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14(1), 114-134.
- Hacking, I. (1990). Making up people. In E. Stein (Ed.), *Forms of desire: Sexual orientation and the social constructionist controversy* (pp. 69-88). New York: Garland.
- Hacking, I. (1995). *Rewriting the soul: Multiple personality and the sciences of memory*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hacking, I. (1999). *The social construction of what?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hailsham, V. (1955). Homosexuality and society. In J. T. Rees & H. V. Usill (Eds.), *They stand apart: A critical survey of the problems of homosexuality* (pp. 21-35). London: William Heinemann.
- Halberstam, J. (2005). Shame and white gay masculinity *Social Text*, 23(3-4), 219-233.
- Halley, J. E. (1989). The politics of the closet: Towards equal protection for gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity. *UCLA Law Review*, 36, 915-976.
- Hampl, P. (1999). *I could tell you stories: Sojourns in the land of memory*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Harris, E. L. (2003). *What becomes of the brokenhearted*. New York: Doubleday.
- Hayes, J. J. (1976). Gayspeak. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 62(3), 256-266.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. MacQuarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Henderson, L. (2001). Queer communication studies. In W. B. Gudykundst (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 24* (pp. 465-484). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Henry, J. (1965). *Pathways to madness*. New York: Random House.
- Herrell, R. K. (1992). The symbolic strategies of Chicago's gay and lesbian pride day parade. In G. Herdt (Ed.), *Gay culture in America: Essays from the field* (pp. 225-252). Boston: Beacon Press.
- Holman Jones, S. (2005). Autoethnography: Making the personal political. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 763-791). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Hom, A. Y. (1995). Stories from the homefront: Perspectives of Asian American parents with lesbian daughters and gay sons. In R. Leong (Ed.), *Asian American sexualities: Dimension of the gay and lesbian experience* (pp. 37-49). New York: Routledge.
- Hopcke, R. H. (1993). Homophobia and analytical psychology. In R. H. Hopcke & K. L. Carrington (Eds.), *Same-sex love and the path to wholeness* (pp. 68-87). Boston: Shambhala.
- Hopcke, R. H. (1995). Gay men and lesbians: Out of the closets, into the streets. In *Persona: Where sacred meets profane* (pp. 121-146). Boston: Shambhala.
- Hopkins, P. D. (1998). How feminism made a man out of me: The proper subject of feminism and the problem of men. In T. Digby (Ed.), *Men doing feminism* (pp. 33-56). New York: Routledge.
- Horner, B. (2002). Critical ethnography, ethics, and work: Rearticulating labor. *Journal of Advanced Composition* 22(2), 561-584.
- Hubert, S. J. (1999). What's wrong with this picture? The politics of Ellen's coming out party. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 33(2), 31-36.
- Hughes, J. (2007, Spring). Rufus on politics, Pelosi, and our rights. *Equality*, 7-9.
- Human Rights Campaign. (2005). *Resource guide to coming out for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans*. Washington, DC: Human Rights Campaign Foundation.
- Hunt, M. (2007, April 16). Untitled. Accessed April 16, 2007 from [www.myspace.com/smada79](http://www.myspace.com/smada79)
- Hunter, A. (1992). Same door, different closet: A heterosexual sissy's coming-out party. *Feminism & Psychology*, 2(3), 367-385.
- Hyde, M. J. (1980). The experience of anxiety: A phenomenological investigation. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66(2), 140-154.
- Hyde, M. J. (2004). The ontological workings of dialogue and acknowledgment. In R. Anderson, L. A. Baxter & K. N. Cissna (Eds.), *Dialogue: Theorizing difference in communication studies* (pp. 57-73). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Jackson, S. (2006). Gender, sexuality and heterosexuality: The complexity (and limits) of heteronormativity. *Feminist Theory*, 7(1), 105-121.

- Jacobs, A. T. (2007). *I'm Here! am I Queer? Analyzing the Discourse of Being Openly Closeted*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL.
- Jacquard, P. (2007, April 22). A matter of life and death. *The Advocate*, 22.
- Jaggard, A. M. (1989). Love and knowledge: Emotion in feminist epistemology. In A. M. Jaggard & S. R. Bordo (Eds.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist reconstructions of being and knowing* (pp. 145-171). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Jago, B. J. (2002). Chronicling an academic depression. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 31(6), 729-757.
- Jandt, F. E., & Darsey, J. (1981). Coming out as a communicative process. In J. W. Chesebro (Ed.), *Gayspeak: Gay male and lesbian communication* (pp. 12-27). New York: The Pilgrim Press.
- Jenkins, M. M. (1994). Ways of coming out in the classroom. In R. J. Ringer (Ed.), *Queer words, queer images: Communication and the construction of homosexuality* (pp. 332-334). New York: New York University Press.
- Jennings, K. (Ed.). (1994). *One teacher in 10: Gay and lesbian educators tell their stories*. Boston: Alyson.
- Johnson, E. P. (2001). "Quare" studies, or (almost) everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 21(1), 1-25.
- Johnson, D. K. (2004). *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War persecution of gays and lesbians in the federal government*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Johnston, J. (1975, June). Are lesbians 'gay'? *Ms.*, 85-86.
- Johnston, L. (2005). *Queering tourism: Paradoxical performances at gay pride parades*. New York: Routledge.
- Jolly, M. (2001). Coming out of the coming out story: Writing queer lives. *Sexualities*, 4(4), 474-496.
- Jones, J. L. (1997). Performing Osun without bodies: Documenting the Osun Festival in print. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 17(1), 69-93.
- Jones, J. L. (2002). Performance ethnography: The role of embodiment in cultural authenticity. *Theatre Topics*, 12(1), 1-15.

- Jones Jr., R. G. (2007). Drag queens, drama queens and friends: Drama and performance as a solidarity building function in a gay male friendship circle. *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research*, 6, 61-84.
- Joshua. (2006, June 21). Old friends. Accessed September 1, 2007 from <http://blog.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=blog.view&friendID=2272761&blogID=135401139>
- Jorgenson, J. (2002). Engineering selves: Negotiating gender and identity in technical work. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 15(3), 350-380.
- Kailey, M. (2005). *Just add hormones: An insider's guide to the transsexual experience*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Karslake, D. G. (Producer/Director). (2007). *For the Bible tells me so* [Motion picture]. United States: Atticus Group.
- Kates, S. M., & Belk, R. W. (2001). The meanings of lesbian and gay pride day: Resistance through consumption and resistance to consumption. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 30(4), 392-429.
- Kielwasser, A. R., & Wolf, M. A. (1992). Mainstream television, adolescent homosexuality, and significant silence. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 9(4), 350-373.
- Kimmel, M. S., & Mahler, M. (2003). Adolescent masculinity, homophobia, and violence. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 46(10), 1439-1458.
- King, J. L. (2005). *On the down low*. New York: Harlem Moon.
- Kirby, S., & Hay, I. (1997). (Hetero)sexing space: Gay men and "straight" space in Adelaide, South Australia. *Professional Geographer*, 49(3), 295-305.
- Kirk, A. (2008). *Coming out or staying in? The unfortunate specificity of the pedagogical "closet."* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Central States Communication Association, Madison, WI.
- Kis, E. & Finley, G. (2007, March 29). Sheriff Calls His Stabbing Death a Hate Crime. *TheLedger.com* Accessed December 2, 2007 from <http://www.theledger.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070329/NEWS/703290493/0/FRONTPAGE>
- Knight, J. P. (1990). Literature as equipment for killing: Performance as rhetoric in military training camps. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 10(2), 157-168.

- Kong, T. S. K., Mahoney, D., & Plummer, K. (2002). Queering the interview. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research* (pp. 239-258). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kuhn, T. S. (1996). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kus, R. J. (1985). Stages of coming out: An ethnographic approach. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 7(2), 177-198.
- Kvale, S. (2002). The social construction of validity. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Qualitative Inquiry reader* (pp. 299-325). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- La Pastina, A. C. (2006). The implications of an ethnographer's sexuality. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(4), 724-735.
- Labi, N. (2007). The kingdom of the closet. *Atlantic Monthly*, 299, 70-82.
- Laing, R. D. (1969). *Self and others*. New York: Pantheon.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lamott, A. (1994). *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. New York: Anchor.
- Langsdorf, L. (1994). "I like to watch:" Analyzing a participation-and-denial phenomenon. *Human Studies*, 17(1), 81-108.
- Lawrence, D. H. (1914). The Prussian Officer. In *The Prussian Officer and other stories* (pp. 1-33). Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press.
- Lazerson, B. (1981). In and out of the closet. *American Speech*, 56(4), 274-277.
- Leap, W. L. (1996). *Word's out: Gay men's English*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Leary, T. (1957). *Interpersonal diagnosis of personality*. New York: Ronald Press Company.
- Lee, J. A. (1979). The gay connection. *Urban Life*, 8(2), 175-198.
- Lee, W. (2003). Queering queer theory: My autocritography and a race-conscious, womanist, transnational turn. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 45(2/3/4), 147-170.

- Leeds-Hurwitz, W. (2005). Ethnography. In K. L. Fitch & R. E. Sanders (Eds.), *Handbook of Language and Social Interaction* (pp. 327-353). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Levine, M. P. (1979). Gay ghetto. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 4(4), 363-377.
- Lim-Hing, S. (1990/91). Dragon ladies, snow queens, and Asian-American dykes: Reflections on race and sexuality. *Empathy*, 2(2), 20-22.
- Lindenberger, M. (2007, March 16). An evangelical's concession on gays. *Time*. Retrieved March 26, 2007 from <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1599987,00.html>
- Lindquist, J. (2002). *A Place to Stand: Politics and Persuasion in a Working-Class Bar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider*. Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press.
- Madhani, A. (2007, March 12). Top general calls homosexuality "immoral." *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved March 26, 2007 from <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-070312pace,1,4954133.story>
- Makagon, D. (2004). *Where the ball drops: Days and nights in Times Square*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mandel, B. J. (1968). The autobiographer's art. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 27(2), 215-226.
- Maso, I. (2001). Phenomenology and ethnography. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of Ethnography* (pp. 136-144). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Maurer, B. (2000). Sexualities and separate spheres: Gender, sexual identity, and work in Dominica and beyond. In A. Lugo & B. Maurer (Eds.), *Gender matters: Rereading Michelle Z. Rosaldo* (pp. 90-115). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- McDonald, G. J. (1982). Individual differences in the coming out process for gay men: Implications for theoretical models. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 8(1), 47-60.
- McDonough, M. (2006, April 18). Gays in Iraq fear for their lives. *BBC News*. Retrieved April 18, 2006 from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/4915172.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4915172.stm)
- McGinty, M. (2006). Peristalsis. In T. Gideonse & R. Williams (Eds.), *From boys to men: Gay men write about growing up* (pp. 273-285). New York: Carroll & Graf.

- McIntosh, M. (1968). The homosexual role. *Social Problems*, 16(2), 182-192.
- Macintosh, L. (2007). Does anyone have a band-aid? Anti-homophobia discourses and pedagogical impossibilities. *Educational Studies*, 41(1), 33-43.
- McLean, K. (2007). Hiding in the closet? Bisexuals, coming out and the disclosure imperative. *Journal of Sociology*, 43(2), 151-166.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Mead, G. H. (1962). *Mind, self, and society from the standpoint of a social behaviorist*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1934)
- Meininger, H. P. (2005). Narrative ethics in nursing for persons with intellectual disabilities. *Nursing Philosophy*, 6(2), 106-118.
- Meyer, I. H., & Dean, L. (1998). Internalized homophobia, intimacy, and sexual behavior among gay and bisexual men. In G. Herek (Ed.), *Stigma and sexual orientation: Understanding prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals* (pp. 160-186). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Meyer, M. (1995). The signifying invert: Camp and the performance of nineteenth-century sexology. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 15(4), 265-281.
- Meyer, M. D. E. (2005). Drawing the sexuality card: Teaching, researching, and living bisexuality. *Sexuality & Culture*, 9(1), 3-13.
- Meyerowitz, J. (2002). *How sex changed: A history of transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Michels, S. (2008, March 14). Politician's 'anti-gay' speech sparks outrage. *ABC News*. Accessed April 4, 2008 from <http://abcnews.go.com/TheLaw/story?id=4444956>
- Miike, Y. (2007). An Asiacentric reflection on Eurocentric bias in communication theory. *Communication Monographs*, 74(2), 272-278.
- Miletic, D. (2007, May 29). Straight-out ban at gay venues sparks uproar. Accessed May 31, 2007 from <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2007/05/28/1180205160437.html>
- Minkowitz, D. (1995, November/December). In the name of the father. *Ms.*, 64-71.
- Minson, J. (1981). The assertion of homosexuality. *m/f*, 5-6, 19-39.



- Moon, D. (2002). Religious views of homosexuality. In D. Richardson & S. Seidman (Eds.), *Handbook of lesbian and gay studies* (pp. 313-328). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Mosher, C. M. (2001). The social implications of sexual identity formation and the coming-out process: A review the theoretical and empirical literature. *The Family Journal*, 9(2), 164-173.
- Nelson, H. L. (2001). *Damaged identities, narrative repair*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Neumann, M. (1999). *On the rim: Looking for the Grand Canyon*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nicholas, C. L. (2004). Gaydar: Eye-gaze as identity recognition among gay men and lesbians. *Sexuality and Culture*, 8(1), 60-86.
- Owen, A. S. (2003). Disciplining "Sextext": Queers, fears, and communication studies. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 45(2/3/4), 297-317.
- Oxford American desk dictionary and thesaurus*. (2nd ed.)(2001). New York: Berkley.
- Padva, G. (2004). Edge of seventeen: Melodramatic coming-out in new queer adolescence films. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 1(4), 355-372.
- Parry, A. (1991). A universe of stories. *Family Process*, 30(1), 37-54.
- Pascoe, C. J. (2007). *Dude, you're a fag: Masculinity and sexuality in high school*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Patterson, C. J. (2000). Family relationships of lesbians and gay men. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62(4), 1052-1069.
- Pearson, C. L. (1986). *Good-bye, I love you*. New York: Random House.
- Pelias, R. J. (2002). For father and son: An ethnodrama with no catharsis. In A. P. Bochner & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Ethnographically speaking: Autoethnography, literature, and aesthetics* (pp. 35-43). Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Pelias, R. J. (2004). *A methodology of the heart: Evoking academic and daily life*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
- Pelias, R. J. (2007a). On being read. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 29, 45-49.

- Pelias, R. J. (2007b). Jarheads, girly men, and the pleasures of violence. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(7), 945-959.
- Pelias, R. J. (2008). Making my masculine body behave. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 1(1), 65-74.
- Perez, H. (2005). You can have my brown body and eat it, too! *Social Text*, 23(3-4), 171-191.
- Perry, L. A. M., & Ballard-Reisch, D. (2004). There's a rainbow in the closet: On the importance of developing a common language for "sex" and "gender." In P. M. Backlund & M. R. Williams (Eds.), *Readings in gender communication* (pp. 17-34). Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth.
- Phelan, P. (1993). *Unmarked: The politics of performance*. New York: Routledge.
- Phellas, C. N. (2005). Cypriot gay men's accounts of negotiating cultural and sexual identity: A qualitative study. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 1(2), 65-83.
- Philipsen, G. (1972). Navajo world view and culture patterns of speech: A case study in ethnorhetoric. *Speech Monographs*, 39(2), 132-139.
- Philipsen, G. (1975). Speaking 'like a man' in Teamsterville: Culture patterns of role enactment in an urban neighborhood. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 61(1), 13-22.
- Philipsen, G. (1976). Places for speaking in Teamsterville. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 62(1), 15-25.
- Phillips, L. (2005). Deconstructing "down low" discourse: The politics of sexuality, gender, race, AIDS, and anxiety. *Journal of African American Studies*, 9(2), 3-15.
- Pierce, C. (2007). Anti-homosexual and gay: Rereading Sartre. *Hypatia*, 22(1), 10-23.
- Pineau, E. (2000). *Nursing Mother* and articulating absence. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 20(1), 1-19.
- Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling sexual stories: Power, change and social worlds*. New York: Routledge.
- Plummer, K. (2001). The call of life stories in ethnographic research. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 395-406). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 8(1), 12-28.

- Pozzycki, T. (2006). The lives and deaths of buffalo butt. In T. Gideonse & R. Williams (Eds.), *From boys to men: Gay men write about growing up* (pp. 89-101). New York: Carroll & Graf.
- Prell, B. (2006, March 7). Untitled [Obituary guestbook entry]. Accessed September 1, 2007 from <http://www.legacy.com/TulsaWorld/GB/GuestbookView.aspx?PersonId=16918149&PageNo=4>
- Preston, J. (Ed.). (1992). *A member of the family: Gay men write about their families*. New York: Dutton.
- Pronger, B. (1998). On your knees: Carnal knowledge, masculine dissolution, doing feminism. In T. Digby (Ed.), *Men doing feminism* (pp. 69-79). New York: Routledge.
- Proulx, A. (1999). Brokeback mountain. In *Close range: Wyoming stories* (pp. 253-283). New York: Scribner.
- Queers. (1990). Queers read this. Accessed June 20, 2007 from <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/misc/text/queers.read.this>
- Radway, J. A. (1984). *Reading the romance: Women, patriarchy, and popular literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rambo, C. (2005). Impressions of grandmother: An autoethnographic portrait. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 34(5), 560-585.
- Rambo, C. (2007). Handing IRB an unloaded gun. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(3), 353-367.
- Rasmussen, M. L. (2004). The problem of coming out. *Theory into Practice*, 43(2), 144-150.
- Rees, J. T., & Usill, H. V. (1955). Introduction. In J. T. Rees & H. V. Usill (Eds.), *They stand apart: A critical survey of the problems of homosexuality* (pp. vii-xii). London: William Heinemann.
- Richardson, L. (1992). Trash on the corner: Ethics and technography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 19, 103-119.
- Richardson, L. (2001). Getting personal: Writing-stories. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14(1), 33-38.
- Ricoeur, P. (1986). Life: A story in search of a narrator. In M. C. Doerer & J. N. Kraay (Eds.), *Facts and values* (pp. 121-132). Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff.

- Rodriguez, E. M., & Ouellette, S. C. (2000). Gay and lesbian Christians: Homosexual and religious identity integration in the members and participants of a gay-positive church. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 39(3), 333-347.
- Rogers, C. (1989a). This is me. In H. Kirschenbaum & V. L. Henderson (Eds.), *The Carl Rogers reader* (pp. 6-29). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Rogers, C. (1989b). The therapeutic relationship. In H. Kirschenbaum & V. L. Henderson (Eds.), *The Carl Rogers reader* (pp. 59-152). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Ronai, C. R. (1992). The reflexive self through narrative: A night in the life of an erotic dancer/researcher. In C. Ellis & M. G. Flaherty (Eds.), *Investigating subjectivity: Research on lived experience* (pp. 102-124). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Ronai, C. R. (1995). Multiple reflections of child sex abuse. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 23(4), 395-426.
- Ronai, C. R. (1996). My mother is mentally retarded. In C. Ellis & A. P. Bochner (Eds.), *Composing ethnography: Alternative forms of qualitative writing* (pp. 109-131). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
- Rosenhan, D. L. (1984). On being sane in insane places. In P. Watzlawick (Ed.), *The invented reality: How do we know what we believe to know?* (pp. 117-144). New York: W. W. Norton.
- Ross, M. B. (2005). Beyond the closet as raceless paradigm. In E. P. Johnson & M. G. Henderson (Eds.), *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (pp. 161-189). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Roth, P. (1991). *Patrimony*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Rüling, A. (2006). What interest does the women's movement have in solving the homosexual problem? In M. A. Lomardi-Nash (Ed.), *Sodomites and Urnings: Homosexual representations in classic German journals* (pp. 25-40). New York: Haworth. (Original work published 1904)
- Russell, G. M., & Bohan, J. S. (2006). The case of internalized homophobia: Theory and/as practice. *Theory & Psychology*, 16(3), 343-366.
- Rust, P. C. (1993). "Coming out" in the age of social constructionism: Sexual identity formation among lesbian and bisexual women. *Gender & Society*, 7(1), 50-77.
- Savage, D. (2007a, November 6). Episode 55. *Savage Love Podcast*. Accessed December 1, 2007 from <http://podcasts.thestranger.com/savagelove/>

- Savage, D. (2007b, December 4). Episode 59. *Savage Love Podcast*. Accessed December 15, 2007 from <http://podcasts.thestranger.com/savagelove/>
- Saylor, S. (1992). My mother's ghost. In J. Preston (Ed.), *A member of the family: Gay men write about their families* (pp. 61-74). New York: Dutton.
- Schrag, C. O. (1997). *The self after postmodernity*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Scott, D. (1994). Jungle Fever? Black gay identity politics, white dick, and the utopian bedroom. *GLQ*, 1(3), 299-321.
- Scott, J. W. (1991). The evidence of experience. *Critical Inquiry*, 17(4), 773-797.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1993). *Tendencies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (2003). *Touching feeling: Affect, pedagogy, performativity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Seidman, S. (2002). *Beyond the closet: The transformation of gay and lesbian life*. New York: Routledge.
- Seidman, S., Meeks, C., & Traschen, F. (1999). Beyond the closet? The changing social meaning of homosexuality in the United States. *Sexualities*, 2(1), 9-34.
- Sela, N. (2006, July 11). Prize offered [sic] to whoever kills gay person. *Ynet News*. Retrieved July 11, 2006 from <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3273891,00.html#n>
- Shakespeare, T. (1999). Coming out and coming home. *Journal of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity*, 4(1), 39-51.
- Shallenberger, D. (1991). Invisible minorities: Coming out of the classroom closet. *Journal of Management Education*, 15(3), 325-334.
- Shepherd, R. (2005). On not being white. In E. L. Harris (Ed.), *Freedom in this village: Twenty-five years of black gay men's writing* (pp. 47-63). New York: Carroll & Graf.
- Shively, M. G., & De Cecco, J. P. (1977). Components of sexual identity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 3(1), 41-48.

- Shores, D. (Director). (2000). *Sordid Lives* [Motion picture]. United States: Daly-Harris Productions.
- Shugart, H. A. (2003). Performing ambiguity: The passing of Ellen DeGeneres. *Text and performance quarterly*, 23(1), 30-54.
- Shugart, H. A. (2005). On misfits and margins: Narrative, resistance, and the poster child politics of Rosie O'Donnell. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 2(1), 52-76.
- Shweder, R. A. (1986). Divergent rationalities. In D. W. Fiske & R. A. Shweder (Eds.), *Metatheory in social science: Pluralisms and subjectivities* (pp. 163-196). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Signorile, M. (1990, May 16). Outing seizes America. *Outweek*, 46, 40.
- Signorile, M. (2007, January 16). Goodbye to the closet. *The Advocate*, 42.
- Simmel, G. (1964). *The sociology of Georg Simmel* (K. H. Wolff, Trans.). New York: The Free Press.
- Skelton, T. (1997). Issues of sexuality in the teaching space. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 21(3), 424-431.
- Slavin, S. (2004). Drugs, space, and sociality in a gay nightclub in Sydney. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 33(3), 265-295.
- Sloop, J. M. (2004). *Disciplining gender: Rhetorics of sex identity in contemporary U.S. Culture*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Solis, S. (2007). Snow White and the Seven "Dwarfs"—Queercrippled. *Hypatia*, 22(1), 114-131.
- Somerville, S. (1994). Scientific racism and the emergence of the homosexual body. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 5(2), 243-266.
- Soukup, P. (1992). Interpersonal communication. *Communication Research Trends*, 12(3).
- Spry, T. (2001). Performing autoethnography: An embodied methodological praxis. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(6), 706-732.
- Stanley, J. P. (1974). When we say "out of the closets." *College English*, 36(3), 385-391.

- Stein, A. (2004). From gender to sexuality and back again: Notes on the politics of sexual knowledge. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 10(2), 254-257.
- Stern, H. (Executive Producer). (2006, May 3). *Howard Stern on demand* [Internet broadcast]. Accessed December 1, 2006 from <http://www.indemand.com/HSOD/index.jsp>
- Styles, J. (1979). Outsider/insider: Researching gay baths. *Urban Life*, 8(2), 135-152.
- Sublette, N. (1981). Cowboys Are Frequently Secretly (Fond of Each Other) [Recorded by W. Nelson]. On *Cowboys Are Frequently Secretly (Fond of Each Other)* [CD]. Nashville, TN: Dreamworks Records. (2006)
- Taylor, J. (1994). Performing the (lesbian) self: Teacher as text. In R. J. Ringer (Ed.), *Queer words, queer images: Communication and the construction of homosexuality* (pp. 289-295). New York: New York University Press.
- Taylor, J. (2000). On being an exemplary lesbian: My life as a role model. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 20(1), 58-73.
- Thomas, J. (1993). *Doing critical ethnography*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Thompson, R. L. (2006, August 20). I'm human. Accessed March 1, 2008 from <http://blog.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=blog.view&friendID=52226707&blogID=158206522>
- Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (2001). *Between gay and straight: Understanding friendship across sexual orientation*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
- Tillmann-Healy, L. (2005, May). *The state of unions: Activism (and in-activism) in Decision 2004*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the First International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois.
- Tololyan, K. (1987). Cultural narrative and the motivation of the terrorist. *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 10(4), 217-233.
- Trachtenberg, R. (Ed.). (2005). *When I knew*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Tullis Owen, J. A., McRae, C., Adams, T. E., Vitale, A. (in press). truth troubles. *Qualitative Inquiry*.
- Ulrichs, K. H. (2006). Four letters to his kinsfolk (M. A. Lombardi-Nash, Trans.). In M. A. Lombardi-Nash (Ed.), *Sodomites and urnings: Homosexual representations in class German journals* (pp. 1-20). New York: Haworth. (Original work published 1862)

- Urbach, H. (1996). Closets, clothes, disClosure. *Assemblage*, 30, 62-73.
- Van Gelder, L. (1998). Marriage as a restricted club. In P. J. Annas & R. C. Rosen (Eds.), *Against the current* (pp. 294-297). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. (Original work published 1984)
- Van Maanen, J. (1988). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Walker, L. M. (1993). How to recognize a lesbian: The cultural politics of looking like what you are. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 18(4), 866-890.
- Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. H., & Jackson, D. D. (1967). *Pragmatics of human communication*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J. H., & Fisch, R. (1974). *Change: Principles of problem formation and problem resolution*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Weeks, J. (1996). The construction of homosexuality. In S. Seidman (Ed.), *Queer theory/sociology* (pp. 41-63). Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- West, C., & Fenstermaker, S. (1995). Doing difference. *Gender & Society*, 9(1), 8-37.
- White, H. (1980). The value of narrativity in the representation of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 6, 5-27.
- Wilkinson, S., & Kitzinger, C. (1994). The social construction of heterosexuality. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 3(3), 307-316.
- Williams, R., & Gideonse, T. (2006). Introduction. In T. Gideonse & R. Williams (Eds.), *From boys to men: Gay men write about growing up* (pp. vii-xi). New York: Carroll & Graf.
- Williamson, K. (2005). Untitled. In R. Trachtenberg (Ed.), *When I knew* (p. 49). New York: HarperCollins.
- Winderman, Ira. (2007, February 15). "I hate gay people," former Heat star Tim Hardaway declares. *Sun-Sentinel*. Retrieved March 9, 2007 from <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/sports/sfl-215hardaway,0,2415610.story?coll=sfla-sports-front>
- Wolcott, H. F. (2002). *Sneaky kid and its aftermath*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.
- Wyatt, J. (2005). A gentle going? An autoethnographic short story. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11(5), 724-732.



- Wyatt, J. (in press). No longer loss: Autoethnographic stammering. *Qualitative Inquiry*.
- Yep, G. A. (1998). My three cultures: Navigating the multicultural identity landscape. In J. N. Martin, T. K. Nakayama & L. A. Flores (Eds.), *Readings in cultural contexts* (pp. 79-85). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.
- Yep, G. A. (2003). The violence of heteronormativity in communication studies: Notes on injury, healing, and queer world-making. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 45(2/3/4), 11-60.
- Yep, G. A., & Elia, J. P. (2007). Queering/Quaring blackness in *Noah's Arc*. In T. Peele (Ed.), *Queer popular culture: Literature, media, film, and television* (pp. 27-40). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yerby, J. (1995). Family systems theory reconsidered: Integrating social construction theory and dialectical process. *Communication Theory*, 5(4), 339-365.
- Zaner, R. M. (2004). *Conversations on the edge: Narratives of ethics and illness*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

## About the Author

Tony E. Adams is a first-generation college student. Having lived much of his life in Midwest Illinois, he received an Associate of Science from Danville Area Community College (May 1999), and a Bachelor of Arts (May 2001) and a Master of Science (December 2003) from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. His primary research interests include sexual orientation and gender identity, personal narrative, troubled relationships, and (re)presentations of nature. He has published articles on these interests in a variety of academic journals such as *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Soundings*, *Cultural Studies* ↔ *Critical Methodologies*, and *The Review of Communication*. He also has a chapter (co-authored with Stacy Holman Jones) in the *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (Sage, 2008). In August 2008, he will return to the Midwest as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication, Media & Theatre at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago.