

THESIS

DANCING IN/OUT/AROUND/ABOUT THE CLOSET:  
NARRATING AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC AGENCY  
FROM [A] MARGINALIZED VOICE

Submitted by

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER OUR SUPERVISION BY GREGORY SEAN HUMMEL ENTITLED DANCING IN/OUT/AROUND/ABOUT THE CLOSET: NARRATING AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC AGENCY FROM [A] MARGINALIZED VOICE BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS  
DANCING IN/OUT/AROUND/ABOUT THE CLOSET: NARRATING  
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC AGENCY FROM [A] MARGINALIZED VOICE

The purposes of this study were three fold: (1) to understand the significance of autoethnography with the communication studies field; (2) to question the relationship between/within theoretical frameworks on identity, voice, and agency; and (3) to theorize on the affects of coming out through the lenses of identity, voice, and agency from an autoethnographic perspective. In short, the study finds autoethnographic perspectives to be a fruitful endeavor for communication scholars seeking to understand a more holistic picture of the human condition, while calling for more research to enhance theoretical conceptualizations of identity, voice, and agency. Furthermore, this study suggests that autoethnographic perspectives can offer voice to otherwise silenced identities, while also providing re/presentations for individuals who lack representation in and/or outside of the academy. Finally, this study urges individuals who avow to being an ally for marginalized individuals/groups to actively voice their support in order to create more comfortable/safe spaces within and/or outside of the classroom.

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## DEDICATION

To everyone who ever has, and who ever will, unveil their cloak, for your journey  
is one of great admiration.

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## Chapter 1

### Studying A Closet

*"Take away the sensation inside/ Bitter sweet migraine in my head/ It's like a throbbing toothache of the mind/ I can't take this feeling anymore.  
Drain the pressure from the swelling/ This sensation's overwhelming . . ."*  
(Green Day "Give Me Novacaine")

There is something comforting about sitting silently in a dark room. Lit only by the glow of my computer screen, the silence is broken with the sounds of my finger tips caressing the keys, changing pitch ever so slightly by the distance and force inflicted by my bear paw hands. The room becomes my mental canvas, each artifact a text for memory's dance. The unoccupied space between the floor and ceiling, the distance from wall to wall, the space only interrupted by the flow of oxygen, the breeze from the windows, the occasional housefly, and pursuant cat, becomes an invisible corkboard, a space for me to explore options, build *topoi*, and situate my memories according to topic, historical significance, and levels of pain and tolerance; I am able to tear down, re/create, and/or re/write the future by reflexively engaging my past, regardless of the distance through time a memory has traveled.

My dark room is comfortable. My thoughts and feelings seem to flow, apparently uninterrupted by the people in my everyday, vacant of the judging eyes of Others. I feel I can be my/self in this space. The silence of the dark room seems to absorb my frustrations, accept my enthusiasm, and ignore my indiscretions. This space becomes a nearly physical manifestation of my mind, an extension, so that I may sit off to the side, de-

centered, broadening my horizon to extend my vantage point, almost able to ‘see’ the mental pictures, movies, documentaries, and epic novels weaving in/out/around each other, tethered to me by history. ‘Simply’ shifting my lenses can be the only force needed to change the meta-audio/visual landscape of my mind, much like switching the lenses of a telescope from visual to microwave, and x-ray to gamma ray to ‘create’ a rainbow of constructed images; changes and challenges to our very conceptualization of our universe can happen in the blink of an eye, the drop of a dime, the beat of a heart. This all seems so possible in my dark, lonely, silent space. This coffee shop is anything but silent.

My usual local coffee shop appears as a microcosm of the everyday in this city. Mostly White people of all ages, shapes, and styles move throughout this space. I am fascinated by the acknowledgement of an infant’s stare, while his/her mother seems to have no knowledge of my presence. Across the room, a man I see in here at least once a week for the last year refuses my glance once more; my nonverbal ‘hello’ means nothing more than that, but I doubt he feels the same. A pack of men in the center of the room struggling with Physics texts and graphing calculators remind me of a past life in high school, and then in Los Angeles. I wish they were not all men struggling over these texts; I wish I saw more women here with mathematical dilemmas. Most of the women here are fatally sitting in chairs, lost in the worlds of their books, headphones, and Internet browsers. “Biscuits and gravy. Biscuits. Bih-bih-biscuits and gravy. They have biscuits and gravy”; the developmentally disabled are represented in this space, as well. And, a dialect of Spanish tickles my ears, making me smile, as it pierces through the racially White space. But, am I the only gay male<sup>1</sup> here?

No. The rainbow sticker on the back window of a truck in the parking lot suggests at least one other GLBTQ person is here. Does it belong to a lesbian female, as women often adorn the spectral sticker here in town? The man sitting next to me on the couch looks familiar; I think I have seen his face on a GLBTQ social networking site, but who is the woman? “Honey”[?] Is he one of the many men who are ‘bi . . . but cannot host [for] discretion is a must’? He made deliberately direct eye contact several times; appearing to force his gaze upon me to make sure I was aware of his stare. I could make an argument for his sexuality, one I am sure (some of) my hetero friends would love to dispute.

What of the guy sitting in the cozy chair facing the backdoor? Twice I have walked through that door today, and twice he has stopped whatever he was doing to watch me. Does he have ADD/ADHD? Is he a procrastinator making any excuse to not work? I doubt it. He was leaning *too* far into my returning glance, continuing his stance even after I turned my head in the opposite direction to look for friendly faces in the neighboring room. Do I just want him to be ‘checking me out’? He is far too attractive to be checking me out seriously; even if I wanted to, I could not perform under his beauty. These self-defeating thoughts serve only to hide the smile I want to flash him; another potential closet door closed. He reminds me of the man who was here Wednesday night with his friend/study-buddy.

The man from Wednesday glanced my way throughout the night, yet he only allowed for two direct eye connections. Each time I looked his way in an attempt to meet his eyes, he would immediately shift his gaze toward his friend, or to his work. Was his flirtation a figment of my imagination? I doubt it, especially after his pose: As his friend

left the table, presumably for a minute or two to ‘answer nature’s call,’ he picked his eyes from his work to capture my attention; repetitiously bouncing his eyes between me and his PDF print out, he slowly shifted his ass to the front of the chair, opening up his body for my gaze. Slowly opening his chest, continuing his eye dance, he reached his right muscular arm behind his head, highlighting his defined *biceps*, while simultaneously stretching out his left leg. I have seen this form performed before in a man waiting/wanting to be pleasured. Had he not looked directly into my eyes just before arching his back to expose his shirt-revealing pectoral muscles, I would have discounted this account as nothing more than my voyeuristic fantasy; more so, had the return of his friend not jolted him out of his exhibitionistic pose, I might have considered the act nothing more than my mental musing. Judging from the abrupt switch in posture and demeanor, his friend has no idea that the Wednesday exhibitionist likes the touch of men, unless, that is, his friend is more than a friend; I *have* heard the terms “dude” and “bro” mean more than a hyper-heteronormative label. There are so many fucking closets in this town; how am I to know if he is inhabiting one of them?

And what of the large man in the other corner of the room? Visually, he reads like a gentle giant, a Panda incarnation. His tiny crystalline blue eyes barely fit inside his roughly 320 pound frame. Today, I only acknowledge him with a smile; unfortunately, I just do not have the time to talk. He looks disappointed, like my nonverbal acknowledgement had taken a bite out of the Apple icon resting over his chest. I remember being almost as large as him. I used food to cope with the life I hated living, hiding my gayness through consumption, visually framing myself as large and masculine to avoid as much persecution as possible. If only it had worked as I had intended. The closet is so fucking

tricky. Who is to say he is even in the closet? Who is to say he is even gay? Who am I to even ask? I am no more out of the closet than I am in with/in this space. Maybe I am the only gay male here. . . .

Questions surrounding the closet have plagued me since I discovered my own closet walls. What does the closet do to our communication? Is it possible to quantify the amount of times I enter and exit my closet each day? How much does the closet influence me as a person? What of the people surrounding me?

In some senses, surely disputable by some scholars, I have been an ‘ethnographer’ for as long as I can remember. Sitting along the sidelines, watching and observing, trying to make sense of my environment, and the people, in an attempt to find methods to interact based on my perceptions of their expectations. Every situation is different. Perhaps, intuitive ethnography comes with the territory of being told, over and over, that my status as a gay male is marginal and not of the norm. Interestingly, I suspect that my sidelined position has had some influence on conditioning my memory to be photographic, and more so, cinematic; at times, my mind is like a video camera, recording visual with audio, and also mood, temperament, environment, and overall climate of an interaction, a situation, a time and place, historically, socially, and culturally. Yet, studying the phenomenon of the closet takes more than simply my word; scholarship requires theoretical framing, clear methodological approaches, coherent data, analysis of the explicit juxtaposed to the implicit, and a conclusion that serves a larger function than the project itself, a contribution to the world of scholarship; and, theoretically speaking, a contribution beyond the metaphorical walls of the academy. But to follow the rigid rules of the academy would surely silence the very voice I was most interested in: the voice

from inside the closet and the mind. Unable to understand the subtle nuances of (my) identity through traditional measures, I turn to autoethnographic perspectives, as autoethnographic scholarship is becoming a conduit to study our everyday performances, beyond description and statistics, engaging the topic on a deeper cultural level.

This decision demands that I turn my scholarly lenses toward engaging and negotiating the autoethnographic conversation. To accomplish this task, wanting to understand the logistics of autoethnography, I begin with an interrogation of ethnography—its historical significance and role as a methodological approach in Communication Studies. Then, I turn my attention toward the shift from ethnography to autoethnography, namely through critical, and later, performance ethnography. Finally, I consider Self in the academic process of autoethnography to gain a sense of the direction that this project takes, ultimately to answer the following research questions: (1) How does autoethnography invite insight into identity, voice, and agency in four coming out experiences as a White, “working” class, first-generation, multi-familial, collectivistically-oriented individual gay male; (2) how do theories of identity, voice, and agency invite insight into autoethnography as a perspective; and (3) what does this autoethnographic process of coming out contribute to communication studies when considering a silenced Self, a coded Self, and an honest Self [metaphor of the closet]?

### **Ethnography, Autoethnography, and the Role of Self in [Scholarly] Research**

#### *Ethnography*

Autoethnography, as a methodological approach, takes root in anthropological ethnographic fieldwork. According to Saville-Troike, “Ethnographic study has been at the core of anthropology virtually since its inception, both in Britain and America” (4).

Originally taking the form of *ethnology*, “the historical and comparative analysis of non-Western societies and cultures” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1), early researchers often interviewed and studied travelers, migrants, and vagabonds. Ethnology shifted to *ethnography*, “an integration of both first-hand empirical investigation and the theoretical and comparative interpretation of social organization and culture” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1), as anthropologists began conducting their own fieldwork. In short, ethnology studied the Other from within the safety of the researcher’s home community, while ethnographers submerge themselves into the margin (as much as possible), experiencing the life of the Other on their turf.

Observing the Other in their habitat proved to be a fruitful endeavor for taxonomic scholarship. Saville-Troike writes, “Observed behavior was recognized as a manifestation of a deeper set of codes and rules, and the task of ethnography was seen as the discovery and explication of the rules for contextually appropriate behavior in a community or group; in other words, culture was conceived to be what the individual needs to know to be a functional member of the community” (6). First and foremost, ethnographers were concerned with cultural understanding through linguistic codes (Saville-Troike 1). Learning the cultural codes to exist within a society proved to be a valuable tool as societies and cultures began to interact more with each other. In the world of communication studies, Saville-Troike has this to offer:

The focus of the ethnography of communication is the *speech community*, the way communication within it is patterned and organized as systems of communicative events, and the ways in which these interact with all other systems of culture. A primary aim of this approach is to guide the collection and analysis of descriptive data about the ways in which social meaning is conveyed . . . (2)

In other words, communication scholars who explore and employ ethnographic methodology are interested in the ways that cultures create meaning through verbal and nonverbal codes, and ways of understanding. Furthermore, ethnography “contributes to the study of cultural maintenance and change, including acculturation phenomena in contact situations, and may provide important clues to culture history” (Saville-Troike 6-7). Ethnographers have tried to forge *objective* methods that relinquished the subjective view of the observer in an attempt to obtain universal modes of communicating.

To be deemed “scholarship,” objectivity is highly regarded by some, and demanded by most, in the scientific and academic communities. Ethnographically speaking, one way of obtaining objectivity is through recognizing, then relinquishing any prejudicial or presumptive notions about the Other, while also considering the unknown (Saville-Troike 3). Understanding that unanticipated occurrences and codes will (inevitably) present themselves is imperative in conducting ethnographic research, and undoubtedly, the task of the researcher is to consciously self-control for unconsciousness.

Saville-Troike highlights seven analytic procedures for conducting objective ethnographic research: introspection, participant-observation, observation, interviewing, Ethnosemantics/Ethnoscience, Ethnomethodology/conversation analysis, and philology<sup>2</sup> (96-107). These procedures are not without limitation. In conducting participant-observation, for example, ethnographers are required to recognize their “cultural relativism, knowledge about possible cultural differences, and sensitivity and objectivity in perceiving others” (Saville-Troike 97). Ethnographers must also consider how their roles as researchers/participants will affect informants, what information they will provide to informants, the ethical considerations and constraints when manipulating

informants, their own cultural awareness, and even the effects their health has on note taking, transcription, and interpretation. Ethnographers must also control for reliability and validity in selecting informants and interview questions.

In short, traditional ethnographers must consider their own cultural appropriations, ascriptions, avowals, and assumptions before, during, and after engaging with informants. Often, early ethnographers interpreted (marginalized) cultural codes through ethnocentric lenses, leading to false assumptions about the Other, forcing Them into categorizations based on Westernized modes and philosophies of being. Though this project has no intention of being a postcolonial critique of acculturating the Other, it is important to note the potential for misrepresentation in ascriptive labeling of the Other. Furthermore, ethnographers must consider the penetrating effects their research has on the everyday lives of their subjects, while always being reflexive on the inherent problems of entering into the lives of Others, disrupting their daily flow, forcing them (at times) to reflexively engage their lives for the purposes of our research, when, in fact, they may simply live happier lives through a denial of their past, present, and future interactions. Finally, traditional ethnographers, while attempting to describe behavior, are at a disadvantage, for they can never truly understand the positionality and lived experience/s of their informants; vital information may be lost in the translation of lived experience/s in the interview process.

### *Critical Ethnography*

Critical ethnography attempts to account for marginalization that has often been overlooked in traditional ethnography. According to Noblit, Flores, and Murillo, critical ethnography is “the marriage of critical theory and interpretive ethnography, as well as a

reflection of the struggle and work of women . . . people of color” (2), and the range of marginalized groups. Critical ethnography adds a political purpose to traditional ethnographies to consider the possibilities of what could be, rather than what is (4). More specifically, while the political purpose of traditional ethnography was (arguably) for domination through colonization, critical ethnography focuses political purpose on liberation from oppression. As Thomas explains, critical ethnographers are “raising their voice to speak *to* an audience *on behalf* of their subjects as a means of empowering them by giving more authority to the subjects’ voice” (4, qtd. in Noblit, Flores, and Murillo 4). This process is often quite difficult, especially when attempting to speak *for* Others, as Alcoff explains, “there is no neutral place to stand free and clear in which my words do not prescriptively affect or mediate the experience of others, nor is there a way to demarcate decisively a boundary between my location and all others” (“Speaking for Others” 108). In other words, while Alcoff suggests we are always speaking for an Other, we must do so carefully, critically, and reflexively (Chávez “Personal Conversation”). In essence, ethnographers of this persuasion must consider the intersections of marginalization to avoid essentializing and commodifying the Other when their intent is otherwise.

### *Performance Ethnography*

Performance ethnography builds on critical ethnography to engage in the performance of culture. Denzin argues that cultures are “performance-based” where “the dividing line between performer and audience blurs, and culture itself becomes a dramatic performance. . . . As Collins (1990:210) has argued, the meanings of lived experience are inscribed and made visible in these performances” (x). The objective of

performance ethnography is based in the everyday; “in showing how people enact cultural meanings in their daily lives, such a discourse focuses on how these meanings and performances shape experiences of injustice, prejudice, and stereotyping” (Denzin xi). With a focus on social justice, performance ethnographies utilize the voices of Others in conjunction with the researcher. Denzin argues that performance as a methodological tool is a result of increasing demands for presentational texts “that move beyond the purely representational” (xi), calling for a veritable paradigmatic shift in the academy (and society).

### *Autoethnography*

Performance ethnography closely aligns with autoethnography, relying on the interstices of performance and Self in relation to Others and culture. To more fully understand how this relationship is actualized, a better understanding of ‘individual,’ in accordance with culture, is required. According to Chang, “individuals are cultural agents, but culture is not at all about individuality . . . culture is inherently collectivistic” (21). Though members of Western cultures often see themselves as individuals (i.e., culturally performing an individualistic Self), the feeling of belonging supersedes the individualistic urge to be separate in most cases. Collectivistic alignment, “despite inner-group diversity,” is the result of “a certain level of sharedness, common understanding, and/or repeated interactions” (Chang 21), though membership in/to a culture is never solidified; one can relinquish their ties to a group, while either maintaining or negating their cultural traits (Chang 22). Furthermore, members from outside a certain cultural community can obtain the codes to function with/in an already established group (Chang 22), as witnessed often in participant-observation/traditional ethnography. In

autoethnographic research, understanding one's own cultural affiliations and negations is imperative to understanding how the researcher/s' performances with/in their everyday lives shape their views and/or frame the lived experiences that become the subjects and/or objects for their academic inquiry. In short, autoethnography is "the lived experience of the ethnographer" (Quinney 357). To further clarify this position, a more intimate understanding of autoethnography is in order.

Ellis and Bochner define autoethnography as "autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation" (742; originally found in Chang 46). Often accomplished through a collection of personal stories/narratives, autoethnography delineates itself from "mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation" (Chang 43). Furthermore, Ellis and Bochner suggest that narrators of autoethnography place differing levels of importance on their methods and styles, observing that "[a]utoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)" (740; originally found in Chang 48). Though autoethnography varies from scholar to scholar, as Gingrich-Philbrook ("Autoethnography's Family Values") rightly argues against a canonical autoethnographic methodology, the majority of such scholarship does have a general sphere that researchers orbit—the narrative.

*Genre/Style/Form of Autoethnographic Writing.* The autoethnographer writes and/or performs scholarship through what Chang highlights as "self-narratives" (31). Within the realm of self-narrative, Chang differentiates between four genres: "Autobiography" (35), as a chronological and comprehensive depiction of one's life;

“memoirs” (36) are often recollections of precise moments in one’s personal history that are said to define one’s life; “journals” (36) are fragmented daily occurrences that map one’s progress through life; and, “personal essays . . . contain personal insights in response to the author’s environment” (37). The use of each style/form tends to sway from scholar to scholar, topic to topic; while each style/form is depicted as a taxonomic category, understanding that the boundaries between each are nearly nonexistent—a pedagogically important distinction. For instance, an autobiography, as it would stand, may seem an appropriate choice for a book designed to extrapolate long-term trends, themes, or simply for *Ooo*’s and *Ahhh*’s; yet, broken down metaphorically, some chapters may be comprised of memoirs, highlighting specific moments the writer deems ‘life-changing’; said memoirs may contain journal entry-esque segments to entice memory over the expansive autobiography; concluding remarks of the book may be filled with personal essays, exploring the text, and their culture/s; if the text/writer were employing *critical* lenses, s/he may explore the use of personal essays, enticing analysis of systemic power, oppressive and privileged. In short, Chang’s categories are neither separate nor distinct, though much like Ellis and Bochner’s auto/ethno/graphy claim, the author may explore one option more heavily. In any case, autoethnography, done well (Gingrich-Philbrook; Pelias; Ellis and Bochner), will “fully expose the author’s perspectives” (Chang 37) in relation to Self and culture, “in which the self or one’s own experiences are constructed as an ‘other’” (Goodall 110).

Self-narratives, as Chang continues, can also be classified into three styles, including: “descriptive/self-affirmative, analytical/interpretive, and confessional/self-critical/self-evaluative” (39). A *descriptive/self-affirmative style* is most notably used in

“literary memoirs, in which stories themselves are of high value” (39). An *analytical/interpretive style* is often exercised in scholarship where “stories are treated as materials to analyze rather than as a centerpiece to appreciate” (39-40). A *confessional/self-critical/self-evaluative* style “tends to expose self—inequalities, problems, or troubles—providing a vehicle through which self-narrators work to come to resolution or self-learning” (40). Chang also notes, though each of these styles is separate and distinct from one another, most autoethnographers will employ varying levels of each where one form is often pronounced. Regardless of the genre or style of writing, autoethnographic scholarship has some semblance of cohesion, namely “memory search, self-revelation through personal stories, and self-reflection in the process” (37).

*Autoethnographic Critique.* Ethnographers engaging in critical, performance, and more appropriately for the purposes of this project, autoethnographic studies are often faced with critiques on “positionality, reflexivity, objectivity, and representation” (Noblit, Flores, and Murillo 21-22; Denzin; Chang; Ellis and Bochner), and claims that this perspective is “non-scholarly, narcissistic, and/or self-indulgent” (Holt; Salzman; Sparkes; qtd. in Chang 51; Ellis and Bochner). Because autoethnography lends itself to personal, and often, private topics, as authors have intimate knowledge of the subject (Chang 51; Ellis and Bochner 13-42), such claims may have merit; yet, these critiques need not be leveling.

When considering *positionality*, autoethnographers must be “explicit about the groups and interests” (Noblit, Flores, and Murillo 21) being researched, often identifying themselves with/in the text (Ellis and Bochner; hooks; Gingrich-Philbrook) in an implicit/explicit locus of enunciation. For example, in identifying and interrogating my

White gay male graduate teaching assistant positionality with/in this project, I engage my position as an epistemological point of reference, much like in the discussions between Collins, Cosgrove, Hartsock, Harding, and Wood on feminist standpoint theory and standpoint epistemology, where “social location shapes the social, symbolic, and material conditions and insights common to a group of people” (Wood 61). In “Black Feminist Thought”, Patricia Hill Collins argues, “position and identity may be the basis of a theory of knowledge that then is explicated via research” (Noblit, Flores, and Murillo 21). Autoethnographically, an ethnographer’s lived experiences serve as the text. For this study, I inform the analysis of my own personal lived experiences through Alcoff’s theories of identity, voice (including scholars like hooks, Ono, and Dow), and agency with the help of works from Chávez and Griffin; Bone, Griffin, and Scholz; and Campbell, to conceptualize theories on the metaphorical closet’s influence on/in Communication Studies; and intersectionalities of sexuality, gender, race, and class using Crenshaw’s theoretical understandings of structural and political intersectionality (176).

When considering the critique of *reflexivity*, Noblit, Flores, and Murillo suggest, “[I]dentity itself, the focus of identity, and the ways in which they change are different. Moreover, time and history are lived and constituted rather than exist as a context to identity” (21). While I agree with this claim, to an extent, “change” in one’s identity can be constituted/constructed through a life-changing event, one worthy of autoethnographic exploration; in most conceivable cases, the “change” is informed on some level by memories that are attached to specific times and histories. Furthermore, Pelias, Neumann, and Ellis and Bochner suggest the act, process, and/or performance of self-disclosure can, and does, relate with individuals who experience similar situations, while

similar feelings may also invoke a sense of camaraderie between the text and the reader, touching “deeply in the lives of others who find themselves portrayed in texts not of their own making” (Neumann 191). To this end, I not only situate each narrative from my standpoint, but also within their respective histories and contexts in the second (narrative) chapter, considering the cultural shifts and trends that may have influenced my identity, voice, and agency as a gay male during the (third) analysis chapter of this project.

*Objectivity* presents its own set of critiques among autoethnographers, themselves. Many (avowed and/or ascribed) autoethnographic researchers have entered into a debate over objectivity, subjectivity, and their respective problems, with many of them attempting to shift the perspective in their own directions. For instance, Chang clues audiences into divisive arguments through an insightful examination of a special issue of *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*:

In an article on “analytic autoethnography,” Anderson (2006) leans toward the objectivity camp. The autoethnography that he advocates is expected to satisfy the following conditions: the autoethnographer (1) is “a complete member in the social world under study” (p. 379); (2) engages reflexivity to analyze data on self; (3) is visibly and actively present in the text; (4) includes other informants in similar situations in data collection; and (5) is committed to theoretical analysis. Atkinson (2006) aligns himself with Anderson’s analytical, theoretical, and objective approach to autoethnography, whereas Ellis and Bochner (2006) and Denzin (2006) stand on the opposing end, arguing for “evocative” and emotionally engaging, more subjective autoethnography. Although some scholars straddle both positions (Best, 2006), this war between objectivity and subjectivity is likely to continue, shaping the discourse of autoethnography. (46)

My position in this debate is one of uncertainty. While I agree that objectivity is imperative to strive toward in academic research, I also respect that subjectivity is inherent “whenever ethnographic interpretations are inscribed” (Noblit, Flores, and

Murillo 22). Karma Chávez, responding to one of my presentations at the *Western States Communication Association* convention, strongly urged me to ‘give up on the objectivity camp, for there is no possible way to be objective in the subjective world of autoethnography, and more specifically, personal narrative’ (paraphrase). While I agree to the inherence of subjectivity whenever a researcher/ethnographer is making interpretations based on observations, I have to wonder if there are not objective-measures an autoethnographer can take to assure readers/reviewers that the project/paper was not written with the end in mind; that, in fact, the employment of autoethnographic perspectives can yield significant theoretical and material contributions, while also avoiding the application of life examples on/to pre-conceived theoretical/material expectations, and positive/publishable results and findings.

Noblit, Flores, and Murillo indicate *representation* as a critique of autoethnography, as it involves selecting a way the material will be presented, while “acknowledging the ‘uncertainty about adequate means of describing social reality’ (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p. 8) and working through the myriad of decisions critically” (22). Understandably, any method of delivery that I employ will have its strengths and weaknesses; in selecting to narrate my experiences through stories, separate and distinct from academic inquiry, I re/present my encounters “in ways that demonstrate difference, the will to display an exotic other, and the right to educate” (Noblit, Flores, and Murillo 22). On educating through personal narrative, Fox (“Skinny Bones”) spins Burke’s 1967 notion of *Equipment for Living* through “*narrative blueprints*” (8). He contends, “a narrative ‘blueprint’ [for living] is a personal tale made public with the intent of inspiring identification among audience members seeking a narrative model to help guide future

attitudes and behaviors” (Fox 8), where “narrative models serve a pedagogical function for people who lack effective . . . coping strategies” (Fox 9). In suggesting that I am speaking for myself, and my gay identity through history, I re/present a path that Others *may* have taken, without suggesting that everyone, or anyone for that matter, has taken, or will take, the same path, but may indeed feel or experience similar emotions and/or problems. Furthermore, viewing personal narratives as blueprints provides non-avowing gay males/men (i.e., closeted gay men) with an opportunity to witness one man’s (my) approach; moreover, my personal narratives serve as a liaison for individuals wanting/attempting to understand or experience the coming out process. While I recognize my experiences are not indicative of every GLBTQ person’s, employing personal narrative offers at least one blueprint for the dynamic process of coming out, offering an avowed homosexual an opportunity to walk, if only for a second, in the shoes of a gay male. Utilizing personal narratives to highlight such experiences appears, at this point in time, to be the best route to combat critiques surrounding representation. I also attempt to make my stories “evocative,” as I feel objectivity need not be devoid of such style.

Choosing personal narrative as an autoethnographic employment entices more critique. Atkinson and Delamont claim that narrative needs “rescuing” from qualitative research, suggesting the popularity of narrative and biographical accounts is leading to the degradation of scholarship, for far too often is the process devoid of “systematic analysis” (164). In respect to Atkinson and Delamont, and the academic integrity of communication studies, I devote an entire chapter to a systematic analysis of the narratives that will precede it. Furthermore, they claim narrative “should be viewed as a

form of social action, with its indigenous, socially shared, forms of organization.

Narratives should be analyzed as a social phenomenon, not as the vehicle for personal or private experience” (170). Here, I question Atkinson and Delamont on their intentions in research; if I were rhetorically analyzing narratives to find common themes, for instance, among gay men, I would agree with their remarks. However, narrative is especially indicative of our daily means of communication (Fisher 245), present in our everyday lives, and worthy of engaging to theoretically conceptualize about the effects of the closet on communicative entities. My narratives circumventing the closet are intended only as a beginning—a platform for others to build from.

Of course, I am offered words of encouragement prior to engaging my own personal narratives; often, autoethnographic research is celebrated for that which it is criticized. Because the researcher is the subject of study, we gain a deeper, more intimate understanding of everyday, cultural processes. For instance, when laws limit researcher access to data, often in the name of potentially breaching patient confidentiality in health-related fields, personal recounts by both practitioners and patients may prove enlightening for some audiences (Defenbaugh “Endoscopic Evidence”).

Autoethnography is also popular among educators (Banks and Banks “Reading”), as their positions not only provide insight through participant-observation, but also clue readers (and hopefully decision-makers) into aspects of the classroom and the educational experience that can be manipulated and/or negated through outside observation, and without worrying about affecting their students’ progress and/or divulging their identities. Furthermore, autoethnography has opened the academic doors to lived experiences of marginalized individuals (Fox “Skinny Bones”), giving visible voice to members from

cultures and communities that have often been silenced and made invisible by society at large.

In the name of scholarship, I dub these critiques challenges to the process, and not detrimental blows to the perspective. Without such a distinction, it is possible to clog the arterial lines of creativity, impede the flow of energy, and, as Gunn (“ShitText”) would suggest, constipate the lines of progress (17).

### **Coming Out as Me: My Methodological Approach**

In my attempt to address the mounting list of concerns, I reiterate the following three questions: (1) How does autoethnography invite insight into identity, voice, and agency in four coming out experiences as a White, “working” class, first-generation, multi-familial, collectivistically-oriented individual gay male; (2) how do theories of identity, voice, and agency invite insight into autoethnography as a perspective; and (3) what does this autoethnographic process of coming out contribute to communication studies when considering a silenced Self, a coded Self, and an honest Self? To answer these questions, I critically examine four personal narratives within the context of my coming out experiences juxtaposed to my educational life. Before proceeding, some specifics in choice need to be accounted for. First, I chose personal stories about my sexual identity as a way of showing both progression and digression of the coming out process in accordance with/in specific cultural contexts. I opted to share stories surrounding my academic experience, not only as a vast majority of my private life been spent in some relation to an educational institution, but also because school has constituted and witnessed a majority of my public identity. Furthermore, two of the stories are experiences of the mundane everyday that comprises the majority of our lives,

while two of the narratives are euphoric in nature, fleeting and ephemeral, yet nonetheless, consequential; often, these are the moments, as I have learned through my experiences, that are most feared by individuals in the closet, that is, the actualization of coming out and the ensuing repercussions. In choosing these narratives, I attempt to understand the communicative significance of silenced, coded, and honest Selves.

To answer my research questions, I examine the following personal recounts. My first narrative is an everyday summary of my high school experiences as an ascribed gay male avowing to ‘straight man.’ Second, I recount my struggles during my first year in college, as I struggled with my conceptions of society’s lock on my closet doors, only to have them broken down from the outside. Third, some years (and some deaths) later, I examine my experiences as an avowed gay man in my return to college. Finally, I narrate my classroom “coming out” as an instructor/teaching assistant in the academy. In writing these narratives, I contribute to the academic discussion on identity formation, giving myself a voice that will, if at all possible, encourage a greater sense of agency in individuals (and perhaps, communities) that long for a sense of acceptance while entertaining the notion that the majority of us have ‘closets’ that we inhabit on some level in our everyday.

To guide me in my academic pursuit, I enlist the help of several scholars, both within and outside of the discipline. I turn to Alcoff, as she provides us with a language to discuss identity, identity politics, problems of essentialization, and the visible/invisible dilemma. The 1997 special edition of the *Western Journal of Communication*, along with Roof and Wiegman, hooks, Ono, and Dow aid me in articulating power, privilege, and a lack thereof, in speaking for, about, and to a gay man’s voice. Furthermore, Campbell

offers a recent and comprehensive understanding of agency, one worth interrogating. I also engage more on the current state of autoethnography, specifically with/in the Communication Studies discipline, and more broadly on queer bodies, shedding some light on the political and personal relationships between autoethnographic inquiry and identity, voice, and agency.

### **Things to Come [Out]: A Look Ahead at the Current Project**

The second chapter of this thesis contains the four narratives listed and explained in the previous section. Chapter three contains an analysis of the narratives through the lenses of identity, voice, and agency. In segregating the narratives from the analysis, I attempt to account for objectivity, reflexivity, positionality, and representation. In order to keep with the expectations for autoethnographic research, a chapter devoted to recounting my experiences prevents each successive story from being informed by a theoretical analysis of a previous narrative; though each narrative is informed by the previous story, they are tainted by academic inquiry as little as possible. My hope is that this approach promotes a more thorough theoretical analysis of my narratives, as they are called upon for example without changing them to fit within current theoretical frameworks, nor are they altered to construct new theories; presenting my narratives separately from my analysis should aid in addressing autoethnographic critique. Finally, the fourth chapter will be my conclusion—answers to my research questions with insights into communication studies, a consideration of the limitations, and proffering potential directions for future research.

## Chapter 2

### Narratives About the Closet

This chapter contains four narratives from different temporal locations through my coming out process. First, *The Wander Years: My High School Journey Through Closeted Lenses* is a recollection of my everyday life as a closeted gay man avowing as a heterosexual in high school, and the impending frustrations once I became cognizant of the closet that surrounded me. Second, “*Sally, The Bi-Polar Bear*”: *Resisting the Closet Doors in College* explores the collegiate life leading up to the euphoric moment of verbalizing my gay identity. *Spreading the Word: Queer Activism in College Part II* revisits my perceptions of my everyday, this time as I come out as an undergraduate student in Coal Country. Finally, *Pedagogically Speaking: Coming Out to a Captive Audience* is a narrative about my first experience in coming out as an instructor in the academy.

The first and fourth stories were initially written in the context of a course with this thesis in mind, followed by a very rudimentary examination of both narratives through the theoretical lenses of identity, voice, and agency. After completing the course, the first and fourth stories were revisited without paying attention to present theoretical constructions on identity, voice, and/or agency, in an attempt to avoid writing with the intent to reify and/or critique any available theoretical frameworks. The second and third stories were written without theoretical influence beyond what was absorbed

from the graduate seminar on identity, voice, and agency. In short, every attempt was made to write these narratives through the lenses of the time period, attempting to re/view the world at the time in my life when each occurred. Finally, each narrative contains some contextualizing information to orient the reader as much as possible to my point/s of reference, beginning with a few choice lyrics representing the emotionality of the time.

While chapter two presents a series of texts (i.e., personal narratives), the third chapter is a rhetorical analysis of these stories through the lenses of identity, voice, and agency.

### **The Wander Years: My High School Journey Through Closeted Lenses**

*“What would you do if I sang out of tune/ Would you stand up and walk out on me/  
Lend me your ears, and I’ll sing you a song/ And I’ll try not to sing out of key . . .”*  
(Joe Cocker/Beatles “With A Little Help From My Friends”)

When I think back on my time spent in high school, as many of us do, I see a time of confusion, disillusion, and disarray. Though these sentiments are not outside the range of “normal” teenage experiences, my years, like so many others, were far more than a representation of the “typical” ramifications of functioning in a hormone-raging body. Like so many, my years were spent contemplating my existence, and the world that surrounded me; I remember noting on MySpace that one of my favorite questions was “why?” and I was not afraid to employ it.

I was an inquisitive child who grew into a curious adolescent. Science and math satiated my inquiries like no subject matter on Earth. In fact, it was that which lies outside of Earth’s gravitational pull that most fascinated me. Many nights were spent in my tiny backyard, gazing at the millions of minute points of light that crawled across our heavenly dome; often, I would attempt to envision a star, any star, from up-close,

contemplating the sheer magnitude and immense energy being emitted for the sole purposes of my viewing pleasure.<sup>3</sup> Then, a new reality would take hold of synapses as my mind drifted into the vastness that is space. As a myriad of mathematical equations danced across my mind, I would project myself into the heavens; soaring over, around, through, and in between the stellar bodies, I would consider the consequences, as if it were humanly possible to exist in such an environment without protection. After allowing myself to mentally experience weightlessness through the sheer forces of my imagination, my skin would then, often, feel a micro-fraction of the cold that would envelope my body, regardless of the temperature in Pennsylvania. Without failure, my mind would consider my body's need for oxygen just before I compensated for such measures by convincing myself it would not be necessary. Completely wrapped inside my own vast little world, only seconds passed before my brain snapped my body back into the physical realm through a deep gasp for air. I have always been a daydreamer.

Yet, I rarely shared such cognitive experiences with friends or family; I could not spare the rejection of my mind, as I was teased, mocked, and belittled enough because of my immense stature. Alcoff articulates that the “reality of identity often comes from the fact that they are visibly marked on the body itself, guiding if not determining the way we perceive and judge others and are perceived and judged by them” (5). I was a six-foot one-inch, 265 to 292-pound ‘heterosexual’ White male who never felt able to fill the footsteps that a size 14 shoe leaves behind; with a broad and furry body, smooth face, and hair that fluctuated between the Caesar cut (i.e., George Clooney circa *E.R.*) and long, golden-tipped spikes, my visible identity was a concoction of a could-have-been-jock-bodied, 80’s rocker-styled, wannabe-preppy nerd; in other words, I was an overweight

honors student that relied on my noggin to get me through the day. Some, most often teachers, would say that I was a typical academic-in-the-making, while others, most often peers, would just call me a “fag.” Torn between praise and torment, a “critical thinker” and a “kiss ass,” I trusted very few people with my day-to-day life; I trusted no one with my secret life.

Today, I would love to claim that I always knew I was gay. At the time, like many others who have toiled over their sexuality, I always knew that I was different from most; and, I knew that I had an affinity for the masculine male form. Yet, subconsciously, I refused to make the connection. And, if I engaged in so much as a slight gaze of another male, I quickly reminded myself of Matthew Shepard, his torturous murder, and the sickening jokes made by peers when we got the news in my tenth-grade English class: “let’s go find a faggot, and tie him to a tree” (paraphrase). Thinking that a couple of them might actually commit such a horrific act was enough to repress any thoughts of homosexuality. Ah, denial.

Aside from deflection, I also felt societal and cultural pressures barreling down on me. Raised in a small borough of 2,500 people in the heart of Pennsylvania’s anthracite coal region, I was expected to be ‘manly,’ as Schuylkill County bred ‘only’ tough, hardworking ‘men,’ and never ‘sissies, fags, or queers.’ As reigns true in many cultures around the world, many individuals in my coal cracking co-culture feared anything and anyone that did not fit the scope of ‘normal’; “differences, it is widely believed, pose an a priori danger to alliance, unity, communication, and true understanding” (Alcoff 5). Being different, in my own mind, was inexcusable, for the hyper/heteronormative ideologies that plagued my secluded region of the state radiated hate for diversity—

natives mocked “*towel heads*” for purchasing all the neighborly-owned gas stations and convenient stores, snarled at “*spics*” for taking over manufacturing jobs, and teased “*queers*” for being disease-infested, moral degenerates that were destroying this great country. Schuylkill County was, and still is to a certain extent, stuck in the mentality of, ‘if you don’t like it, take a hike.’ Being mentally present in this environment was difficult, and following prescriptive rules was almost impossible.

Unlike most of my peers, I avoided many of my high school’s extra-curricular activities. I convinced myself that I could never be in a school play, for only ‘*fags*’ did performance, unless, of course, they were female, a teacher’s child, or involved with sports. I was too ashamed of my body (hair) to join the swim team; and, not to mention, mortally terrified to be in such close quarters of the locker room. Being surrounded by an overabundance of raw skin and naked muscle, the permeations of sweat, deodorant, and cologne that danced desperately throughout my nasal passages, and the sheer presence of dangling glands being towed and powdered was enough to pile drive me into a panic attack. In fact, the locker room was enough to deter me from any sport. I avoided football, for fear of hazing and bodily harm (on and off the field); wrestling, because I was petrified by the thought of being more focused on the act of tumbling around on mat with a man in a singlet rather than on winning the match, and the impending shameful gaze by the disciplining eyes of the crowd; and gym class, in general, as most of my classes contained upward of fifty students, many of them men, and at the time, many of them utter ‘assholes.’ In short, the school nurse saw me just as often as my gym teachers, as “exercise-induced asthma” became *my* definition for “anxiety disorder.”

My anxiety was often founded on, and fueled by, failed attempts to assimilate into

the collective hive of high school, as I was constantly reminded of my otheredness through name calling; “given that only the master has the power to name, naming is a kind of imaginary fixing of the Other and is an expression of aggression” (Alcoff 74). For the majority of my high school life, I was called every label that you could possibly conjure for a gay male; aside from the standard epithets, such as *fag*, *homo*, and *queer*, I would receive pitiful attack through attempted parody; for instance, ‘cleverly’ substituting “Gay Homo” for Greg Hummel. In marking me as Other, “the practices of visibility are indeed revealing of significant facts about our cultural ideology, but that what the visible reveals is not the ultimate truth; rather, it often reveals self-projection, identity anxieties, and the material inscription of social violence” (Alcoff 8). Attempting to dissuade the mounting testosterone-driven attacks, from outside and within, I retaliated with slanderous denouncements of my own; often of the same persuasion, in an attempt to redirect and deflect the very hatred that plagued me, I, too, would engage in the verbal gay flogging that took place. While being taunted at my locker, for instance, I would shift my attacker’s focus onto an unsuspecting victim, only to finish my business and dart before the hater realized what I had done. These are the moments, again that so many of us have, that I am not proud of. Misleading women is another.

I dated (at the time, “went out with”) several teenage women throughout my high school experience. One female that I courted was from a neighboring town; without visual proof of our relationship working in my favor, I quickly abandoned her for another young lady. She was my best friend, and everything I needed in a confidant. Smart and sassy, she displayed many visible markers of femininity; aside from her abundant bosom, she always adorned long nails and hair, dark and mysterious make-up, and silver

embellishments. She also had a slightly promiscuous reputation; like an angel sent from heaven, she was my get-out-of-hell-free card.

I convinced myself for years that if I worked diligently at being sexually attracted to my girlfriend, or any girl for that matter, that I would eventually become the man I was supposed to be. Yet, I turned down intercourse for years under the guise of avoiding pregnancy, justified by an endless list of conflated ramifications and doomsday scenarios that would result from bringing a child into the world at such a young age. Once the pressure became too great, I would withdraw, create fights, and inevitably force our separation. After a cooling off period of a few months, we would start from scratch—this, coupled with voicing my insecurities about her coital relations while on hiatus, was a great de Certeauian (“Practice of Everyday Life”) *tactic* to delay sex. Endless foreplay was my compromise, or more appropriately, my concession. With each passing act, my “flame” grew hotter and stronger, almost igniting my mask into a blazing inferno; my gayness grew more difficult to contain. It was during our last bout as boyfriend/girlfriend that my mind would no longer accept my denial as truth.

Laying alone in bed one night, wandering through the endless caverns of my cortices, visions, pieces of my sexual puzzle that I had consciously recessed into my unconscious, swirled about my mind’s eye. As I always did when this happened, I attempted to ignore the pieces, as “intuitions sometimes reveal truths only after we engage in symptomatic readings of them, to reveal their ideological preconditions, rather than taking them at face value” (Alcoff 87); I was not yet mentally prepared, or emotionally equipped, to schematically critique my intuitous projections. Instead, on this night, I would deny my thoughts with a late-night stroll from my attic bedroom to the

first-floor kitchen, then to the bathroom on my ascent back to the belfry. Yet, on this night, my hand was not the only one turning the knob to the powder room; with a quick thrust of the door, I was pulled forward, stumbling toward my mom's naked boyfriend. Startled, he nervously mumbled some semblance of English as he quickly darted past my frozen expression and paralyzed body, barely brushing my arm. Unfixing my feet, I made my way to the toilet, still in shock. Aroused and unable to perform, I gave up my futile efforts to relieve my bladder and stumbled back to my third-floor sanctuary. Hours passed, yet the image of full frontal male nudity was burned into the center of my mind's eye as puzzle piece after puzzle piece swirled around the room; it was as though every homosexual urge that had ever coursed through my veins returned with a vengeance. Eventually, with a faintness of breath, my inner voice uttered the phrase, "I'm gay."

The symbols ravaging through my thoughts quickly shifted from scandalous images of men to cultural and societal clips of damnation. Never would I lead a "normal" life; never would I have a wife . . . or children . . . or a home, with a dog, a cat, and a white picket fence. Never would I have the life that I so desperately desired, one so different from the life experiences that I was denied. My family would never accept it; if my mom did not disown me, my father would kill me. More importantly, my grandparents would never look at me with the same gleam in their eyes. Here, Alcoff reminds me, "when we organize around identity . . . we are compulsively repeating a painful reminder of our subjugation, and maintaining a cycle of blaming that continues the focus on oppression rather than transcending it" (79). At the time, I had no intention of transcending my fears, for refusing to avow to a gay public identity was my only conceivable route to maintaining cultural/familial ties. Yet, my mind denied me denial.

After toiling through a sleepless night, I went to school the next day pretending like nothing had happened, though my closest friends knew something was wrong—I was more quiet and withdrawn than my usual shy, introverted self. I also had a small tick in my right hand, micro-spasms that I laughed off when noticed by peers, making inappropriate jokes about potentially having Parkinson’s disease—anything, at that point, to take my mind off of my mind.

That night, sleep evaded me yet again. By the second day, my tick had turned into a twitch, controlled only when consciously, and exhaustively, forcing my pen to scribe. No sleep that night, either. Again, the tick that grew to a twitch progressed into a tremor. By the third day without rest, my entire right arm flailed and bucked uncontrollably, sending shockwaves throughout my body. No one said anything to me that morning. Perhaps, because my peers could not classify my new visible incongruity, the uncomfortable situation was enough to silence their voices of concern. That is, until sixth period Probability and Statistics.

While attempting to be cognizant enough to complete the days required in-class assignment, my entire upper body, everything north of my waist, collapsed. Smashing my face into my textbook, I quickly rebounded to my upright position. While some of my peers sat there staring at me, others went along with their business. My girlfriend did neither; glaring at me, she demanded that I leave the room immediately to see the nurse where I was to demand excusal from school to be examined by a doctor. On the way to the emergency room, ignoring my mom’s questions, I prayed for Parkinson’s.

Hours lapsed as doctor after doctor examined me; picked, prodded, poked, and scanned, practitioner after practitioner consulted the practitioner before them. With each

visit, I was asked more questions than I thought possible, though none of them had anything to do with my newly discovered sexual orientation; I was safe. According to the physicians, my symptoms did not match anything they had ever witnessed, diagnosed, or treated. Finally, after six exhaustive hours in the emergency room, the attending physician called my mother away from my side. All I overheard was “psych consult.” After what I assume was her consent, the in-house psychiatrist took one look at me, and decided that nothing would be accomplished without sleep; more pressing, my brain and muscles would soon start to deteriorate and lose vital functioning if I did not rest. A consultation appointment with a psychiatrist was set for a week later; for the time being, a weeks worth of excusals from school accompanied a prescription for seven days worth of Ativan, a fast-acting sedative designed to treat people with sudden, crippling panic attacks and/or epileptic seizures; still to this day, I look back on Ativan as my savior from the nearly 85 hours of walking lucidity that was my life. With the exception of relieving my body of waste and taking in minimal amounts of food and fluid, I slept for a week while my mother prayed and pondered on my condition.

As my seven-day slumber came to an end, I realized that a psychological evaluation would surely, eventually, reveal my secret. Though I could no longer deny my homosexuality from myself, I sure as hell could deny it from the world. I decided lying about my identity was far less problematic than dealing with the impending disappointment, disdain, and utter disgust from family, friends, peers, and mentors. I refused to let the tormenting ascriptions from fellow classmates validate their already disproportionately conflated egos. I would be damned if I was not going to control this. So, I told my mother that I failed a test, and worried that she would be upset with me for

not living up to her expectations, even though my own expectations for myself were often far more stringent. She bought the lie. Ah, denial.

Choosing to lie my way through life was more exhausting than I could have possibly imagined. Every utterance needed to be scanned before it could leave my mouth. If any aspect of a statement had the potential to leak valuable information, a vast overhaul needed to happen, and fast; I had to be on-guard during any vocal interaction. I also became exorbitantly mindful of my non-verbal communication, monitoring every wave, step, stance, handshake, point, twist, shift, clap, gaze, and so on, while simultaneously consuming every masculine trait as my own. In essence, I felt the need to meta-analyze everything that I knew about myself; when I discovered something new, a tactic was devised to, in my mind, subvert society into seeing me, as I wanted to be seen. Human interaction became unbearable.

Recognizing that I could not keep my act up forever, I contemplated taking “the easy way out.” Suicidal thoughts ravaged my nighttime daydreams. I remember trying to conceptualize a world without me. Unable to stop at the notion that the world would be better off without me, I interrogated each of my interpersonal relationships, questioning what their life would be like after I was found dead, walking through their grief to hypothesize about how they would come out in the end, after they had moved on. How would their lives change? Would they change significantly because of my departure? Would the person care at all after they left the presence of my mother? Oh, my mom. My mental musings on suicide usually ended when contemplating the effects such an act would have on my mom’s life; I was certain she would never recover. Not only would she suffer, but everyone in her life would suffer too, especially my younger

brothers. Drenched in tears, I would recognize that we were far too collectivistic a family to every take my own life. I needed a plan B.

I decided to abandon my intentions of attending college close to home. A timely suggestion by a mentor with a connection to the University of Southern California, and a lot of coaxing to leave the collective, became my ticket out of my nightmare, “for once one has acknowledged oppression, one needs to know and experience the fact that one can constitute oneself as a subject (as opposed to an object of oppression), that one can become *someone* in spite of oppression, that one has one’s own identity” (Witting 160). It was time for me to formulate my own identity. I knew that being near my family, and many high school peers, was not the solution; so, I moved 2,670 miles away, from a borough of 2,500 to a metropolis of 6.5 million, alone, in hopes of jumping light-years into my future.

### **“Sally, The Bi-Polar Bear”: Resisting the Closet Doors in College**

*“Eddy waited ‘til he finished high school/ Went to Hollywood, got a tattoo/  
He met a girl out there with a tattoo, too/ The future was wide open . . .”*  
(Tom Petty “Into The Great Wide Open”)

The final night of my first-year in college had finally arrived, and against all odds, I had survived. Moving from Coal Country to midtown Los Angeles was no easy feat. The day of departure was met by some unforeseen incidents. After breaking probation by staying out all night, my younger brother was hauled off to boot camp just as the stretch limousine that my mom rented pulled up to the front door; the ride from Ashland to Newark International Airport was full of twisted emotions. As my mom fought back her worries for my brother, she was confronted by her fears for me, and her guilt for not being able to travel with me to help with the moving process. My then-girlfriend

attempted to portray happiness for me, but was stilted by her concerns that I was moving on to something bigger, something better. I did everything that I could to appear calm and collected, while my mind concentrated on preventing my lunch from spewing all over the rental car; I choked back the tears until I walked down the terminal, leaving behind a mother who felt like she was losing a piece of herself, the last girlfriend I ever had, and a life that I would never see again. Cinematically, I thought about that first departure hundreds of times, and still to this day, I cannot believe that I did not turned around to share one more tear-filled gaze with my loved ones; I remember running “don’t look back” through my mind, as I re-contextualized a mentor’s advice.

I arrived at the Los Angeles International Airport five hours late. A “complication” with the airplane’s radio equipment forced an emergency landing in Albuquerque; while waiting for repair crews to open the lines of communication with air traffic control, my apartment complex was bustling with new, first-year college students, family members, and Residential Assistants (R.A.) willing to answer any questions. By the time I had reached the shuttle service, the USC chartered vans had changed drivers. Having nothing more than an address, my driver, clueless as to the location of my building, drove around campus for over an hour until he had forsaken me to the general vicinity, well beyond the move-in time frame. I stood alone on the corner of Orchard Avenue and West Jefferson Boulevard, frightened for my life, without a single idea about how to proceed. The next few hours went just as ‘smooth’: My R.A. and his girlfriend found me walking up and down the street like a lost child at a carnival; my first roommate greeted me with, “You must be Greg’s father”; and, each subsequent meeting of new peers and parents forced a painful response when asked, “where are your folks”

and “why aren’t they here”? Needless to say, college was off to an awful start.

Gaining a sense of trust and security for my new environment took the better half of my first semester. During the first week, my Minnesotan neighbor and I ventured out late one night to find the McDonald’s that we both remembered seeing as we exited the freeway; much farther any either of us had anticipated, we found ourselves walking by the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. I stared in admiration as we walked passed, listening for faint sounds resonating from the 1932 and 1984 Summer Olympic Games. While discussing the historic monument with my newfound friend, visualizing the hoards of spectators, our gaze landed on an ice cream truck surrounded by large men parked on West Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard; shocking us back into reality, we recognized that our surroundings had changed dramatically. We had seen enough movies and heard enough music about/from “South Central” Los Angeles to know that we were walking into someone else’s territory; yet, the only vindication we needed came from the stares from within the cars that passed us. We immediately turned around, and never looked back.

After trekking into unknown territories, I refused to leave my second-floor apartment after dusk for a month, giving me the opportunity to learn about my roommates; though, taking the opportunity was more difficult than I had imagined. Still quite socially awkward, I looked for common ground; and, if I could not find any, I create it. Longing to be accepted by my Brazilian roommate, and his quickly growing posse, I re-introduced myself to cigarettes, a habit that I was forced to stop in high school; it felt great to be included in those mysterious conversations on the balcony, especially when discovering that the contagious laughter taking place beyond the closed,

glass, sliding doors was not directed toward me. Quickly bonding with the Brazilian provided enough comfort to learn more about my other roommates, one from Seattle and one from Las Vegas. They both decided to rush neighboring fraternities, a hypermasculine space I was not willing to enter. So, I learned about them through conversation, and their actions. The Seattleite was vocally opinionated, yet one of the most relaxed individuals I had ever met; staunchly anti-tobacco, and pro-marijuana, he provided the apartment with a breathe of Northwestern culture. The Las Vegan was hyper, active, and inquisitive; we bonded over sharing a room, life with separated parents, and six-hour car rides across the Mojave Desert. He became my confidant, for behind closed doors, he listened with an empathetic ear. For the first time since my childhood, I was making friends with men.

It did not take long for my Coal Country roots to gain global perspective. We met one Pakistani after he nearly set the building on fire attempting to grill a hotdog, or a “sausage” as he called it in his British-influenced voice; sporting a tee with an image of a nametag reading, “Hello, my name is Wasted,” he introduced us to some flavors of Karachi. His high school friend from Islamabad was rooming with the Bostonian, a comedic guy that I had met at the East Coast orientation for USC; another roommate of theirs was also from Massachusetts. The Brazilian introduced us to several ladies from his country, as well. One, a fellow astronomy major, was from a powerful political family based in Rio de Janeiro, and the other still holds the title, “The Coolest Girl I’ve Ever Met In My Life”; her personality was as radiant as her flowing golden hair, crisp clear blue eyes, vibrant smile, beautiful curves, and brilliant mind—I would eventually, some years later, make a plea for her eggs. The Brazilian also brought an Argentinean

architecture student into the mix, though her time was mostly spent over a drawing board.

By the end of that first semester, apartment #239 started to gain a reputation.

An eclectic mix of the planet's cultures came together as a cohort aimed at having fun. Enjoying myself with friends was a new concept to me; before college, I understood good times as family gatherings, chuckles at work, and quality time with my girlfriend/s. I never had a circle of comrades that would gather for the sole purpose of enjoying each other's company. However, my newfound friends were not nearly as socially inept as I, enlightening me to a history of horseplay, buffoonery, recreation, and entertainment associated with friendship; they also brought with them experience with experimentation, and a fandom for 'God's Greenery.' Having only smoked marijuana twice during my post-high school graduation summer, I turned down the opportunity several times during that first semester. With each missed joke and in-group reference, I felt the oppressive powers of exclusion; always hating the sidelines, I began to feel resentful of my goody-two-shoes way of life. The newly acquainted radical inside of me yearned for new experiences, novel sensations, and life-changing occurrences. Though there was never any pressure from my peers to partake, my mind instigated a war with my moral values. Finally refusing to deny myself full acceptance into the group, I kissed the piney lips of the glass pipe and never looked back.

By the start of the second semester, I took up the cause for legalization. Unfortunately, I quickly shifted from enjoying 'herb's' euphoric affects to longing for the effect of memory loss; three days into my first Spring semester, my paternal grandmother passed away after losing her battle with Emphysema. Sluggishly mulling between each class on Wednesday, January 10, 2001, I turned on my cellular phone, stared at the

screen, and wondered why, unbeknown to me, no one was calling me, only to power down the device again as I entered the next classroom. That evening, upon entering #239, an indication of urgency became more visibly apparent; the Las Vegan, with a somber tone, told me that I had received over twenty phone calls from my mom *and* dad. Nanoseconds after breaking the news, my cell phone began to frantically vibrate, as if desperately screaming at me to return the 37 missed calls and 19 voicemails that I had acquired throughout the day. My grandmother was the closest re/presentation of ‘traditional’ mother that I knew, and her death was my first personal experience with loss; I was devastated.

I returned to Los Angeles in a daze; confused and heartbroken, I began to lose sight of compassion. Caring about my schoolwork became more and more difficult, as my mind wandered through a sea of ‘never again’s’—never would I walk into my gram’s house and see her smiling face, smell the intoxication of her homemade spaghetti sauce, or rub the tops of her clear-coated finger nails as she held my hands for comfort while instilling her endless knowledge. I grew weary of concerning myself with the everyday, dismissing it as trivial. Answering phone calls from home became daunting, as the “trials and tribulations” of their everyday paled in comparison to my pain and suffering. The only happiness I found was high above my troubles, in a cloud of smoke with my friends.

The rest of my spring semester consisted of night after night of partying, with the occasional emotional breakdown. Through the rollercoaster ride of highs and lows, talks of being bipolar began to whisper between friends. Other conversations started taking place, as well. A few of my friends pondered on my sexuality, using as evidence: my posture while ‘comfortably numb,’ my high-pitched cackle when laughing

uncontrollably, and my overtly emotional responses after being inadvertently excluded from some random activity. When their down-low dialogues began to surface through inside jokes, conflict arose. Perhaps I should have known something was going on behind my back when I was encouraged to name my special character on Super Nintendo's NBA Jam, "Sally"; ironically, wanting to be a part of the joke, I took their advice and labeled my player, a polar bear, Sally. For weeks, friends would gather to play NBA Jam, and every time I was asked about "Sally, the bi-polar bear," the Las Vegan and the Paki would laugh hysterically. Becoming utterly frustrated with my situation, I often became verbally abusive and physically aggressive to the point of tears.

By the end of finals week, I was utterly exhausted, and a final gathering of the cohort was in order. It was a night of beer bongs<sup>4</sup>, and letting bygones be bygones. While carrying on a farewell conversation with a friend, the Las Vegan came up to me for what I thought was a year in review chat. He looked me directly in the eyes, and said, "Are you gay"?

I became furious: "I thought you, of all people, knew me better than anyone out here! How could you ask me that . . ."

"If it's not true, then why are you getting so upset about it?" I stared at him blankly, as he stopped me dead in my tracks; without a single retort, I left the party.

The Las Vegan came into our bedroom a few minutes later. Without turning on the lights, he stripped down to his boxers and crawled into his bunk. Both of us laid there in silence for over an hour, until he hopped down from his bed and left the room. Realizing that he had not returned from what I had assumed was a run to the bathroom, I decided to get up and investigate with my own trip to the toilet. Upon opening my door, I

heard muffled voices from the other bedroom hush to a murmur. Then, a Brazilian accent called out to me: “Grego? Grego. Come in here, man.”

I eerily entered the Brazilian’s bedroom, greeted by the concerned looks of the Paki and the Las Vegan. In that room, I was informed that “most of the world” did not view homosexuality like “Bumblefuck, Pennsylvania” did; being told that I would be more accepted for being true to myself than for lying about it, and that my friends would stand by me regardless of my sexuality, I came out of the closet for the first time. Exhilarated by the confession, feeling years of torture lift from my shoulders, with friends charged by my newfound liberation, I burned down my closet doors, answering their questions until the sun glimpsed through the window panes; there was a new day on the horizon, and there was no turning back.

Yet, this time, I *had* to look back, for my flight<sup>5</sup> would be forcing me back to Coal Country the following day. Officially, I avowed to being “gay” for 36 hours, before crawling back inside my charred closet, and deeper into my pit of despair. Not all was lost, however, for once the admission was uttered, I would forever carry with me a whiff of smoky exuberance entwined with the comforting smell of my burning closet, and the reluctance to build new doors.

### **Spreading the Word: Queer Activism in College Part II**

*“So close, no matter how far/ Couldn’t be much more from the heart/ Forever, trust in who you are/ And nothing else matters/ I never opened myself this way/ Life is ours/ We live it our way/ All these words, I don’t just say . . .”*  
(Metallica “Nothing Else Matters”)

Several years had passed, as did people, on my quest to relieve the immense barometric pressure found with/in my closet. I left Los Angeles behind after waking up

one morning with the realization that I had accomplished the goal I had set for myself when leaving Coal Country; I was an out and proud gay male. Leaving a coveted security job at a popular West Hollywood gay club, and my first true gay friend (and roommate), I set out to restart my life as a gay male, starting with my roots; though Coal Country, and life, had other plans for me.

Still fearing a clash with Old World values, I kept my gay identity from my grandparents, though their numbers were dwindling. During my final semester at USC, my paternal grandfather died, one year and six days after his wife, my grandmother (see “Sally, The Bi-Polar Bear”). I was home in PA for only two months when my maternal grandmother received word that the irritation at her partial mastectomy site was cancer-revisited, this time a rare/radical/aggressive form that required two-hour trips to Philadelphia several times a week; now, she is listed in some medical journal somewhere as being the first human to (unsuccessfully) receive the experimental treatment. At the age of 59, cancer took her life eight months after her initial diagnosis. While she was battling her rogue breast, my maternal grandfather, a man I only met a handful of times, died while driving his big rig cross-country; the autopsy revealed liver cancer had consumed his body. A year and twelve days after my maternal grandmother’s passing, her father, my great-grandfather, died from complications associated with Alzheimer’s disease. The village I had been raised in began to look as though it were pillaged, raped, and destroyed, not by invading forces or neighboring clans, but by the scythe of Death.

At a time when both my maternal and paternal families were undergoing radical shifts and sibling dissonance, I was facing not only feelings of mourning for my loved ones, but a loss of freedom I had become accustomed to in West Hollywood. Not long

after returning to Coal Country, I took a job as a bartender in a local ‘bottle-and-shot’ bar<sup>6</sup>. Very early on, one of the cooks developed a crush on me. I decided to come out to her in an effort to subdue my new stalker. Like a fire, the news spread quickly to the six other employees; the owner/manager was ready to play ‘firefighter’, as she reconsidered her decision in hiring me. With very few job opportunities in the area for a college dropout, I pleaded with her to keep me on-staff; forcing her to recognize she knew nothing of my sexuality prior to being informed, and citing evidence of my heterosexual passing with her clientele, remaining in the closet became a condition of my paycheck. Fully understanding the repercussions of having a gay bartender in Coal Country—the ascription of being a “gay bar” was unshakable, unforgivable, and foreclosable—I knowingly accepted the terms of my employment. Believe it or not, being forced to remain closeted at work was a welcomed event, freeing me from feeling on edge about a co-worker outing me to an undesirable crowd. Besides, I was not ready for public outing yet, for my family was just beginning to find out.

Though my mother learned of her gay son through a 19-page letter I wrote and sent while living in Los Angeles, most<sup>7</sup> of my family was not yet informed. One by one, I began telling family members closest to me; and outing after outing, what started with “I have something to tell you,” often ended with a similar reply: “It’s about time.” My perceptions about their lack of empathy and compassion dwindled, as my family’s love and support became more apparent; it was as though my honesty relaxed any tensions held in the past. I was no longer the black sheep, or the chosen one in my mother’s family; I was ‘one of the family.’ Yet, I knew this place of excitement would wane, and I would be left living my everyday with one foot regionally cemented in the closet; I also

understood that my talents with people would be ascribed as “an amazing bartender,” and little more. In recognizing my need for more mental stimulation, while appeasing the pleas of my paternal family, and simultaneously denying claims of stagnation, I decided returning to college was the next logical stepping-stone in my journey, for walking Coal Country with a closet over my head was an everyday that I refused to accept.

I enrolled at Bloomsburg University (BU) of Pennsylvania in the fall of 2005. Following the advice of a close friend, I enlisted in the Mass Communication program; still unsure of my decision, I signed up for classes ranging from Theatre Appreciation to General Psychology. I also enrolled in Public Speaking, a course I was confident matched my skill base. The professor for Public Speaking was a boisterous intellectual who peaked my interest in the first minutes of class. Unsure of the local academic environment, I chose speech topics in areas of interest that would relate with my audience. As the semester progressed, I became more at ease in the classroom, recognizing that my peers looked up to me, for my age (only 23 at the time) and life experiences afforded me wisdom in their eyes; my professor also gazed at me with a sense of “knowing.” After a meeting with her, I saw a Safe Zone sticker on her office door; feeling the need to come out to her, thinking she may be a lesbian, I verbalized a reference that only an insider would recognize. Her ‘knowing’ smile suggested to me an alliance was formed.

Prior to starting my second semester at BU, I received a recruitment letter from my Public Speaking professor notifying me that I was among the top five percent of her students during the fall term; she was sending the letter in hopes that I would enroll in the Communication Studies major. Having felt more comfortable with her than any of my

collegiate faculty, and antithetically feeling uneasy about Mass Communication, I was granted special permission to enroll in her Intercultural Communication course; I wanted to learn more about what Communication Studies had to offer before changing majors<sup>8</sup>. It took only eight class sessions before I found a home in Communication Studies, yet the program was not satiating my desire to discuss gay topics, that is, until *I* became the topic of discussion.

Fully engaged in a lower-level communication course, Understanding Social Influence, with my new adviser, I was taken off-guard one day when her ‘knowing’ smile became more than that. A peer had brought up a GLBTQ topic as an example of the class constructs we were discussing that day. My adviser, fully engorged in the lively discussion, turned and said, “What do you think, Greg, as a gay ma . . .”? I had not been out in class. My face dropped, showing only the top of my head to my peers. Understanding there was little I could do to salvage my closet doors, I picked my face back up only to see my adviser bright red, covering her face in embarrassment for her social *faux pas*, simultaneously gazing upon my peers’ dropped jaws. From that moment on, after being ripped from my closet, I had a difficult time keeping my gay voice from the walls of the classroom. In fact, I could not satiate my appetite to discuss gay topics.

While walking on campus one day, my eyes spotted a flyer boasting a rainbow flag. Feeling the need to socialize more, I decide to check out a meeting of BU’s gay/straight alliance, Free Spirit. Nervous as a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs, I was greeted with warm smiles and friendly salutations; though, fifteen minutes into the meeting, I realized social justice was not the prime focus of the group, rather gossiping about who-did-what and who-wanted-whom occupied the discourse. A year

passed until I attended another meeting. This time, I was researching a paper on people's interpretations of the term 'gay' as meaning 'stupid,' and I wanted some opinions from community members directly affected; this time, the advisor of the group was present, along with new student leadership. They were fascinated with me, and I with them, from the start. We chatted extensively during the meeting, before the advisor invited me to join the group to help with reconstructing the university's social equity charter<sup>9</sup>. Fighting for gay rights became my new driving force.

I took on my new purpose with a vengeance. I accepted every opportunity to challenge, correct, critique, and/or re/construct the views of my peers, colleagues, and faculty. In several Communication Studies courses, I became the voice charged with speaking for the entire GLBT community; in courses outside of Communication Studies, I was sure to interject an argument for social equity whenever and wherever the notion was being overlooked. Yet, my efforts were rarely channeled through an organization; without wanting to be tied down, linked, or pigeon holed to any one cause, my voice was more like freelanced shouting than a refined speaking. While some applauded my efforts, many began to criticize my approach. For instance, a column written for the BU student newspaper was heavily critiqued for my use of epithetic language; while trying to argue against the hateful and discriminating use of epithets in our everyday language, several faculty members reprimanded me for using words I denounced. Moreover, close friends and family grew tired of my cause, claiming not everything was an attack on equal rights, while saying some phrases are merely colloquial, and not intended as harmful. I refused to accept their arguments, yet the pressures associated with segregating loved one's were enough to make me rethink my approach.

By senior year, my efforts to make arguments for why social equality should be everyone's concern shifted. I accepted my attacks as futile through the help of critique from mentors. I amended my approach to become more 'matter of fact' than 'in your face.' Simply shifting my vernacular to include social inequities about socioeconomic statuses, gender, race, religion, and disability opened the scope of my audience; though I still included the GLBT family in most of my rhetoric, learning to 'not make everything a gay issue' seemed to make people less anxious, and more willing to listen. In essence, my discourse on social justice became more than gay rights advocacy; it became a discursive move toward social and cultural equality for anyone who faced dissonance and disparity in their everyday. Still being forced to "agree to disagree" with some audiences from time to time, my inclusive approach became more than a masking for an ulterior motivated fight for gay rights; changing discourses shifted my own perceptions of what social justice and equality was about, along with my interpretations of my audiences' needs.

### **Pedagogically Speaking: Coming Out to a Captive Audience**

*"I am walking on the bridge/ I am over the water/ And I'm scared as hell/  
But I know there something better/ Yes, I know there's something better . . ."*  
(Paula Cole "Me")

As a graduate teaching assistant, and an instructor of *Public Speaking*, I had convinced myself that the classroom was no place for my sexuality. After accepting a volunteer teaching assistant position with Eric Aoki for his *SPCM 334: Co-cultural Communication* course, we had a frank conversation about my concerns on coming out in class. Shrilling at the thought of having my personality directly correlated with my sexuality, I wanted to keep my gay identity from our students; I worried about my *ethos*,

as I relied upon my performative personality and teaching persona to connect with students. In short, I worried that the students would judge me. I also worried about Eric, his *ethos*, and the credibility of the course, as I was fully aware that he is openly gay in all aspects of (campus) life. My biggest concern was for the students, and their learning experience; the last thing I wanted was for our students to re-label the course, *Co-cultural Communication: Two Fags in the Front of the Room*. In short, I refused to allow my sexuality to become *the* distraction.

Eric was very forward in his perspective. He made it quite clear about avowing to one of his identities as a gay man, and he would share his experiences with his students in an effort to help them understand different modalities of oppression and privilege. He also concretely stated he would never ask me to closet or out myself—this was *my* choice—and he fully respected my decision. He also warned me that he would be asking students to grapple with their perceptions of identity—of themselves and of Others—throughout the course, and he would be asking me for my opinions, insights, and understandings of marginalized identities. At this point, I “understood” what that meant for me: I would have to self-monitor my every word as I did in high school. Granted, I do this in my own *Public Speaking* courses, but the topics of the course rarely discuss marginalized identities as central to the discussion, so the most I monitor is in opening dialogue with students before the start of class. I thought, by now, I was a professional at masking my sexual identity, passing as heterosexual whenever necessary. Regardless of my choice, Eric was more-than-obvious about the material for the class, and cautioned it would be difficult for me, in knowing me, to keep my identity a secret. I brushed off his warnings, as images of my high school days permeated my thinking, clouded by fears of

being attacked by disgruntled students, justifying their defense with claims of “gay panic,” as witnessed in the Matthew Shepard murder trial some 90 minutes northwest of Fort Collins. Regardless of my fear, if I could handle passing in Pennsylvania and *Public Speaking*, I could ‘surely’ cope with the closet in this case.

Eric began his *Co-cultural* course with a cultural introduction activity. The point of the activity, according to him, was to entice students’ thoughts on their own co-cultural identities as a way of fostering their thinking about the aspects of their lives that hold/which have privilege, and the identities they avow to that may be marked by cultural and/or societal oppression. Following his lead, I introduced myself as a first-generation college student from a socioeconomically depressed region of the country. I also marked my privilege as a White male seeking an advanced degree. After clueing them into my religious avowals as a Christian Spiritualist—one who does not necessarily go through the clergy to mentally, emotionally, and spiritually connect with a higher power—I moved into the body politics of being a hefty, furry man in a mediated society permeated by thin, hairless bodies. Throughout the performative introduction, the back of my mind kept screaming, “Don’t tell them”!

As the semester progressed, students continued to grapple with the notions of identity, just as Eric had forecasted. Yet, with each impending lecture, my high school dramas resurfaced. I lacked, in my mind, a definitive voice, one marked by consistent and constant prefacing of my opinions; when my time came to speak, whether announced or impromptu, I had difficulty in choosing aspects of my life that highlighted my views on the discussion, for my sexual being haunted my vision. I knew, for instance, my experiences as a socioeconomically disadvantaged, first-generation college bound youth

spoke to the concerns of enrolling in higher education, and the inherent discrimination in the application process; yet, at the time, the only example my mind could conjure dealt with my harassment as a closeted gay male in high school. I would, most often, have to talk through Eric's question, highlighting responses from students, until an 'appropriate' example came to mind. Class after class, my frustrations grew.

We were about a month into the semester when the physical manifestations of my frustrations began to surface once more. To this day, I cannot recall the topic of the dialogue, because my mind could only think one thing: "*WHY* am I doing this"?! From the first coming out experience in an undergraduate course, I have not been good at hiding my perceptions from the classroom walls (see "Spreading the Word"). Frustrated, my blood pressure rose; becoming lightheaded, my mood swung aggressively as I contemplated my decision to turn down the open invitation to be my Self. After class, I turned to Eric to discuss my plight.

I felt like a fraud silencing my gay voice in a class where our students were doing such an amazing job of interrogating their own identities. I needed to come out to them, but by this point in the semester, it would be far too awkward to just say, "Oh, by the way, I'm gay"; I feared the delayed unveiling would leave most students feeling confused about why now and why not before; mislead about not being a part of the in-group; distrustful toward me for lying to them; and/or, irritated for wasting class time on 'yet another gay' topic. Furthermore, there needed to be pedagogical significance in my avowal, for coming out to the class required a higher purpose than simply my sanity. After claiming my coming out would be a beneficial experience for the class to experience an outing, while also engaging in the construction of my gay instructor

identity, Eric offered me a chance to come out in an Oprah-style interview after watching the documentary, *The Times of Harvey Milk*. Harvey's stance on coming out during a time when teachers faced impending doom seemed an appropriate transition into coming out for the first time as an instructor. And so I passed on passing, as I 'knew' I could never again look another 334 student in the eyes after hearing Harvey Milk's pleas to "come out" and be recognized had I continued my passing performance.

When October 27th, 2009 finally arrived, my nerves disregarded everything I had rehearsed in my mind, every conceivable response to every conceivable question was gone—It was show time. Eric and I had taken time prior to this event to map out some general questions and topics to be addressed. Wanting to know how I would respond in the moment, we held an informal interview session over coffee and appetizers. Yet, I knew in the moment that my responses would be predicated by the context, the wording of the question/comment from the student/s, and environmental undertones of the class. I had mentally prepared as much as possible, yet my nerves still unraveled just before beginning class.

After a short minute or two segue from a review of the film, and after reminding our students about his policy to revisit a topic if someone deemed it necessary, he cued the class that I wanted to culturally reintroduce myself. Cleanly shaven, wearing the same attire from our first class session<sup>10</sup>, I rose to begin my performance. I started off my introduction almost exactly as I had on the first day, but instead of calling myself "Greg Hummel," I began with "Gregory Sean Hummel," as a call to my publication name in the academy. From there, I went into a discussion about my background, my native land, and the implications for growing up in a town where "everybody knew everything"

about everybody's everything." Calling attention to growing up in a collectivistic family, and the inherent responsibilities to protect the family name—more specifically, my mother and brothers—the moment finally came to divulge my great secret. Prefacing once more by verbalizing the shaking of my hands and sweat running down my head and face, I could delay no longer. I felt separated from my body, metaphorically viewing myself from the far corner of the classroom as the words left my mouth, not in the conventional 'I am gay' approach, but in terms of "protecting my gay identity."

After taking a moment to collect myself, I noticed I had the undivided attention of the classroom. Most students shifted their bodies, and gaze, toward me, waiting for the next revelation; a few students completely redirected their bodies, and their gazes, toward either of the sidewalls. Regardless of their positioning, you could truly hear a pin drop, as the silence left the air in the room almost touchable. I followed my self-disclosure with a discussion on my perceived fears in coming out, and my worries about their experience in the classroom. One by one, students, mostly female at first, thanked me for my "courageous" act; many congratulated me for coming out as an instructor, following with personal stories of friends and family members who had come out to them, and their own understandings of the difficulties associated with the process. Until this point, "ally" was an avowed identity very few students had openly reported in the context of the course. Never missing an opportunity to interject, Eric discussed the relevance of coming out as someone who is an ally for GLBT folks, for if we do not explicitly know you are someone who is comfortable with queer populations, then how are we to know it is safe to come out; here in lies the burden of avowing—who will/should take the first step? The first half of the session was, without a doubt, wholeheartedly outside of my expectations.

Once the praise settled, the questions began. I had anticipated questions regarding my reasons for closeting myself in such a safe environment, accusations of lying about a portion of my identity, and queries about my views on the religious debate; I had not anticipated the emotions behind their vocalization. Of course, the question that stung the most was not really a question at all. A student disclosed her feelings of deceit about my coming out, or my lack thereof. Apparently, my coming out forced her to rethink everything I had offered to class prior to my admission, forging her to wonder how many of my contributions were actually true. In all honesty, her statement was one I greatly feared, while entirely appropriate. After validating her concerns and reassuring her all of my statements were, in fact, *truthful*, I discussed my views on the difference between being completely open and honest, and being honest enough to avoid persecution—thoughts a majority of people do not consciously have to think through. I also mentioned some in the GLBT community (citing the lead singer of *Green Day*, Billie Joe Armstrong), feel they are not lying when choosing to not self-disclose if no one asked about their sexual identity. Noting that no one<sup>11</sup> in the class ever explicitly asked about my sexuality, I felt I was not necessarily lying to them.

After a few more questions about my experiences in and out of the closet, the religious topic was brought to the table by a young man avowing to join the priesthood upon graduation. He posed the question unlike any I had ever encountered on the topic. The question did not surround Heaven or Hell, but about my own negotiations with my religious upbringing, inquiring about how I came to avow to a Christian Spiritualist identity. The question was truly “invitational” in my mind. Appearing to be genuinely concerned for his future parishioners, he wanted to understand how I coped with the

gay/religion negotiation in my own mind. After thanking him for his question at great length, I discussed the years of turmoil I experienced when thinking about my God, and my family members who had passed away. Maintaining an Asantean Afrocentric and Cherokee spiritual view that our ancestors have access to us beyond the grave, I self-disclosed my fears about ascribing opinions to my deceased relatives, and the strength it took to convince myself that they loved me for me, and that they would continue to do so beyond the grave. I also mentioned my discussions with my God, concluding He would not have created me solely for persecution, for my drive to find a same-sex partner was not something I, or anyone that I know who avows to being GLBTQ, would knowingly choose, especially when considering the attached cultural and social stigma. In essence, the costs associated with avowing to a marginalized identity did not outweigh the benefits; here, the choice was not in *being* gay, but in avowing as gay. I am not sure if my answer satiated the questioner's query, but my insight was all I could provide.

As the class came to a close, I felt a newfound sense of pride. In my final ascent toward the door, many students called out: "Thanks again, Greg! Have a great day, Greg!" Eric and I looked at each in shock.

Eric excitedly questioned: "Did you hear that"?

"Yes! But, are you hearing what I am hearing"?

"They referred to you by name!"

"I know!!!"

No longer was I "Hey," "Yo," or some other general label; I had a name. I left the room contemplative and thankful for my students' receptions of me, and the heartwarming experience of coming out in the academy. In the city where Matthew Shepard took his

last breathe 11 years and 15 days prior, I felt wholeheartedly appreciative of his contributions; and, as I wandered home in bewilderment, I wondered just how much influence he had on our classroom discussion. A Christian Spiritualist might even suggest that Matthew “occupied” a seat in Clark A, Room 207 as a sign of support from beyond the grave.

## Chapter 3

### A Rhetorical Analysis of My Personal Coming Out Narratives

In the previous chapter, I have re/presented four temporally situated personal narratives on my experiences with the closet: First, a re/count of my mundane high school experience, closeting my sexual self from the outside world, while coming into self-realizing denial; second, a transitional narrative from the mundane to the ephemeral, as self-realization poured through my closet doors and out into the public, offering cues to my close-knit community that enticed my friend/roommate to open my closet doors and introduce my sexual-self to my public self; the third personal narrative is a return to the everyday, this time, in transition from the closet to an out-and-proud gay male attempting to find a voice suitable for the public at large; and finally, I ended the previous chapter with a personal narrative of my first coming out experience as an instructor at a public land-grant university in northern Colorado, including my perceptions of the dialogue with students and faculty that followed my pedagogically oriented outing.

In this chapter, I analyze each of my four personal narratives distinct from one another through the theoretical lenses of identity, voice, and agency. Through this process, I track the changes through time and context via theoretical constructs associated with identity, voice, and agency. In the final chapter, I attend to my initial research questions proffered in chapter one, discuss the limitations of this project, and potentials for future endeavors. But first, to frame the analysis of my narratives from chapter two, I

outline several constructs found within the larger conversations on identity, voice, and agency.

### **Identity as Public and Lived**

To begin this section, a clear conception of identity is imperative. Alcoff (“Visible Identities”) articulates her understanding precisely:

Identity is not merely that which is given to an individual or group, but is also a way of inhabiting, interpreting, and working through, both collectively and individually, an objective social location and group history. We might then, more insightfully define identities as positioned or located lived experiences in which both individuals and groups work to construct meaning in relation to historical experience and historical narratives. (42)

By her definition, identity is not solely an individualistic act of signification; it is quite the contrary. For Alcoff, identity formation is a cooperative act contextualized by a lived history and everyday interaction with community members (i.e., people in our everyday), where “our ‘visible’ and acknowledged [public] identity affects our relations in the world, which in turn affects our interior life, that is, our lived experience or subjectivity” (92). Alcoff defines “*public identity*,” as a person’s “socially perceived self with the systems of perception and classification and the networks of community in which we live” (92-93); and, “*lived subjectivity*,” essentially, as “who we understand ourselves to be, how we experience being ourselves, and the range of reflective and other activities that can be included under the rubric of our ‘agency’” (Alcoff 93). While I save my discussion on agency for later in this chapter, the distinction Alcoff makes between public identity and lived subjectivity helps us to understand the ways identity is functioning interdependently, albeit not always harmoniously, in our everyday lives, as “neither public identity nor lived subjectivity are separable entities, fundamentally

distinct, or entirely independent from the other. Specifically, for this project, noting the distinction between public identity (i.e., given identity) and lived subjectivity (i.e., inhabited identity) is imperative to analyzing my identity as enacted, contained, disciplined, and enlightened with/in and outside of the larger social and cultural structures of the historically located personal narratives from my everyday life. Also important to this project is the process of naming that identity undergoes.

Often, identity is portrayed through a series of labeling, whether by the Self and/or by Others. While the terms “avow” and “ascribe” may be commonplace in academic literatures, taking the construct’s definitions for granted can be problematic for some audiences. In this project, I side with Martin and Nakayama’s definitions of *avowal*, “the *process* by which an individual portrays himself or herself” (158; emphasis added), and *ascription*, “the *process* by which others attribute identities to them” (158; emphasis added). In other words, avowing to an identity is to engage in a process of self-identification, while ascribing is the process of labeling someone else (and consequently, to be ascribed an identity is to be labeled by an Other). Martin and Nakayama suggest an avowed identity may concur with an ascribed identity, but when the two are not in alignment, a conflict in communication can occur (158). Often, the conflict occurs when an individual and/or group ascribes a label deemed unfitting by the person being labeled. Collier also notes that ascriptive labeling happens through stereotyping (260).

The everyday enactment of identity ascription often occurs through visual interpretation. Alcoff articulates, the “reality of identity often comes from the fact that they are visibly marked on the body itself, guiding if not determining the way we perceive and judge others and are perceived and judged by them” (5). Often, individuals

and/or groups ascribe a person a specific identity via stereotypical traits visually marked on the body. In the case of males, for instance, individuals may (violently) ascribe label/s pertaining to homosexuality through visual markers that include, but are not limited to, effeminate enactments of posture, gesture, dress, and walk<sup>12</sup>. Yet, ascribing truth through visual interpretation is highly problematic; “the practices of visibility are indeed revealing of significant facts about our cultural ideology, but that what the visible reveals is not the ultimate truth; rather, it often reveals self-projection, identity anxieties, and the material inscription of social violence” (Alcoff 8). Inevitably, relying on stereotyping as a medium to ascribe identity, not only reveals, in this instance, the heteronormative ideologies of the ascriber’s culture, but also the ideological assumptions and anxieties of the person engaged in the act of ascription.

Moreover, as alluded to earlier, Alcoff notes that the act of ascribing an identity to an individual can often be viewed as violent, especially in instances when the ascribed label is concurrent with a stigmatized and/or marginalized group within the participant/s’ culture/s. Therefore, the ascriptive labeling is an enactment of power over an/other. Alcoff continues: “Given that only the master has the power to name, naming is a kind of imaginary fixing of the Other and is an expression of aggression” (74). In (aggressively) labeling an/other, dissonance with/in the person being labeled can force said person to question their perceptions of their public identity with/in their cultures’ frameworks, potentially disrupting their lived subjectivity. In essence, the act of ascribing identities has the potential to question the labeled person’s notions of truth about who they are, and/or how they want to be viewed with/in their cultural frameworks.

Overall, the notion of identity inherently invokes questions about truth. More

specifically, which truth is correct—the ascription of identity based on visual markers, or the subjective truth of the individual? Alcoff suggests “when truth is defined as that which can be seen, there develops an uncanny interdependence between that which is true and that which is hidden” (Alcoff 7). Can we question the integrity and ethics of an individual who avows to being straight when, in all actuality, the person is a closeted homosexual? What does the perceived climate of a context described as ‘hostile’ by one individual, and ‘comfortable’ to another, do to the voices of (marginalized) individuals? Though these questions may deserve their own projects, one must consider that the act of voicing identity, specifically avowing, in any context *is the right of the individual*, regardless of denying or succumbing to socio-cultural oppression, “for once one has acknowledged oppression, one needs to know and experience the fact that one can constitute oneself as a subject (as opposed to an object of oppression), that one can become *someone* in spite of oppression, that one has one’s own identity” (Witting 160). In essence, an individual moving beyond object/oppression does so via their voice, and consequently, their agency.

### **Voice as a Process of Portraying Identity**

While clear theoretical definitions for *voice* have eluded me, descriptive measures for talking/writing about voice’s role in identity formation vigorously greeted the end of the 20th century. For instance, in Judith Roof and Robyn Wiegman’s edited collection, *Who Can Speak? Authority and Critical Identity*, many important critical discussions ensued about who has the ability to speak for whom, who has the authority, who feels they should have the authority, and so on. Furthermore, many scholars in the text discuss the role of the author/scholar in speaking for/on behalf of Others, questioning and

criticizing how much of their personal lives must/should appear in the text. Yet, little (if any) attention is paid to a theoretical definition of *voice*.

Teasing out a definition takes a bit more consideration of the questions being asked surrounding the notion of voice. First, much like the previously stated discussion on ascription, the act of ‘giving voice’ is problematic. “The phrase ‘giving voice,’ common in discussions surrounding the disclosure of the less powerful (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982) is problematic here, in that, the notion of ‘giving’ implies both a person who gives and a person who receives voice” (Petronio, Flores, and Hecht 102). In their article, “Locating the Voice of Logic: Disclosure Discourse of Sexual Abuse,” Petronio, Flores, and Hecht seek to articulate “a voice of logic” in/for/with sexually abused adolescents, and note, “In the case of survivors of sexual abuse, the concept of ‘giving voice’ suggests these survivors were reactive and disempowered rather than active and empowered, until they were given permission to disclose their abuse” (102). Here, it is suggested that the act of ‘giving voice’ is an enactment of power over a group perceived as, or are in actuality, less powerful than those distributing voice, especially via privileged media, academic and mass alike.

In “locating the voice of logic,” (102) Petronio et al. not only recognize “our limited role as researchers” in the process of articulating voices for/with Others, but also that the “root of [the abused person’s] logic occurs with or without us, not through us or because of us” (Petronio et al. 102). In other words, to articulate an/other’s voice, research/ers must situate their (privileged) voice in relation to the logics of the Other, recognizing the significance of the (marginalized) individuals’ avowals, as the root of an

avowal is informed by/from the individual or group's lived experiences and social location. Such a distinction is imperative to avoid exploitation and oppression of one's and/or an/other's voice, especially in cases of articulating marginalized voices.

As hooks writes, "There would be no need to even speak of the oppressed and exploited coming to voice, articulating and redefining reality, if there were not oppressive mechanisms of silencing, suppressing, and censoring" (16). One such mechanism, in academic writing, (speaking, and teaching,) can occur from careless use of scholarly voice, as Ono notes that we must be reflexive about our use of voice, as our "voice[s] may overshadow the voices of people who have less or no access . . ." (122). Ono continues, metaphorically addressing a conduit for voice as a microphone: "My voice cannot stand in for other people's voices; if it did, it would surely leave out some part of their unique life experiences and perhaps drown out things they would say if they had access to a mike" (Ono 122-123). Here, Ono is directly addressing the concern of speaking *for* others, much like Alcoff in *Who Can Speak?* Our responsibility, then, as writers/researchers/teachers/scholars, is to assure that our voice avoids replacing an/other's voice (Ono 123). By explicitly situating ourselves with/in our work, we can utilize our voice in conjunction with Others' as "a means of resistance" (Petronio et al. 111). Personally, it is difficult to think of "resistance" outside of a political frame.

Dow melds our social locations with voice to bring the discussion into the political realm. She articulates, "When we speak and write, we do so from social locations that are constituted by discourse and experience. Moreover, because all social locations are not equal, because some are attended by privilege and others by marginalization, our socially located voices have political implications" (Dow 243).

Restated simply, “scholars view ‘voice’ as a political issue; that is, it is about *power*” (Dow 245). Again, the notion of voice is inherently linked to the expression, that is, a performance, of power in relation to our social location, our identity; politicizing the discussion inextricably links to agency.

Throughout this section, it is apparent that voice is *a politically charged performative process of portraying identity*. Materially, the process of voice is actualized/Performed in the act of avowing to a particular identity, both as a method of self-identification with/in a marginalized group, and as a challenge to systemic oppression. While context is imperative in understanding the relationship between identity and voice—more specifically, the interrelated dynamism of public identity, ascription, lived subjectivity, and avowal—the political will to engage one’s own voice is yet to be discussed, requiring a more explicit discussion on agency.

### **Agency as Enactment of Identity**

An individual’s agency to avow to a particular identity is never separate and/or distinct from communal ascriptions; in fact, the agency to avow to any identity, marginal and/or centered, directly correlates with the individual’s lived subjectivity in relation to social, cultural, and political systems of power, oppressive and/or privileging alike. This performative act, by my account, becomes problematic when individuals lack the agency to avow, where *agency* is defined as “the capacity to act” (Campbell 3). While this loose definition of agency serves a purpose when noted *in relation to power*, a more thorough investigation into how scholars denote agency appears to be helpful in understanding the subtle nuances at play. Bone, Griffin, and Scholz provide a condensed version of Burke’s notion of agency from *The Grammar of Motives*, “as the instrument or the means

by which an act is accomplished and is concerned with how things get done” (275–320; as cited in Bone et al. 445). Bone et al. also note the importance of attending to agency as “*a means to act*” (445), appropriately disassociating agency as a synonym for “change” (445). In other words, to understand agency as a politically motivated means to act in relation/response to power is imperative to appreciate the inherent link agency shares with notions of identity and voice.

Attending to the exigence of understanding agency, Chávez and Griffin write:

[T]here are times when agency is or is not granted as a result of those identities. It also is to suggest the ways that agency can be granted, held on to, taken away, or simply demanded, is as tied to institutional structures and relationships with others as much as it is to the individual—and these ties are as complex as they are simple and as elusive as they are obvious. (3)

Clearly, while agency can become a static *status quo* for a select few who are “granted” open and free reign (i.e., privilege) to play; agency most often engages in a simply elusive and obviously complex dance between partners: figurative, literal, imaginary and/or real. Often difficult to discern who/what is leading the dance, the intricacies of agency are almost always changing, as Campbell calls agency “promiscuous and protean” (14). In experiencing the world stage of everyday performance<sup>13</sup>, agency as “the capacity to act” and “*a means to act*” may be further realized, for the purposes of this project, as *the capability to perform in relation/response/resistance to power*.

Having outlined what I find are some key tenets to understanding identity (public identity/ascription and lived subjectivity), voice (a politically charged performative process of portraying identity), and agency (the capability to perform in relation/response/resistance to power), I analyze each of my four personal narratives as

separate and distinct moments in my history in terms of public identity, lived subjectivity, avowal, ascription, and agency to interrogate how each construct is working within each narrative. More broadly, each narrative is analyzed in terms of identity (who am I?), voice (how do I portray self?), and agency (how I enact my voice and identity). Within each of the following sections, citations are provided in reference to my personal narratives, should the reader decide to revisit my stories.

### **Analysis of “The Wander Years”**

#### *Public Identity/Ascription*

In the narrative on my years in high school hiding, my public identity is explicitly stated as a “six-foot one-inch, 265 to 292-pound male . . . with a broad and furry body, smooth face, and hair that fluctuated between the Caesar cut (i.e., George Clooney circa *E.R.*) and long, golden-tipped spikes” (27). My public identity is also constructed as racially White, sexually hetero, and socioeconomically “working”<sup>14</sup> class.

There were two main ascriptive labels used throughout “The Wander Years,” namely “critical thinker” (27) and “fag” (27, 29). More often than not, I saw myself as the dumbest of the intelligence in my school, yet teachers and mentors often praised my efforts in school. While my grades were not always of the highest caliber, my thought processes were valued, though I could not see the distinction at the time. I often resisted the label of “critical thinker,” as it forced me to ponder what it really meant to think critically.

I was more consumed by the ascriptive label of “fag.” I highlight this particular pejorative in analysis as it was most detrimental in my high school years, though it should also be noted that I was ascribed most effeminating pejoratives, “such as *fag*, *homo*, and

*queer*" (29). Throughout the narrative, it is apparent that homophobic epithets reached my core.

### *Lived Subjectivity*

Superficially, my lived subjectivity, as a construct, becomes apparent through adjectives, descriptors of my emotional state. First, my lived subjectivity can be described as *awkward*, noting, “[M]y visible identity was a concoction of a could-have-been-jock-bodied, 80’s rocker-styled, wannabe-preppy nerd” (27). Second, *confused* comes to mind, as my mental turmoil in trying to follow prescriptive rules for being a man in Schuylkill County’s rendition of *Teamsterville* (Philipsen “Speaking Like a Man”), while fully realizing, albeit in denial through most of my narrative, that I was different from most of my peers. Third, *uncomfortable* seems an appropriate label for my lived subjectivity. Though my discomfort is often seen in play with, perhaps even resulting from, my awkwardness and confusion, subjectively living uncomfortably becomes a more concise construct when considering the resulting “anxiety disorder” through experiences in the locker room, for instance, and my lack of participation in extra-curricular activities.

*Closeted* is another appropriate label for my lived subjectivity, as having a closeted lived subjectivity can be seen throughout the narrative; the notion of being closeted is implicit in my recollection when denoting “denial” (28, 34); in discussing forced female attraction (30); in talking about my mind’s admission (31); and, in my impending insomnia and resulting body tremors (32-34). Having a closeted lived subjectivity becomes explicit when admitting my choice to live a lie (34), and my impending psychological effects (34). Finally, I viewed my lived subjectivity at the time

as *abnormal*<sup>15</sup>, specifically noted in my never-will-I-ever mental and emotional ‘train wreck’ just after my inner voice’s admission to being gay (31-32).

Upon further inspection, more intimate descriptions of my lived subjectivity become apparent. Early in the narrative, it is obvious that I feared *rejection* (27). Noting my affinity for “daydreaming” (27), questions regarding ‘why’ surface. Was my daydreaming an obvious escape from the perils of my life? Consistently being *judged* (27) negatively was something I abhorred, as ascriptions based on my appearance plagued me; constantly being mocked forced me into a *secretive* (27) life, as I withheld sexually-explicit pieces of myself from the outside world, for fear of further degradation of the me that I had no control over, namely my sexuality. In other words, because “I was teased, mocked, and belittled” (27) for the visual aspects of my physical and academic presence, I was unwilling to allow the more intimate details of my life (i.e., my sexuality) to be open for visibility, as one could induce that being mocked for being big and smart would only lead to being berated for being openly gay. This/my line of reasoning was further compounded by death of Matthew Shepard in 1998 while I was a sophomore in high school (28). Surrounded by classmates engaging in demeaning and disgusting jokes, threatened by their insensitivity, “[t]hinking that a couple of them might actually commit such a horrific act” (28), I was *frightened* into denial (28).

With denial in tote, more intimate details of my lived subjectivity become apparent. Lacking a positive conception of Self, I was *ashamed* (29), explicitly of my body and my body hair, but also implicitly ashamed of being me. I was “mortally terrified” (29) of the hyper-heteronormative space of the all-male locker rooms, and avoided, often at the expense of my grades, physical education classes, because I was

afraid of what someone might do/say to stab further into my already battered, closeted psyche. This becomes further realized when noting, “I was called every label that you could possibly conjure for a gay male” (29). My lived subjectivity became just that—*labeled* (29). It is clear that I was unable to separate my Self from the ascriptive self constructed by my labelers; my publicly battered identity was verbally beaten beyond protecting my lived subjectivity. An image of Star Trek’s *U.S.S. Enterprise* is conjured in my mind, as I visualize the ship being attacked by foes, photon torpedoes crippling the ship’s shields and defensive systems, entire decks being destroyed, and (often) unnamed and/or unrecognizable crewmembers dying, being hurled into the vacuum of space. Like the troubled ship, every energetically charged, torpedo-like pejorative pierced through *my* ship’s hull to destroy any sense of *pride* (30).

As a last ditch effort to avoid annihilation, I engaged in verbal gay bashing (30) as well. Lacking any sense of pride for myself, I explicitly state in my narrative that I was *not proud* (30) of engaging in such shameful acts. I was also not proud of “misleading women” (30) in my attempts to *pass as straight* (29), though I felt having girlfriends was the only way to reconcile my “failed attempts to assimilate” (29) in/to my high school. It hurt to kiss, touch, and be intimate with women, as I knew each kiss, each embrace, was a lie. I feared that my metaphorical pissing on *eros* would forever damage the women I cared about, but could not love, while also worrying about my own karmic repercussions for leading women around by their heartstrings. Being *not proud*, at this point in my analysis, seems an understatement. Perhaps, despicable is more appropriate.

Eventually, my lived subjectivity becomes recognized as *gay* (31). Once I finally put a label to my feelings of being dissonant and abnormal, my lived subjectivity became

more frightened than ever, to the point of being *physically terrorized* (32-34). My body became a ticking time bomb waiting to explode. The terrors of my mind became physical manifestations of trouble brewing beneath the surface of my skin. In essence, my mind had become so toxic and unhealthy that I was making my body ill. Unwilling to allow western medicine and its practitioners to find and ‘solve’ my ailing mind and body, I explicitly and consciously became a *liar* (34). Though lying solved nothing. Knowing wholeheartedly that I was lying to the people I loved and cared about the most became daunting. My lived subjectivity, the ‘me’ inside my body, became *suicidal* (34). I could not stand to live a lie, yet I would not dare to be honest. In what quickly became an either-or situation, escape was inevitable. Unable to escape my life through death, unwilling to retaliate through suicide the harm imposed upon me by my family and friends, I was forced to draft a *new course* (35), a new plan of action. Though I could not take my life, I could take my life somewhere else. While I struggled immensely with the decision to leave my life—my home/town, family, friends, everything I had ever known—behind, I saw no other option, as living judged, rejected, secretive, frightened, ashamed, labeled, ill, suicidal, and without pride—in essence, closeted—was not an option for living. The closet, for me, was certain death.

In this section, it is apparent that my lived subjective experiences as awkward, confused, uncomfortable, closeted, abnormal, judged, rejected, secretive, frightened, ashamed, labeled, ill, suicidal, and without pride do not work entirely independent of one another; in fact, they seem to work interdependently throughout “The Wander Years.”

#### *Voice/Avowal*

Analyzing this narrative in terms of voice, re/defined as “a politically charged

performative process of portraying identity,” I avow to being “an overweight honors student” (27). In relation to my sexual identity, I implicitly avow to being heterosexual in noting, “Today, I would love to claim that I always knew I was gay” (27). In this instance, the signpost “today” suggests that back then, in the mid- to late-1990s, I did not avow to being a gay male. My hetero avowal becomes more apparent when discussing my hetero(almost)sexual relationships with women. I also avow to being a “daydreamer” (27). Whether or not this is the result, even in part, from my need to escape from my everyday is indiscernible from this narrative; I mention this distinction as it speaks to my need to enter into mind-space as a method for both musing and meaning making.

Because avowing to an identity is a process of voice, I do not suggest that I avowed to being a gay male in this narrative. While my inner voice recognized my gay identity, this was not an avowal that I voiced explicitly. In fact, I forced denial unto myself: “Though I could no longer deny my homosexuality from myself, I sure as hell could deny it from the world” (33). In other words, I refused to avow to a gay identity; this observation serves to note a broader dilemma with the closet. Specifically, the closet is witnessed as an unavowable construct, making the closet devoid of any political agency.

### *Agency*

Redefined for the purposes of this project as “the capability to perform in relation to power,” my agency was largely constrained by homophobic pejoratives and prescriptive expectations for being a “man” in Schuylkill County, because, at the time, any other agented performance meant certain death, of relationships and/or of life in general, as witnessed in my ascriptions in familial expectations: “My family would never

accept it; if my mom did not disown me, my father would kill me” (31). While still constrained, I do not suggest that I had no political agency; the varying degrees of agency, and the enactments of agency in relation to, in this case, constraints, are of value in deciphering the process of identity and voice construction. In “The Wander Years,” it is apparent that my agency was politically performed through *avoidance*, *retaliation*, and *passing*.

First, the act of avoidance is evident through several instances in this narrative. Avoiding reality is witnessed in my avowal as a “daydreamer” (27). Avoidance as a tactical act of agency is also witnessed in my lack of participation in physical education class, the politics of the locker room, and the sports co-culture at large (28-29). This same act is also evident when skirting sexual interactions and intimacy with my then-girlfriend (30). Finally, avoidance is implicit when jesting toward “having Parkinson’s disease—anything, at that point, to take my mind off of my mind” (32).

Second, the performance of retaliation is witnessed as a power struggle with agency. Constrained by epithetic ascriptive labeling, instead of avoiding the situation, I would often “redirect and deflect” (29) the use of labeling “onto an unsuspecting victim” (30) and unto my attackers. Engaging in “verbal gay flogging” (29) was an act of retaliation, for physical violence was beyond my means of defense.

Finally, passing is examined as an act of agency, where passing can range from a “disguise and deception, or pretending to be something one is not, to a political strategy that disrupts the notion of identity as unified and static; it is also an adaptive response, as a way of laying claim to privileges unfairly denied to certain groups of people . . . or to obtain social and personal benefits that one is already due” (Moon, 1998). Passing as

heterosexual is implicit throughout much of the narrative. Specifically, passing is evident in my dating of females in high school (30). I was also passing when “refusing to avow to a gay public identity” (32) after my mind’s admission came to fruition. While passing may be a protective measure, it may also be viewed as deceptive. This is evident when choosing to pass through blatantly lying to my mother (34) about my physical manifestations of duress (33).

Again, in this section, it is notable that avoidance, retaliation, and passing are not holistically separate and distinct constructs. They are, however, indicative of my capability to perform in relation to power. Though in some instances one construct is witnessed more as an act of agency, many of the situations throughout this narrative show avoidance, retaliation, and passing as interdependent phenomenon.

### **Analysis of “Sally, The Bi-Polar Bear”**

#### *Public Identity/Ascription*

My sexuality goes through a marked transformation in this narrative. In the beginning of “Sally, The Bi-Polar Bear,” it is apparent that I was still assumed to be heterosexual, as I still had a girlfriend at the time. My sexuality tends to shift toward asexual throughout the majority of the narrative, where ‘me’ as a sexual being does not become apparent until my roommates/friends begin to contemplate my sexuality. It becomes explicit toward the end of the narrative that my sexual identity is, in fact, gay.

Ascriptively, when meeting my roommates for the first time, I was labeled “father” (36), as many assumed me to be their new roommate’s dad. I was also ascribed “bi-polar” (40), as my inner-turmoil over my grandmother’s death in conjunction with my sexual frustration became an emotional “rollercoaster ride of highs and lows” (40).

Finally, my sexually closeted identity was ascribed, “Sally” (40), by my friends and roommates by the end of the narrative. “Sally” was juxtaposed to “Grego” (41), the first affirmative nickname<sup>16</sup> ever given to me.

### *Lived Subjectivity*

Again, paying attention to adjectival references to describe my lived subjectivity, I begin this piece as *scared* (36) about my move to Los Angeles, facing “twisted emotions” (35) about leaving behind the only way I knew how to live life. I was emotional, dancing on a continuum between fear and excitement for my new journey, sadness and comfort in my brother’s detention, guilt and relief in leaving my mother behind, and also between loss and liberation for moving away from my then-girlfriend. These feelings became even more complicated as I was delayed (36) in Albuquerque, hastening my anxiety; my only safety net in knowing there would be a welcome wagon to USC was stripped away from me, leaving me pacing Albuquerque International Airport lonely and frightened. Upon arriving in Los Angeles, it is apparent that I felt *alone* (36), especially when considering my family’s inability to help with my move. My twisted state of emotions was further complicated, yet again, when I was *mislabeled* (36) as “father” by my Las Vegan roommate. In short, my undergraduate collegiate experience “was off to awful start” (37), inducing feelings of regret in my decision to move (so far) away for college, disappointment for facing yet another string of situations where I failed to assimilate, and disgust for growing up socioeconomically disadvantaged, not having the resources available to make my transition into college look more like a Hallmark card, or a Kodak moment, instead of reading like an advertisement for Prozac.

As the piece progresses, my lived subjectivity became *socially awkward* (37),

suggested by the difficult I had in creating friendships with my roommates and neighbors. There is a marked shift in this perspective when I started *gaining trust* (37) for my surroundings. I became more comfortable with roommates and neighbors, learning about them, their cultures, and their differing life experiences through conversation; *learning through conversation* (37) became my new mode of existing, as I *longed to be accepted* (37) by anyone. My desire for acceptance entailed making some destructive decisions, most notably smoking cigarettes, though the slow destruction of my body was a small price to pay when looking back, especially when considering the impact nicotine had on my lived subjectivity. It became a gateway to *laughing* and *bonding* (37), finally feeling some sense of inclusion. Breaking through to the in-group made way for more positive feelings of acceptance, as I was, for what felt like the first time in my life, *making friends* (38). I began to gain a *global perspective* (38) through friendship, a framework I longed for, one Coal Country denied me. My outlook on life became remarkably more positive, as if the more positivity I experienced made available more opportunities for growth. Sincerely “having fun” (38) was foreign to me in high school, as was bonding with men, but the more I engaged my surroundings with eye toward having a positive experience, the more I found comfort and security, fun and friendship. I was actually *enjoying* (38) my life, as I became *enlightened* (39) to experiences I thought beyond my reach. By this point in the narrative, it becomes apparent that my lived subjectivity is engaging in an interdependent dance with my public identity, no longer leaving the two as separate/distinct entities; yet the dance is by no means perfectly harmonious.

While I made my way toward inclusive practices, exclusion is also evident in “Sally, The Bi-Polar Bear.” I *hated the sidelines* (39), most likely because of my

excluded high school experience. This becomes more evident when coupled with feeling like an *outsider* to the in-group of the marijuana co-culture (39). Again, I made another destructive decision to break through to in-group status, for I refused to let my inclusivity stay limited. It was obvious to me that getting high created a shift in perception, another set of lenses that I could never see though without fully experiencing and reflecting on the feeling; consequently, I felt I could never fully join the group without experiencing the feeling of being stoned. My excluded subjectivity changed, of course, when I became *rebellious* to my ethical and moral roots, as I strived to become a *stoner*.

My lived subjectivity undergoes another shift with the death of my paternal grandmother. On the day of her death, before any visible indication that something had happened to her, I was “sluggishly mulling between classes” (39), as if I ‘knew’ something was wrong. I had no reason to be down, as the day was marked by Southern California sunshine, yet I continually checked my phone to find a reason for my dissonance. I became more alarmed when “the Las Vegan, with a somber tone, told me that I had received over twenty phone calls [at the apartment] from my mom *and* dad” (39). My father was pretty-typically absent from most of my life, so when I found out that he had been trying to communicate with such urgency, I knew without knowing that my grandmother had passed. When, without much more of a second’s notice, my phone indicated, all at once, “37 missed calls and 19 voicemails” (39), I became sullen, and unable to speak: “I was *devastated*” (40, emphasis added). It was the first time in my life I had ever experienced a death in my family; *her* death made it all the worse, as she “was the closest re/presentation of ‘traditional’ mother that I knew” (40). My grandmother’s death led to a *hardened* sense of self. I dismissed my *everyday as trivial* (40), clouding

my self in pot smoke and sorrow, only able to conjure chemically induced laughter. I no longer cared about studying to obtain good grades, for without her, who would care? And if people did care, I felt as though they had no right to, as I lost “sight of compassion” (40). Antithetically, her death also left me *vulnerable* to a “rollercoaster” (40) of emotions.

The emotional state of my lived subjectivity became *unpredictable*, as again, my lived subjectivity and public identity appear to be engaged in a dysfunctional dance. If I perceived the slightest hint of inconsideration to my public identity, my lived subjectivity became ballistic, lashing out at someone or something for the previous 19 years of subordinate statuses in my life. When I perceived an utterance or occurrence as funny, I laughed hysterically for all the times in my life that I was denied laughter. I became emotionally unequipped to self-monitor, and consequently, unable to hide any and all mannerisms that may be read as ‘gay.’ My queer cues opened the floodgates of interpretation for my friends/roommates, leading to “down-low dialogues” (40) behind my back, and consequently, “conflict” (40). It is very clear to me now that I became physically abusive when my friends/roommates made inferences about my sexuality because I was *frustrated* (40) with being labeled gay; because my new ascriptors were far less physically, and far more intellectually intimidating than my high school attackers, I resorted to physical confrontation, employing my *aggressive* (41) hyper-heteronormative roots, as my emotional state could not withstand a battle of wits. Moreover, I was furious that it appeared to be effortless for Others to label me as ‘gay,’ yet insurmountable to label myself in the same light. Clearly, throughout most of the narrative, my lived subjectivity revolves around the emotionality of being *closeted*.

My lived subjectivity undergoes one final drastic shift toward the end of the narrative when my Las Vegan roommate forced me out of the closet, forcing my public identity and lived subjectivity into a harmonious dance, if only for a few hours. When he first posed the question about my sexuality, I was explicitly *upset* (41). I never expected any of my friends to directly ask me if I were gay; I thought the question was beyond anyone's gumption. Unable to respond when he confronted me about my obvious emotional state, I felt I had no other choice but to leave. My mind swirled, yet again, as I contemplated an entire year's worth of connection building as worthless, for in my mind, he would surely tell everyone else, and they would definitely dismiss me as a friend for being gay. Fear of loss consumed my lived subjectivity yet again. Then, when the Brazilian called me into his bedroom, I reached a point of no return. My heart could be felt pounding in my chest, and in my throat. Explaining to me that our connections could only be made stronger through honestly re/presenting myself, my lived subjectivity became *relieved*; actually saying the words "I'm gay" out loud for the first time in my life catapulted my relief into *elation* and *liberation* (41), as my public identity finally held hands with my lived subjectivity. Though this version of my Self did not last long, as I re-closeted my sexual self to return to Pennsylvania, my lived subjectivity remained somewhat *out* and *hopeful*, "for once the admission was uttered, I would forever carry with me a whiff of smoky exuberance entwined with the comforting smell of my burning closet, and the reluctance to build new doors" (41-42).

Finally, throughout "Sally, The Bi-Polar Bear," a version of the phrase "never looked back" appears several times, specifically: While walking down the concourse and away from my life in Pennsylvania (36); after my Minnesotan neighbor and I recognized

that we had entered into unsafe territory while on a hunt for food (37); upon relinquishing my ethical and moral ties by smoking marijuana (39); and finally, after coming out for the first time (42). In each of these instances, the notion of refusing to look back carries significance to my lived subjectivity. During this time in my life, I was attempting to relinquish any and all ties to my roots through yet another form of denial. When leaving Pennsylvania, for instance, I did not want to look back because I wanted to put my past behind me, while simultaneously feeling there was no possibility of a future should I stay; concurrently, I feared the act of looking back would somehow capture a piece of me, leaving a crucial part of my self behind. I refused to look back at the torn down neighborhood in LA, for it reminded me too much of home, and also for fear that turning around would entice a conflict I was not equipped to combat. When smoking marijuana, I never looked back, because doing so would surely propagate guilt for giving up a life of sobriety I worked so hard to maintain in high school. And finally, refusing to look back after coming out was a way of assuring myself that I would never again closet my sexual identity from my self, nor would I completely closet my sexual self from the world I inhabited. In essence, ‘never look back’ became an ideological mindset and re/conceptualization of denial as my way of fighting fear, combating anxiety-crippling stagnation, building an intricate dance between my public identity and lived subjectivity, while breaking the bindings of societal and cultural expectations; refusing to be reflexive, at this point in my life, allowed me to move forward, beyond the heteronormative expectations of my motherland to envision and realize, with the help of my friends, a lived subjectivity worth living and a public identity worthy of pride, for the only thing I could see when I did looked back was the darkness of my closet.

In short, both public and lived aspects of my identity go through drastic changes from the beginning of this narrative to the end, from being closeted, alone, frightened, vulnerable, socially awkward, and devastated, to being included, elated, liberated, relieved, (partially) out, and gay. Yet, throughout this narrative, a common theme of *never look back* drives my lived subjectivity forward as a means to deny my past to build a hopeful future.

#### *Voice/Avowal*

As “Sally, The Bi-Polar Bear” is a more descriptive narrative about my experiences leaving Pennsylvania, and continuing through my first-year of study at the University of Southern California, I explicitly avow to few identities. However, implicitly, I avow to being a *first-year undergraduate student*. I also avow to being a “goody-two-shoes” (39) when struggling for in-group status among my marijuana-smoking friends. After “refusing to deny myself full acceptance into the group” (39), I implicitly avow to being a marijuana-smoker, a prime example when avowing to an identity is the explicit right of the individual.

With the death of my paternal grandmother, it becomes apparent that I also avow to being a *grandson* (39), yet the pressure associated with a grandson avowal does not come through in the narrative. Being the only male to carry my family’s name came with added pressure to reproduce; in a heteronormative familial twist, being the only male to carry the family name did not make avowing to grandson a pleasurable experience; in fact, while many family members resented the privilege that I was afforded through male heir status, I would have foregone the power for less pressure to heterosexually, normatively reproduce to carry on the family name. Through this lens, it is also apparent

that I avow to being a *son*. Noting the beginning of the essay, *brother* and *boyfriend* are also avowals that are implicitly read. Here, familial ties become highlighted. There are also instances throughout this narrative that I avow to being *friend* and *roommate*.

Finally, by the end of the narrative, “[o]fficially, I avowed to being ‘gay’ for 36 hours” (41). Most importantly, it becomes clear throughout “Sally, The Bi-Polar Bear” that, as my public identity becomes more accepted and in tune with my lived subjectivity, my voice becomes more empowered, allowing me to move beyond the ascribed politics of familial, cultural, and societal expectations to engage in “a politically charged performative process of portraying [my] identity” as more than just a first-year undergraduate who belongs to a collectivistic family. My more empowered voice in Los Angeles is directly correlated with an increase in agency.

### *Agency*

My agency in “Sally, The Bi-Polar Bear” was not necessarily as constrained as witnessed in “The Wander Years.” Continuing to view agency as “the capability to perform in relation to power,” this narrative shows a progression of increased agency throughout most of the story. It is evident that I begin to open up to male friendships (38), a process not witnessed in my high school years; as the power dynamics between friends in LA felt more egalitarian than in my oppressive high school, my agency experienced a positively marked shift. Also, a sense of camaraderie (38) begins to develop, as I learn to have fun with my peer group. My agency is also enriched through experimentation (39), as I begin to question the scripts of my roots, feeling empowered enough to make decisions for myself.

My agency begins to shift in my narrative as I become dismissive of my everyday

(40) after the death of my grandmother; here, death becomes an oppressively powerful force that begins to shift my agency. Shifting leads to constraining as my friends' "down-low dialogues" (40) forced my physical aggressiveness (40) forward, for I knew no other means to retaliate other than my hypermasculine *Teamsterville* (Philipsen "Speaking Like a Man") scripts; with my lived subjectivity entirely interdependent on my public identity, my grandmother's death dramatically increased my sense of vulnerability, directly affecting my ability to perform in relation to power. To further clarify, in my previous narrative, I was more empowered through verbal retaliation than physical; in "Sally, The Bi-Polar Bear," there is a shift toward physical violence, as I viewed my peer group in Los Angeles as more witty and cunning than I, seemingly impenetrable to my verbiage, unlike my high school instigators. Metaphorically, my agency was constrained to the point of a chained, starving (i.e., vulnerable) dog, only capable of thrashing and biting to avoid death; I felt my bark would be deemed ineffective, and so I resorted to my bite. In short, as my public and lived subjective identities came under attack, my voice was constrained to the point where my agency manifest as physically abusive retaliations, as I apparently lacked the agency to engage my voice in a politically charged process of self-defense.

By the end of the narrative, it is evident that my agency makes a final turn toward empowerment through force. When my Las Vegan friend called me out, he was forcing agency upon me to avow (i.e., speak the truth about my sexuality), as I was left with few options because of my implicitly intoxicated state of mind. Yet, the early-morning discussion that followed empowered my agency to the point of, not only avowing to being gay, but also openly talking about my gay identity for the first time in my life—a

moment I shall never forget. Finally, my lived subjectivity gained, through the support of my friends, enough agency to voice my sexuality openly and honestly; in other words, my lived subjectivity, public identity, voice, and agency were engaged in a harmonious dance powerful enough to burn through my closet doors, while simultaneously changing all of the rules to the dance floor. In short, once my agency was empowered enough to publicly avow to a gay identity, my entire life changed.

### **Analysis of “Spreading the Word”**

#### *Public Identity/Ascription*

My public identity as *grandson* (42-43) continues through to “Spreading the Word” as more of my grandparents passed away. I also am identified as  (43) with my first job at a local “bottle-and-shot bar” (43). My public identity can also be viewed as *half-in/half-out* (44) as many close friends and family members learned of my gay identity, while many more still had yet to know. My coming out created a new public identity as *family member* (44). As the narrative progressed, I was also publicly identified as *gay* and *advocate* (45). Finally, after publishing in Bloomsburg University’s newspaper, my public identity became known as *irresponsible* (46) to some and *columnist* to many. Throughout “Spreading the Word,” questions about truth surrounded my sexual/public identity.

My ascriptive labels did not go through nearly the transformation of my preceding narratives, but change did inevitably take place. To my grandparents and my bar guests, I was implicitly (and heteronormatively) labeled *heterosexual* (42-43). While in college, I was ascribed the position of *wise older (hetero) male* (44) by my peers. One of my professors, however, implicitly through a “knowing” smile (44), then explicitly in outing

me (45), ascribed the label *gay* (45). Finally, my ascription as *the token gay guy* (45) is apparent when faculty and peers alike forced me to speak on behalf of the entire GLBTQ community.

#### *Lived Subjectivity/Voice/Avowal*

In this narrative, my lived subjectivity begins to mirror my public identity in some respects, while still differing in others. Even though differences still existed, drawing distinct lines between my lived subjectivity and my voice/avowal become forced and ineffective. To pay homage to the transformation of my lived subjectivity and voice in “Spreading the Word,” I marry the two in this sections here to show and support the intricate dance my identity and voice are undertaking.

The narrative begins with an “out and proud” (42) lived subjectivity before leaving Los Angeles. I knew my time in LA had come to an end when I woke up from a sound sleep one morning with a fond recollection of a promise I had made to my Self to ‘find my gay self.’ Feeling I had “accomplished [my] goal” (42), I could return to Pennsylvania feeling with some semblance of pride, regardless of not finishing my Bachelor’s degree. In other words, I was ready to “restart my life as a gay male” (42), re/visiting Coal Country with a newly acquired, and earned, set of lenses.

This notion digresses into a *half-in/half-out* (44) subjective experience, as I was *partially closeted* (42) to most people at first, then slowly, yet exponentially, becoming more and more public with my gay subjectivity; here, my public identity and lived subjectivity are engaging in an intricate dance, sometimes being forced apart by cultural and familial expectations, while also learning to waltz together when in the comfort and security of accepting peers, though the status of my dance is never static.

At the beginning stages of my partial closet, my lived experience is informed by my grandparents' deaths, creating a sense of *mourning* (42-43). By the (second) death of my paternal grandfather, I had lost a piece of my emotional self, barely able to shed a tear as his funeral. Perhaps, because I was jilted by the destruction of my family, for the estate sale could have only been uglier had someone been murdered. As my grandparents continued to pass away, year after year, the comfort of the collective dwindled as my “village” (43) collapsed.

Not only did death create a mourning self, but losing the freedoms I had as an avowed gay male in Los Angeles was also cause for feeling a sense of loss. Being openly gay in the streets of Coal Country was only barely excusable for the non-passable, and unacceptable for those of us whose masculinity is meant to be defined through spitting, drinking, beating, and breeding. I could no longer socially meet men out in the open; instead, meeting men became a down-low crapshoot of exchanged flirtations and conjugal ‘maybe’s’ via emails and instant messages. ‘Meetings’ were rarely about socializing, and hardly ever for socializing in public; instead, ‘meetings’ were about closeted sex with (mostly) closeted men. My lived subjectivity, once able to flaunt a smile while walking down the street, was reduced to a profile, a snapshot in time available to the voyeuristic gazes of men from all over the world, while seemingly very few out gay males from my own backyard. As my public identity and lived subjectivity merged, truth was negotiated very differently from my days in the closet.

Freedom continued to evade me when I was *almost fired* (43) from work for being gay. As noted, however, I had mixed reviews about the situation. I was living in fear, yet again, while working in a heteronormative, hypermasculine Irish pub as a big, burly

bald man; I spent entire shifts worried that someone, anyone, would disrupt the natural, day-to-day flow of Frackville’s ‘local drinking establishment’ by ‘calling me out,’ so the requirement to *re/closet* (43) my gay self was welcomed, as I avowed to being ‘heterosexual’ while at work. Concurrently, I abhorred the necessity for a re/closet clause in my verbal contract, scowling at the ignorance of people who subscribed to the ethically corrupt morals and morally corrupt ethics that drove the homophobic, hypermasculine, heteronormatively hegemonic ideologies of Coal Country. In other words, my public identity and lived subjective dance partners were not seeing eye-to-eye. This time, however, I would not stew on the emotions of mourning and loss alone, for I had learned that my body would tell the tale for me.

One by one, I began coming out to my closest family members, starting with those whom I felt most comfortable. Knowing that many of the people in family would have a difficult time refraining from obtaining the perceptions of someone else in the family, my coming out process became increasingly exponential. It was not long before I gained a sense of *acceptance* (43) by the family, finally *welcomed into* (44) the collective family name; not as the chosen one, or the black sheep (44), but invited into the fold as one of them. Consequently, my *perceptions changed* (44) about my family, as they proved my expectations and suspicions “about their lack of empathy and compassion” (44) wrong. I finally began feeling a familial support system that brought my public identity together with my lived subjectivity to ultimately increase the power of my voice through agency.

With support being secured, I felt the need to continue moving forward. I refused to be known and avow solely as “an amazing bartender” (44) and/or a “college dropout”

(43). Desiring more *mental stimulation* (44), while also feeling the need to silence the condescending tone of my paternal family, I re-enrolled in college. As a *college student* (44), I felt “at ease” (44) with my positionality, privileged in the classroom by my age and my life experiences in Los Angeles. I began forming *alliances* (45) with faculty, specifically my mentor/advisor, finally finding an *academic home* (45) in Communication Studies. No longer would my lived subjectivity be tormented by critiques of *indecisiveness* (44). Becoming more comfortable with my academic surroundings presented new problems, however, when my closeted gay subjectivity was *outed* (45), even though I never officially avowed to being heterosexual while in college. Having little more than a few seconds to respond to my Professor’s comment, I felt I would be degrading my difficult journey through closet liberation had I denied her outing query. Her “social *faux pas*” (45) created an insatiable desire to voice my perceptions of my subjective experiences with/in the academy. My lived subjectivity quickly accepted the role of “*the voice charged with speaking for the entire GLBTQ community*” (46, emphasis added). I became so comfortable with being gay in the academy that I began to segregate most of the people around me, as my public and lived subjective experiences, fueled by my voice, took over the dance floor. In effect, I became too gay for comfort, as “my voice was more like freelanced shouting than a refined speaking” (46). In fearing and abhorring the margin, I needed to “rethink my approach” (47), *shifting and amending* (47) my words to appease the uncomfortable, while also paying respect to my gay self and my queer community. This discursive shift also changed my own perceptions of *advocacy* (47), as I came to recognize *social equity* (47) as a more humble, *inclusive* (47) approach, successfully leading to *social equity advocate* and *inclusive ally* (46) avowals.

In this narrative, remarkable shifts occur in my identity, as I traveled from out and proud, to partially closeted in some respects while re/closeted in others, and back again. There are notable moments when my public identity is in harmony with my lived subjectivity; equally notable are the instances when my ascribed identity could not be farther from my subjective experiences. Also significant was the interdependence of my identities, lived and public, with my voice, where avowing becomes more explicitly tied to a political process of portraying identity.

### *Agency*

In this narrative, my agency goes through several transformations through performances of power, namely *constrained*, *empowered*, *entitled* and *disciplined*. First, my agency is constrained at work by my boss, as I was given the ultimatum, be-straight-or-be-unemployed. Such a constraint, though notably welcomed in the narrative (43), required me to *pass* as a responsibility to the integrity of the bar (43). Passing is also evident in this narrative through heteronormative assumptions about my sexuality, in particular with my family members (43).

Second, my agency became empowered through a number of processes requiring responses to enactments of power. With each act of *self-disclosure* or *outing* (43-45), my sense of agency grew, especially when noting my acceptance with family and friends. My agency continued to grow with my refusal to accept stagnation (44), prompting me to return to school (44). *Textual winking* (44) to my professor after witnessing a “Safe Zone” sign indicates an enriched sense of agency; while not enough to vocalize my sexuality, I did experience enough agency to implicitly suggest my sexual identity to her. Recognizing my professor’s fondness for me, I also invoked privilege (45) in enrolling in

her intercultural communication course. Though agency was essentially forced on me when I was outted in class (45), I seized the opportunity to further enrich my agency, using the uncomfortable situation as learning tool (Hummel and Adams “Feeling Awkward”).

This enrichment turned into a sense of entitled agency, as I resisted my fellow GLBTQ community members when refusing to join the on-campus ally organization (45). Such entitlement also led to *combative advocacy* (45), specifically noted when “I accepted every opportunity to challenge, correct, critique, and/or re/construct the views of my peers, colleagues, and faculty” (45), while also feeling the need to “interject an argument” (45) whenever possible. Here, I perform my agency as an explicit enactment of power over the people in my environment.

My entitled agency was disciplined for challenging folks from my small town university too much. Specifically, my agency was disciplined for using “epithetic language” (46) in a newspaper column on hate speech. Friends and family also scorned me when I refused to accept their *mythos*-infused language as merely colloquial (46). In being disciplined, I learned I had to make my approach more *inclusive* (46) as I learned that a combative approach was “futile” (46) with many audiences. In essence, I had to negotiate my agented performances with/in local/cultural power structures.

As we can see throughout the analysis of this chapter, my identity, voice, and agency went through a series of transformations. Notably, portions of my public identity, lived subjectivity, avowals, and ascriptions are in harmony, while some pieces of my self are still dissonant. In the following analysis, similar transformations in identity, voice, and agency are recognizable.

## **Analysis of “Pedagogically Speaking”**

### *Public Identity/Ascription*

My public identity in “Pedagogically Speaking” is more complex than in previous narratives. First, I am recognized as a *teaching assistant, instructor, and graduate student* in Communication Studies at Colorado State University (47). In this narrative, I am presumably ascribed as *heterosexual* (47) through the heteronormative assumptions of many students. This becomes more evident when many students remarked on their cluelessness after I came out (49). Concurrently, I am known to be *gay* by my professor (47), and later by my students (49). My coming out prompted many co-cultural students to label me as *courageous* (51), an ascription I accepted as praise. One student, in particular, ascribed me as a *liar* (52), validating one of my biggest fears in coming out to the class. Finally, the generic ascriptions of “Hey” and “Yo” shifted to “Greg” after coming out as a gay instructor, signifying a significant shift in naming; the act of naming my public identity beyond a generic ascription to by given name shows a significant shift in my students’ perceptions of me as an individual.

### *Lived Subjectivity/Voice/Avowal*

In this narrative, my lived subjectivity goes through several transformations; again, as my lived subjectivity undergoes similar transformations with my voice, I marry the two in this section. First, my lived subjectivity was fearful of my students’ perceptions of me (48). *Worried about judgment* (48), I convinced my self to closet my gay identity from my students. Concurrently compounded by fear for Eric’s *ethos* (48), and for the experience of our students, “I refused to allow my sexuality to become *the distraction*” (48). In essence, I *worried about Other’s perceptions* (48) of me, inevitably

forcing me to stay closeted, *passing* as a heterosexual teaching assistant (48), while simultaneously avowing to being a *gay student* (47). This was further complicated by my subjective experience as a *gay student*, effectually creating a *contextualized subjectivity* (48), marked by shifting between *out* and *closeted* with/in/out a moments notice. One notable problem with inhabiting a contextualized subjectivity became apparent when “my mind kept screaming, ‘Don’t tell them [your gay]’” (49) during my cultural introduction; my lived subjectivity was not necessarily dancing, but colliding, with my public identity, as I avowed to being “a White male seeking an advanced degree . . . a Christian Spiritualist . . . [and] a hefty, furry man<sup>17</sup>” (48), while simultaneously not avowing to a sexual identity.

The classroom environment compounded my complications even further. Working with a person who was ‘out’ (48) made it that much more difficult to *self-monitor* (48) my gay lived subjectivity. As time progressed, it became apparent that being a *professional passer* (48) was no match for my past; as my high school experiences *resurfaced* (49), I *regretted* ignoring Eric’s warnings about the inherent difficulty in masking my gay identity in a class designed to question assumptions surrounding identity. Feeling *guilty* and *frustrated* (50) for succumbing to my fears under the assumption that I could cope (49), while *haunted* by my closeted sexuality, I became *disappointed* with my decision to pass, as my lived subjective experiences conflicted with my public identity. Consequently, my mood and health became visually unstable, as my mental turmoil created, once again, *physical manifestations of internal terror* (50). Compounded by my guilt, I began to see myself as *fraudulent* (49), considering my self a liar. Feeling the need to come out to our students, in part to relieve my mounting guilt,

while also unsure of how to accomplish the act (50), I took my plight to Eric for consultation. Fearing repercussions for withholding, Eric would only allow me to publicly out myself for pedagogical purposes. Once I was granted the class time to come out, it is evident that my lived subjectivity was *confident* (50) in my abilities to read the environment, being able to adjust accordingly, regardless of my inherent apprehension.

On the day of my outing, my lived subjectivity was *performative* (50), dressing and shaving to fit the visual framework of my first (day) impression. Even though I was *mentally prepared* (51) for the event, I was still explicitly *nervous* (51). I was about to engage in an act that I had never done before, creating uncertainty in my perception. As I *reintroduced my Self* to the class as *Gregory Sean Hummel* (50), bring my lived subjectivity into a harmonious dance with my public identity once again, the act of *divulging my secret* (51) created another rollercoaster of emotions, noted by fear, anxiety, excitement, and reverence. In the actual moment of coming out (i.e., avowing to a gay public identity/lived subjectivity), I felt *separated from my self* (52). Moments after, my subjectivity became *empowered* (51), as I was overwhelmingly praised for talking so openly about my sexuality to the group of almost 40 students, while simultaneously feeling *dismissed* (52) by some of our students' shifts in body gesture. Fearing a charge of dishonesty (53) could be seen as *intuitive*, as my expectation became a reality when one student voiced his/her feelings of being lied to. Overwhelmingly, however, my experience was "wholeheartedly outside of my expectations" (52). My *spiritual self* (53-54) also came into question, allowing me to explain my perspectives on being concurrently gay, religious, and spiritual. By the end of the experience, I became *prideful* (54) and overtly *self-reflexive* (53) as I pondered on my accomplishment, and the

resulting effects it had on, at least some of, our students; specifically, my lived subjectivity was recognized by *name* (54). It appears as though I was seen as deserving of a promotion from generic labels to my given name through *self-disclosing* (54).

In this narrative, transformative shifts occur once again in my identity, as I grappled with presumptions about others' perceptions, while also succumbing to the fear of heteronormative assumptions. My lived subjectivity moves beyond the contextualized subjectivity of being partially closeted to being out through the performative act of coming out. As with my previous two narratives, there are notable moments when my public identity is in harmony with my lived subjectivity; and, equally notable are the instances when my ascribed identity could not be farther from my subjective experiences.

### *Agency*

Again, like the previous stories, my agency as the capability to act/perform in relation to power shifts throughout this narrative. This time, agency shifts from *constrained* to *empowered*, and is even *threatened* by real and/or perceived systems of power. First, my agency is empowered by the invitation to come out at the start of the Co-cultural Communication course. However, my assumptions about the heteronormative perceptions of our students immediately constrained/shut down my agency, as did my fear, for "I was convinced that the classroom was no place for my sexuality" (47). Here again, I invoked *passing* as my strategy for *coping* (48) with my fear, while succumbing to heteronormative assumption. My language was *guarded* and *equivocal* (49) in my attempts to *rhetorically pass*.

My agency becomes empowered, albeit anxiously at first, when I had the privilege to "pass on passing" (50). *Self-disclosing* (49) my dissonance to the professor

of the course also helped to enable/open up my agency, specifically after he granted me the class time to come out of the closet. My agency became more empowered by receiving praise for my *honesty* (51). My agency was also threatened in two instances: (1) by students who immediately shifted their non-verbal communication, cuing dismissive dispositions; and (2) by a student who expressed deceit upon my outing, as it tapped into my underlying fears. However, my agency quickly rebounded when students who shifted their bodies away from me slowly but surely turned their heads, then their bodies, to give me their undivided attention. Furthermore, watching students' non-verbal reactions to the person who felt deceived reinvigorated my agency, as most students' snarling and snarky facial cues suggested the student stood alone. Finally, my agency was empowered through the shift in labeling from generic terms to my given nick/name, signifying a new level of respect from my students.

In this narrative it is evident that the coming out process had differing effects on my identity, voice, and agency dependant upon the metaphorical location of my body on the coming out continuum. In the next (and final) chapter of this project, I conclude with a discussion on the implications of my analysis in terms of identity, voice, and agency theories, autoethnography as a perspective, and the process of coming out. I also attend to the limitations of this study, and the potentials for future endeavors.

## **Summary**

Throughout this chapter, we experience conceptualizations of theories on identity, voice, and agency, first as witnessed within the scholarly world, and then applied to each of my four personal narratives. In analyzing my narratives, detailed descriptions of my identity, publicly ascribed and lived, avowed voice, and politically charged agency shine

through as testament to the transformative power of coming out.

It is evident that my identity goes through several marked shifts as the coming out process progresses. From an ashamed, closeted liar ascribed homophobic pejoratives in high school to a curious comrade coming into a sexual identity at the end of my first-year in college; from a liminally closeted out gay male to an inclusive advocate instructing college courses, my identity, both public and lived, given and inhabited, suggest the coming out process is not only a life changing experience, but a dynamic dance that shifts steps and changes rules with each contextualized outing, interdependent with the individuals/groups present on/in/around any in particular dance floor.

My voice also goes through several incredible shifts, as my avowals stratify the continuum of heterosexual man to gay male, and nearly everything in between. Most notable in this chapter is the conclusion that avowing to ‘closeted’ is an unattainable self-label, for once admitted, the individual is now out. Here in lies the problematic nature of the closet. Because an individual can never avow to being in the ‘closet,’ the closet inherently and inextricably denies the inhabited any positive forms of political agency in their sexual identity and voice.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Endeavors

There is something disconcerting about sitting silently in a dark room. Lit only by the glow of the people in our lives who care to know more about the suffrage of the closet, the silence is broken by the courageous act of avowing to a marginalized identity, changing pitch ever so diligently by the climate and energy infused by the people in our environments. The closet becomes my safe zone when the weather is unfavorable, damaging when the walls have stripped my agency. An occupied closet can consume the floor and ceiling, the distance from wall to wall, the space only interrupted by a glimpse of alliance, the breeze of hope, the occasional forced outing, and ignorant homophobe; the closet becomes an invisible force, a space for me to explore options, build *topoi*, and situate my emotions according to topic, historical significance, and levels of pain and tolerance; we are able to tear down, re/create, and/or re/write our futures by busting through our walls, learning to dance in, out, around, and about cultural and societal expectations so we may move to the beat of our own chosen tune. In short, the closet has a significant impact on the formulation of identity, voice, and agency. To understand how, it is important to unpack this project.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I offered a summary of my chosen methodological tools, from ethnology to ethnography, critical to performance ethnography, and finally autoethnography to show the progression of the perspectives for

culturally studying our world. With a focus on communication, I began this project with the intention of addressing three research questions dealing with notions of identity, voice, agency, coming out, and autoethnography. Through writing four personal narratives on pinnacle coming out moments in my life (see chapter two), then rhetorically analyzing my narratives (see chapter three), I now answer my introductory questions with newfound insights. Admitting limitations of my study follows the address of my inquiries. Finally, a call for future research ends this master's thesis.

While each research question has great potential for overlapping insight, I first attend to each inquiry as separate and distinct, and worthy of exploration. To recapitulate, my research questions are: (1) How does autoethnography invite insight into identity, voice, and agency in four coming out experiences as a White, "working" class, first-generation, multi-familial, collectivistically-oriented individual gay male; (2) how do theories of identity, voice, and agency invite insight into autoethnography as a perspective; and (3) what does this autoethnographic process of coming out contribute to communication studies when considering silenced Self, a coded Self, and an honest Self?

### **R. Q. #1: Autoethnographically Inviting Insight into Identity, Voice, and Agency**

In considering the ways autoethnography invites insight into identity, voice, and agency in four coming out personal narratives, I offer several observations for consideration. Specifically, autoethnography has the ability to permit the researcher to explore the depths and inter/relationships of our intersecting avowed/ascribed identities; to touch aspects of our lives unattainable through traditional means; to bring voice to otherwise silenced pieces of our/selves; and, to provide potential clues as to how portions of our identities inform our everyday perceptions in enacting agency.

First, autoethnographic perspectives permit researchers to explore the subtle nuances of the interdependent relationships created between/with/in our avowed and/or ascribed identities, privileged or oppressed. For instance, while my Whiteness and maleness afforded me privilege, it is clear that my sexuality created dissonance for me, especially when considering my socioeconomically disadvantaged status. Furthermore, the geographic region of the world where I called ‘home’ as a teen, and later as an adult, complicated the avowal process, as did the collectivistic orientation of my maternal family and my hegemonically ideological paternal family; in U.S. America, where individuality is highly regarded as a valuable ideal, the pressures associated with appeasing and/or protecting ‘the family’ work against the process of avowing to any particular identity, especially when the identity is viewed as marginal within the family unit and/or society/culture at large. To better understand how these differing identities interact with/in an individual/group, Crenshaw (“Mapping the Margins”) claims, “Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics” (193). In the case of U.S. American co-cultures, attempting to create more social and cultural equality demands more understanding between and with/in groups, requires deeper explorations into the intersections of our avowed and/or ascribed identities. Autoethnographic perspectives invite insight into the intersections of our avowed/ascribed identities in much more intimate and detailed ways than, perhaps, other approaches, with the help of communication performance scholars who are willing to expose their life experiences to academic inquiry, and thus leading me to my second point.

Personal narratives permit communication performance scholars exploring autoethnographic perspectives to take research on identity, voice, and agency in directions that are unattainable through traditional and critical forms of scholarship. For instance, while quantitative measures can provide predictive power in understanding the perceptions of participants involved in a particular study, data and statistics can relinquish agency from the individuals/groups often most affected; in Thurlow's ("Naming the 'outsider within'") research, for example, we learn valuable information on the dismissive interpretations and lack of perceived immediacy when employing, 'disciplining,' and/or coping with homophobic pejoratives in several British grade schools. Ultimately, with the help of Armstrong ("Homophobic Slang"), Thurlow claims ignoring homophobia maintains GLBTQ invisibility. In other words, ignoring homophobia maintains a silencing of voice and a stripping of agency to deny one an identity; and cyclically, denying someone political agency by not permitting the process of finding one's voice. Furthermore, Thurlow urges educators to invoke their use of power to silence hateful language, not by turning their eyes and ears away from the homophobia, but by confronting the situation head-on. Had Thurlow included his own autoethnographic perspective, he could have attended more directly to the exigence of the invisible individuals, while simultaneously empowering his audiences to address his critiques in an effort to create a safer environment for GLBTQ students in schools. In short, autoethnographic perspectives can raise awareness to the exigencies facing identity construction, voice formulation, and agency creation in marginalized individuals/groups. Furthermore, by empowering agency in readers, researchers, and fellow educators, autoethnographic perspectives can offer pedagogical tools for actively "performing ally"

(Hummel and Adams “Feeling Awkward”) to increase agency in marginalized individuals by creating a more healthy environment for the fostering of thought through voice. To achieve such a goal, one must seek to understand where/when hateful voices, and bigoted identities, are produced and politically charged by exploring their roots; fostering a safe/comfortable environment requires understandings of selves, leading me to my third point.

Autoethnography can help us question aspects of our/selves that are traditionally silenced through systemic oppression. While qualitative and quantitative measures may interrogate systemic privilege and oppression, autoethnography can open the doors to inquiries into the affects of systems on individuals/groups. As ethnographers, and researchers in general, we are asked to remove ourselves from our subjects’ lives; while ethnographers seek to understand the depths of communicative interactions, researchers face the problem of translating interlocutor confessions that may be devoid of, through no fault of the participants, pertinent information that may further explain the perceptions of the informant. By reversing the lenses of observation from the Other to the Self, we, as researchers, have the critical skills, tools, and lenses to read and interpret the influence of systems of power on our identities, voices, and agencies. Through examining interactions in our everyday lives, no matter how mundane or ephemeral, autoethnographic researchers can offer marginalized points of reference for individuals/groups who avow to the center, and visa versa. By understanding our/selves and how we influence our environments through multiple lenses afforded through autoethnographic inquiry, we can begin to understand difference from a more nuanced framework, potentially unlocking keys to furthering Warren’s (“Performing Difference”) work on contingent ontological

approaches to difference.

Finally, autoethnography can provide us with deeper understandings of the ways pieces of ourselves inform our everyday perceptions. As leaders/educators in the classroom, we have an obligation to understand where our students' perceptions are being derived. More importantly, we have the power to influence how students critically perceive their fellow humans, including the systems that we exist with/in. Siding with Fox's notion of personal narrative as "blueprints for living," autoethnographic inquiry can invite insight into the dilemmas facing individuals/groups who avow to marginalized identities through obtaining more complex and nuanced insights into identity, more information about the links between structures of power and individual/s voice/s, and also deeper understandings on when voice and agency are constrained and/or opened. Autoethnography has the ability to relate on multiple levels with differing audiences through common experiential threads. Understanding how/why one aspect of our identities influences our voices and agency with/in the everyday has the potential to permit us to change our perceptions through reflection. On some level, understanding the communication dynamics of/with the Other can aid us in building coping mechanisms for our everyday interactions, helping to build bridges across differences, celebrating difference *with* each other, and not in spite of one another.

### **R. Q. #2: Inviting Insight into Autoethnography via Identity, Voice, and Agency**

In considering the ways theories of identity, voice, and agency invite insight into autoethnography as a perspective, I again offer several observations for consideration. Specifically, theories of identity, voice, and agency help us to understand autoethnography as a scholarly perspective by examining the multimodal methods we employ

to dance through our everyday. Also, because autoethnography focuses on the reflexive experiences of the writer/researcher/scholar, understanding theories of identity, voice, and agency can help the researcher investigate the ways their Selves affect their perspectives/assumptions. Furthermore, understanding theories of identity, voice, and agency help the researcher/reader reflexively cope with privilege and/or oppression. And finally, theories of identity, voice, and agency can invite insight into productive, creative, and critical ways to engage the public as an agent of equality.

First, theories of identity, voice, and agency aid us in understanding autoethnography as a scholarly perspective by examining the multimodal methods we employ to dance through our everyday. For instance, in exploring the use of personal narrative in this project, some critics of autoethnographic perspectives may denounce my approach as non-scholarly. Yet, when used in conjunction with analysis through the lenses of identity, voice, and agency, the significance of one's personal experiences becomes complicated, not through one lens, but three. Combining theories of identity, voice, and agency with socio-cultural lenses (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and economic status), the diversity, flexibility, and all-around multimodality of autoethnography is not only highlighted, but also pronounced. In this respect, theories of identity, voice, and agency can help to legitimize the significance of offering the Self as a complicated and complex subject of study.

Second, because autoethnography focuses on the reflexive experiences of the writer/researcher/scholar, understanding theories of identity, voice, and agency can help the researcher investigate the ways their Selves affect their perspectives/assumptions. As discussed in the first chapter of this project, ethnographers *must* understand where their

politics, ideologies, and assumptions lie to avoid essentializing an individual/group under observation. In the realm of autoethnography, where the researcher is the subject, understanding theories of identity, voice, and agency is imperative. For instance, while writing “Sally, the Bi-Polar Bear,” I thought my identity was simply undergoing a shift from being closeted to being out; on the contrary, after analyzing the narrative through the lenses of identity, for example, the complexity of communicative interactions becomes apparent, as does the influence of my history on my perceptions, then and now, almost a decade later. Similar, yet distinct, complexities arise when inquiring about the effects the closet had on my voice, how my communicative interactions helped to reinforce and/or deconstruct my closet doors, and also the ways my political agency was influenced. Through this process, I was able to understand how my reactions to certain stimuli/scenarios were influenced, informed, or contradicted through analyzing my narratives in terms of identity, voice, and agency. In short, theories of identity, voice, and agency provide scholars employing autoethnographic perspectives with the tools necessary to further complicate the Self in relation to communities, cultures, and societies. However, employing this technique can create dissonance for the researcher, as analyzing painful experiences are not duty-free; conversely, this autoethnographic process can help alleviate the pain of reflexively engaging the past.

Understanding theories of identity, voice, and agency help the researcher/reader reflexively cope with privilege and/or oppression. Often, researchers who avow to marginalized status experience dissonance when reflexively engaging their cultural and social statuses. Theories of identity, voice, and agency can aid the autoethnographic researcher in understanding why they are experiencing dissonant feelings. For example,

while engaging my high school years, the pain of re/experiencing the past provoked new understandings of, not only what I was experiencing during that time frame, but also how those experiences influenced by future communicative interactions with friends and acquaintances, alike. As Ellis and Bochner have expressed, autoethnography affords the researcher the ability to cope with difficult experiences or periods of time in one's life. Employing theories of identity, voice, and agency can help the researcher more fully realize why/how/when/where and what some of the root causes are/were for their cognitive dissonance, allowing the researcher, and consequently the reader, the ability to build tools to cope with difficulties in identity formation, voice construction, and agency performance; these tools can then be explored and employed as pedagogically significant mechanisms for engaging students, and the public at large, to empower individuals with/in and beyond their immediate environments.

Finally, theories of identity, voice, and agency can invite insight into productive, creative, and critical ways to engage the public as agents of equality/equity. As a graduate student, I have heard time and time again critiques about critical theorists doing nothing more than envisioning utopias. Yet, after experiencing my first communication conference, critical/performance scholars seem to be the frontrunners for advocacy work in the field, taking their skills beyond the classroom walls and academic publications to engage the public. Again, understanding theories of identity, voice, and agency can aid autoethnographic scholars in their advocacy work by attempting to find and question more fully the roots of dissonance created and reinforced by difference; by theorizing on how an individual's and/or group's identity, voice, and agency are influenced, conflated and/or constrained, by external environments, practitioners of autoethnography can

explore more informed options to empowering and affecting change.

### **R. Q. #3: Autoethnographically Contributing to Communication and Coming Out**

In considering the ways this autoethnographic process of coming out contributes to communication studies, I once more offer several observations for consideration. Specifically, the autoethnographic process can aid us in understanding more of the potential experiences of our fellow human beings (e.g., colleagues, peers, advisees, and students); autoethnography can also help us understand more about what the process of coming out is like for individuals/groups who (will eventually) avow to a marginalized sexual identity; while also opening up a space for silenced voices within communication studies, and the academy at large.

First, the autoethnographic process of coming out of the sexual closet can help us understand more of the potential experiences of our fellow gay humans. As mentioned previously in this chapter, there is an inherent difficulty in understanding where human beings are coming from if their life experiences differ greatly from one's own. Coming out of the closet through an autoethnographic process can offer individuals/groups who avow to the sexual center (i.e., heterosexuality) a glimpse into the experiences of someone who avows to the sexual margin (i.e., gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer). Concurrently, this process can help individuals who have yet to avow gain a sense of security in knowing they are, not only one of many, but also that the uniqueness of their experiences is important to informing their everyday. For those of us in power, to gain an understanding of the potential experiences of our students is imperative to relating and empathizing with their everyday; such an understanding would, inevitably,

aid us in creating safer, more welcoming environments for all of our students who avow to (and/or who have experienced ascriptions of) a marginalized identity.

Second, coming out autoethnographically can help us understand more about the process of coming out of the closet in general, especially for individuals: (1) Wanting to know more about what the process looks and feels like; (2) who can never fully understand what coming out looks and feels like; (3) who seek more re/presentations of narrative “blueprints for living” (Fox 8); (4) who are seeking forms of scholarship that more closely resemble their everyday experiences; (5) who are afraid of coming out for fear of the unknown; and, (6) who are afraid of sexually marginal avowed persons (i.e., homophobia) for fear of misinterpreting/misunderstanding/ignoring the struggles of avowing to a marginalized identity.

#### *Autoethnography for Individuals Who Want to Know More About Coming Out*

I, like many who avow to being gay, find a fascinating curiosity emitting from heterosexually avowed individuals. Often, for instance, many of my friends (ranging from close to acquaintance) are eager to embark on a game of 20 (thousand) questions once they find out that I am, in fact, gay. Depending on the person’s personality and/or personal experience, the individual will inquisitively engage me with angst, candor, and everything in between. Autoethnographically coming out of the closet can provide first-person accounts of the process for individuals who are inquisitive about the process, yet may never be able to fully understand what the process entails for they avow to a centered/hegemonic identity, with all of the privilege in voice and agency that the avowal affords them. In short, autoethnographic perspectives can offer information about the coming out process, regardless of the reader’s own sexual avowals.

### *Autoethnography for Individuals Who Can Never Know About the Coming Out Process*

For individuals who avow to a centered identity, autoethnographically coming out of the closet can provide glimpses into a life that the individual can never lead. For instance, in “Spreading The Word,” many of my family members became irritated with my frank and open rallying for GLBTQ equality, for they had little to no access to my experiences with/in the closet. Autoethnography can open the doors to hegemonically avowing individuals who can never fully know what it is like to avow to a marginalized identity, while simultaneously providing glimpses to fellow marginally avowing individuals who seek to understand the process through different lenses.

### *Autoethnography for Individuals Seeking A Coming Out “Blueprint”*

By this point in the project, my fascination with Fox’s notion of personal narrative as “blueprints for living” (8) should be no surprise. Engaging the process of coming out through an autoethnographic perspective offers an example for individuals who have not yet engaged the process of coming out, who are contemplating embarking on the coming out journey, and/or for individuals who have little to no exposure to identity crises, voice constriction, and agency deconstruction. By offering up segments of my life in as honest a process as possible, I, along with many performance scholars, offer our experiences, not as a roadmap and/or guide, but as one of an infinite set of possibilities where the reader may or may not relate to the emotional turmoil associated with, in this case, coming out of a sexual closet. I offer my personal narratives to help “people who lack effective . . . coping strategies” (Fox 9) when faced with their, or someone else’s, sexual closet, in hopes of “inspiring identification among audience members seeking a narrative model to help guide future attitudes and behaviors” (Fox 8).

### *Autoethnography for Individuals Who Seek More Re/presentational Scholarship*

There is no mystery surrounding the lack of GLBTQ scholarship available in the academy. Communication Studies is no exception. Furthermore, the lack of GLBTQ scholarship that reaches our undergraduate students is almost more disconcerting than the gaps in published research. I, for one, often found myself asking where *I* am re/presented in scholarship. Moreover, many of the courses I have engaged over the last decade that had a ‘GLBT unit’ (note the lacking *Q*) tacked onto the end of the course offered readings from lesbian feminists writing about the lack of lesbian voices in ‘gay’ scholarship. I found the ‘abundance’ of lesbian scholarship paradoxical; while I appreciate reading/experiencing the words of the traditionally silenced, I wondered where the voices of the gay males who were fighting against hegemonically constricting masculine confines were located. For those of us who lack re/presentation in traditional communication scholarship, autoethnography has the potential to provide insight.

### *Autoethnography for Individuals Who Fear Avowing to a Marginalized Identity*

Beyond re/presentation and narrative blueprinting, autoethnography can create a safe space for individuals who fear avowing to a marginalized identity. For instance, individuals who fear coming out, for the process appears too daunting, can find solace in autoethnographic writing. Reading and participating in knowledge construction through the experiences of someone who has already (and is continuing to) engage the coming out process may offer strategies and tactics to ultimately make the decision if, when, and/or where to come out for the first time to friends, family, co-workers, and so on. Sometimes, simply knowing that someone else has been through the struggles of the closet can create a sense of comfort for the reader.

### *Autoethnography for Homophobic Individuals*

Most challenging to the project is idea that someone staunchly homophobic may encounter this material. Yet, my experiences with homophobia suggest blind ignorance rests somewhere at the root of the person's disdain. Here, autoethnography has the potential to enlighten 'non-believers' to the process of coming out. Again, the *pathos* infused nature of autoethnographic scholarship has the potential to reach readers at the emotional level, hopefully breeching through the homophobic shell to encounter the empathetic side of the individual who avows to hating homosexuality. As a pedagogical tool, autoethnographically coming out can show individuals who spout 'choice' rhetoric that the struggles to find an identity, their voice, and a sense of agency in being gay is something few, if any, individuals would actively choose.

And finally, autoethnographically coming out can contribute to widening the space for silenced voices within communication studies, and the academy at large. In this growing information age, the postmodern condition has flushed the airwaves with voices from every walk of life with access to the Internet. Conversely, it appears as though gatekeeping within the academy has becoming more and more restrictive; while the array of topics has increased significantly, the amount of voices from silenced identities continues to struggle. Communication scholarship confronting the dynamic process of coming out appears to have been silenced since its late-1990s rage. Yet, coming out of the (sexual) closet still continues to be a struggle for individuals, especially for those of us who were not born and raised in a U.S. American megalopolis. With increasing attention in scholarship to the notion of identity politics/formulation, re/examining the

closet through communicative lenses is imperative to breaking the silence created by hegemonic systems of power hell-bent on pushing homosexuality off the radar.

Let's face it: There are aspects of our everyday lives that silenced, coded, and honest. There are pieces of our lives that remain silenced by old, rigid ways of thinking. Aspects of our lives come into question by individuals who are not necessarily deemed trustworthy enough to hear the truth, so we code to save face. And, then there are portions of our lives that open to the public. For communication studies, understanding and questioning the potential affects of silence, coding, and honesty are quintessential if our discipline is to continue to grow in relation to the postmodern condition.

Autoethnographic perspectives open up channels for us as researchers, scholars, teachers, readers, and citizens of the world to understand more holistically the affects silence, coding, and honesty have on our identity, voice, and agency.

### **Limitations of this Project**

Every style of scholarship has its set of limitations. This study is no exception. Theorizing about the closet from a singular voice appears to be the biggest challenge to this project. In attempting to maintain a level of objectivity throughout this thesis, I purposively did not consult any texts, scholarly and/or everyday, on the coming out process. Without the help of Other's voices, especially individuals who have been through my similar situation, my scientific lenses were disheartened. In this sense, separating the analysis from the narrative created the most dissonance for my scholarly identity, for the lack of deduction seemed antithetical to my training. However, recognizing, after some time, that this specific project was taking on a more grounded

theoretical approach, relying on my own observations to inductively theorize calmed my nerves about speaking from a singular voice. Yet, objectivity still haunted me.

Recalling my conversation with Chávez, ‘give up on objectivity, for you cannot be objective when subjectively analyzing from your own subjective experiences’ (paraphrased). Trusting that I was following along with Ellis and Bochner in maintaining the highest level of integrity and honesty that I possibly could without incriminating the people in my life was all I could do to maintain a sense of scholarly voice. While this may not seem good enough for some scholars, I critique their over reliance on rigid objective structures that pay little to no attention to the subjective human experience. We are an amalgam of our subjective experiences; subjective memories about our subjective experiences, and our reactions to situations/contexts/stimuli are a result of our subjectively tinged lenses about the world we live in and the people who inhabit our collective world. Communication scholars must recognize that our communications are riddled with our subjective take on the world. To ignore subjective approaches to scholarship is to ignore the nature of the human condition. The subjective experiences from with/in the closet are no exception; in fact, the closet is a great subject of study.

Another dilemma I faced surrounded the notion of the closet. The metaphor of the closet to represent the silencing of an individual’s voice and agency, and as a constraint to an individual’s and/or group’s identity, is problematic. The closet suggests a fixed location; coming out of said closet suggests an once-in-a-lifetime event, for once one has come out, they are ‘out.’ While I do not dismiss the significance of an individual’s first exodus from their closet, the process is by no means over; for anyone who has ‘come out,’ we know the process does not end with the first time, for it is only

the beginning of an unending, dynamic process that shifts and changes as we learn the moves to perform confidently in our everyday. This is also not to suggest that the process gets easier and easier, for such a notion would deny the difficulty associated with learning to intuitively gage, often in a moment's notice, the context of the situation to judge whether or not to engage in coming out (yet again). Yet, to learn/create one's own coming out dance can make the process less uncomfortable over time, as one learns to actively participate in making their own dance, able to shift beat, step, tone, and rhythm in a moment's notice to serve the dancer's purpose.

For instance, should the dancer want to disrupt the everyday flow of a situation, s/he may chose to waltz right through the middle of a carefully orchestrated line dance. In the case of fitting in, a dancer may chose to tap right along with the rest of the group, perhaps adding just a bit of flair to transitional steps to celebrate the inherent difference of their presence on the dance floor. In any event, the act of dancing as a re/presentation of the coming out process can help us to better understand the interactions that occur beyond stepping from the closet into the bedroom/hallway, still stuck in the house; to the contrary, dancing can open new lenses for understanding the communicative processes and interactions of marginalized individuals with/in larger cultural/social structures and systems of power.

### **Potentials for Future Research**

While the potentials stemming from this project seem nearly infinite to me, I offer several logical directions for future research. In particular, more researchers in the communication studies discipline need to focus their attention to widening the scope of our research that helps us understand the human condition. Also, more attention needs to

be spent on understanding the inherent connection between identity, voice, and agency in the study of human communicative interactions. Furthermore, our discipline would benefit from more inquiry into theories on performing difference. And finally, Communication Studies would be wise to continue inquiries on the notion of the closet.

#### *Continuing to Widen Our Communicative Lenses*

Throughout my two years of master's study, I have heard several nearly-leveling critiques of autoethnographic and/or critical forms of scholarship, ranging from 'I just don't even get it' to '*that is not* scholarship.' One intention behind this project was to question the relevance and significance of autoethnographic inquiry within communication studies. While many performative/communication scholars have begun to breach this discussion, some devoting their entire careers to this realm of work, more scholarship pronouncing autoethnographic inquiry is important, and more so, significant. Within this project, an autoethnographic perspective is clearly a good choice when engaging the subjective communicative experiences as part of understanding more about the human condition, and specifically, identity, voice, and agency. More over, with increasing budgetary cuts to higher education, if Communication Studies wants to continue to compete in the 21st century, we must continue to broaden our scope of study, while also widening our lenses to the notion of what constitutes a text.

#### *Continuing Research on Identity, Voice, and Agency*

Upon engaging theories on identity, voice, and agency, an inherent connection between the three came to the forefront. Communication Studies would benefit greatly by more questions that explore the connection between identity, voice, and agency in the study of human communicative interactions. From this project alone, an inherent link

between an individual's identity, their voice as a process of portraying identity, and their political agency (i.e., their capability to perform identity in relation to power) appears to emerge. In my mind, difficulty arises when trying to speak to one construct while ignoring the other two. Understanding more on how identity, voice, and agency work holistically within an individual is just one direction for future research.

#### *Continuing Research on Performing and Coping with Difference*

While much of our discipline's attention to difference has surrounded conflict, Communication Studies would benefit from more inquiry into performing and coping with difference. Through personal conversations with John T. Warren on "Performing Difference," understanding more about the subtle nuances communicated through difference became an interesting direction for future study for me. Along this line of thinking, Brent Adams and I engaged in a "narrative dialogue" to question the notion of performative allyship in GLBTQ interactions. Hummel and Adams ("Feeling Awkward") urge individuals to move beyond the process of avowing as an ally to *perform* ally in order to create more open/safe spaces for marginalized individuals. More research into the distinction between avowing and performing an identity would benefit not only Communication Studies but also the theories already available on identity, voice, agency, and performativity. Furthermore, more research on coping, philosophically what it means to cope, and also what coping strategies may look like for communicative interactions between/across marginalized and/or privileged identities is needed.

#### *Continuing Research on the Closet*

Finally, more research on the notion of the closet is required in Communication Studies. This project, while breaching the subject, would benefit from more research

across the wide array of available methods and perspectives to better understand how the closet affects an individual's and/or group's communication. Also, inquiries across methodological approaches would help to provide a more holistic picture of the closet, potentially providing a more appropriate metaphor for discussing the silencing of one's voice, and the denial of one's agency as a way of condemning one to a life of dissonant identity. Finally, understanding more about 'the closet' as a construct not only devoted to sexuality would help us, as communication scholars, to devise more coping strategies for intercultural and co-cultural communication in the 21st century.

In a world where/when GLBTQ individuals are still struggling for equitable rights, still fighting for the privilege to live in co-existence without the fear of facing repercussions for simply being, research focused on GLBTQ populations is imperative if we are ever to design new, inclusive policies and strategies for coping with difference, while providing every U.S. American with the 'unalienable' rights they are due. Until then, my hope is to aid my fellow GLBTQ brothers and sisters, whether avowed, ascribed, silenced, coded, and/or honest, in learning new tactics for dancing in, out, around, and about systemic oppression. While I still feel the time, place, and context for coming out are at the sole discretion of the individual inhabiting a closet, I urge every single ally in this world to voice their support as one way of creating a safe/comfortable environment for all individuals who avow, or are afraid to avow, to a marginalized identity, for "I know that you cannot live on hope alone, but without it, life is not worth living. And you . . . and you . . . and you . . . have gotta give 'em hope" (Harvey Milk).

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this project, I will refer to myself, a man who avows to being gay, as “gay male.” Personally, I find this label more fitting than ‘gay man,’ as the term ‘man’ is far too loaded, hegemonically, ideologically, socially, and culturally, laden with burden to publicly perform masculinity at all times. ‘Gay male’ feels less demanding.

<sup>2</sup> Introspection is most often used when interpreting the differences between enculturation and acculturation within one’s own speech community. The most common method for ethnographers is participant-observation, engaging with subjects to hypothesize about the rules of communicative behaviors. Observation is more difficult than participant-observation as ethnographers conducting such studies must avoid contact with individuals and groups being observed. Interviewing, on the other hand, is useful when the researcher(s) require or desire first-hand subject knowledge and is often used to supplement and/or complement participant-observation through either open-ended or close-ended questions. Ethnosemantics/ Ethnoscience is primarily concerned with understanding the methods that informants use to categorize communicative experiences, where Ethnomethodology engages informants to examine their “underlying processes which speakers of a language utilize to produce and interpret communicative experiences” (104). Philology is concerned with the written text versus direct human contact; often associated with hermeneutics, philology is a great way to document semantic shifts over time.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, statements like this do, or should, raise the red flags of egocentrism, but remember, I was a teenager and the only thing I wanted more than to be among the stars was to have my world revolve around me.

<sup>4</sup> A ‘beer bong’ is a long tube attached to a funnel. Beer (or other liquid) would be poured into the funnel while the tube was pinched off and/or held above the funnel. When ready, the participant would dip below the funnel, allowing gravity to force the fluid into their stomach. Admittedly, this is not the safest practice for consuming alcohol.

<sup>5</sup> My original flight was slated for the afternoon following my coming out. Unfortunately, we all overslept, and I missed my plane. Fortunately, this bought me 24 more hours of liberation.

<sup>6</sup> A “bottle and shot bar” is a colloquial reference to an establishment that primarily serves bottles of beer and shots of liquor, most often whiskey.

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<sup>7</sup> I found out later that my mother outed me to her mother and sister, my grandmother and aunt, respectively.

<sup>8</sup> At the time, I had occupied five different majors in four disciplines: Astronomy/Physics, Biology, Marine Biology, Classics (USC), and Mass Communication (BU). Each major was selected with very little research.

<sup>9</sup> I was not able to be present on the day of the social equity charter signing, and so my name was never included, or recognized by the adviser of Free Spirit.

<sup>10</sup> In hopes of discussing the ways our perceptions shift over time and acquaintance, I decided to shave my two months of facial hair growth, while adorning the same clothing, to appear as the same person our students met on the first day of class.

<sup>11</sup> Two lesbian allies did, in fact, know of my gay identity, though I felt it was not my place to out them in class.

<sup>12</sup> A prime example of this act can be found in Morris's *Pink Herring and the Fourth Persona* article where he discusses Edgar Hoover's mediated dilemma over his "mincing walk."

<sup>13</sup> It may be helpful to think of this in the Shakespearean, and consequently Burkean, notion of "all the world is a stage" (Burke "On Shakespeare").

<sup>14</sup> I continue to quote "working" in relation to class because I see the label as problematic. In effect, the label working class assumes active employment. In my family, working was not always the case, as employment was difficult to obtain and maintain. In my case, I specifically joined the working class at the age of 10 when I started delivering the local newspaper with my younger brother. My employment continued, as I cleaned tables at a local restaurant. I officially became a tax-paying member of the working class when I turned 16, obtaining a job at the world's most profitable fast-food chain. My mother worked as a home health provider until 1994, when she left the position to earn a Bachelor's degree in 1998. My father was in and out of employment through most of my high school years, for reasons that are his responsibility to report, not mine. None of this material is stated in my narrative, yet I find it helpful to more fully appreciate the "working" conditions of my teen youth.

<sup>15</sup> While I viewed myself as abnormal at the time, I do not see this functioning as an abnormal experience for individuals struggling with their sexual identities. In fact, I abhor the use of "normal" to describe any social phenomenon. But, while in high school, I saw myself as not normal, and so for the purposes of analysis, I feel it is only appropriate to label the emotional state as such.

<sup>16</sup> "Gregzão," meaning "Big Greg" in Portuguese, quickly followed "Grego" as a

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nickname. Gregzão was also seen as an affirmation from my Brazilian peers, as it suggests my towering presence.

<sup>17</sup> Had I avowed to being gay at that point in my experience, I would have followed up “hefty, furry man” with the commonly referred to label, “bear.” A bear, in the GLBTQ community, is an extremely hairy, usually large and tall, gay male (as opposed to ‘cub’ or ‘bear cub’ for gay males who were usually shorter, slightly to moderately hairy, and young; and ‘otter’ as a reference for gay males who are markedly thin and furry). There is some discrepancy about my avowal, as many Bears have argued that I am too young to be a bear, while Cubs have argued that I am too furry to be a bear cub. I often select the label that seems most appropriate to the situation. As I am older than most of my students, I would have referred to myself as a bear.