

Subversive Stories / Hegemonic Tales:  
Conversations with Non-heterosexual College Women  
on Sexuality, Society, and Self

By

Jamie Louise Budnick

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Advisors:

Professor Pamela J. Smock  
Professor Gayle S. Rubin

University of Michigan  
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## ABSTRACT

Both pervasive cultural attitudes and historical trends in research tend to assume an essentially stable and internally cohesive model of sexuality. These attitudes are manifest in the expectation for LGBT people to synthesize their processes of identity exploration and development into easily digestible, retrospectively reported “coming out” stories (on which research has traditionally been based). Recent and innovative scholarship on women’s love and desire, however, indicates that their sexuality (and the language through which it is expressed) is relatively fluid and dynamic—suggesting it may be time to revise our models. My study explores and examines how non-heterosexual college women talk about their sexualities in the context of other axes of their identity. Through the chapters of my thesis, I report and discuss data collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with fourteen participants who do not identify as straight (but do not necessarily claim another label along the LGBT spectrum). Respondents were asked open-ended questions about sexuality, labels, family, community, and campus life. I find: (1) respondents articulating two competing discursive levels of sexuality: identity and desire; (2) perceptions about and participation in various types of community depend on each woman’s unique combination of identities, some of which compete against LGBT community inclusion; and (3) these women are simultaneously participating in and challenging normative expectations for coming out, hegemonic models of identity development, and traditional ideas about LGBT subjectivity through the stories they tell.

Keywords: community, desire, discourse, identity, narrative, queer, sexuality, standpoint, women

## INTRODUCTION

*Isn't there supposed to be a model for this? You find out sooner or later that if it isn't going to be girl-meets-boy then by default it's girl-meets-girl. There are names for this—names for what you feel, who you are: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender. Depending on where and how and by whom you were raised, that expanse of time and space between what you were and what you are might vary but you have to come up for air eventually. Right? You figure it out, you say it out loud: "I hereby come out: mom and dad, I'm gay." Then there it is: community—there they are: your people. You've read the book; you've seen the movie. We know what art imitates, so this is life. Right?*

The bulk of scholarship on sexuality and identity development presupposes the existence, at least abstractly, of concrete and relatively static categories of being which figure as the natural conclusion to which the subject arrives after progressing teleologically through a period of exploration and experimentation. Beginning with this assumption, researchers set out to identify, define, and make sense of the range of sexual desire, attraction, and behavior that falls outside the hegemonic heterosexual matrix. It is only after the invention of the homosexual that the category of heterosexuality (its dichotomous opposite) is constructed. Bisexuality, the most potentially destabilizing, is best understood as a midway point between these two modalities. Bearing names aptly marking these categories as appropriations of a certain medical-scientific discourse, our modern conception of human sexuality attempts to incorporate new ways of being into the existing, fundamentally binary, model. Research born of this ideology isolates those who fit a definition of homosexual or bisexual based on sexual behavior in an attempt to understand the origin and effect of their abnormality.

While this history might seem a gross simplification, I would caution against its dismissal. After all, central tenets of sex research and identity studies rely upon the ideology described above. Early psychological models of identity development are continuously being revised and reapplied when it is the necessity of models that should be interrogated. Social research that approaches

visible and established communities to find its subjects ignores all those people who fall through the cracks between factions of structure (and it is into these cracks, rather than within these communities, that nearly everyone in my sample falls). Scholarship has only recently begun to make up for decades of inattention to the particularities of female sexuality. Additionally, the widespread use of retrospective interview-based studies further obliterates ambiguity and contradiction.

While I am interested in understanding women's sexualities, my research makes a number of interventions that—when taken together—present an opportunity to capture data without the usual noise. By basing participant recruitment on shared experiences, thoughts, and feelings I was able to interview women typical identity-based studies would have excluded. While I invite respondents to reflect on some critical areas of the hegemonic coming out trope, resisting language that invokes this model provides space to challenge and subvert established narrative expectations.

*But there isn't a model for this. LGBT: those letters are little boxes that can't capture what you feel or who you are so you cast them off. In place of labels unaccompanied by explanatory monographs, you say 'queer' or nothing at all. Finding yourself suspended interminably between having asked the question and the answer that never seems to come, you move on. Besides, things change. There are words for this: fluid, facile, dynamic. You figure it out, you say it out loud: "let me tell you a story." You're writing your own book now. "Life imitates art far more than art imitates life."*<sup>1</sup>

My thesis attends to the weaving and meaning of words through my participants' narratives. I am not merely concerned with taking up what they tell me as evidence, as data. I am interested in the telling itself: the motivation behind the words, the sequence and selection of sentences, the informative origin of biography, the places and people that constitute the layered backdrop to their stories. The speaker is not simply recounting a personal chronology of experiences, but contributing her voice to a collective cacophony fully implicated in defining self, sexuality, and society. There is no pre-discursive ontological truth—it is only through communicating our stories that identities,

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<sup>1</sup> A popular aphorism by Oscar Wilde.

communities, experiences, and knowledges are defined and understood. In short, with words these women make worlds.

My thesis begins with a brief overview of relevant literature to acquaint the reader with the major themes and issues. It is not intended to be exhaustive, and is thus aptly titled “Framework, Analytic Approach, and Context: An Orientation.” The goal of this section is to describe the contemporary stances and assumptions toward identity, performativity, and narrative. It references the most relevant contemporary literature on each theme, as well as illustrates my broader theoretical grounding through the mention of canonical scholarship.

The next section, “Methodology”, describes, defines, and reflects upon my research design and process. I have included several figures to aid in visualizing the composition of my sample in terms of racial, religious, geographical, and academic diversity. These images are intended to give the reader a quick overview of basic macro-demographic information. This information is further synthesized and presented visually as an appendix for easy repeated reference.

The findings, analysis, and discussion of my research are organized into four co-constitutive chapters that inform and rely upon one another. Each chapter represents one of four cornerstones, the foundation being the overarching and all-encompassing framework of a performative narrative analysis and the power of storytelling to influence and define individual and collective identity.

The first chapter, “Declarations of Desire / Assertions of Identity”, introduces the reader to the fourteen women I interviewed: providing individual biographical vignettes and plotting out how each woman currently identifies on the spectrum of queer sexuality. It is also a summation of responses of most salient interest to those preoccupied with hegemonic models of coming out. Respondents reflect upon what words they use to describe their sexualities and question the efficacy of labeling. They collectively articulate a need for alternative, fluid, and more dynamic models of identity.



The second chapter, “Origin: Family and Place”, begins where stories begin and where we begin: with family and home. My respondents remember those key components of their history that set the stage for recent interactions, experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. They recount instances of both affirmation and rejection, and reflect upon their subsequent influence on familial relationships. This chapter concludes by gauging current attitudes about family, looking toward the future and imagining how things might be different.

The third chapter, “Threshold People: Liminality and Communitas”, seeks to understand the marginal (i.e. liminal) positionality of these queer women in the various geographical and social spheres in which they move. My respondents’ experiences with, feelings about, and perceptions of visible queer communities and queer subjectivities complicate popular understandings of what inclusion and being out mean.

The fourth and final chapter, “Performing Resistance: Reimagining and Reinventing Identity through Storytelling”, describes how the academic institution as discursive location is thoroughly implicated in the potential and productivity of storytelling. Participants assert the role that the university atmosphere, classroom climate, and academic rhetoric had in facilitating identity development and encouraging agency. These circumstantial factors also proved to be tools at their disposal to control aspects of their reception by others. Following the inclusion of additional examples of narrating stigma, this chapter concludes by illustrating how in all these stories there is some part hegemonic tale and some part subversive story.

## Framework, Analytic Approach, and Context: AN ORIENTATION

In brief, this study is ultimately about the way we construct ourselves through the way we tell our stories. Specifically, this study is about how non-heterosexual college women simultaneously create, enact, and resist popular ideas about what it means to identify along the LGBT spectrum—and what it means to identify at all. In exploring these questions, I draw upon several different areas of scholarship that intersect at the site of the interview and, when taken together, offer layers of insight into what is going on in and around the stories my participants came to tell. Organized into three sections (identity, performativity, and narrative) this literature review is meant to orient the reader to the framework of my analytic approach and to contextualize the four chapters discussing my research findings.

Substantively, this thesis is primarily about identity. After outlining what I mean by and how I think about identity, I survey the predominant ways in which identity (and particularly *sexual* identity) has been theorized in the disciplines of sociology, critical theory, metaphysics, and—for the sake of historical context—psychology. I conclude my discussion of identity with scholarship that theorizes coming out as a *performative* act. I consider the relevant literature on performativity, dramaturgy, and symbolic interactionism—extending these insights to the interview setting. Finally, I discuss the specific performative act under investigation: storytelling. Narrative analysis is widely recognized as a viable mode of social inquiry and, importantly, takes significant strides toward fulfilling the fundamental epistemological goals of feminist research.

Within these three broader spheres of discussion—that I hope will nonetheless blend together and inform one another in relatively transparent ways—I will briefly mention literature on the micro-level themes that arose out of my inductive methodological approach to interview analysis. Among these micro-level themes are community participation, feelings of inclusion and

exclusion, family and kinship, intersectionality, standpoint and space, and the importance of language and naming.

## Identity.....

I conceptualize identity as a term that encompasses the multiple, complex, and changing parts of self that are context-dependent and socially constructed. In approaching identity utilizing a narrative analysis, I am assuming that to have an identity is to “be able to tell a story about the self and related communities” (Stevenson 2006:278). In this section, I will explain how I think about and how I mean to approach identity, beginning with definitions and a survey of historical approaches.

### *A Typology of Identity*

This study essentially originates out of a typology of identity. I am attempting to sort through my interview data in a way that allows me to organize, dissect, and define the identities of my study participants (while considering my method but one of many ways to approach the study of identity). In referring to these various classifications and approaches to identity as a *typology* I include all three of the following definitions listed in the Oxford English Dictionary:

ty pol 'o gy  
 \tī-'pāl-ə-jē\

1. The study of symbolic representation; also symbolic significance, representation, or treatment; symbolism.
2. The study of or a discourse on printing types or printing.
3. The study of classes with common characteristics; classification, especially of human products, behavior, characteristics, etc.; according to type; the comparative analysis of structural or other characteristics; a classification or analysis of this kind.

At a theoretical level, I am studying the representation and meaning of identity categories. If I might be granted the creative liberty to extend the OED's second definition of typology to include other discursive practices, then my use of typology fully encompasses my various approaches to studying identity.

I am studying a particular, culturally recognizable modality of being around which politics and privileges are organized. Though I adopt a post-structuralist view of sexuality (and race, for that matter), the theoretical sense it makes and potential it offers does little to negate the everyday experiences of people who are themselves read and classified but who also inevitably read and classify others. In short, concrete and confined categories of identity may not exist but they still have the power to dictate how we move through the world. Race and sexuality may not be hard, biological facts but they remain just as real with all sorts of tangible consequences. This contradiction is depicted in the tension between the efforts of gay rights activists whose success depends upon advancing “like-race” theories of sexuality and emerging scholarship in queer theory that rejects definitions that ultimately reinscribe essentialist notions of gender.

Notably, this example of contradiction juxtaposes *queer* scholarship against *LGBT* scholarship. If *LGBT* means understanding and finding a place for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in society, then *queer* means resisting categories altogether and challenging hegemonic structural organization and institutions.<sup>2</sup> The significance of this distinction for my participants at both an abstract and personal level is conveyed through their reflections on naming their sexualities. On the whole, their assertion and definition of labels is very context-dependent: most women use different labels with different people and in different places. These choices illuminate the power implicit in naming.

### *Identity Development Models*

Identity was first conceptualized as innate character traits possessed by the individual that could be empirically studied. Subsequently, research on identity is drawn historically from such

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<sup>2</sup> I made the difficult decision to use the term “non-heterosexual” in my title simply because it’s the only word that can encompass all the women in my sample: no one identifies as straight. Because of the diversity in label-preference and ascribed definitions, I make the effort to vary my use of terms used to describe sexuality throughout my thesis. As a general rule, “LGBT” (including “lesbian”, “bisexual”, “trans”, etc.) is evocative of categories, identity politics, and clearly delineated boundaries while “queer” suggests resistance, redefinition, and comparative openness.

quantitative models as stage theories of development. I do not adopt such a theory, but to contextualize my shift away from such models I will outline what thinking has been most impactful on more contemporary research. Chronologically, the field of psychology was the first of the social sciences to take up the issue of sexual identity, superimposing adaptations onto models of identity formation and development. Since the American Psychiatric Association's removal of homosexuality from its diagnostic manual of psychiatric illnesses, there has been a push in scholarship in the discipline to understand, if it is not pathology, what bearing homosexuality *does* have on individual identity. I will explore chronologically four major identity development models, each increasingly narrowing in on the particular subjectivity of concern here: first, a general theory of personality and identity development; second, a more complex theory concerning sexuality broadly and male homosexuals specifically; third, a relatively inclusive model of gay and lesbian sexual identity development; and fourth, an alternative model of sexual identity development centering on the lesbian experience. It is this fourth model that I take up in my approach to understanding the stories collected in my interviews with non-heterosexual college women.

Early theories of homosexual identity took the form of *stage models* in which the individual was thought to progress through successive stages as the identity matured and was holistically incorporated into full personhood. Initially, stage models were used to illustrate identity development more generally and then extended to describe sexual orientation. Stage models have also been used to describe the process of recognition, acceptance, and integration of one's racial identity (Cross 1991). Erik Erikson (1968) incorporated the central tenets of Freudian psychoanalytic theory into his understanding of personality development. However, Erikson challenged a key tenet of Freudian thought: that one's personality, rooted in sexuality, was largely established in early childhood. Erikson believed personality developed through the lifespan. These ideas were the catalyst for his eight-stage model, which gives due emphasis to cultural,

environmental, and social influences. While Erikson's model did not center on sexual identity, the ideas are most applicable and have been taken up and applied by subsequent psychologists. This model is explicitly *linear*: an individual begins in adolescence to experience how the fulfillment of certain social roles lends itself to the development of identity and, next, in young adulthood to either develop productive interpersonal and intimate relationships or—in their absence—to become isolated. Here, successful identity formation occurs when the individual progresses from one stage to the next.

James Marcia (1966) proposes a more complex linear stage model consisting of four distinct processes individuals experience to establish, develop, and maintain their personal identity. In Marcia's model, the subject moves through the stages of *Identity Diffusion*, *Moratorium*, *Identity Achievement*, and *Foreclosure*. Unlike Erikson's model, Marcia's is primarily concerned with (homo)sexual identity. The heavy emphasis on ability to commit to a relationship and capacity and willingness to explore sexually reflects a major limitation of Marcia's research: it was conducted solely with men. Subsequent scholarship contended Marcia's findings were not generalizable to female sexuality.

Vivienne Cass (1979) authored what is considered in clinical psychology to be the most affirmative conception of the homosexual identity and is today still being used as the basis for therapeutic interventions of sexual minorities. The Cass development model specifically theorizes the identity development of gays and lesbians. Here, the individual progresses through a series of six self-explanatory stages: *identity confusion*, *identity comparison*, *identity tolerance*, *identity acceptance*, *identity pride*, and *identity synthesis*. Cass's model theorizes the individual's internal development of an awareness of their own personal sexuality as well as the individual's experiences with and attitudes toward various dynamics at the group level (such as inclusion in queer circles, integration as a queer person in straight circles, coalitions between non-queer and queer identified people for a unified

cause or concern, as well as the individual's orientation to pervasive cultural perceptions of gays, homophobia, heterosexism, and the tension between personal and private worlds). The Cass model is the first that explicitly takes up the issue so often thought of as key to sexual identity development: *coming out*. Importantly, the Cass model explicitly allows for the individual to move less linearly through the stages. Instead, they may move rapidly from one to another, get caught up in the next stage for a comparatively long while, skip the subsequent stage before moving to the end, all the while returning intermittently to one aspect of an earlier stage. This shift from a strict linear model in which each stage is further constricted by boundaries of age expectations to more fluid, dynamic models accurately reflects the changing attitudes toward sexuality of science and society at large.

Finally, Eli Coleman (1981) presents a model that most explicitly challenges the assumption of linear progression. His model includes four stages: *pre-coming out*, *coming out*, *exploration*, and *first relationship*. Also focusing explicitly on the sexual identity development of gays and lesbians, Coleman insists on a model that allows for comparatively greater flexibility. Coleman's mature individual nears the completion of identity development through sexual exploration, and achieves identity integration with the first relationship.

Lisa Diamond (2008) has synthesized many years of research on the fluidity of female sexuality in her recent book *Sexual Desire: Understanding Women's Love and Desire*, which reported the results of her ten-year longitudinal interview-based study with non-heterosexual young women. Her analysis makes a clean break from established models of identity development based on men and unsatisfactorily altered or haphazardly applied to women. She asserts this differentiation in an article on feminist epistemology and narrative-based research, saying, "psychological models of development function as culturally specific origin-stories reinforcing the interests of dominant social groups" (Diamond 2006:471). The bulk of Diamond's work takes up the complicated issue of

sexual fluidity and its implications for the very concept of a static, coherent identity. In another bold destabilizing move, Diamond emphasizes the phenomenon of refusing labels or actively asserting an unlabelled identity. Opting out of the label matrix presents some real challenges in theorizing identity, but it presents some promising possibilities as well.

### *Intersectionality*

The rise of visibility of and tolerance for queer identities reverberates through all communities, though with variations in reception and results. There are many unique cultural orientations toward sexuality and queerness, and each is impacted by other intersecting identities. No two women inhabit the same queer world. Rather, one woman may feel validated, accepted, and welcomed into the most visible social and political queer groups on campus, while another may experience them as racist. The individual woman's racial subjectivity may make a significant difference in her identity development process, family ties, relationships, etc.

Much of the recent research on identity in sociology focuses on the intersections of identities, seeking to understand the experiences of those living at these particular crossroads—especially where certain combinations might have been previously thought to be incompatible. A series of articles on gay men in (otherwise hetero) college fraternities and the establishment of gay fraternities have been well received and frequently assigned reading in the undergraduate classroom (Yeung, Stompler, and Wharton 2006; Yeung and Stompler 2000). There are also several newer scholastic journals specializing in literature on bisexuality or the intersection between race and sexuality. Much of the research that informs articles subsequently published in such journals relies on qualitative methods to gather in-depth data on the specific experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of individual women. Many researches contend their respondents “constructed their sexuality as a succession of interrelated impediments and imperatives that act in tandem to both prohibit and potentiate bisexuality” (Dower, Gurevich, and Mathieson 2002). The place of bisexual-identified women in



lesbian communities is also taken up. Other research is rooted in (both sexual and racial) identity model theory and considers the effects of age differences, religious differences, feminist ideology, and culture (Dworkin 2002). Recent literature on intersectionality has also heavily focused on gender identity and trans subjectivities (Bilodeau 2005; McKinney 2005; Meyer 2002). Inclusive overviews and criticism on this literature has also recently emerged, productively synthesizing psychological literature on identity research (Collins 2004).

It is my hope we can give up our conceptions of a unified queer community and embrace its replacement by a model with blurred boundaries that affirm and encourage, rather than attempt to ignore and assimilate, different queer identities.

#### *Origins: Family and Place*

Qualitative research originated out of a methodological and epistemological push to take up the biographical and the historical and the relation between the two in society (Mills 1959). Beginning narrative analyses with the subject's own family and place of origin is a way of quite literally incorporating this objective at the most fundamental level, thus narrative inquiry often begins here (Berger and Quinney 2005). Understanding where a person comes from is the first necessary step toward conceptualizing their current positionality and self-understanding. Working against the pervasive contemporary perception that "'straight' is to 'gay' as 'family' is to 'no family,'" there has been a dramatic proliferation in the last two decades and especially the last few years of literature on family and sexuality across several planes. These include studying adolescent LGBT youth within their families of origin, relationships between LGBT adults and their families of origin (Weston 1991), and—more recently—creative conceptions of partnering and parenthood among LGBT adults and the queering of traditional family models (Bergstrom-Lynch 2007; Allen and Demo 1995; Stacey 1991, 1996). This interest in alternative family models has extended even to the shelves of the nation's largest and most popular chain bookstores (Agigian 2004; Brill 2006; Clunis

and Green 1995), featuring such titles as *Confessions of the Other Mother: Non-biological Lesbian Moms Tell All* (Aizley 2006). Research and literature on LGBT families is quickly becoming its own interdisciplinary sub-field, including scholarship in science and technology, law, political science, public policy, family studies, psychology, social work, sociology, and queer theory.

### *Standpoint and Space*

Early feminist scholarship introduced new working definitions of standpoint and positionality as tools to describe the unique lives and knowledges of different types of people in society (Hooks 1984; Hartsock 1997; Collins 2000). Research dependent on these definitions is grounded in the epistemological assertion that there is no singular fundamental truth and that, as a consequence, social and other sciences should not attempt to claim objectivity or universal generalizability. Instead, individual and close attention to phenomena and positionalities can more realistically approximate truth. Recent scholarship on identity, especially qualitative and interview-based research, reflects this paradigm shift.

Georg Simmel (1903) identified one manifestation of modernity that was unrivaled in the breadth, depth, and permanence of its effect on individual psychology and social organization: the *metropolis*. In what is now a canonical sociological text, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, Simmel claims that people in the metropolis develop highly unique personalities, tastes, and attitudes in an attempt to assert some shred of individuality. The cosmopolitan metropolis encourages experimentation with all sorts of identities and offers the freedom and anonymity that make realizing this new capacity feasible. The ceremonious move from one's suffocating and intolerant hometown to the fervor, thrill, and permissiveness of the city remains a trope in the queer coming-of-age narrative. The perception of freedom and the experience of affirmation are key to encouraging queer identity development. The rise of visibility of gay and lesbian people and the development of queer communities has long been associated with urban centers (Chauncey 1994; Boswell 2005), and my

study participants have identified this move as the catalyst for their acknowledgment, acceptance, or integration of sexual identity.

### *The Dialectical to Post-structural Shift*

Earlier work on identity assumed a dialectical position at best, conceptualizing identity work as the interactional synthesis of two different perspectives or orientations. The dialectical approach to identity challenged some previously held essentializing assumptions and proposed increasingly complicated models to describe developing notions of self. For example, social research has only begun to move away from a body of scholarship almost exclusively on gay, lesbian, and bisexual identified people. Research on queer subjectivity is a relatively recent phenomenon, moving out of a comparatively prolific body of work on bisexuality (Berenson 2002; Bower and Mathieson 2002; Bradford 2004; Carr 2007; Meyer 2003). The post-structuralist shift moved from a dualistic model of interaction to a multiplicitous model, resisting the confinement of models at the onset and invoking a more complex epistemological standpoint.

### **Performativity**.....

The idea of performativity is central to several aspects of my research. First, the lens of performative studies brings a fresh, dynamic, and multidimensional focus to the interview setting and the relationship between the researcher and respondent. Second, the act of coming out—the most culturally recognizable mode of expressing sexual identity—is in various ways a performative process. Third, the concept of performativity frames my overarching understanding of identity and the way we construct notions of our self in conversation with others.

### *Performative Research*

Recent scholars conceptualize social research itself as a performative practice (Grace et al. 2006). This definition highlights the centrality of performance to the ways “we research our stories,

and to the ways we disseminate and make available our stories to others within and outwith the LGBT community” (Valentine 2008). Additionally, it underscores the fact that “narrative acts do not take place in a vacuum”, but are stories whose form and content are dependent on social context (ibid).

Researchers are increasingly interested in building a “collective understanding of [their] identity positions and research interests and experiences” (Grace et al. 2006:340–341). The expressed goal of this self-reflexivity is to reimagine the stories that emerge from the interview setting as co-constructed narratives in which the research is inextricably implicated. This shift recognizes the multi-dimensionality of dialogue, an area of research that historically went unaddressed in spite of the fact that “The very notion of ‘dialogue’ is culturally specific and historically bound, and while one speaker may feel secure that a conversation is happening, another may be sure it is not” (Butler 1990:20). The construction, definition, and maintenance of communities each has a stake in the idea of performative research: the “special objective of composing a shared heritage of the stories of a marginalized community” risks much when it relies on the mediation of outside researchers to collect, understand, synthesize, and disseminate information about itself to others (Valentine 2008:49). Involving the researcher and analyzing the research setting and dynamics can be a step toward self-definition—of selves and of communities (Esterberg 1997).

### *Sexual Identity as Process and Performance*

Both the cultural trope and the personal experience of coming out is an example ripe for rich theoretical analysis. As a constructed category of subjectivity that depends on being socially situated, theories of performativity facilitate an understanding of the importance of coming out to gay and lesbian people. My analysis will incorporate key elements from the thinking of both sociologist Erving Goffman and feminist queer critical theorist Judith Butler.

Erving Goffman (1959) articulated a dramaturgical approach to human interaction that conceptualized relationships, and all of life in general, as a sort of *drama* in which individuals had to learn and perform roles. Probably most significant for a study of queer people is Goffman's recognition that an individual's role is dynamic rather than static: that is, a person's performance of role depends on their contextual situation. This observation is illustrated time and again in narratives of gays and lesbians: their presentation of self, especially their presentation of their sexual identity, shifts perceptibly between locations of tolerance and acceptance and spheres in which homophobia, heterosexism, and a traditional orientation toward gender and sexuality persevere. Extending his drama metaphor, Goffman pays due attention to all aspects in the play: the actors, props, set, and more. Goffman invests in his conception of the individual the agency to take all these things into consideration in a given performance. He views the actor's main goal as maintaining *coherence*. This is achieved through an assembly of the right costume, props, comportment, and demeanor that will produce a recognizable enactment of the role he is performing.

The most important part of making this performance culturally intelligible is the ability of the actor to perceive, gauge, and respond to social cues and situations. This emphasis on interpersonal relations is the foundation for theories of *symbolic interactionism*, the subfield of sociology in which Goffman was deeply invested throughout his career. The interaction between actors, Goffman asserts, is what bridges *structure* (set, script, props) and *agency* (costume, comportment, demeanor). Thus, the realm of relation and interaction is the medium through which structure acts upon individuals, but also where individuals can influence or accede to structure. Structure and agency simultaneously enable and limit each other. Symbolic interactionism will become an important conceptual framework within which to understand my respondents' interactions with family members, within relationships, and both within and outside of queer circles.

Judith Butler (1999) rejects notions of personhood based on coherence and continuity, saying such features are actually socially instituted and maintained norms of *intelligibility*. What upsets the notion of identity and “the person” is the emergence of apparently incoherent or discontinuous (gendered) beings. For Butler, intelligible genders are those that in some sense institute and maintain this sense of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. This expectation of cohesion and continuity is just as much a cultural construct as gender has long been acknowledged to be. On the other hand, biological sex is typically seen as the un-constructed and pre-social (“*pre-discursive*”) on which culture acts. This myth effectively secures the internal stability and binary frame for sex. Conceptualizing sex as pre-discursive effectively functions as a naturalizing move, which aims to hide the constructedness of sex and gender, and introduces these categories as natural and assumed. Butler’s unmasking this *myth of naturalness* thrusts center stage the importance of the recognizing the responsibility of social context and culture in the construction and maintenance of identities that are often taken for granted as natural. This is, of course, a fundamental concept for sociology. An individual’s understanding, acceptance, experience, and integration of sexual identity rests solidly on the degree to which they reject myths of naturalness.

At the societal level, debates on the naturalness of sexual orientation continue to rage—ironically with the most significant tension within our own community: between queer critical theory and LGBT identity politics. Finally, for Butler, gender is defined as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 1999, 43-44), an act which “requires a performance that is repeated” (178), and a “stylized repetition of acts” (179). This—the *theory of performativity*, which is nearly single handedly responsible for Butler’s canonization in her area of scholarship—intentionally echoes Goffman, even incorporating the same imagery as illustration.

These theories of performativity and symbolic interactionism constitute the framework within which to place the act of coming out. Coming out asserts itself as the primary way queer identity is constructed in a multiplicity of ways, namely: when individuals come out repeatedly over a lifetime to different people and in different places, they simultaneously disclose and construct their sexual identity for themselves and others; and the collective act and cultural expectation of coming out reinforces the power of self disclosure to construct the very existence of sexual identity.

### *The Socio-linguistics of Coming Out*

Because the phenomena of coming out is imbued with cultural significance and, to some degree, recognized as something most LGBT-identified people have in common, many areas of scholarship are devoted to analyzing its function, role, and form. The act of coming out is the object of study of many disciplines, including cultural studies, dramaturgy and performative studies, community and kinship theory, and various identity studies. Socio-linguistics, which lies at the intersection of sociology and language study, approaches coming out as a spoken communicative act. Arguably more quantitative in the presentation of information, socio-linguistics identifies and defines different types and aspects of coming out (Chirrey 2003). Coming out may take the form of a locutionary (verbal) act or illocutionary (non-verbal) act. The perlocutionary aspects of coming out are also considered: that is, what sort of reception is incited and how the listener is implicated. Deborah Chirrey contends that coming out is too “momentous” of an act to constitute a mere “speech act”, but is rather better conceptualized as a performative act with multiple dimensions, forms, and functions.

Socio-linguistics also encourages the analysis of identity as a social and cultural construction, as opposed to a “primarily internal psychological phenomenon” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005:585). The socio-linguistic approach to identity is well summarized in Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall’s 2005 article, “Identity and Interaction: A Sociocultural Linguistic Approach”, in which the authors

“propose a framework for the analysis of identity as constituted in linguistic interaction” (ibid). This framework outlines five essential principles, whose significance I believe merits quotation at length:

1. The Emergence Principle: Identity is best viewed as the emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practice and therefore as fundamentally a social and cultural phenomenon.
2. The Positionality Principle: Identities encompass (a) macro-level demographic categories; (b) local, ethnographically specific cultural positions; and (c) temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles.
3. The Indexicality Principle: Identity relations emerge in interaction through several related indexical processes, including: (a) overt mention of identity categories and labels; (b) implicatures and presuppositions regarding one’s own or others’ identity position; (c) displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as interactional footings and participant roles; and (d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups.
4. The Relationality Principle: Identities are intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy.
5. The Partialness Principle: Any given construction of identity may be in part deliberate and intentional, in part habitual and hence often less than fully conscious, in part an outcome of interactional negotiation and contestation, in part an outcome of others’ perceptions and representations, and in part an effect of larger ideological processes and material structures that may become relevant to interaction. It is therefore constantly shifting both as interaction unfolds and across discourse contexts.

These five principles represent both the major current scholastic approaches to identity as well as my epistemological assumptions running through this thesis. A socio-linguistic approach to identity analysis essentially ties together multiple modes of inquiry (e.g. regarding the uses of narrative and the construction of the subject), all fundamentally rooted in the Butlerian and Foucauldian concept that identity emerges from discourse and that there can be no pre-discursive truth.

### *Ritual*

Interest in private and collective ritual practices has been a central tenant in the study of society since the birth of sociology. This object of study encompasses the greatest and smallest aspects of human life and interaction: belonging “to the most incidental as well as to the most significant episodes of human life” (Turner 2006:525). A Durkheimian approach to ritual (consequently, an essentially sociological approach to ritual) sees such practices as instrumental in “the maintenance of both social conformity and social solidarity” (526). Building on this basic functionalist view, later contributions to ritual theory sought to explain the place of such practices in



constructing, maintaining, or resisting hierarchical social structures, marked by individual rank and class (Goffman 1959; Turner 1969).

More recent literature on ritual in the lives of LGBT people suggests the need for redefinition. Rituals integral to (heterosexual) mainstream society might seem to be replicated in queer communities, but are often functionally and significantly different (Weston 1991:161–162). These rituals, of which weddings seems to time and time again figure in as prime examples, actually serve to isolate, exclude, and ostracize LGBT family members, constructing them as “outsiders within” (Oswald 2001, 2003). The effects of such ritual practices for LGBT people are two-fold: while they are constructed as others, heterosexual family members’ sense of belonging and group cohesion is emphasized by this dynamic of difference. Such work suggests that some of the most fundamental theories and models of society may not be universally generalizable, generating a growing need for research attentive to the differences in marginalized communities.

## **Narrative** .....

Recent scholarship’s summation in a sound bite asserts, “The narrative turn in the social sciences has been taken” (Denzin 2000). The age of narrative is upon us:

The linguistic and textual basis of knowledge about society is now privileged. Culture is seen as a performance. Everything we study is contained within a storied, or narrative, representation. Indeed, as scholars we are storytellers, telling stories about other people’s stories. We call our stories theories. (ibid)

This epistemological orientation frames my approach to the interview as mode of social inquiry, to coming out stories as the primary mode of expressing and constructing sexuality, and to what it is I am doing as a researcher and writer with the collection of stories that constitutes my data.

### *Narratives of Stigma*

Goffman identifies and describes three different types of stigma that mark people as having a “spoiled identity”: first, those with physical defects on the body; second, those with “blemishes of

individual character”; and third, tribal stigmas such as race or religion “transmitted through lineages” (Goffman 1963:4). Homosexuality is cast into the second of these types. Coming out of the age of identity politics, members of stigmatized groups became the objects of analysis. Especially where there is political or social power at stake, those members increasingly took the telling of their stories into their own hands. Recent literature theorizes how narratives of personal feelings and experiences—through emotion language—“mediates between culture and the person to sustain social organization” (Swindler 2001). Work on emotion language describes how emotions are only culturally recognizable and understandable through regulating rules and norms. While at face value, narratives of pain may seem able to transcend the traditional hierarchical organization of social power, they may actually serve to reproduce such hierarchies (Moon 2005). Dawne Moon explores how the context and content of narratives of pain regarding homosexuality and religion (of both LGBT religious people and their heterosexual families) can reify social hierarchies the actors may be actively attempting to subvert. Specifically, Moon found that “Pain effectively served as a moral entrance fee for gay men’s and lesbians’ admission to the church, with putative heterosexuals retaining the power to determine whether particular lesbians and gay men demonstrated the appropriate emotions” (Moon 2005:332). It’s not unusual for coming out stories or vocalizations of same-sex desire to be received as narratives of pain—even if that was not the intention of the speaker. For many LGBT people, the masking disapproval or intolerance as genuine worry or concern by parents or other influential authoritative figures was transparent and ill-received.

Aside from the established scholarship of identity politics, there are other growing arenas in which narratives of stigma figure prominently. For the purposes of this study, these are namely narratives of sexual violence and mental health. Encouragement to actively claim membership in these stigmatized groups, effectively calling for the integration of such stigmatized experiences into the very core of their identities, is actually formally facilitated by the institution that serves as the

geographical backdrop for my study. That is, the University organizes, trains, funds, and publicizes speaker's bureaus around mental illness and LGBT identities and hosts various forums for survivors of sexual violence to tell their stories.

### *The Epistemological Promise of Narrative Analysis*

The theoretical orientation of my research does not only inform how I conceptualize definitions and problems, it directs my methodology and guides both my data collection and analysis processes. More importantly, it invests this project (and other narrative-based identity studies) with a potential and power to challenge ontological assumptions and move toward a new epistemological paradigm. I assume a feminist epistemological standpoint, which, as I hope this section shows, fits seamlessly into qualitative trends in postmodern scholarship.

In the late 1950s, C. Wright Mills penned his innovative—and now canonical—*The Sociological Imagination* calling for a qualitative turn in methodological orientation. With the expressed goal of “grasping history and biography and the relations between the two within society,” Mills underscores the relatedness of individual troubles and societal issues—or, as feminist consciousness-raising groups would refer to it a decade later—‘the personal is political’ (Mills 1959). So began the age of anti-positivism: a rally against what Mills dubbed “abstracted empiricism” and a shift away from an attempt at objective, value-free inquiry. Qualitative sociology stresses the inevitable effect of the researcher on their object of study, highlights counter-factuals, challenges what is taken for granted as common knowledge, and asserts the existence and importance of alternative ways of seeing the world. These interventions are rarely a-political: after all, a major impetus for the turn away from quantitative method was a desire to penetrate deeply into issues of class and power, often resulting in a destabilizing of a single, authoritative viewpoint rooted in hegemonic ideology.

Specifically, this research relies heavily on a type of qualitative sociological model-building known as grounded theory: put simply, a methodology for “building theory from data” (Corbin and

Strauss 2008:1). I began the data collection process with an intentional patience and openness regarding what themes and issues would arise as most salient in the participants' narratives. As the data collection process progressed and the early stages of analysis began, the theoretical foundation my interpretation of the data would rely upon became more clearly defined. At the same time, some ambiguities and incongruities solidified. The difficulty of resigning complete control in this way is compensated for in gaining a deeper and truer account of the phenomena under investigation, an invitation to explore ongoing emergences of curiosity, an opportunity to imbue scientific investigation with imagination and creativity, and—most fulfilling of all, in my experience—the humble pleasure of learning from your participants. Several research aims dictated my choice of a qualitative, interview-based methodology, namely: to develop detailed descriptions, integrate multiple perspectives, describe process, develop a holistic description, learn how events are interpreted, and bridge intersubjectivities (Weiss 1994).

Grounded theory—and qualitative method, more generally—appear against the backdrop of postmodernism (alternatively called deconstructionism by those concerned primarily with texts and poststructuralism by feminist scholars). Michel Foucault, one of the most prominent and pivotal theorists in the movement, demonstrated how authoritative figures, whose power is made manifest in and through the context of institutional structures, defined the criteria for the generation of knowledge, governed its dissemination, and policed its transgressors. In solidifying these normative standards, this regime simultaneously created space for the production of inferiorized knowledges (called specialized knowledges by feminist scholars) and disciplinary Others. Foucault is interested in the complex interplay of these knowledges and the resulting effect on structure and power. His analyses speak to the macro level—describing structures and systems—by foregrounding the biographical and historical. The setting of the structured research interview is itself ripe for analysis.

Feminist scholarship is also interested in power, the production of knowledge, and the location of the subject within these spheres. Feminist epistemology represents a paradigmatic shift “exemplified by the many reinterpretations, reconstructions, and reanalyses of existing data” from the standpoint of those at the margins of society. In one historical moment, this shift may have been concerned primarily with women, but the effects of such theory continue to echo broadly and deeply throughout disciplines in both the humanities and social sciences. In this thesis, I am able to take advantage of this far-reaching influence, but choose to refocus attention on women.

Early feminist criticism of the social sciences argued that knowledge is inherently dialectical (Westkott 1979). The concept of dialectics—the synthesis of a thesis with its potentially contradictory antithesis—is key in several ways: dialectics facilitates the inclusion of counterfactuals, underscores the reciprocity inherent in social research, and supports subversive influence on hegemonic structure. I am interested in this dialectical relationship specifically where it is found in the interaction between storyteller and listener, researcher and subject, interviewer and respondent. I apply Goffman’s concept of symbolic interaction to my analysis of these dynamics, paying close attention to where and how the notion of stigma influences respondent narratives.

The specific production of knowledge I am interrogating is the construction of sexual identity through the discursive practice of storytelling, which I define as a performative act. Throughout, my understanding and discussion of narrative is anchored by Foucault’s attention to enforced silence, incited speech, and power in discursive practice.

## METHODOLOGY

When I began this study, I sought to explore, in depth, the dynamics at play in non-heterosexual young women's transition from home and family of origin to attend college in a new city. I was most interested in how this major shift in life circumstance affected my participants' (personal and general) thoughts about sexuality, identity development, feelings of inclusion and community, and experiences with and role within their immediate family. I consider these initial interests and questions to constitute the *substantive frame* of my study: that is, "the set of topics the study explores, taken together" (Weiss 1994:15). My participants reflected on these issues in various ways, but what became most salient and interesting to me was the ways in which they did so. I'd never before spoken about identity development with such a diverse group of people in so direct and candid a way. Through these interviews, I became cognizant of a variance in vocabulary, noted key actors, emphasis on personal experience, general recitation trajectory, and apparent motivations of my participants' stories. In a sense, I had been asking these women to tell me their coming out stories. I found that interpretations of what this meant—both in terms of how to do it, why to do it, and what counted—varied to a person, especially when considering the impact of other recognized macro categories of identity such as race, class, gender identity and expression, and religion.

I continued to explore the questions with which I began, but allowed my attention to these varying aspects of narrative to refocus my analysis objectives. Taken together, this thesis is a step toward filling a few holes in the research on identity development: I highlight the experiences and beliefs of young adult women (for whom age and gender continue to be barriers from equal inclusion in the literature), capturing a snapshot in time without the noise distortion of the more common retrospective analysis, and challenging the hegemonic coming out model. I explore the

degree to which the stories collected in my interviews constitute subversive narratives and the importance of the university location as the facilitating context.

### **Data Collection**<sup>3</sup> .....

In outlining the preparatory steps in qualitative research design, Weiss proposes thinking of the sample as a “panel of informants” that includes “the people who together can provide the information the study requires” (Weiss 1994:18). He goes on to describe four distinct entities we might want to learn about: events, an organization, a loose collectivity, or a social institution. My panel of informants actually seems to bridge these distinctions. Non-heterosexual undergraduate college women are, by definition, located within the same academic institution and they compose a sort of loose collectivity based on their identification with an oppressed minority group. Additionally, the women in my sample have all to some degrees crossed paths through affiliation with, investment in, or knowledge of specific organizations and events at the University targeted to LGBT students. Neither random nor convenience sampling, this study’s sampling methodology is what qualitative sociologists have referred to as purposeful sampling or criterion-based sampling (Maxwell 1996:70).

### *Sampling Method*

The sampling method employed in this study was non-random, purposive, self-selected sampling. This method, and my sample size, both preclude generalizability to the general population of non-heterosexual college women. The purpose of this method, rather, is to give voice and contribute and build theory. Though generalizability is a stated goal of the discipline, I maintain that it is neither possible nor desirable for this population. While identifying one’s population has always

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<sup>3</sup> My research design was reviewed and approved by the Social Research branch of the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). This process was generally unremarkable; the only interaction I had with the IRB after my initial approval in late summer 2008 was for a routine amendment approving changes to my recruitment flyer.

been an emphatic problem of sex research, we might go one step further and conclude that in all actuality this population doesn't even exist since sexuality is not a static or objectively-defined modality or category. What this method does offer, however, is the opportunity to probe deeply into the complexities and intersections of respondent identity and their reflection in narrative content and structure.

### *Recruitment Method*

I recruited study participants in a variety of ways. In the earlier stages, I attended well-known LGBT-related events on campus, including a campus mixer aimed at freshman and new students and the open house of the LGBT office in the student union. I handed out fliers<sup>4</sup> and discussed the study in person with interested parties. Immediately, I encountered the problem of who counted. At these events, I self-consciously approached only people I judged to be women, occasionally even skipping over groups I assumed to be entirely straight (I made these assessments based on an unscientific consideration of their apparent comfort level, interest in particular groups' and organizations' booths, and my perception of the heteronormativity of their gender presentation). The only person to respond to this first series of fliers—and the first respondent for my study—was someone I recalled intentionally targeting at one of these campus events: a tall and willowy transwoman I didn't want to leave out when I handed fliers to her friends. Dylan, as she's called throughout this thesis, bore a central role in the definition of gender. I agonized over what words to put on my fliers to refer to what sexual identities I was interested in. Ultimately, I chose to commit the sin of defining my 'other' category against the hegemonic subjectivity (using "non-heterosexual") in an effort to be as inclusive and unconstrained as possible. On the other hand, I decided to retroactively define my flyer's use of "women" according to the gender identities of my respondents (my first, and perhaps most influential, use of grounded theory).

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer.



A brief description of the study was included in the LGBT office's monthly newsletter and sent out in a mass-email to both list-servs and individual students (laying the groundwork for snowball sampling, should I need to employ it). Large batches of these flyers were posted twice around campus in major lecture halls, computer labs, the student union, the main undergraduate library, and stall doors of women's restrooms in all of these locations. The vast majority of participants responded to my second series of fliers, this time in color and including language I hoped would target participants I anticipated being under-represented (women who did not label their sexuality, weren't out, or were still questioning). In the end, the opposite ended up being true. A smaller portion of participants engaged in LGBT social or political life on campus than those who eschewed defining their associations by their sexuality. I do recognize the potential influence of my flier on my results in several ways. First, women for whom sexuality was a more problematic issue or who were in the earlier stages of exploration may have been motivated to tell their stories as a means of making sense of themselves and receiving affirmation in the context of a legitimate research study that took them seriously. Second, my flyers were rather wordy and may have been more appealing to a certain type of woman comfortable with intellectual discourse and academic rhetoric.

### *Sample Descriptives*

I conducted in-depth interviews with a total of fourteen women.<sup>5</sup> Without the investment of much intentional effort on my part, the sample organically included relatively diverse representation in terms of race, nationality, class, religion, gender identity, and labels used to describe sexual identity. While these composition factors don't indicate any sort of generalizability, the individual

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<sup>5</sup> To collect data for a single section of my thesis ("Ritual Against the Durkheimian Tradition"), I sent questionnaires to my respondents via email in early January immediately following students' return from winter break. These questionnaires ask participants to reflect on their time with family over break, relay meaningful experiences, and share retrospective thoughts and feelings. Because a substantive portion of my sample did not respond and because this information is not elsewhere incorporated, I do not describe this secondary method of data collection at length.

identities of the participants figured centrally in their narratives and should be noted. I will introduce the reader to the women whose stories fill these pages in two ways: first, I will present an overview of the pool as a collective through the use of visual descriptive statistics of several macro-level categories, and second, I will present individual vignettes for each participant at that woman's first mention within which narrative excerpts may be contextualized. This information is further synthesized into a reference chart.<sup>6</sup>

Half my sample was white (seven of fourteen women),<sup>7</sup> while the remaining half included three African American women (with relatively widely divergent geographic, educational, and class backgrounds) and four first-generation American immigrants (from Uruguay, China, Bangladesh, and India), of whom all but one currently has US citizenship. Each of these immigrant women retains close contact with extended family still living in their home countries (this transnational existence and dynamic will be examined later in my discussion of location and place). It should be noted that my white respondents did not form a homogenous class: there is significant variation in terms of class, educational background and expectations, and sexual identification labels.

Religious identity<sup>8</sup> was a complex and contentious issue for almost all respondents. My classification of participants' religious background represents my consideration of the combination of several factors: religious affiliation of nuclear family while growing up, participation and formalized practice throughout childhood and adolescence, and personal past religious identity. For a couple participants, religious background represents a collective consciousness shared with a community organized around another aspect of their identity. Experiences with religion varied across denomination and figures more prominently in these narratives for some than others.

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix D: Participant Demographics – Reference Sheet.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix E, Figure 1 – Race / Ethnicity.

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix E, Figure 2 – Religious Background.

Because the location of this study was a large, well-funded, and prestigious university, students are regularly drawn from every state and from all over the world.<sup>9</sup> Over half of my participant pool receives in-state funding and has some type of formal residence in Michigan. In considering geographical representation, I distinguish between several areas of Michigan: the northern and western Lower Peninsula is less populated and generally more conservative. Though the remaining three categories are geographically quite close to one another (the suburbs of metropolitan Detroit, Detroit proper, and Ann Arbor), the differences in locational context I am interested in couldn't be more significant. Though a trip from Detroit to Ann Arbor by car may take just over half an hour, the distance traversed represents whole worlds. While Detroit's crumbling public school system continues to receive dismal grades in nation-wide comparative studies, any and all of the wide variety of both public and private education alternatives offered in Ann Arbor prepare students to be successful and productive members of society.<sup>10</sup> Ann Arbor is thought to be Michigan's intellectual and cultural Mecca, while the other suburbs that surround Detroit (including one of the single richest counties in the country) are full of McMansions, big cars, and lots of white people. Racial disparities in housing and education between Detroit and its suburbs have long been the target of criticism and study.

My original conception of this study involved only freshman participants.<sup>11</sup> I was persuaded to interview undergraduate women of all years not only because it seemed hardest to solicit younger women, but because several academic advisors and staff personnel at the LGBT student office encouraged me to consider in what stage of identity development first-year students would be. They believed interviews on changing perspectives, critical experiences, and deepening self awareness would be more varied and interesting across college years. I found this to be the case. Additionally,

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix E, Figure 3 – Geographical Representation.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix E, Figure 5 – Type of High School Attended.

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix E, Figure 4 – Current Year in College.

time spent immersed in the unique social and academic life of college seemed to influence the *way* some participants told their stories, the terms they used to describe themselves, their definitions and conceptual framework for queer ideas, and the emphasis they placed or did not place on queer community involvement. In the end, I did not try to control for an even distribution of participants across years. I interviewed twice as many upper classmen (juniors and seniors) as lower classmen (freshmen and sophomores).

I had anticipated receiving mostly responses from women who were concentrating<sup>12</sup> in subjects tangentially related to social issues or those subjects that might lend themselves to creative self-expression. Most of my participants studied social sciences or humanities; only a few studied hard sciences, math, or engineering (disciplines in which women are generally under-represented). I was struck by the number of women who had extended their interest in issues related to personal identity to their academic career. I don't think it is surprising that personal interests are applied in this way, but I do think it's important in terms of understanding the impetus to participate in this study: perhaps women already predisposed to self-reflective identity study had unique motivations to speak about their sexuality to a researcher.

I will spend a significant amount of time elaborating on the use of labels to self-identify sexual orientation throughout this thesis. Suffice it to say, most participants were well acquainted with discussing their views on and uses of descriptive labels.<sup>13</sup> This did not seem to be an uncomplicated issue for a single participant. I have organized participants according to sexuality identification based on the most common labels given during interviews, breaking their use into two categories: primary (those labels first mentioned, usually used in discussing their sexuality with others, such as in the interview setting) and secondary (those labels mentioned subsequently,

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix E, Figure 6 – Academic Concentration(s).

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix E, Figure 7 – Sexuality Identification Labels.

typically reserved for conversations inviting elaboration and used only in certain contexts, nearly always accompanied by an explanation).

All participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity. I have attempted to choose names reflective of ethnic, religious, or national identity where applicable. The narrative excerpts interspersed through this text were taken directly from transcriptions of the recorded interviews (or, in the cases of Martina, Sara, and Talia, from approximations appearing in my field notes). All quotations appear in their original form except where omissions of excessive “ums” or “likes” improved readability without sacrificing meaning. All replacements or additions inserted for clarification are denoted by bracketing.

### *Location*

Recruitment efforts targeted current enrolled undergraduate students at a large public research university in the American Midwest. I was interested in my respondent’s experiences of their transition from their family of origin and hometown, and thus asked everyone for their impressions of the city and university to contextualize their location here. As one might expect, both respondent’s opinions about and experiences with academic life, the campus climate, and college social life were influenced by where and from whom they came.

Approximate enrollment is 25,000 in the undergraduate programs and 15,000 in graduate and professional programs. The school is located in a city of a relatively small population (approximately 115,000 permanent residents) considering its recognition as the state’s cosmopolitan, intellectual, and cultural Mecca. The university has a rich athletic tradition, a vibrant social scene, but most of all, a distinguished academic reputation. Both the university and the city are known nationally to be relatively liberal and progressive.

The site of these interviews is actually central to this thesis. In outlining a sociology of narrative, Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey (1995) locate the third and final condition for generating

subversive stories in the potential of collective circumstance and certain institutions. They propose that certain institutional sites, such as the university, “create both a common opportunity to narrate and a common content to the narrative” (1995:221). Indeed, the structure of my interviews did both: the expressed intention of my recruitment design was to reach as many (different types of) women as possible, and I incited common content by asking similar questions on a prepared list of themes. Later, I will discuss the implications of doing this research in this location: the particular ways in which certain campus authorities incite declarations of identity and experience, the uses of academic discursive practices, and the impact on interviewer/respondent dynamics. Ultimately, I attempt to illustrate the potential power and restraints inherent in the university’s role in facilitating subversive narrative.

### **Data Analysis** .....

Joseph Maxwell encourages the combination and overlap of what he identifies as the three major groups of qualitative analytic methods: memos, categorizing strategies, and contextualizing strategies (Maxwell 1996:78). My analysis might be thought of as taking place in two stages that bleed into one another: first, I use categorizing strategies to sort through the raw data of my interviews (described in detail below). This initial organizational process helped me to identify and expound upon themes that arose through my inductive data collection process. Having identified and roughly defined my conceptual categories, I moved to utilize categorizing strategies: namely, narrative analysis based on individual case studies. Because my sample group and the themes of this study centered on marginalized sexualities, one could argue I also engage in a sort of ethnographic microanalysis (*ibid*).

I transcribed each recorded interview, elaborating upon and typing field notes where applicable. Transcriptions were made using speed-variable dictation and transcription software. This allowed me to spend a great deal of time and attention to capturing in text the respondent’s

exact words, phrasing, annunciation, emphasis, and hesitation. Maxwell considers these organizational processes to be an additional opportunity for analysis (ibid). I like to think this study utilized textual analysis in a literal sense, as well as only one tenant of attention to narrative. That is, *what* was said was as important as *how*, *where*, *when*, and to *whom* it was said in helping me attempt an inclusive and contextual answer to *why*.

### *Coding and Textual Analysis*

I began analyzing transcriptions the old fashion way: on printed paper and with colored pens. After transcribing three or four interviews, I came up with a list of ten conceptual categories based on common themes. They are as follows:

**External coming out:** Implicit or explicit declarations of desire or identity to other people (including family, friends, and peers in the academic environment).

**Internal coming out:** Recognizing, understanding, and exploring one's own sexuality.

**Labels:** The terms used to describe desire or identity in various contexts.

**Intersectionality:** Other important identity categories and their relevance to experience of sexuality (namely: race/ethnicity, religion, class, and gender identity).

**Relationships and dating:** Meaningful experiences and interactions with romantic potentials; alternatively, the importance or relevance of their absence.

**Family:** Perceived role within nuclear family, influential experiences or interactions (especially regarding sexuality and coming out), abstract ideas about structure, and expectations for one's own.

**College life:** Role of attendance within socioeconomic and familial context, involvement, and role in facilitation exploration of sexuality.

**Academic discursive practices:** Couching exploration of sexuality within academic rhetoric as legitimating practice, influence of intellectualism or academia on ideas about sexuality.

**Sexual violence:** Experiences in one's life or the lives of loved ones and reflections on relevance to sexuality and identity.

**Mental health:** Impact of sexuality on psychological well-being, relevance of sexuality to episodes of depression and unhealthy coping mechanisms.

The conception and definition of these categories was a product of grounded theory: they represent common themes that arose from my body of interviews rather than pre-defined expectations. Though some conceptual categories closely resemble the thematic categories of my interview guide, others are completely organic and reflect ideas and experiences shared by several women that I did not anticipate. The overarching structure and intention of my analysis shifted accordingly.

I assembled collections of interview excerpts organized around these resulting themes, keeping careful notes tracking overlap and intersection. This process involved a successive stages of broadening and narrowing: I'd expand upon my carefully narrowed research scope to make way for the role of grounded theory, find commonalities among all the new information, distill these commonalities into new and narrower themes, revise, and repeat.

Through the course of my interviewing and early data analysis, I felt myself strongly and deeply interested in the data I had collected, the stories I'd been told, the distinctive voice and style of each individual, apparent motivations for participation, and the complex interpersonal dynamics at play. Gradually, I decided to turn what I'd intended to be a single chapter on narrative into the overarching frame of analysis within which to explore the multiplicity of issues woven through my participants' stories.



## REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

The validity, utility, and ingenuity of this project centers on some critical choices regarding methodology. There has been a recent critique of interview studies on identity that relied on retrospect and memory (Diamond 2008). By interviewing relatively younger respondents than in studies seeking to comment on the same issues of identity, I am able to capture a real-time snapshot of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. This presupposes narratives filled with contradiction, ambiguity, and a relative lack of internal cohesion. Because science necessitates skepticism and social interaction inevitably involves deception, the concept of “believing the interviewee” becomes understandably controversial (Reinharz 1992:28). An analysis broadly concerned with narrative acts and processes is able to incorporate these difficulties by interrogating them rather than trying to iron them out or explain them away.

Respondents consented<sup>14</sup> to being asked questions about sexuality and coming out, thoughts on and experiences with family, college life, and where they found community. The structural interview guide I prepared<sup>15</sup> outlines these major categories, but did not have a set stock of questions. Rather, respondents were encouraged to respond to questions only insofar as they felt relevant. I encouraged everyone to direct the interview to the degree they felt comfortable with and to share what they felt were their most defining experiences, even if the researcher I did not necessarily inquire about them directly. Consequently, individual interviews look somewhat different from one another. Each woman was invited to respond to my prepared themes, but I followed her direction and pacing so long as I felt she was giving me relevant data.

Qualitative, postmodern, and feminist approaches to social research all prescribe elucidation on the interviewer’s role and effect on their subject. Where there is no singular objective truth to be

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix B: Informed Consent.

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix C: Interview Guideline.

found, there is much to learn about power, relationships, interaction, and location in society. By interrogating—rather than ignoring or attempting to erase—the role of the researcher, social science uncovers and illustrates through its method those manifestations of power being investigated. It has been well-established in the literature that the combinations of recognized macro-identities (e.g. race, class, religion, native language, ability, etc.) present between researcher and respondent influence the general climate, tone, and dynamic of the interview setting in both large and small ways.

### *Entrée and Inclusion*

From the earliest stages of communication with potential participants, I made it explicit that they would be telling their stories to someone not only familiar with issues they'd be describing, understanding of troubling emotions that might arise, and empathetic to concerns about anonymity and confidentiality, but someone with whom they shared the identity in question. My concluding assessment is that my being part of the queer community was a great asset to interviewer/respondent report, conversational climate, resulting interviews, and overall success of my study.<sup>16</sup>

I took detailed notes on my impressions of these dynamics immediately following each interview. By choosing nearly identical interview atmospheres for all of my participants (except, of course, the ones who asserted their own preference), I had a certain degree of control. These field notes capture details about apparent respondent comfort, ease, and familiarity with the setting in

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<sup>16</sup> I experienced the difference inclusion—or in this case, perceived exclusion—makes rather acutely in a later interview: having implicitly come out to each respondent before beginning the interview nearly a dozen times, I did not—though I only realized this in retrospect—make it clear to one woman that my motivation for doing this study was deeply personal and that I shared with her that key identity of interest. After twenty or so minutes of unremarkable conversational exchange (labored on my part and distracted on hers), I began to notice she was dropping explanations and clarifications of queer cultural phenomena into her responses. When she apologetically interrupted her train of thought to clarify who Bette and Tina were (arguably the most central two characters on *The L Word*, the Showtime drama about the lives of fashionable Los Angeles lesbians) I stopped her. “I know that show. You do know I’m queer, don’t you?” I ask. She laughed uncomfortably and responded indecisively and flippantly. I apologized for not making it clearer and empathized with the apparent difference it made for her. The forty minutes of interview that followed were palpably more interesting and engaging.

both the physical sense and the interpersonal sense. These reflections are inevitably one-sided and thus inherently limited since “no two persons participate in and experience a setting in exactly the same way” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995:63). I kept this rule in mind through the analysis of my interview recordings and transcriptions.

All but two interviews (which were not recorded and took place in coffee shops at the respondent’s request) took place in public campus buildings. Two were held in private offices, the remaining ten in reserved group study rooms in the main graduate library or the student union. These locations were quiet, private, and rather formal. After sensing one woman’s visible discomfort with my digital recorder through one early interview, I made the point to place the recorder on a chair out of view after obtaining permission to use it. Even interviews that began with tense apprehension relaxed into a sort of conversation skewed to their side, causing me to conclude it is the visibility—not the mere presence—of the recorder that signifies formality and incites anxiety. I intentionally did not take notes through any of the recorded interviews (which taught me a difficult but important lesson: you cannot trust even the most expensive of professional digital recorders, even if it’s your tenth time using it and especially when you’re depending on it capturing the most interesting, creative, and articulate of stories).

Because I saw myself as a sort of research instrument, I uncovered some of my own weakness and biases. Over the course of my research, I came to see the purpose of the researcher—and this research itself—to tell *a story of a story*. Initially disappointed in my inability to judge myself effectively objective and equally value-free in every interview, I now see these incongruities as inevitabilities of interviewing individual people and am thankful for my self-conscious acknowledgement of dynamics that probably affected their resulting narratives. For example, I was relatively more nervous prior to my interview with Dylan (a first year student who identified as a trans lesbian) than for the two interviews that took place prior to hers. Even then, I knew it wasn’t

that I was still so new at the process: I felt confident in my role as researcher and had been happy with the resulting interviews. I was concerned that Dylan might judge me relatively gender-normative and find it difficult to open up to me about the complexities of her coming out as a trans lesbian. I practiced how I would let her know I was trans-friendly and trans-educated without drawing undue attention to her gender, since the stated interest of my study was sexuality. In this situation, I think my preparation paid off. The resulting interview was one of my longest and best, and I think we were both comfortable on the whole. Here, my anticipation of potential issues that might arise due to interviewer/respondent dynamics set me up for success.

In another interview, I had not prepared myself to handle my participant's disclosures of serious familial dysfunction and personal trauma. This woman's background and experiences incited in me an overwhelming feeling that my questions—indeed, my purpose—were insignificant and unimportant in such a context. Though I am confident that I hid my discomfort and proceeded professionally, the resulting interview was one of my shortest, most shallow, and most unrewarding. The juxtaposition of these two very different outcomes of handling instances of discomfort or distraction has reinforced the idea that interviewing is above all a skill. I can improve my craft through anticipation, preparation, introspection, awareness, and constructive criticism.

#### *Motivations for Participant Involvement*

As advertised on my recruitment fliers, I offered participants a \$5 cash incentive. This hardly compensated for their time, however, as interviews averaged eighty minutes (the shortest interview was forty-five minutes and the longest was just over two and a half hours). The length of interview seemed to correlate to the participant's apparent comfort and enjoyment of the process. Longer interviews included more personal illustrations of general statements, greater depth and detail, and offered more opportunities to meaningfully expand upon and connect to responses.

For each respondent, certain topics were clearly difficult to discuss. Many women grew more serious or used a more somber tone to describe certain ideas and beliefs, growing emotional when illustrating such areas with familial interactions and personal experiences. I was uniformly given the distinct impression that involvement was purposive and meaningful and that these women found telling their stories to me affirming and relieving. One of the most interesting responses was the way in which more than one participant seemed to use the interview setting to work out unanswered questions and settle frustrating discontinuities. Having observed this dynamic in his own interviews, Weiss concludes, “the result is likely to be that the respondent becomes somewhat more comfortable with matters the respondent had previously felt troubled by” (123). In short, I conclude that the reason my interviews were as successful as they were and the reason I collected such insightful data was because participants sincerely enjoyed the process.

### *Strengths and Weaknesses*

Ideally, this study would have been longitudinal in design. Even if I were not able to follow respondents over time, completing more than one interview would have been extraordinarily beneficial in gaining entrée and trust, grasping the depth and complexity of individual stories, and theorizing about retrospect and internal cohesion in narratives. For these reasons, I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Diamond’s (2008) comprehensive book on women’s love and desire is the best on the subject to date—her pointed insight and nuanced conclusions are directly dependent on her methodology (in-depth, semi-structured interviews with approximately one hundred non-heterosexual women over the course of a decade).

My study would have benefited greatly from a series of pilot interviews. This would have allowed me to get a sense of what conceptual categories might arise early enough to take this into consideration in planning my interview guideline. Through the analysis and writing stages of this project, I realized I could have more narrowly defined my scope of interest to get more detailed

information. Of course, there is always the need to strike a balance between early definition and intentional openness. Here, I erred toward the latter. While this presented me with more difficult decisions to make regarding how to approach the data I'd collected in later stages, this was also a strength in terms of respondent rapport and openness.

To keep with my goal of making the interview setting feel as open and comfortable as possible, I wanted my respondents to feel as conversational as possible. I encouraged participants to direct the interview to the degree they felt comfortable, especially if I wasn't asking them questions that hit on experiences and beliefs most salient to them. Through my first couple interviews, I realized the placement of my recording device actually played a part in this: participants seemed visibly more at ease when the recorder was out of sight. Similarly, my relationship with the respondent tended to feel more open and comfortable when other study materials (e.g. consent forms, incentive envelope, interview guideline, my notebook) were out of the way. Keeping these materials out of the way and choosing to entirely immerse myself in the conversation at hand had been a consistent strength until one of my last interviews. During this interview, my digital recorder malfunctioned—something I might have caught had I been repeatedly checking in on it throughout the interview. In place of my longest and absolutely most interesting, thoughtful, and articulate interview was over two and a half hours of monotone static. I cried. I knew I couldn't ask the respondent to repeat the interview, and for the first time I wished I'd sacrificed some of that informal atmosphere and comfortable dynamic for pages of back up field notes. I retrospectively constructed what I could of her story, but her words were lost to me. This was the major disappointment of the three semesters I spent on this project.

For emphasis, I want to conclude by repeating what I felt to be my single greatest asset in these interviews and the greatest strength of my research: I'm gay, too. This shared axis of identity allowed me to have firsthand insight into a lot of the things my participants were telling me about. I

had privileged access to queer vernacular, cultural references, and a shared sense of place on this university campus. Furthermore, the sense of unity based on this shared axis of identity likely contributed to the spontaneous diversity of my sample: women from a wide range of racial, economic, and religious backgrounds participated in this study because they wanted to share with me their thoughts on sexuality. I also felt that this connection established an early sense of trust and understanding on the part of my respondents toward me as an individual and as a researcher.

# Chapter 1 | Declarations of Desire / Assertions of Identity

*Because philosophers cannot obliterate desire, they must formulate strategies to silence or control it; in either case, they must, in spite of themselves, desire to do something about desire.*

*---Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire**

Though sexuality is an innate human attribute, its management becomes considerably more complicated when it runs counter to traditional hegemonic models of desire. According to Foucault, while same-sex desire may have once been conceived of as behavior everyone was equally capable of engaging in, medico-legal authority has transformed the paradigm so that now those with such desires constitute new ontological beings: “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault 1978:43). Today, many queer people grasp the power of this distinction and utilize it according to how they wish to be perceived. Many people still believe that in order to be an effective social or political constituency, LGBT people must name themselves as such. Others—either out of an awareness of heterosexist prejudice or because they don’t feel connected to such categories—refuse to label themselves in this way.

In this chapter, I present the different names my participants have used in various settings over the years to identify their sexuality. My participants collectively draw a basic distinction between labeling themselves (e.g. “I am a lesbian”) and putting words to their experiences and feelings of desire (e.g. “I love/want her”). These distinctions seem to be something my participants are aware and in control of, changing their language according to context. In addition to this willful control of language, they also report feeling varying levels of association with different terms according to dating relationships and community immersion. Ultimately, the women I interviewed



displayed a collective wariness regarding the ability of labeling to adequately or effectively encompass themselves as sexual beings.

As the first chapter to introduce my respondents, I will spend some time introducing each individual woman at the first mention of her name. Some of the information mentioned here might not have direct relevance for the discussion at hand but is nonetheless important in the overall conception of her personhood and story. Elsewhere in my thesis, I will repeat information about these women as it is pertinent to that particular context. For consistency's sake, I try to bring up the same information for each woman—all of which is synthesized into the participant demographics reference chart as an appendix.

### **Approximating Identity Labels**.....

*We and those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue I shall call the normals.*

---Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*

Regardless of how they conceived of their sexualities, my participants experienced and typically responded to the intense societal pressure to adopt labels. Not a single woman I interviewed was without any sexual or romantic experience with the opposite sex, yet none felt they could call themselves heterosexuals. Having to call themselves something, they gave such naming practices thoughtful attention.

### *Naming Ourselves...*

Deja is an African American senior concentrating in Women's Studies. She attended an urban public magnet school in South Central, a rough neighborhood in Los Angeles, California. She is the first person in her family to attend college. Deja is active in both the black community and the LGBT community on campus. She was raised by her mother and grew up a part of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She had very ambivalent feelings about her same-sex attractions

through high school, which she confided in her gay male best friend. Deja has preferred to date women in college and currently identifies as lesbian.

Deja's response to my question about how she identified for other people perfectly captures the sort of dialectical and seemingly contradictory way my participants, on the whole, spoke of labels: "I always thought, 'I'm not straight'... I never really claimed being a lesbian as an identity... well, I guess I have [*long pause*]." In the interview setting, Deja takes her time settling on an answer, feeling free to change her mind. Deja gave me a glimpse into her inability to confine her sexual identity to a single box. Several women described experiencing internal confusion, finding it difficult to come out to themselves. In retrospect, Dylan can identify signs over the years preceding her coming out to herself.

Dylan came out as a transwoman and a lesbian in tandem upon her arrival from the East Coast this fall. She currently retains her masculine birth name. A white freshman concentrating in Art and Design, Dylan finds self-expression of her whole person through music and visual art. She attended a suburban public high school on the East Coast, but visits her father in the Midwest often. Her relatively liberal parents are loosely Protestant, but their religious background was not an influential part of her adolescence. Dylan struggles to find the right terms with which to identify, but finds 'heterosexual lesbian' the most meaningful at this point. Reflecting on her path to recognizing and defining her gender and sexuality, she says:

With the counseling system, it was only about halfway through when I started to talk about it. I was just so afraid of it myself: first realizing way back in middle school that I related far more to girls than I did with guys and it didn't just feel like it was cause I liked girls. I felt like there was something else there, and I was always afraid to think of it because I felt like there was something scary going on there. With things like that, it was always such a scary thing to deal with that it wasn't until about halfway through high school that I started to deal with it.

Here, Dylan describes responding to the incitation to speak made by authorities located within educational, psychological, and medical institutions. Despite feeling that speaking about "things like that" was inherently "scary", such thoughts were coaxed out of her by her school psychologist. The

educational and medical institutions serve a dichotomous purpose for Dylan: she simultaneously felt pressured to speak in such settings, but—having done so—retrospectively reads this pressure as freeing.

Heather, now a junior concentrating in biology, transferred to this university after a semester attending community college in her rural Midwestern hometown (she—like everyone where she grew up—is white). She is the first in her family to attend college—though her father had planned for her to work in his bakery—and pays her out-of-state tuition herself. Heather is the eldest of four daughters and hopes she is setting an example for the other women in her family to stand up to their controlling patriarch. She was raised in a strict, evangelical Lutheran home and attended religious private school until high school, when all the primary schools filtered into the one public high school. Heather began questioning her sexuality in college when she fell for her female best friend. Prior to this experience, she had only had romantic and sexual experiences with men. Heather recently began attending meetings for a campus LGBT organization and identifies as bisexual.

Like Dylan, Heather also retrospectively identifies a period of repression and self-imposed silence prior to her coming out to herself:

I'd write in my journal, "I really like her! But it's just as a friend!" Shouldn't that be a sign if I'm trying to convince myself in my own journal? [*Laughs.*] I think I knew all along, but I was in denial at that point. I remember the very first night in my new apartment [after moving out of Jemilla's place], I wrote in my journal, "I love her, damn it! I can't stand it anymore!" I finally let myself think about everything and that's when I started to let myself accept it—I still don't accept it all the way—it took a while before I was comfortable, well 'comfortable' with it [*making bracketing gestures with her fingers*].

Heather used writing as a place within which to explore her private thoughts and feelings, though even there found herself unable to remain completely honest with herself. Finding the space—literally and figuratively—to explore herself fully was necessary before she could write or say the things that she'd been repressing and denying. Heather seems to assert her own agency in this process rather than attribute changes to circumstance ("I finally let myself...").

Confronting feelings and thoughts honestly was experienced as an internal struggle. The pressure to assign oneself a label and draw that developing internal understanding outside and concretely assert it was difficult, if not impossible, for most of my participants. However, there were instances of comfortably and easily identifying with labels as a way to come to terms with one's identity.

Sue is a first-generation Chinese immigrant. She is a junior concentrating in Anthropology, LGBT Studies, and Asian and Pacific Islander Studies. Sue was raised in a strict Catholic household and was home schooled until her senior year, when she attended a secular private school in Ann Arbor. She has consistently identified as bisexual since high school, but her one relationship has been with a man. Sue grew up in a home that discouraged any conversation about sex, so even though she had started to develop feelings that contradicted what she learned at church and during homeschooling, Sue never felt pressured to interrogate her feelings or put a name on it:

When I was about fifteen or so, I discovered the word 'bisexuality' and I thought, "oh, that's what I am, that makes sense." There was no real process of, "oh my God, maybe I'm: fill in the blank." I had heard it and it made sense to me and I thought, "okay. Now I know."

For Sue, labeling was almost instantaneous. Interestingly, the context in which she first heard and identified with the word 'bisexuality' was at a church lecture on the sinfulness of sexual deviancy (one of the rare lapses in the silence surrounding the subject). Nevertheless, Sue immediately felt a connection with the term, feeling it adequately captured what she'd been feeling.

Like Sue, Emily also easily identifies with the label 'bisexual.' She is a white junior concentrating in English. She transferred here after attending a commuter branch of the university for a year. She attended a suburban high school in metropolitan Detroit. Despite some relationship-dependent label ambivalence, Emily currently identifies decisively as bisexual. Even though her identification is more clearly defined than most participants', even she arrived at an approximation rather than an answer:

I tended to come out with a label, saying, “I’m bisexual” instead of, “yeah, I have some feelings for men and some for women and I don’t really know.” That’s what I was thinking, but I just figured that bisexual was a pretty good label, and a pretty accurate label to describe what I felt about my attractions.

For Emily, “pretty good” is good enough. Most of the other women I interviewed, however, might have chosen a label but have relatively more ambivalent perceptions about its pragmatism and efficacy.

*...For the Normals*

If the process of naming and identifying with a particular label is almost always awkward and difficult for the people pressured to do it, then who is it really for? In giving explanations of why they chose one label and not another and why that choice might differ depending on context and circumstance, the women I interviewed tended to associate labeling with the impositions of dominant, straight culture. This is one factor in Dylan’s discussion of the futility of labeling:

I think partially it’s because it’s easier if it’s this empirical thing—for the outside. Then you can just have these specific queer labels that people are used to. . . . Luckily, you can just use the label transgender and not deal with all the varying aspects of it, which is why I use that label instead of transsexual, because I don’t really feel transsexual. It just feels like it’s sort of a useless thing because if you’re trying to include so much stuff [with the long acronyms], you just need one of these broad overall terms like ‘the Spectrum Center.’ That works because it means nothing at all. . . . That’s just how it is. We try to expand upon that and fit into that system and it just stops working. I think it makes people more comfortable if there are these nice labels to it. It took me a very long time to realize I was trying to find a label for myself and that eventually just found that I couldn’t do it and that it just doesn’t matter.

The way Dylan describes her process sounds almost like trying labels on for size before admitting they just don’t fit, which illustrates the impersonal prefabrication of those labels. Dylan outlines an interesting critique of the queer community’s complicity and complacency with the pressure to label: we keep adding letters to an ever-expanding alphabet soup of an acronym—which, of course, makes the Normals increasingly uncomfortable—until we reach the limit of this attempt at inclusion and trade LGBTQAAI (for example) for something “that works because it means nothing at all.” Dylan insists the “[system] just stops working” when we try to utilize labels in a way that makes sense for everybody. Her frustration gives way to apathy: she concludes, “I couldn’t do it and . . . it just doesn’t matter.”

Radhwa, like Dylan, connects her own relationship with labels to other people. She attended an urban public high school in Detroit, where her widower father raised her in a strict, close-knit Bengali<sup>17</sup> community. As a woman and an immigrant from Bangladesh, Radhwa feels it is no small success that she is currently a college junior concentrating in Classical Studies and South Asian Studies. Radhwa was raised Muslim and her religious identity figures prominently into her story. In spite of years of attraction and feelings for women, she is reluctant to explore dating because she anticipates an arranged marriage. Radhwa thinks of herself as a non-heterosexual (that is, she knows she is not straight, but feels she lacks the concrete experience prerequisite to claiming another label).

When I asked Radhwa if she identified with any particular labels, she answered by telling me what she thought of her friends' application of labels: "More or less—I don't know if I've picked it—but I've decided to go that traditional route, so my friends say I'm heterosexual. I'm not entirely opposed to that label, but I don't think I've applied it to myself." Here, the only time in all my interviews, there is explicit consideration of the label 'heterosexual' (though Radhwa does identify herself as a bisexual in passing elsewhere in her interview). Radhwa's resignation regarding labels makes sense in the greater context of her life: she seems to say that because she will have an arranged marriage it doesn't really matter anyway.

Kiara is an African American senior concentrating in sociology and philosophy. She is extremely active in the campus black community and founded a mentorship organization to reach out and give back to students in the Detroit public school system, where she grew up. Kiara grew up Baptist and her religious upbringing remains very influential. Kiara was raised by members of her extended family and has triumphed over trauma (some of her experiences are integrated into relevant discussions in other chapters). She is now the legal guardian of her teenage brother, who lives with her and attends school in Ann Arbor. Having shifted almost entirely to dating women,

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<sup>17</sup> People from Bangladesh are "Bangladeshi" and people who speak the language are "Bengali". Radhwa happens to be both, but I use her preferred term throughout.

Kiara currently identifies as a lesbian. Kiara was sympathetic to the Normals' preference for labels rather than being offered lengthy and personal explanations:

I'd rather give them a label and a short explanation [than be ambiguous]. There's a lot of people in the gay community who are like, "don't put a label on me," and I think that gets kind of old. It's just too much—it doesn't help someone. They're trying to find out more about you... at least give them something.

In her view, societal pressure to label is rooted in the basic desire to know someone better and not out of the fundamental human impetus to categorize. In regards to herself as an individual, Kiara admits to labeling for other people's comfort and to help them understand her.

As time progressed, I thought I should have some type of label. More and more, people would ask me about it and I felt myself not having an answer and I thought, 'I need to think of an answer so I don't have to keep giving the long story.' It really wasn't for me, for the most part, because I don't need a label for myself.

While Kiara's understanding of the pressure on LGBT people to label stems from a desire to know individual people, Dylan's understanding centers on the larger structure. She believes that people, on the whole, are uncomfortable with ambiguity and prefer things in "neat little boxes" so that it's easier to identify those who are different. Dylan is very resistant to this pressure on both the theoretical and personal levels:

I end up just having to explain [my trans identity] to people and having a lot of difficulty in conversations attempting to get them to understand how it all works. . . . Coming out as trans has just complicated my sexual orientation. I haven't had to come out with it, it just now involves an explanation: an explanation of terminology. I feel like I have to get out a chart whenever I do it.

Though Dylan described finding solace and affirmation in academic discourse, she admits to being frustrated with having to employ this knowledge in educating those around her: "It sort of feels like coming out like this involves some sort of acceptance that you'll have to educate people about it. I wish I could just say I'm a lesbian and have it be understood instead of having it be a big identity issue." Viewing her trans identity as the complicating variable, Dylan seems to believe that labeling oneself as a lesbian is accepted without much complication, though the women I interviewed who use this label do so with reservation and ambivalence. This betrays Dylan's conception of labels such as 'lesbian' to be comparatively more static and concrete than others.

Dylan's experience with labels illustrates that some labels arouse more discomfort, attract more questions, and require more explanation than others. Similarly, some labels have different types of (often stereotypic) associations—held and professed even by those within the queer community.

Allison is a white junior concentrating in kinesiology. She attended a prestigious, secular boarding school for fine arts and—after injuring herself dancing professionally—wants to become a physical therapist for dancers. Allison transferred to this university after attending community college in a big city out of state, where she had work with a ballet company. Though her family formally identifies as Catholic, Allison considers herself and her family largely non-religious. She actively resists adopting an LGBT label and is not an active part of any sort of LGBT community on campus, despite the importance and centrality of her four-year relationship with a woman.

Allison's thoughts on labeling are interjected with candid admissions of instances of homophobic prejudice:

I don't want to be viewed as a lesbian. I've been in a same-sex relationship for the last four years with the same person. I think that just being in love can be its own... orientation. I don't know why I have to define it for other people. *I'm* happy with who I am and what I'm doing. I think labeling myself just makes it easier for other people to classify me into something.

While her reasoning for not wanting to label at all is grounded in a fundamental resistance to forcing categorization, I push her on her reasoning for having a marked repulsion from the label 'lesbian.' She explains, "I feel like there are two types [of lesbians]: there's the butch lesbian and then there's the lesbians that will kind of do whatever for show. People have a hard time understanding that there's an in-between, so I just don't even try to identify." Allison has the sense that labels don't adequately capture her experience and will be misunderstood regardless. Ultimately, her resistance extends beyond herself to a broader ideology: "I don't identify as straight, but I kind of don't believe in labels either."



*On the Efficacy of Labels*

Jessica is a white senior concentrating in General Studies. She grew up in suburban metropolitan Detroit, and is the first person in her family to go to a four-year college. Jessica emphasized her participation in my study was due to her enjoyment of sharing her positive coming out story. She is very involved in LGBT student life and has held leadership positions in various student organizations. Jessica shares the same apprehension of labels, but in a slightly different way. Among my participants, Jessica is unique in that she never experienced significant stigmatization or exclusion based on her sexuality. Even as a young child and adolescent, Jessica never felt like she was different: “I never saw myself or my [queer] identity as different from anyone else’s. It never really became that.” For her, labeling simply feels unnecessary.

She goes on to provide some deeper insight into her history and ideas:

I knew that I thought women were pretty since I was four. But I don’t think that I ever put a label on it. I still don’t like to. I don’t think there’s any need to. I don’t think that it’s something that makes me different than other people. I think being a part of the community is something that I can label. I think that’s why I usually identify as gay, because I see ‘gay’ as a word for the LGBT community. . . . I never knew it was different, I still don’t think it is different. I think everyone’s queer in some way.

She asserts an unambiguous history of queer desire extending back to early childhood, but refuses to categorize or see herself as different to this day. She poses an interesting idea, asserting that perhaps labels could be seen as a way to conceptualize the gay community. She takes her bold blurring of the line between the individual and the group one step further, proposing that maybe “everyone’s queer in some way.” While Jessica is comfortable with labels and has a rationale for rejecting them, Allison probably captures a more typical impetus to not label when she candidly admits, “I just don’t want to be negatively judged by anyone, so I think that if I didn’t put a label on myself, then no one can judge me.” While Allison’s admission underscores that negative effects of labeling, Jessica’s experience introduces the possibility that labeling might truly be an ultimately ineffective and futile way of understanding ourselves and each other.

## Articulating Desire.....

*"I want a woman" does not require a closet; the words announce desire, not identity.*

*--Didi Herman, 'I'm Gay': Declarations, Desire, and Coming Out on Prime-Time Television*

There was consensus among my participants that there was a distinct difference in admitting to having romantic or sexual feelings for another woman and coming out as lesbian. While several women empathized with dominant society's pressure to definitively label oneself, others were perfectly comfortable continuing to insist upon this distinction and describe desire while resisting labels. Beginning in late middle school, Jessica would tell her friends about her developing crushes for both boys and girls freely. Because of her friends' easy reception and these early positive experiences, the promise of a safe and affirming atmosphere served as the context for her subsequent coming out: "I came out to my first friend [in person, rather than online] but it was never like, sit you down and 'I need to tell you I'm gay'. It was just like, someone's walking by and I'm like, 'oh, she's pretty!'" This approach, for Jessica, is borne out of an easy acceptance of her same-sex desire and an expectation for positive reception. Heather identifies her sexuality in much the same way, but for wholly different reasons:

I do the whole "I have feelings for girls" [thing] because I don't feel so much like I fit into a category. Plus, I don't question the fact that I have feelings for girls, but I've never had a relationship with one. I've only had a relationship with one guy, so it's not like I've had a huge history on either side. But I don't want to have to explain to people, especially my more conservative friends, if they start to ask, "Well, how do you know? You've never dated a girl" and this and that. I don't want to have to go through all that, so I do the whole, "I have feelings for a girl."

Heather is hesitant to say anything that might incite further questioning from friends—questioning to which she feels she only has complicated, half answers at best. Her response is artfully constructed in such a way that reduces her risk of having to defend herself. Dylan has significantly less flexibility to do this because her identity as trans inevitably incites a battery of questions and appeals for clarification and explanation:

I tried to [claim a label] for the longest time, but it just ends up not working. Ever. The best label I've been able to come up with so far is heterosexual lesbian. It means that my sex is male, but I feel I'm female and I am attracted to other people who are female and that's the only way I've really been able to come across it

because it seems like people can get the lesbian thing and they can get the transgender thing—as long as it’s transsexual, as long as it’s that you’re just switching. But as soon as you get into making it a bit more fuzzy and even making sex and gender not the way they’d normally be but still having both fairly well established—it just screws it up. I just haven’t been able to find a name or a label that works with it, and so when people ask about that I just say I like girls. And then they ask, “What does that mean?” and I say, “that I like girls.”

Dylan is indignant: she has to repeat herself and insist on having her responses taken seriously. At the center of her reflections on labeling is the observation that people tend to accept answers that reify the binary foundation in which all hegemonic ideas of gender and sexuality are rooted. Even answers that challenge societal norms (such as asserting an identity as “transsexual”) are accepted and understood because they are, after all, only reconfigurations of the same material within the same system (that is, “you’re just switching”). The inability to synthesize information and defer to the implicit authority of the subject whose own identity is being interrogated arises when the very system is called into question.

#### *Desire-Dependent Label Fluidity*

One of the most frequently cited challenges of labeling was the confusion and contradiction introduced by attractions that ran counter to one’s understanding of their sexual identity. Deja sums this up when she describes changing her label upon entering and then exiting relationships: “I always thought I was bisexual up until that point, and then when I got into that relationship [with a woman] I thought, ‘oh, I must be a lesbian.’ Then when I got out of the relationship with her, I started feeling more like I was bisexual again.” The reason for Deja’s internal tumult was largely her own agonizing over desires that were deemed incompatible with her family, her religion, and her race. Though her external environment was the impetus for her anxiety, Emily’s was explicitly instigated by her first girlfriend:

For a while, I was out as a lesbian. My first girlfriend—she’s probably still not conscious of this—but she’s really not okay with having a bisexual girlfriend. . . . Part of the reason I came out as a lesbian when I was that I felt pressured to *be* a lesbian. Not bisexual. Toward the end of our relationship [when I came out as bisexual], it actually caused a lot of problems. After her, I just kind of went without labels. Or I used queer because that was ambiguous and I could say that until I figured out what I really was.

Though she currently feels a prideful sense of ownership of her bisexual identity, this was the result of a lot of work. The emotional and psychological toll of having a bi-phobic girlfriend is telling when Emily's reaction is to forego labels altogether.

Saying, "I'm attracted to the person, not their sex" is a common enough trope and is indicative of the inefficacy of labels (and, interestingly, is an almost moralizing defense of asserting desire rather than claiming a specific identity). Allison personalizes this archetype with her romantic recollection of her initial diminishment of labels: "I don't really think I talked to Summer about labels. I would ask her, 'why do you like girls?' or 'what do you see in girls?' or 'why don't you like guys?' I was more interested in her preferences and what she was looking for because I wanted her to be looking for me." Allison has actually been on both sides of this situation. She tells of a serious sophomore year crush on her gay best friend. He experimented with changing his label from gay to bisexual for a short period when he and Allison fell into a physical relationship. She describes her reaction to his shifting labeling:

He told me for about ten days that he identified as bi and it was the best day of my life, I thought I'd won the lottery. I knew that we were going to get married and that it was going to be amazing. And then he was like, "yea... I'm gay... sorry." I felt led on. I really, really was convinced that I could at least make him bisexual for life, and so it was kind of disappointing.

Allison seems to believe that sexuality is highly dependent on individual attraction and desire. Her own identity adapts easily to incorporate her developing feelings for Summer; she expects her gay crush to do the same and is disappointed and let down when he doesn't respond so fluidly. For Allison, the determining factor in how she sees her sexuality is not so much the direction but rather the current object of her affections.

The disconnect between Allison's own experiences of her sexuality and her hopes for that of her gay male friend exemplify the general trend in research on gender differences in sexuality: that is, research seems to indicate that women tend to report more changes in same-sex attraction and behavior and are more willing to attribute these changes to choice an circumstance (Diamond

2008:50). A few pioneering psycho-social researchers studying female same-sex sexuality are beginning to consider the possibility that female same-sex sexuality is fundamentally different than that of their male counterparts (Diamond 2008). I am not alone in having difficulty coming to terms with a hypothesis that problematizes traditional understandings of sexual identity and proposing a nuanced fluidity model within the context of postmodern queer social constructionism that nevertheless seems to reify the binary gender structure to which all hegemonic notions of sexuality are anchored. Indeed, one can study differences between people who move through the world as women and those as men while rejecting essentialist notions of sex—but it's a fine line at best. More than one of my participants spoke in specifically queer terms: including trans people in their description of what bodies they could be attracted to and to exemplify their overall gender ideology. It is my hope and my contention that these narratives, especially when considered alongside Dylan's story, move us away from increasingly crystallized forms of recognizable queer subjectivity and into a space that encourages reimagining and reinventing identity.

### **Coming Out as Process and Practice**.....

*Coming out is always a process. Yes, you can gather family and friends around and tell them, but as you meet new people, you have to come out again and again and again. ---Sue*

The decision to come out to immediate family members is complicated and full of consequence. Without exception, my data indicate that coming out was not seen as a single or static act. Many women described a process of making private decisions, resigning themselves to the fact that their parents would know or be told, and then decreasing efforts to maintain secrecy. Even for the women who sat their parents down for conversations or wrote letters, these acts were presented as the culmination of a period of reciprocal hinting and interpreting remarks. In the end, what is actually a continuous and evolving life-long process often gets distilled into contained and scripted sound bites. Because I did not want my participants to feel pressured to follow this proscription, I

intentionally did not ask them to tell me their coming out stories. I did my best to resist phrasing questions in such a way that would confine them within the normative coming out framework.

Justifications for concealing secrets are as numerous and varied as reasons for coming out. After the internal debate, some cast their decision as selfless consideration for the feelings, nerves, or sensibilities of their loved ones. Emily's mother implored her to keep her bisexuality from her father during his time of unemployment, and Madison defends her silence with realistic simplicity: "I don't think it'd be constructive to incite that sort of conflict in my family." Allison, for one, was more than comfortable inciting a bit of conflict in her family. She felt her parents had been intentionally ignoring the serious relationship that was increasingly becoming the priority in her life, and felt they should share in the collective burden of silence around the issue of her sexuality. With more than a hint of hurt and hostility, Allison recalled,

I wrote them a letter. I was like, "listen, I'm in this romantic relationship. It's none of your business, but I'll tell you about it because you're apparently overlooking it and I don't appreciate it." I was like, "it's none of your business; I understand you probably don't agree with my lifestyle, but again, it's my life and not yours." I just informed them of the situation because I was sick of so much beating around the bush and just kind of little comments... little stabs that were left up to interpretation. They just never had the balls to come out and say something. I was sick of it. I called them out on it.

Allison's language is reflective of her general reluctance to claim a label. The impetus for her disclosure is not a gnawing sense of concealed identity, but rather an isolated "situation." Were it not for the circumstances of her relationship, she might never have had this exchange at all. Allison's frustration with her parents' inability or unwillingness to pick up on what she felt were overt signs and invitations for conversation was comparatively dramatic, but not unique.

Several women described attempting to feel out their parents' opinions, gauge their level of awareness, and anticipate their response. Allison sought this information through interaction and conversation, but got very conflicting information: "[My mom] was talking to me about all the gay people that she knows and I think that was her way of trying to tell me it was okay, but then I would come over and talk to her about it and she would just say really rude things about my haircut making

me look like a dyke. It was really inappropriate, uncalled for things.” Allison’s narrative shows that coming out is a performative act in that she is trying to get her mother to engage with her and the letter represents an attempted solution to a problem, with the hopes that it will transform future interactions.

### *The Test of Ties*

Insight and truth are some of the dialectical effects of coming out: the act tests the endurance and unconditionality of ties to loved ones, which can be at once freeing and defeating. Referencing Foucault, Weston writes, “the ambivalence and uncertainty frequently associated with a decision to come out arise because disclosure entails far more than the cultural conviction that a person can liberate or explicate the self through confession” (Weston 1991:51). Most queer people spend some time ruminating over how they think their families would react to their sexuality before choosing whether or not to come out. Many of the questions we ask ourselves regard the evaluation of our relationships: whom might we expect to lose, and on whom can we count to stay? “No method exists to measure the strength of social ties; indeed, ‘strength’ is a quality inferred largely with hindsight, as relatives affirm or deny kinship in the aftermath of disclosure” (53). The inevitable retrospective nature of this sort of insight has been well established in narratives of coming out and continues to contribute to fearful anticipation and anxious preparation. Nevertheless, predictions and anticipation can be agonizing. Most of the women I interviewed who were not out to their families had long since settled on a prediction as to how their families would react.

Madison is a white sophomore concentrating in Engineering and is very involved in several campus organizations focused on feminism and sexual violence. Though she grew up in Ann Arbor, she attended a conservative secular Southern boarding school. Madison identifies as bisexual. Madison acknowledges her family’s conservative Catholicism would be at odds with immediate

acceptance, but she gauges the longer term forecast as less grim: “I think that because of how close our family is, they would huff and puff and be angry and upset and all those other things [if I came out], but eventually they would get over it because, ultimately, they know and love me and want me in their lives.” Having imagined their reaction, Madison’s decision to not come out seems rationally justified since she’s considered and even walked herself through the alternative. Having made her decision, she seems able to move on with the confidence of knowing what she can expect.

### *The Incitation to Speak*

The hegemonic coming out narrative is one of verbalized disclosure localized in a particular moment and place. There is a lot of scholarship on what sort of act this is. Sociolinguistics has elucidated upon the various ways in which coming out functions as a speech act, though more recent scholarship moves one step further: arguing coming out is rarely so one-dimensional and should be conceptualized as a performative act. Even when this act is localized in a particular moment and place with a set audience, one can come out through other discursive practices. Ultimately, however, the women I interviewed describe the pressure to make a particular kind of verbal disclosure since the dominant trope of coming out continues to center on speaking up and speaking out.

Writing of the retrospective narratives of the men and women she studied, Weston acknowledges the fact that “individuals sometimes wished relatives would figure it out to avoid the anxiety entailed in the act of disclosure” (49). Allison describes hesitating to come out in a way that maps onto the normative model, and her narrative betrays a tension with this personal decision and the expectation to speak:

I didn’t officially tell my parents until last summer . . . because I think they knew. I didn’t want to sit down and have an awkward conversation with them. I was just going to go on with my life because I was fine. They’re my parents, they know everything, they could probably tell, so I didn’t really feel a need to make it this big ordeal and sit down and have ‘the talk’ with them. I just didn’t want to.



On the one hand, any need to come out through a speech act is not a spontaneous, internal thing. Allison implies that coming out in this way (that is, having “the talk”) would be a disruption in her life, one that she doesn’t feel the need to pause—to “sit down”—for because she feels fine. Clearly, there is something more—something in tension with her own internal feelings—compelling her. She anticipated the “awkward conversation” of coming out to ultimately be a “big ordeal,” which justified her putting it off. On the other hand, Allison didn’t feel like she had *not* come out at all, though. She refers to having engaged in other performative acts that should have clued her parents in (“they could probably tell”), while implying an expectation that children already be known in all ways were their parents appropriately attentive (with slight indignation: “they’re my parents, they know everything”). This expectation is made all the more apparent when Allison says the reason she finally decided to explicitly come out was her frustration that her parents seemed to be ignoring the situation.

Jessica, conversely, takes full responsibility for the insight her parents have into her life and identity. Even though Jessica insists she never made a point of hiding her sexuality and because she would have had more opportunities to convey it to her parents in other ways (since Allison attended a boarding high school), she didn’t want anyone to mistake the lack of an explicit disclosure for shame or secrecy:

I wrote a letter. I’m really close with my mom . . . and I didn’t want to have to hide something from her. I mean, whenever you’re telling your parents something that they don’t know that seems like you might have been keeping it, you don’t want them to be disappointed, even if it’s just because you’re keeping a secret. I think that’s what I was most scared of.

Jessica’s stated primary motivation for coming out is the maintenance of a positive relationship with both her parents. This motivation is unique among my participants’ stories and likely reflects her comparatively more open, communicative, and respectful family dynamic. Despite an atmosphere so affirming and safe that Jessica never worried about her parents’ reaction to her sexuality, her

narrative is nevertheless illustrative of the pervasive idea that if one does not speak out decisively, they must be purposefully—and shamefully—guarding their secret.

The effects of this incitation to speak are clearly dialectical: on the one hand, the LGBT individual is encouraged to come out without hesitation and making no mistake. On the other hand (as in Emily's case), the act of coming out is often met in ways that undermine the hegemonic narrative when the listener says they would have preferred silence and secrecy: "My mom said, 'you're just doing this to upset me.' I said, 'no, actually I don't even want to be talking about this' and she said, 'well, then you would have done a better job hiding it.'" However, the pressure to speak that ultimately compelled Emily's actions had overwhelmed any personal preference for silence and discretion. The circulation of stories about this type of reception provide solid ground from which to challenge the incitation to speak, as Sue does:

I don't really want to [come out to my parents], but there's a lot of pressure from most of the queer community to come out. I've heard over and over again that the most important thing you can do for the queer community is to come out to your family and friends. I'm not sure I totally buy that.

Sue's reflection that pressure to come out also originates from within the queer community provides pointed insight into the function of discursive power. What might make individual or political sense for some LGBT people likely does not adequately consider the consequences for someone like Sue—a first generation Chinese-American female. Just as speech on the part of the queer community is mandated, prohibited, and regulated by dominant heterosexist society, so too are queer individuals with relatively less power and privilege similarly restrained by the regulatory impositions of other queer factions.

### *Summary*

This chapter introduced the women in my sample and survey their attitudes and actions around labeling sexuality. My participants articulated a distinction and tension between the discursive levels of identity and desire. Women's sexuality (and the language through which it is

expressed) appeared to be relatively fluid and dynamic: for example, claiming a label varied according to time, context, and current partner or attractions. Respondents were aware of and personally affected by societal pressure to label their sexuality, but challenged and resisted this in a variety of ways. The adoption of identity labels was often done out of deference to this pressure rather than on personal impulse. Most preferred to locate themselves within the discourse of desire: there was a strong preference for open labels that incited questions and invited conversation. In this preference was rooted the impetus to use more open descriptive words that incited questions and invited elaboration. However, some feared that in the effort to be inclusive and self-defined, such words lost all meaning. Ultimately, this chapter underscores the importance of labels at both the societal and individual level and offers insight into some of the tensions around defining sexuality.

## Chapter 2

## Origin: Family and Place

*In an era when nearly every lesbian and gay man considers coming out, the unconditional love recognized as both symbol and substance of kin ties has come under intense scrutiny by almost every gay-identified person.*

---Kath Weston, *Families We Choose*

Throughout my participants' narratives, experiences with and memories of family were persistent and central. Because of the prevalence of and importance assigned to these relationships, I proceed with my analysis here. Referencing Mill's definition of the sociological imagination, Denzin writes that the "autobiographical and biographical genre is structured by the belief that lives have beginnings in families" (Denzin 1989:19). While this may seem like an obvious statement, it holds the key to understanding why stories about family figured into my participants' narratives so prominently: indeed, they form the very foundation for the practice of storytelling. Additionally, Denzin implies that just as one's family forms the initial context for that individual's life, so is family itself a social construction shaped by time and place.

When considering origins and identity, place is not just a geographical location but also the meaning ascribed. The meaning of place encompasses and recalls human interaction—"even when there is no one there" (Bell 1997:813). The significance of this is twofold: physical place is imbued with meaning in the absence of people, and even when people are present we remember who is not there. Ronald Berger and Richard Quinney begin their *Storytelling Sociology: Narrative as Social Inquiry* with a collection of illustrative narratives on family and place. They underscore the connection between people and place: "Our memory of place is filled with visions of the physical terrain, whether it is the asphalt streets of an urban milieu or the scenic beauty of a mountainous landscape. We experience these physical environments as if they were people, for they are embodied with a

soul, the soul of our selves and the lives of others who have made us what we are or hope to be (or not to be)” (Berger and Quinney 2005:13). This collection of souls is not comprised merely of those people gathered around us: after all, “for many people, family constitutes not just a *presence* but an *absence* as well. Missing people. Ghosts of the past. People who live in our heads. Lives once known that have been lost (ibid)”. The literal and figurative loss of connections and ties figures strongly in conceptions of a physical place.

While this observation might ring true for most everyone, most LGBT people feel it in acute and unique ways. Indeed, the loss, or perceived threat of loss, of loved ones who cannot reconcile their revulsion of non-heterosexual behavior or identity in their brother, sister, son, or daughter has long been a key experience around which coming out narratives turn. The expectation to remark on the decision to disclose or conceal one’s sexual identity from family members has become a central tenant of the hegemonic coming out narrative, set up by all sorts of explanations and justifications illustrated through anecdotes and side stories. I will begin with narratives of family and home—the origin of our lives, our selves, and our stories.

### Setting the Stage.....

*I think that [sexuality] is predetermined but the environment that you are raised in makes you either comfortable with it or not comfortable with it, and suppress it or express it. I think that if from a young age I was taught I was straight and I like men, I probably would have or could have suppressed it and made myself think I was straight. I don't think that would have been an issue. ---Jessica*

Formulas for creating a bisexual daughter or ensuring a gentle parental reception of a gay child remain unwritten despite fevered attempts to placate an anxious public with essentialist definitions, measurable indicators, and discernable categories. While the culture wars rage on in their embattled game of tug-and-war between nature and nurture explanations for homosexuality, one thing remains clear: context matters. Not in an explanatory sense, but rather for elaborative and illustrative purposes. In her analysis of the sexual lives of fictional gay characters on prime time

television, Didi Herman writes that exploring the period prior to coming out “is important because such antecedent representations are intimately connected to later ones in terms of how subsequent revelations generate meanings and effects” (Herman 2005:11). Each of my study participants spent time elucidating the connections they’d drawn between all aspects of their current subjectivity and the backdrop against which the present was unfolding.

While Radhwa, a Bangladeshi immigrant and faithful Muslim, saw her experience of moving away to college and her expectations for her future family life rooted in her cultural and religious upbringing, she was quick to emphasize that she was not trying to speak for everyone with a similar background: “Not all Bengali communities are like this, but the one I’m from particularly is very strict. They don’t believe in the idea of girls going away from home. The idea is that girls go from their father’s house to their husband’s house. Marriages are arranged for the most part.” The nature of the interviewer/respondent relationship is made transparent through her educating tone and the summation of complex realities into, “the idea is...” for my benefit.

Most women, though to varying degrees, demonstrated the fruits of analytical self-reflection, including explanations or interpretations alongside recollections of experiences. Emily grew up in a conservative Catholic home and attended a religious private primary school. “Growing up in these environments, I just had this intense internalized homophobia. I hated gays, just hated them. I didn’t even want to look at the word gay on a piece of paper because it just sent me panicking. It was very much that I did not want to be gay.” In this statement, Emily describes a concrete memory and reads onto it her retrospective understanding through a stock phrase common to LGBT vernacular (“internalized homophobia”). This comment is ripe for analysis: to what degree is her recollection of how she felt influenced by who she has become over the years and how does her summation play into LGBT rhetoric? In this section, I will explore the time my participants spent returning to the past in their narratives: what aspects of their upbringing resonate with them to this

day, how they read religious or cultural tradition from their current positionality, and how these stories are thought to have set the stage for what came next.

*Coming Out Against Your Religious Upbringing*

Several of my participants told stories that followed the normative patterns and trajectory of coming out, though regarding issues other than sexuality. These women reflected on how other types of disclosures that had the potential to move them away from their family were accepted, and how such experiences prepared them for how they would deal with sexuality later on.

Almost everyone had a history of immersion in a community of faith. Religious identity had been a central part of their identity at one point in their lives. While some women recall this stage in their lives bearing the mark of subsequent exclusion and rejection, others are still able to identify with that part of themselves. Heather, one of these women, unjudgmentally recalls, “I used to be really, really into God. I listened only to Christian music and I wouldn’t say cuss words. People would listen to the normal [radio] channels and I would go, ‘what! That’s the devil’s music!’ I really enjoyed that aspect of [going to Christian primary school].” Radhwa’s personal faith and spiritual community identity remain important to her, but she associates religiosity with certain practices: “My family is Muslim, but it’s a relative term. My dad is very religious, in terms of: he prays, he prays often, he goes to Mosque, he reads the Koran. I used to do it a lot more, but I’ve sort of phased it out.” The emphasis on moving out of religious tradition and practice appeared in several women’s stories: recalling the time when she told her mother she didn’t want to attend church anymore, Deja told me,

My family’s really religious... African Methodist Episcopal, which is a really strict black church. But I wasn’t really with that. It took some part of high school. I remember I told my mom: I was like, ‘I don’t want to go to church’ and she was like, ‘what happened?’ I remember, she had a conniption. She was like, ‘I don’t know who I raised!’ It was out of control.

Deja's story is an act of coming out in many senses, and was received by her mother as such. After a period of inner-exploration and self-reflection, Deja confronted her changing religious identity and made a declaration. Her mother's reaction bordered on bewilderment. Both her mother's response and Deja's use of the word 'conniption' to describe it are echoed in her second coming out narrative (that of sexuality).

Deja draws an explicit connection between her changing religiosity and her initial questioning of ideas about sexuality: "Up until that point, I for sure thought that gay people chose to be gay, and I for sure thought that they were going to burn in hell for that decision. I was like, 'mom, you know... this is really tearing me up because Johnny's so sweet and he tells me he did not choose to be this way, so how could I not believe him? And how could he deserve to go to hell? It's just making me look at my religion in a different way.' That was a real turning point for me in my religion. Still to my family I am not out as this person who doesn't want to... who isn't into Christianity: who is not Christian." Indeed, Deja's changing sense of religiosity is rooted in ideas about sexuality. Having befriended someone who identified as gay challenged her religious belief system so dramatically that she was unable to reconcile the two, though not for a lack of effort that extended even into college. Also remarkable is Deja's use of the term "out" to describe the current state of her family's understanding—or lack, as the case may be—of her religious identity. Clearly, coming out about religious identity and sexuality are experiences that parallel each other in enough ways to warrant use of the identical term.

Experiences with coming out against one's religious upbringing informed several women's subsequent decisions regarding if, when, and how to come out about their sexuality. Emily describes having learned valuable lessons from the way she handled this initial coming out experience: "I wanted to be secure in my identity and everything before I [came out] based on my experience with the religion thing when I told [my parents] I wasn't Catholic. I didn't know what I



was—it had just occurred to me in the past six months that I wasn't Catholic. It was this terrible outburst and I didn't really know how I felt about everything, so it just confused me even more. I didn't want to repeat that experience.” And so when issues with sexuality surfaced years later, she made sure she didn't.

### **The Dance of Affirmation and Rejection** .....

*It was a good thing I was totally self-supported, I didn't really have to care about my mom's reaction for those reasons. But in truth, I care a lot about what my family thinks. I don't always say so because it makes it easier for me. When I came out, I told my mom, "I'm not straight." I think her reaction was perfect: "I already know, but I love you anyway." What wasn't perfect was what followed. ---Martina*

Most of the women whom I interviewed described not ever truly knowing what their parents thought of them or how they felt more generally about non-normative sexuality. Martina's mother reacted to her disclosure positively and with affirmation. Regarding her subsequent shift to anxious discomfort, Martina thought her mother's initial reaction reflected her ideological liberalism, while her subsequent transformation betrayed her true feelings. For Martina, this ambivalence was difficult and disappointing because the early charade gave her the opportunity to see glimpses of how things could be different between herself and her mother.

This is not to say that responses of unadulterated disapproval are necessarily preferable. “I'm out to my mom and my grandma. They are not happy.” Deja tells me this, growing quieter. “They are not happy with it *at all*. Which is a great source of pain for me, you know, that they are *just not happy with it*.” She bobs her head in rhythmic emphasis of those final words, sighing. With similarly palpable emotion, Allison recalled a conversation before she came out when she was ambiguously discussing her love for her girlfriend with her mother. “She did [respond to that]. She said something—it's really hurtful. This is probably another thing I blocked out. It was something along the lines of, ‘if you are in love with her, then that means you're a lesbian. And you're not one, because I won't have a lesbian as a daughter.’ Something really dumb and mean like that, but it was

really shocking after she said it. I can't believe she would actually say that to her own kid!" By the end of her story, she is angry. Both women momentarily lose themselves to these memories of disavowal and disappointment.

### *Cultural Intelligibility and Impossible Identities*

Butler views the ontological category of 'identity' as a normative ideal rather than a "descriptive feature of experience" (Butler 1990:23). What is generally recognized as 'identity' is an interesting problem: there is a proscription for combining aspects of being that, when taken in certain combination and done in a particular way, are recognized and understood as expressions of a certain identity. The traits or expressions of the individual assumed to be indicators of an underlying identity are socially determined. That is, "the 'coherence' and 'continuity' of 'the person' are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility" (ibid). My participants frequently commented on the tension between perceived pressure to approach sexuality as a stable and internally coherent part of themselves, and their experience of it as anything but. Describing attempts to incorporate their experience of sexuality within the broader context of their lives, many women articulated the source of the difficulty and frustration to be external. They described varied instances of being told—typically by a person in a position of relative authority and power—that their sexuality didn't make sense, couldn't be real, or wasn't possible.

Emily's mother dismissed the possibility of her daughter's bisexuality: "she did not believe that I was actually bi and here's her reasoning: you can't be a lesbian and I know bisexuals don't exist, therefore I know you're straight." This overt inability to synthesize her daughter's experiences and self-understanding within the normative cultural expectations of sexual orientation illustrates the destabilizing effects of the emergence of incoherence. This instance of unrecognition is rooted in

her mother's refusal to even accept the existence of an identity category that threatened her dichotomous worldview:

[My mom] gave this really wonderful "there are three kinds of bisexuals" speech: there are gay people who feel the need to cling to society's norms, there are straight people who are acting out and want to be different, who are showing off by trying to be cool and edgy, and then there are the slutty ones who just want to have sex with everything. She thought that there were gay people and straight people who act outside their labels—she had all these examples of people who could theoretically be bisexual, but she had a reason for why they weren't.

Sue also indicated the difficulty of trying to define her attractions outside of the established hetero/homo binary: "I have seen more pressure to be gay or straight—to decide. Whatever gender you end up with is what defines your sexuality. Bisexuality seems like an impossibility." According to Sue, though she might experience her attractions or relationships with men and women as both indicative and illustrative of her bisexuality, other people reassign her according to the perceived gender of her current partner.

Emily and Sue struggled to inhabit their bisexual identities because of the fundamental discontinuity of sex preference. For others, parents authoritatively imposed limiting readings of their sexuality through temporal predictions. "She didn't say it, but I think she was indirectly telling me that maybe I'll meet a guy, this was all just a phase. They always tell me it's a phase: 'Allison, you're going through a phase...'" Allison's aggravated reception of this flagrant dismissal makes sense: her parents were rejecting her attempts at self-definition, affectively denying her ownership over even these most personal parts of herself and her life.

Other women based their struggle to realize, assert, or defend their sexualities in the context of their cultural background. Deja's family would not accept that the strong, religious black woman they'd raised could have been destined to be a lesbian all along: something must have gone wrong. They came up with several explanations for Deja's non-heterosexuality, all of which were attempts to deflect blame. Deja recalls her mother's impressions of her first girlfriend: "Alma's a predator. She turned you this way, and I can never forgive her for that." While the locus of her mother's

blame resides in one specific person, other family members see a connection between the “real rough” gendered personalities of certain female cousins who’d emerged from doing jail time with girlfriends in tow. With the broadest explanatory gesture, Deja’s father blames her queer sexuality on “coming to college . . . being around white people.” His move to make identifying as a lesbian incompatible with her cultural background not only throws doubt on Deja’s experience of her sexuality as organic and natural, but calls into question the authenticity of her racial identity as well. If there can be such an incompatibility between cultural background and sexuality in this poor, urban black family, the disconnect is perhaps more acute for Priti, whose extended Hindu family still lives in India.

Priti is a first-generation Indian immigrant. As a sophomore, she has not yet declared a concentration. Priti was raised by her mother and remains in close contact with her extended Hindu family in India. She is very involved in both feminist and Indian student organizations. Priti identifies as a lesbian. Intensely interested and invested in popular culture, reflections on media images of lesbians form the backdrop for nearly Priti’s entire narrative. She describes an alternative take on pop artists who exploit lesbian images for publicity: “When I got back [from a summer spent with my family in India] and returned to the US, the Katy Perry song ‘I Kissed a Girl’ was at its height.<sup>18</sup> This totally blew me away—I was floored. I know that boys think this sort of media image is hot and it’s just a publicity stunt, but even though it’s exploitative, it forces families to deal with it who hear it on the radio—to at least admit it exists.”

### *A Deafening Silence: Erasure and Invisibility*

Whether one is made to feel invisible through the regulatory practices requiring coherence

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<sup>18</sup> This undeniably catchy yet divisively controversial pop sensation catapulted its artist to new heights. Despite the general recognition that the song isn’t meant to be serious or personal, it has started conversations all over the lay media—including popular queer girl press. The song includes such lyrics as “it’s not what I’m used to, just wanna try you on / I’m curious for you” and “you’re my experimental game, just human nature / it’s not what good girls do, not how they should behave”.

and continuity before rendering desire recognizable as identity, or simply at the hands of personal interaction, dismissal and erasure seem to be some of the more existentially challenging of a queer identity. Several women described the pain and anxiety of coming out to their parents, only to be denied any sort of discernable response at all. According to Allison, the days spent in silence after coming out were almost unbearable: “After I wrote the letter, my mom refused to talk to me. We were living in the same house that summer. Wouldn’t talk to me at all. Just basically treated me like I was invisible.” Deja describes a similar response from her mother, juxtaposing it against her grandmother’s explosive reaction:

My mom acts like it doesn’t exist. She won’t address it; she won’t say anything about it. I kind of wish she was like more like my grandmother, because then I could have some sort of dialogue with her... argue with her about it. My mom tries to act like it doesn’t exist and that really hurts me. I feel like it’s the pink-elephant-in-the-room type of thing. . . . I’m always thinking about it... I’m very self-conscious about it. I’m very conscious of the fact that it’s the pink elephant in the room and it’s there, but nobody wants to talk about it.

In retrospectively comparing these two alternatives, Deja maintains that she would prefer the opportunity to have a dialogue with her mother than suffer in silence. Because she feels there is no space to defend herself or ask to be understood, Deja is left to interpret her mother’s blatant homophobia: “[My mother and I] will go places and her friends will say very homophobic things and my mother will engage in that right in front of me and won’t be like, ‘you shouldn’t say that’ or ‘that’s not right.’ There’s a lot of different ways they let me know this is not something they want me to talk about.” Even what her mother does not say reinforces and encourages Deja’s silence.

Dylan had prepared her parents for her coming out for well over a year: she had identified as transgender and as a lesbian since before senior year started, but still feels that her mother and stepfather refuse to acknowledge the current role these identities have in her life. Because she has not been silent for some time, Dylan has effectively forced her parents to acknowledge her as a lesbian daughter. These moments of recognition, though, are felt only as intermittent disruptions in pervasive and repetitive denial: “For the umpteenth million time, [my parents] are just really, really in

denial about it. . . . It's kind of weird because I'm out here [at college] and starting life and everything but I still think that they don't know it, so I still have these weird feelings like I still haven't *really* come out yet. I think that's basically the last piece of it." Her parent's refusal to fully acknowledge her in her identities ultimately is preventing Dylan from feeling fully out, though not from any lack of effort on her part.

*Conditional Love: The Golden Child Falls from Grace*

Most women I interviewed confessed to worrying or at least wondering what influence coming out had or would have on the listener's holistic impression of them. For some of them, this anxiety proved to be well founded when—after learning about their sexuality—their parents never looked at their daughters in quite the same way. Allison is particularly judgmental of the apparent weight placed on her sexuality: “[My parents] are very much about reputation, very materialistic: everything that I feel like I'm not. So they have great bragging power saying that I got into Interlochen, huge bragging power that I'm going to Michigan, and all this stuff great stuff. I think that they think that if they have a daughter who is not straight then it tarnishes the family reputation.” Later, when discussing the effects of transferring to her current, prestigious university, she paints a caricature of overcoming the need to compensate for her sexuality through success as a dancer (success driven, as her statement implies, by self-destructive habits): “I proved to them that I can still be successful even if I'm not center stage and eighty-five pounds in a tutu.” Allison continues to be haunted by the idea that her success and accomplishments will only exist in the shadow of her sexuality.

For Deja, this is not a possibility that haunts her, but rather her explicit reality. She has obviously done enough to warrant the acceptance and unconditional love she longs for, and her reception is clearly not what she feels she deserves:

[My family] is really proud of me. I'm the first person to go to college and I've been really successful here. I've been able to do a lot of things here that my family has never been able to do. Like go abroad... stuff like that they couldn't really imagine me doing. In the family, everyone sees me as this golden child, which makes my mom and my grandmother proud... extremely proud. But... I don't know, to me... I'm like, if they can't accept me as all of me and be proud of that, then it doesn't really matter to me how proud they are. I mean, it matters... but it doesn't matter as much.

Deja's ability to be fully present for the particular extensions of approval, pride, and love her family does offer her is compromised by her sense that the daughter they are reaching out to is not her whole person. The pain of realizing the conditions for full inclusion is significant enough to push Deja to break a powerful taboo in her matriarchal black family:

I started being very resentful to [my grandmother] about this. This is *very rare* for me to say something, and it took a lot of courage. I think, in black families, the grandparents are very revered, so you don't say anything. So for me to even respond to her in the way that I did was very rare. I was like, "you don't know what classes I'm taking right now. You don't know what my GPA was last semester—which it was like a 3.8—but you don't know that. All you talk about with me since you found out about me and Alma, every single time whether we're on the phone, or in a card, or a letter... or right now. This is all that you talk about with me. Is that all that you care about? Cause I'm at school busting my ass and you don't even care about that."

In the eyes of her grandmother, Deja's sexuality is effectively essentializing. The totality of this effect is enough to make Deja feel that nothing she could do or be would be enough to overshadow her sexuality—effectively, she cannot go home a lesbian and be who she was before. For Deja, the place she once occupied in her family is dependent on several pre-conditions: failing to meet them, she is not her family's golden child anymore.

### **The Future of Family**.....

*The discourse on gay families that emerged during the 1980s challenged many cultural representations and common practices that have effectively denied lesbians and gay men access to kinship. . . . What set this new discourse apart was its emphasis on the kinship character of the ties gay people had forged to close friends and lovers, its demand that those ties receive social and legal recognition, and its separation of parenting and family formation from heterosexual relations. For the first time, gay men and lesbians systematically laid claim to families of their own.*

---Kath Weston, "Exiles from Kinship" in *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*

I asked all of my participants for their take on the media's orientation toward and presentation of queer family politics. While everyone shared opinions on the mainstream gay political agenda and their own personal aspirations for family, those participants who have been reconciling their sexuality within their family of origin also reflected on how things have changed

over time. Allison seems extremely strong willed and willing to assert herself at all costs. She is optimistic about her effect on her family's beliefs, asserting her role in broadening her mother's mindset and her brother's opportunity: "[My mom] is not as conservative anymore. My brother is pretty independent now. I set the groundwork for him to be his own person." She cites her own personal maturation and independence as the source for her family's developing acceptance: "I think a lot of it is me maturing and just having my own goals and letting them know that this is what I want to do and saying, 'I value your input, and I welcome it, but I'm not going to conform to anything you want me to be' and I think they slowly started to realize that. So, we get along better."

Allison might very well be correct; after all, she has little patience for being made to feel unappreciated, disrespected, or invisible and demands inclusion and openness. Allison has experienced considerable success in these areas thanks to her willfulness, but she still doesn't feel like her girlfriend of four years is accepted with the same honesty as warmth that is extended to Allison from her girlfriend's family. This imbalance is deeply frustrating for Allison, who ruminates over her family's potential to do better. For example, Allison interprets her family's differential behaviors between holidays to reflect their underlying sentiments about her relationship: "[My parents] invite [my girlfriend] over for Thanksgiving, but anything bigger than Thanksgiving they don't extend the invitation to." This seemingly minor incongruity fuels Allison's hopeful anticipation of a future created with her partner.

### *Families We Choose*<sup>19</sup>

*"I do want a family, and a family that's acceptable to my family." ---Radhwa*

I was very interested in how college-age women thought about family and what they anticipated their future might hold for them in this area. Everyone seemed to have thought about it

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<sup>19</sup> This section borrows its title from Kath Weston's *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (an acclaimed and influential anthropologic study chronicling and analyzing the implications of gays' and lesbians' appropriation of the language of kinship).



extensively and was able to answer quickly and decisively. However, individual answers differed dramatically. While a couple of women had never wanted children and had resistant or ambivalent stances toward traditional marriage, the vast majority held a relatively hegemonic family ideology. Madison is wary and critical of this easy acceptance: “I guess I assumed that I would [have a family], but I didn’t really think about it as something I wanted. It’s just what people did. I assumed that’s where my life was going regardless of what I wanted or anything else.” Madison admits to wanting a family in the abstract, but admits to what she feels are insurmountable obstacles. She is generally pessimistic about intimacy, citing having lived through her parents’ “messy and combative” divorce and sexual assault as primary causes. Radhwa has a similar resignation to a future that she didn’t necessarily choose but has come to accept. She is bracing herself and biding her time before her arranged marriage, which all but dismisses any possibility of a life with a woman. Radhwa describes her process of weighing consequences against possibilities:

[I began leaning] toward my heterosexuality, in part because of the thought that one day I would be expected to have an arranged marriage. Those sorts of influences affected that because I knew I could never have a future with a girl unless I completely and utterly cut myself off from my entire family, which is an impossible thought on its own.

She goes so far as to describe the possibility of a future with another woman as “impossible” and focuses on the importance of her family, faith, and tradition to reinforce her acceptance of this reality. While Radhwa’s decisions are rooted deeply in her identity as a Muslim and Bengali woman, everyone’s decisions are ultimately conditioned by the specific and general contexts in which they are located. Allison candidly admits to being haunted by both some of the more harmful myths perpetuated by hegemonic and homophobic societal influence: “I dissect what I think from ‘does it screw a kid up to have two moms?’ and ‘what would it be like without a father figure?’ It just gets into this whole situation that becomes kind of overwhelming, so I kind of think of it as [me and Summer], just the two of us, our entire life.” What is important to note is that Allison’s ultimate ambivalence toward having her own children is not based on her own innate sensibilities or desires,

but is what she prefers to the “overwhelming” process of making, justifying, and defending subversive decisions.

In an intriguing and promising reversal, several of my participants’ aspirations and intentions regarding their own families were influenced in counter-hegemonic ways after accepting the queer aspects of their identities. The attitudes and beliefs of the few women who did not want and had never wanted children resonated with Heather and Emily. They had grown up in traditional Christian homes and had little desire to replicate the nuclear family or the role of wife and mother that had served as their model. This is not to say, however, that they did not want a stable and monogamous partnership or children. Queer identity and conceptions of family allowed them to reimagine what this might look like for them.

Heather’s resistance extends far beyond even the most amenable heterosexual nuclear family: she and her four sisters witnessed the physical abuse of her mother (and were themselves emotionally abused) by their patriarchal and controlling father.<sup>20</sup> After moving away from her family, she spent most of college bearing witness to the dynamic between her young married friend (an intimate co-worker turned confidant and the woman who sparked Heather’s same-sex desire) and that woman’s emotionally abusive and neglectful husband. Only recently had Heather begun to imagine an alternative to replicating these violent and oppressive domestic dynamics: “For the longest time, I’ve said I don’t want kids, I don’t want kids, I don’t want kids. But I’ve started to think, maybe I could be a little more open-minded about this.” Though Emily did not live with domestic violence, the effect of her parent’s performance of the model was equally influential. She explicitly attributes her shift in perspective to accepting and embracing her bisexuality. When I asked her what she thought about having a family, she responded,

That’s kind of changed since I came out, actually. In part, just because I’m a lot more comfortable with myself and a lot more sure of myself than I was then and partly because part of the issue I had about not me not being

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<sup>20</sup> The impact of these experiences is discussed in my fourth and final chapter, called, “Narratives of Sexual Violence”.

a good mother was that it was within this really rigid gender role of a heterosexual family and I'm just not that type of mother. I could never be that type of mother. Now that I'm older and I can see the different kinds of parents, the different kinds of families . . . that's made me more able to see myself with a family.

That Emily has at all been able to recognize “different kinds of families” is indicative of changing times. Weston’s pivotal study, from which this section borrows its title, described the emergence of possibilities for LGBT people to fulfill kinship needs through creative conceptions of community and reimagining partnership and parenthood. Weston did her fieldwork in San Francisco among men and women in their mid- to late-twenties and thirties. Emily and Heather appear to be participating in a similar counter-hegemonic framework, though there are significant and marked departures: these two women have comparatively more fluid sexual identities, are not engaged in an active and visible queer community, and maintain relationships with their families of origin in the Midwest. What was once the domain of a certain San Franciscan subculture seems to be making its way to America’s heartland—leaving its fingerprint on the whole of social structure as well as expanding the possibilities for this new generation of non-heterosexual young women.

### *Summary*

The places from which and people from whom we come are highly influential on our identity recognition, development, acceptance, and integration through life. Most participants repeatedly reached back into these parts of their histories and wove significant experiences through their narratives. Reception of LGBT individuals by family members is at the core of my participants’ experience of their sexuality and remains a definitive part of broad cultural ideas about what it means to be gay and come out. Though several women resisted the idea that they should (or even could) come out, most had interactions or conversations with loved ones that would ordinarily fall into this category. Nearly everyone spent a considerable amount of time reflecting on the reactions to and reception of such conversations: these experiences remain some of the most defining despite the resistance to the abstract expectation of coming out. Respondents

contextualized significant experiences with loved ones with the particulars of their backgrounds such as race, class, religion, and education. Respondents also articulated a wide variety of personal attitudes about family, asserting creative and innovative conceptions of partnering and parenthood that support recent scholarship's assertion that dominant ideas about kinship are indeed shifting to accommodate alternatives to the traditional model.

## Chapter 3

# Threshold People: Liminality and Communitas

*The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.*

*Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority.*

---Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*

Victor Turner’s concepts of liminality and communitas have been extended through the social sciences to understand identity, community inclusion, and becoming. I am interested in considering the act of coming out through Turner’s analysis of the form and attributes of rites of passage, or transition. This canonical framework understands rites of passage as constituted by three phases: separation, margin (i.e. *limen*, Latin for threshold), and aggregation. The first phase is characterized by “symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions” or both (Turner 1964:94). The second phase (the liminal period) is ambiguous: the “ritual subject”—suspended between what he was and will become—“passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (ibid). That coming state, the third phase, is that in which the passage is consummated through the subject’s “reaggregation or reincorporation” (94–95). Having emerged from the ambiguous liminal phase, the ritual subject (which Turner conceptualizes as either an individual or an aggregate of a larger whole) is again extended and entrusted with “rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and ‘structural’ type” (95). Reincorporated, “he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions” (ibid). The concept of liminality is also taken up in performance studies theory (McKenzie 2001; Schechner 1988), where performance

studies is conceptualized as that space in between theater and ritual. I understand coming out as a performative act—one that embodies both ritual and theater quite distinctively through certain formalized speaking opportunities in the university space, and is a perfect synthesis of the two through everyday life.

The act of coming out moves the performer through these stages: away from and toward community. Asserting a non-heterosexual identity effectively renders one different than they were before, but not entirely something new. This position of being suspended between who you were and what you are becoming is conceptualized as liminality. In coming out, we move away from center, to occupy the prescribed positions of marginality of LGBT people in society. The space one occupies away from center is conceptualized as liminal space. Its occupation is at once isolating and full of potential—moving toward and inhabiting liminal space is the difficult but necessary first step to come into community (conceptualized as *Communitas*) with similarly marked Others.

Importantly, Turner differentiates the overall structure of dominant society from *Communitas*. *Communitas* is a moment and space removed from the day-to-day and imbued with a particular sort of sacredness acquired through transition and statuslessness. Turner observes, “each person’s life experience contains alternating exposure to structure and *communitas*, and to states and transitions” (97). Religious life, he asserts, functions on a different plane and is the notable exception from this dialectical process constituted by “successive experience of high and low, *communitas* and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality” (*ibid.*). Turner maintains that “nowhere has this institutionalization of liminality been more clearly marked and defined” than in the realm of religious life, a place in which “transition has . . . become a permanent condition” (107). In this chapter, I present evidence to suggest this continuous state of liminality and transition is similarly experienced by queer women. Queer sexuality is ripe for analysis in that it

is inherently ambiguous and resists classification—fitting Douglas’ understanding that those things which fall between or overlap boundaries are seen as polluting and dangerous (Douglas 1966).

There were two distinct instances of moving from liminal space toward *Communitas* in the narratives of my participants: first, the move away from home and family of origin to college is seen in this way for a multiplicity of reasons, and second, coming out as non-heterosexual quite accurately fits this model. Many participants thoughtfully reflected on this, and assigned deep meaning and invested hope in the move to college with regards to their sexuality, as well as to the act of coming out. In this chapter, I will highlight some of the common experiences of inhabiting positions of liminality and navigating paths toward and away from *communitas*.

### Hopes for College.....

*I’d already made up my mind before when I was trying to decide when to come out, or if to come out, that I was definitely going to do it. As soon as I set my mind on senior year [of high school], I was very set on that, but since that had to be cut off for so many reasons, I just set my mind to college and that could not be taken away. ---Dylan*

The idea of college represented new beginnings, expanding possibilities and space, and hope for many of the women I interviewed. Though most of them had long begun to explore their sexuality, many concealed these internal developments from friends and family and hoped that they would have the courage and space to change that when they moved away to school. Nearly everyone spent some time telling me about what they expected and wanted of their move away from their families of origin to college, and what they actually got.

### *College as a Ticket Out*

Deja was never expected to go to college. She grew up in poverty and describes her family as very dysfunctional: “when I say dysfunctional, I mean a very dysfunctional family. My dad never worked: he was a drug dealer and a gang banger.” She had been singled out to go to a public magnet school in her city and had been nominated for a special scholarship to come to this university by one

of her teachers and mentors. Her family was very impressed and supportive of this success, but Deja saw things from a slightly different perspective:

I think [college] means a lot to them. A lot of times I don't think they really understand a lot of the things I go through just cause they're not here and they've never been to college, and they don't understand the implications of me going to college. I think they think it's *a lot* more than it really is, so I came here thinking it's a lot more than it really is. My mom is like, "oh, my daughter went to college so she's going to be rich" and I'm like, "mom, I'm trying to be a teacher." I'm a Women's Studies major here and of course my mom is like, "what the hell is that? I've never even heard of that shit." It's really interesting, the kind of dynamic it is. But for me, coming to college was really important because it meant me getting out of the situation I was uncomfortable in, like living in the 'hood.

Her emphasis is on the totality of the change held in moving across the country to attend a prestigious university. While her mother luxuriated in her new bragging rights and the idea that her daughter would grow up to be rich, Deja is able to stand at a distance and comment on the widening disconnect. Her mother was largely ignorant of what college was actually about and altogether unaware of Deja's focus on sexuality. She had experimented with dating men in high school several times, but didn't feel it was right for her and continued to look forward to being able to have a different "lifestyle" in college:

In twelfth grade I started talking about girls a little more and when it came time for prom, my mom was trying to hook me up with all these guys. But I ended up going to prom all by myself because... it just wasn't poppin' with these guys... at all. Then when I got out of high school, I was working. I had made up my mind that I was going to go to college and have my whole different lifestyle. I was going far away. I was going to be myself and be out and all this stuff.

What is notable here is Deja's ownership over this anticipated change ("*my* whole different lifestyle") and her insistence that things in her life she planned on doing differently were manifestations of being herself.

### *College as Catalyst*

While some women eagerly anticipated the potential change college promised, others were surprised by the changes it brought about, especially in the realm of sexuality. Heather's experience aptly captures the effect of unanticipated desire. She says, "I never questioned my sexuality until I came to college. I don't think I was even in denial—it wasn't something I even thought about."



Implicit in Heather's statement is the fact that those assumed to be in the privileged, unmarked category can choose whether or not to make their sexuality an issue. Unless pushed to confront it through specific experiences, one can take so much for granted.

Some of the circumstances unique to college can also be a catalyst for change because they push people to make decisions and deal with problems. Finance is the major realm in which this was experienced by most of the women I spoke with. Because our university is one of the most expensive public universities in the country and because many of my participants paid out-of-state tuition, they had to take financial security into consideration when deciding how to deal with their sexuality. Though I interviewed her only a month or so after her move away from her family to college, Dylan had already been experiencing anxieties over her parents' financial control over her life: "I get really paranoid and worried about [my parents threatening to cut me off financially]. All of these worries and neuroses just got transferred to that one. No matter what, I'd stay out." Dylan's insistence that no matter what happened, she would stay out brings into sharp relief the primacy she places on living true to herself and the importance of no longer being forced to hide and stay silent. Fear of having to make the difficult choice between being open and being able to pay for school prompted several of the women with whom I spoke to take measures to ensure they wouldn't have to completely compromise either. Typically, this meant safeguarding issues about sexuality from family members who were seen as potentially threatening. For two of my participants, this meant circumventing their family's financial power over their lives by seeking alternative funding sources. Sara<sup>21</sup> and Talia<sup>22</sup> are both recipients of the nation's premiere fellowship

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<sup>21</sup> Sara is a white freshman who has not yet declared a concentration. She grew up in an unstable home and completed her last two years of high school in her northern Michigan hometown living on her own. Sara fought to institute the Gay/Straight Alliance at her public high school and is also a recipient of the same prestigious LGBT student scholarship. She currently works for the LGBT office on campus. Sara's older brother recently came out as gay, and Sara identifies as a lesbian.

<sup>22</sup> Talia is an African American junior concentrating in Performance Arts Technology. She completed college credit during her high school years through special technical programs she participated in to augment her religious home schooling. Talia was raised in a strict Baptist home headed by two successful and well-educated parents who were very

for LGBT students who were either financially or completely disowned by their families when they came out. This scholarship not only pays for recipients' entire undergraduate education, but also provides them with a mentor in their area who is encouraged to fulfill the role of surrogate family.

Because Dylan is trans, she was immediately met with additional layers of difficulty regarding her sexuality. She describes the process of navigating on-campus university housing that presupposes a binary gender system: "Because of Michigan's screwed up rules, I couldn't be housed with people of my same gender unless I quote 'completed the process'. I then asked housing, 'well, what's the process?' and they said that they're not involved in defining that." These sort of difficulties push Dylan to have to make decisions even other queer students don't have to make regarding the degree to which they're willing to kick up some dust to ensure equitable treatment. For Dylan, though, no matter where she decided to let the housing offices place her, she would be forced to continually come out and explain herself to her neighbors.

### **Community and Inclusion** .....

*I don't know what kind of people I am. --Martina*

Martina is a Uruguayan immigrant and, at 27, sees herself as a non-traditional college student. A senior, Martina is concentrating in General Social Science and Latin American and Caribbean Studies. She attended a Catholic private international school in Uruguay. She spent time studying and working in Mexico and on the West Coast before coming to this university. Martina identifies as gay. The interesting syntax of Martina's statement underscores the complex yet pivotal role of imagined inclusion and belonging to a unified group to one's personal conceptions of identity and self. Martina's statement appears in the context of wondering where her place on campus is. Because she struggles to find her place, she struggles to understand just who she is. This

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involved in the civil rights movement on campus years ago. She is a recipient of the nation's most prestigious scholarship organization aimed at LGBT students without the financial support of the family. Talia identifies as a lesbian.

connection is managed by the women I interviewed by involvement in organizations and activities for the purposes of providing insight into self, and then extending support and affirmation for the realizations that come out of that first part of the process. In this section, I will explore what sorts of community is sought by the women I interviewed, what participation means to them, and how feelings of inclusion inform their self-perceptions and understanding.

### *Group Participation*

In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman asserts that while those outside a particular stigmatized category might refer to the “total membership by the term ‘group’ or an equivalent . . . However, often in such cases the full membership will not be part of a single group, in the strictest sense; they will neither have a capacity for collective action, nor a stable and embracing pattern of mutual interaction” (Goffman 1963:23). Participation in a group organized around issues pertaining to the queer community is the most obvious and straightforward form of seeking community with other LGBT people. However, it is also the most complicated and inaccessible to individuals with any of the intersecting identities that negate the possibility of full inclusion. Jessica had been dating a member of one of the largest and most popular queer student groups before she even came to college. From the very beginning, she felt welcome and comfortable with the groups she became a part of and felt that they fit seamlessly into the fabric of her life—so much so that the people with whom she worked on political or social justice issues became her closest friends:

In the queer community, it’s kind of different because your friends are the people you’re in organizations with, who you hang out with, who you do work with. Going to organizations and stuff is just another way to be social, so I didn’t really think about it as being involved on campus. It was just hanging out with my friends.

Jessica feels this coalescence of activist and social spheres in community organizing is unique to the queer community. She experienced formalized participation in queer student organizations as “just another way to be social” with her friends. Though her initial involvement was not motivated by a

desire to be politically active, she cites the “close-knit community” she inadvertently found there as responsible for her success and growth:

It’s pretty much made my college experience—kind of inadvertently. If I hadn’t gotten involved with LGBT Commission, I wouldn’t have become co-chair, and I wouldn’t have run for representative [of student government], and I wouldn’t have become Chief of Staff. Even if I wasn’t a leader in an LGBT organization, that’s what got me to where I am today. Having a close-knit community gives you a place to become a leader, and I took advantage of that.

Jessica’s experiences with formalized group involvement both inside and outside the queer community have inspired her to integrate this sort of activism into her professional pursuits. What Jessica “took advantage of” was not equally extended or made accessible to other women I interviewed who found these visible queer circles well intentioned but ultimately naively oblivious and even racist.

### *Finding Space*

There are many reasons someone might not want to participate in the active and visible spheres of LGBT life on campus. Some women simply do not see their same-sex desire as defining enough to warrant particular associations. In these circumstances, there is a fundamental lack of identification with the queer community. This lack was most profound when sexuality was associated with fluid desire rather than concrete identity, and when the queer community was not experienced as an inclusive haven.

Kiara never sought out a queer community, but is nevertheless associated with it by the people with whom she works in (non-queer based) organizations. This association is typically based on ideology: “A lot of my outness comes indirectly either by my defense of homosexuals in a lot of conversations that’s not usually done, or my associations with organizations and people. It’s really indirect, that kind of out. But from what I hear, a lot of people know I’m gay and I haven’t told a lot of people.” Because Kiara’s politics on homosexuality meet resistance from what she identifies as a largely religious and homophobic black community on campus, she is marked as a sexual other

without intentionally aligning herself with that identity. Kiara's case depicts space being carved out around the marked other, whether or not it was her intention. Here, space finds and defines her—not the other way around.

However, this is not to say Kiara does not seek space in other ways. She accepts that her deep integration into active black student life is largely tied to an inattention to sexuality. In other spheres, though, Kiara finds acceptance for her sexuality and her race among a small group of friends who share this combination. “My friends and I would make this fake sorority called Gamma Alpha Epsilon, or ‘GAE’ for short.” This group simultaneously pokes fun at the organizing structure of dominant spheres of social life on campus, while perhaps suggesting a desire for such easy inclusion.

### *Virtual and Creative Spaces*

Where visible or tangible communities are lacking, some women described immersing themselves in creative spaces to explore their sexualities and find affirmation. Dylan, who concealed her identity as a trans lesbian through high school, did not have a supportive network of friends and was involved in extra-curricular activities sans the social component. She dealt with this by retreating deeply into two alternative worlds: academic work on gender and sexuality, and art. Dylan first taught herself to sketch and paint, then began to bring her work to school under the independent tutelage of a few favorite teachers, but never took part in formalized art classes or clubs. She doesn't see integration of art and identity as intentional, but rather inevitable: “In this way I really get to bring myself out. In my creative process, I don't really directly work with [gender and sexuality issues], it just kind of comes out. Because if you're really being creative your identity is pretty much one-hundred percent of where your creativity is flowing from.” Now a freshman in the University's School of Art and Design, Dylan is for the first time legitimizing what was primarily a personal endeavor and anticipates her college academic and social lives becoming organized around

art in the company of other artists. Dylan comments on the prevalence of popular performing artists in the area whose work focuses on their gender or sexuality, but insists she is not interested in confining her artistic expression in this way:

That's part of my life, but in terms of expressing myself, there are other much deeper parts that I'd rather deal with. It always just felt a bit silly to me. I was kind of getting into that and it just never felt right, it just always felt like this... I don't know. Like it was just kind of bastardizing myself down to just one little thing.

Instead, she seems excited to find community that is supportive of her process rather than what is in the end one part of her complex identity.

Radhwa, a Muslim Bengali immigrant, attributes her early and easy Americanization to her love of prime time television. Through adolescence, the people with whom she communicated through Internet blogs and on online forums were integral to her understanding of herself as a woman of color, as an immigrant, and as a knowledge-seeker. Radhwa's ability to learn from and through media was later extended to her exploration of sexuality. Through high school, Radhwa combined her love of American television and talent for creative writing by taking part in the increasingly popular "fan fic" scene.<sup>23</sup> Notably, there is a large faction of this scene that focuses on reimagining characters (often, but not always, in Asian anime or manga) as homosexuals. Radhwa describes her part in this phenomenon: "I also wrote a lot on male homosexuality—I still do. Most of what I write happens to be about male homosexual relationships between two characters on a TV show or something like that. That was a way in." Though she had experimented with writing bisexual female characters, Radhwa found male characters more developed and multi-dimensional (which she attributes to the genres and shows she was most interested in). Radhwa might have also felt encouraged to write about desire between two male characters because a script for this particularity was quickly establishing itself, while there still wasn't much of a model through which to reimagine female bisexuality.

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<sup>23</sup> Fan fic is an online phenomenon in which young fiction writers author alternative story lines for their favorite series and circulate them around other dedicated fans (MacDonald 2006).

Dylan and Radhwa demonstrate alternative ways of seeking and participating in community. The appropriation of creative and virtual space allows them to explore developing thoughts, ideas, and desire through safe ways that maintain both the silence imposed upon them and their ability to continue living other identities that seem irreconcilable in the “real” world.

### **Intra-community Discrimination** .....

*There was a lack of understanding about my part in regards to the whole.  
I didn't understand the complexities of communities here, but I quickly discovered that. ---Deja*

People who identify with the queer community almost invariably have experienced instances of discrimination or expressions of dominant heterosexist ideology. Part of the impetus for defining a collective group around so many different sexual and gender identities is the ability to take a united stand against external oppression. But what happens when you experience those things from which a community promised to shelter you within that community itself?

### *Oblivion as Privilege*

Those people in unmarked categories (e.g. straight, male, white, etc.) have the privilege of not even having to recognize their position within the overall structural matrix. They can take for granted their existence and approach identity politics as the domain of subjugated positionalities. Contexts that lack a visible representation of diversity encourage the idea that the unmarked category can and should stand in as the normative expectation against which other ideas and peoples are measured. Deja's ability to so aptly comment on this dynamic is born of her experience of the college context: “When I came to orientation, it was my first time coming or even knowing anything about [the University]. I think one of the things that I noticed most was the lack of people of color.”<sup>24</sup> She quickly moved from recognizing her unique position at the university to having to

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<sup>24</sup> This comment stands in sharp and telling contrast to the remarks made by some of my white respondents—as well as the pervasive attitude around town and campus—that Ann Arbor is racially and otherwise very diverse.

come to terms with the marginalization of that position: “I was immediately, almost immediately, approached by a racist incident. You know... some racist comments at my orientation, and I was the only black person in my orientation. Which is pretty customary to be the only black person... so I was like, ‘wow, this is a lot different.’” Not only was it different than her diverse educational background, it was also different from what she expected of college. “I kind of came to school with this idea that, ‘oh, I’m going to be able to hang out with everybody, anybody, just anybody who’s interesting in what I am, anyone who’s about what I’m about.’ But I didn’t understand the complexities of communities here, but I quickly discovered that.” What Deja discovered was how difficult it was to be out in all your identities even in a context that espoused inclusion and a liberal understanding of identity.

Despite the initial shock of feeling so isolated in her racial identity, Deja continued to try to realize her college goal of being friends with all types of people who had similar interests and ideological beliefs:

I would just notice this big disconnect between me and the people [in Dance Marathon]<sup>25</sup> because, quite frankly, a lot of black people on this campus can’t really hang out with a lot of white people for too long without them saying something crazy, or not understanding when you ask them a question, or just feeling like you’re disconnecting. It was so bad because I didn’t want it to be like that. I wanted to be more like, “I’m here with all different types of people.” I wanted a diverse circle of friends, but you just get tired of being that only one person there.

Initially, Deja attributed the feeling of disconnect to being “that only one person there” involved in the activities she was pursuing. No matter the good intentions of her diverse circle of acquaintances, sooner or later something would be said that brought Deja back into an acute awareness of her difference. Deja found herself completely immersed in what she saw as “white culture”:

Then I’d start hanging out with people, mostly white groups. I was in the RC [Residential College],<sup>26</sup> so there were totally no people of color in the RC. I lived on the RC floor in East Quad, where I was the only black

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<sup>25</sup> Dance Marathon is a popular university organization that raises money for cancer research and children living with the illness through an annual all-night rally and dance competition.

<sup>26</sup> The University’s Residential College is an alternative housing and academic community located in East Quad, the area of campus best known for being “indie” and liberal. The RC emphasizes social justice and political involvement, the arts, and foreign language immersion. As with all university housing, each floor has an older student, the Resident Advisor, who serves as a mentor to other student/residents.



person, except for my RA [Resident Advisor], on the whole floor. So I quickly found out that even though people were kind of interested in the same things that I was, they were still racist. People I tended to hang out with, like white lesbians, they're racist as hell, too. On the outside, it seemed like we had the same interests, but it seemed like even if they weren't racist, it seemed like they didn't realize the way they grew up was very dominant. Not typical, but just very common. That it was a cultural thing that most people were a part of, and that was something I definitely wasn't a part of. There was a lack of understanding about my part in regards to the whole. I was exposed to a lot of white culture when I came here, you can't help it. In society, I'm exposed to it all the time, but I was exposed intimately to it here. I started to realize then that I had people not even understanding that that was a culture in itself. They just thought it was the norm. That's still an issue. It wasn't even that people were being racist, but they just didn't know they were being ignorant of how other people were living. They didn't even know.

This statement marks an important shift in Deja's understanding of the disconnect she was experiencing. It wasn't simply that she was the only black woman in a sea of white faces, because she had looked forward to bridging culture gaps and befriending all sorts of people. She had understood everyone as coming from a unique cultural context, but what she had begun to realize was that her white hallmates, classmates, and friends were oblivious to this simple fact ("I started to realize then that I had people not even understanding that that was a culture in itself"). Deja reflects on her inevitable awareness of both black and white culture, but begins to see that the people around her raised in "dominant" white culture saw their background as "the norm" rather than just a "very common" experience of but many cultural possibilities. Deja description of a disconnect speaks to the vast space between specialized and subjugated knowledges: as a black woman, she has access to both types of knowledge while most of the white people around her do not and can not share her particular subjugated knowledge, but ultimately fail to tap into the existence of these alternatives in the first place.

In the end, Deja gave up her goal of organizing her peer group on types of interests, rather than types of people. As a senior, things look rather unlike what she expected in four years prior: "I would say that most of my friends, my friendship network, is black. And most of my best friends are black and queer." This summation describes the result of the intersections of several types of exclusion: exclusion from white circles because she is black, exclusion from black circles because she

is queer. Ultimately, Deja is relegated to an increasingly selective social circle populated with people almost just like her.

*Varied Experiences of Intersectionality*

Racial identity was not the only thing that complicated one's understanding and expression of sexuality. In fact, every single woman I spoke with reflected on at least one other axis of her identity intersecting in crucial ways with her sexuality. Some of these reflections followed a relatively hegemonic narrative script around acknowledged macro-category identities, such as race or class. Others seemed more organic and spontaneous having considerably fewer models upon which to base their own story.

Martina has obviously given a lot of thought to the intersection of different axes of her identity, going so far as to make a hierarchical assessment, saying, "Being an immigrant really, really shaped my identity. I'd say, more so than being gay." Having lived in Uruguay until she graduated high school and then attending a few years of community college in Mexico, Martina is acutely aware of her place in an increasingly transnational world. For her, the primacy she places on this background is rooted in nationality: "Even if I do get my citizenship, I will still be gay. I feel doubly disenfranchised because even if I make it through all the hoops and work to become a US citizen, I will never feel like a full member of society since I am gay." Martina's sexuality will profoundly affect her experiences of citizenship and nationality no matter what geographical boundaries she traverses.

Madison discusses two different types of intersectionality around her sexuality. The first regards a sort of border-crossing based on her personal worldview, a type of subjugated knowledge not otherwise tied to established macro-identities such as race or class. She reflects on the disconnect and incompatibility between her intellectual pursuits:

I kind of have this bizarre dichotomous existence: I'm a woman in engineering, and I'm a non-heterosexual woman involved in the rape movement and I'm interested in Women's Studies and social justice—all these things that don't usually intersect. It's been interesting seeing how different those two worlds are.

Madison judges her act of bridging these two worlds to be unique and unusual, noting that her diverse passions “don't usually intersect.” Because of her intellectual outlook, she is interested in the challenges incited by her existence at these crossroads. She finds such tension “interesting” rather than “painful”, as Deja had, perhaps because these incongruencies were not rooted in intractable parts of her most fundamental personhood (or, what is generally recognized as such). Though Madison seems to experience these parts of her identity as essential components of herself, that they do not mark her makes an important difference in her reception and inclusion at the behest of other people. However, Madison had previously experienced intersectionality specifically regarding her sexuality in a way so powerful that it shaped the rest of her experience at her elite Southern boarding preparatory school:

[Boarding high school] was one of the first places I actually felt embraced as an intellectual human being [with dyslexia]. Then there was this entirely different other side where you had to fit—in order for all this other acceptance to be granted to you—you first had to fit this prerequisite list of: straight, woman-identified, feminine-presenting female. There was so much acceptance to be had across all these other categories, so long as you fit this list of preconditions. . . . Jackie [the school's first out lesbian] was also the person who said, “You can't be that here. They'll eat you alive.”

Hearing Jackie's advice, strengthened by having witnessed Jackie's removal from the all-girls dormitory to the school infirmary for final two weeks of her senior year, had a momentous impact on Madison's handling of several issues that challenged her identity at school. Being a scholarship student, she sensitively tuned in to the social nuances of her new world and did her best to comply with the “prerequisite list” of expectations. Madison was never out as a bisexual through high school, did not discuss the existential crisis posed by her waning Catholicism, and chose not to report her rape. This prohibition to speak crystallized those things that didn't fit into a contained burden—which had dangerous consequences for Madison's present and would require focused retrospective attention for years to come.

### *Biphobia*

Perhaps one of the most interesting and complex instances of intra-community prejudice was that within the queer community itself. Its existence demonstrates the impossibility of community being a single, unified entity. Additionally, intra-community oppression exposes the function of power both as a reinscription of dominant hegemonic ideology and as creative reworkings tailored to the motivations of certain factions of the population.

Sue knew from the first time she heard the word that “bisexual” described her attractions. Despite her easy confidence in naming her sexuality for herself, she is not happy with the reception of her chosen label and is relatively inhibited both within and outside the queer community: “I know I’m bisexual—there’s no question in my mind about that—but talking about my experiences, I need to be discrete or I could encounter biphobia. That, I have seen: [people] talking about bisexuals as heterosexual sexual tourists or not out of the closet yet.” Most acknowledgments of intra-community prejudice in the queer community were accompanied by explanations that reflected a variety of negative hegemonic stereotypes about sexuality. Sue attributes her experiences of biphobia to the monolithic insistence on a binary system of desire that presupposes two opposite sexes and sexualities. She recalls hearing people talk about bisexuals as either exploitative experimental heterosexuals or as stunted homosexuals in hiding, effectively obscuring the possibility of existing between these two poles.

Emily has also experienced biphobia in more general and intimately personal ways. Her comments about biphobia are drawn from close relationships:

I had a lesbian friend last semester who didn’t like bisexuals, wouldn’t date a bisexual, who then ended up sleeping with some men. So I guess there was some internal biphobia on her part. . . . I don’t think it’s true for all [lesbians], but I know there are people who definitely feel that way because there’s always the stereotype that—especially *feminine* bisexual women—are really straight girls doing it for male attention, or that they’re going to leave women for a man because it’s more stable, it’s more acceptable.

This is not the first of Emily’s stories to draw attention to the possibility of internal ambivalence as a

motivating factor for outward expressions of prejudice and intolerance. Though she is quick to point out that the opinions and actions of the friend she is describing aren't representative of all lesbians, she does acknowledge the pervasive stereotype that bisexual women publically express same-sex desire for male titillation. Emily sees this stereotype pertaining more strongly to bisexual women with a traditionally feminine gender style. While markers of gender expression such as clothing, accessories, physique, and deportment are likely what Emily is referring to, another component of gender style is (gendered) attraction and desire. Because of the assumption of internal continuity among these aspects, one might infer from feminine expressions of gender the natural correlate of heterosexuality. The second stereotype Emily cites as the impetus for her experiences of biphobia is that even if bisexuals constituted a legitimate sexual identity, they continue to exist within the domain of male privilege, power, and desire and would ultimately be compelled to reject women in favor of whatever safety and stability they could expect as an extension of their primary alliance.

Despite her awareness and criticism of biphobia, Emily had internalized it sufficiently to necessitate preparation to defend her identity as a bisexual:

What I had been afraid of for some reason was people not believing me. I don't know why. I think because I knew people had been joking about me being the gayest straight girl ever. I think it had to do with the fact that in this group of [queer] women, I was by far the girliest, I had had boyfriends, I very obviously liked some men. I just didn't think that they would believe me.

Even within a group of close queer female friends, Emily felt excluded and was not extended the same affirmation as the lesbian-identified women in the group.

### *Homophobia in the Black Community*

Deja describes the visible and organized black community on campus as exclusionary and homophobic. This is something she is quick to pick up on and does not take lightly: "I feel like I'm very sensitive to how homophobic people are within the black community. It makes me very sad."

It makes her sad primarily because she is an extremely active student involved in various groups whose efforts are aimed primarily at the same black students who discriminate against her because of her sexuality.

The black community on campus... the quote unquote "black community," cause I don't really like to say that. There are a lot of people that fall outside of that, a lot of different communities. But the typical black community, the most visible one, they do a good deal of trying to bring black freshman into that community. The problem is they bring them in and they don't want them to be exposed to anything else. It's kind of like a protecting of them, like, "you're going to experience all this bullshit outside this community, so come inside this community." But then I started experiencing bullshit inside this community so I was like, "*this* is some bullshit anyway!" I became really active in the black community... I still am. I got into black organizations, and then I started to face a good amount of homophobia. I got a really good amount of homophobia. The black community on *this* campus is very homophobic, very religious.

More than once, Deja emphasizes that her reflections are not meant to generalize to all black people on this campus, or to all visible black communities in other locations. This insistence both resists further essentializing or stereotyping of any of her identities, and also implies the possibility for things to be different somewhere else.

Deja's final words here draw a parallel between her experience of the black community on this campus as homophobic and religious. The two appear to go hand-in-hand. Deja is not the only one who notes this connection; Kiara goes one step further to interrogate it:

The black community is not very welcoming to a lot of homosexual deviance. There's a lot of black people who are kind of religious and they just see it as wrong somehow. Those views have made people say some things to me that have made me uncomfortable. I think that's where [homophobia] roots from, even if that person isn't religious.

Kiara sees the pervasive homophobia in the black community as rooted in religiosity, despite the variety in beliefs of individuals.

Priti emphasizes the importance of the unique combination of identities on her experience of being Indian and of being queer. Shortly after coming out, Priti read a poem at the annual Yoni Ki Baat, a South Asian adaptation of the Vagina Monologues. While the Vagina Monologues are attended by various (mostly white) feminist factions on campus, Yoni Ki Baat's audience is almost entirely Indian. Given this context, Priti's reading of a poem about her experiences as an Indian lesbian is powerful and courageous. Work around the intersection of these two identities is

fundamental to Priti's self-awareness and campus personality: "Indians see being gay as a Western import—I can't imagine telling my family in India. I think it's powerful to be a person of color who is queer. I still grapple with it."

The take away message from most of the women of color I interviewed is that the intersection of their racial identity and ethnicity with sexuality is key to their current conception of self as well as reception by others. Near the conclusion of each interview, I asked each participant if there was anything I didn't present an opportunity to say or if there was anything they'd like to elaborate on. Though Deja spent a considerable portion of her interview thoughtfully and articulately reflecting on her experiences as a black lesbian, she was one of the few who took up the offer to leave me with a final message. Because of its importance to her, I will leave this section with Deja's words:

There are certain things that I would like you to take from what I said. As for me speaking as a queer black woman, I think that it's really important that you take from me that my experiences as a lesbian or as a queer person have been very much influenced by my culture. But more importantly, coming to Ann Arbor: people may think of Ann Arbor as this little college place where you'll be accepted. But for me... being in the black community hasn't been that. It's been very painful for me to have to deal with the homophobia in the black community, especially when I do so much in the black community to try to help people. So... trying to negotiate that. Really, how painful [it is] that the black community is so homophobic here... to me and to a lot of my friends.

### **Dating and Relationships**.....

*I have become a lot more solid and secure in myself in what I want and in what I know my future will be or have to hold. Having those understandings, maturing into that, I think it's become a lot less important. I wouldn't be completely and utterly heartbroken if it never happened. At the same time, it would be an open-ended, unsolved sort of thing for me. Unresolved. ---Radhwa*

Most of the women I interviewed imbued same-sex relationships with a promise of resolution. They had interrogated and explored their sexuality long before and in the absence of concrete experience, and continued to do so in the face of dating experiences that complicated what they thought they knew about themselves. With few exceptions, the women I spoke with did not attribute their sexual identity to early love interests or partners. Nevertheless, there was a general

consensus on the importance of dating and relationship experience in their individual narratives and for an accepting and affirming reception of identity disclosure both within and outside the queer community.

*Keeping You a Secret*<sup>27</sup>

The portion of women I interviewed who had explicit romantic or sexual experience with other girls and women early in their exploration of sexuality did so with considerable discretion, often taking measures to conceal their relationship. Allison's boarding school environment and the fact that her girlfriend was in a relative position of authority (as an employee rather than a student/resident of the school) imposed a necessity of secrecy that took its toll on the women's relationship and on the two of them as individuals:

[Keeping the relationship a secret] was awful. It was so stressful. I really didn't get that much sleep, I was doing poorly in my classes. It was really bad... I mean, we had a great relationship when we were together, but always being on the lookout, always trying to be... secretive just... it just really wore us down.

This imposed secrecy was especially difficult for Allison, for whom sharing and public expression came naturally. Once she graduated and moved to a big city in another state to dance professionally, Allison began to relax and her relationship progressed in tandem:

It was a lot better [once we were out of the school environment]. We were able to be ourselves, we were able to talk to whomever we wanted, about whatever we wanted. We could be open about our relationship. There just wasn't stress that there were people watching all the time. It was a lot nicer.

The expectation that many same-sex relationships in high school and early college would need to be kept a secret is a well-established trope of the coming out story (reflected in popular contemporary works of fiction, such as the novel from which this section takes its title). Some women decided that they would not be able or willing to keep a relationship secret from their families or friends—a decision that dramatically influenced the trajectory of their identity exploration and development.

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<sup>27</sup> This section borrows its title from Julie Anne Peters' young adult novel by the same name—a story about first love between teenage women.



While a substantial portion of the literature suggests that identity development follows real life experience, Emily intentionally did things in the reverse:

I would never have fooled around with a girl before I was out. For me, that would have been way too stressful. I'd been aware of [my sexuality] for two years before I came out and my opinion on it was always, "if I'm not ready to come out then I'm not ready to have a relationship with a woman." I needed to come out first and start dealing with that before I started dating a girl.

Emily kept the knowledge of her bisexuality to herself for years, until she began dating a woman for the first time during her freshman year of college. Maintaining integrity regarding this early promise to herself, Emily could not bear to keep her first girlfriend a secret from her family and came out as bisexual a few weeks into her relationship.

#### *Necessary but Insufficient Evidence*

The general consensus among my participants regarding the role of experience in defining sexuality seems to be that it constitutes necessary but insufficient evidence. That is, while sexual or dating experience is a prerequisite to being able to label identity and feel part of the queer community, one does not need experience upon which to base interrogations of sexuality. Women I interviewed who had not yet had any sort of sexual or dating experience with women (though they may have had both with men and experienced sexual and romantic feelings for specific women), were the most reluctant to claim a non-heterosexual label to describe their attractions. This reluctance did not seem to be based on a nuanced rejection of labels or identity categories, but rather hesitation rooted in feelings of inexperience, illegitimacy, and inadequacy (for example, Radhwa's justification for not labeling her bisexual attractions: "I think it would require that I actually have experience in those terms... I don't feel as though I quite have the right to claim that title.")

Dylan recognizes a frustrating paradox in herself: she does not feel confident in how to approach sex and dating because she does not yet fully understand who she is as a sexual person, but she believes she won't develop further insight into herself without these experiences:

I haven't really gone out with anyone, pretty much ever... just because it all got tangled up that I couldn't really bring another person into that. . . . Having problems with depression just starts to bring in a lot of negativity with that and a lot of doubts and questioning. I feel like a big problem is that I don't really have enough experience to really begin to figure it out on my own. But, at the same time, to get experience I have to have a slightly better of myself first.

For Dylan, this paradox fuels depression and the sense that her questions are too overwhelming to tackle. She feels confined and worries that things will never get less complicated: "I still haven't been able to figure out for the life of me which side would be attracted to me. . . . It gets so complicated that it gets me down a lot of the time, because I just cannot for the life of me figure it out... and will never be able to. It's just very difficult being able to accept that." There is a distinct sense of hopelessness in Dylan's confession. After all, having recently begun moving through the world as a woman, she is burdened by the unrelenting pressure of the intractable decisions she has made. Her sense of insurmountable complication and negativity is so solidified that she sees acceptance as her only way to make and find peace.

Dylan and Radhwa were my two participants who most emphasized the relevancy of experience to their conceptions of sexuality and identity. Radhwa's story similarly ends with radical acceptance. Dylan arrives here after witnessing a part of herself that she cannot turn away from and finding a way to continue to be herself. For Radhwa, this conclusion reflects her inability to realize potential "unconfirmed" and "unresolved" parts of herself:

That part still remains an unconfirmed portion of my life. . . . I think it's become less important [to explore relationships with women] in time. It used to be important to me when I first got to school when there was a lot of emotion involved in it. I have become a lot more solid and secure in myself in what I want and in what I know my future will be or have to hold. Having those understandings, maturing into that, I think it's become a lot less important. I wouldn't be completely and utterly heartbroken if it never happened. At the same time, it would be an open-ended, unsolved sort of thing for me. Unresolved.

Radhwa had invested in the idea of college hopes for exploration and the realization of experiences which are bound to the strict timeline imposed by her family. Her radical acceptance that college has not fulfilled these things for her extends to her overall acceptance of what her life will "have to hold." Radhwa's resignation is rooted in deference to tradition.

I'm not opposed to [having a relationship with a woman] but it's not something I'm actively seeking out. I'm also not actively seeking out a relationship with a man. Because there is the arranged marriage thing... that is going to come up. If I can find someone that I can actually introduce to my dad, which would be: he has to be Bengali and he has to be Muslim, then we can possibly talk. So I'm reluctant to be in a relationship with anyone.

Like Dylan, Radhwa seems to get overwhelmed by the complications presented by her situation, even becoming “reluctant to be in a relationship with anyone” even though she wants a loving life partner and a family.

### **Mapping the Margins: The Geography of Identity**.....

*Without any frame of reference, you think you're the one who's crazy. ---Martina*

Location plays a central role in facilitating one's ability to recognize, accept, and integrate a queer sexual identity. My participants spoke variously about the role of college as a catalyst in their identity development, positioning college as an escape, the utter impossibility of a queer identity within certain contexts, and feeling confined to live out and openly only in certain spaces.

Martina grew up in the capital of Uruguay and attended a Catholic private school. Though she retrospectively identifies oversights through her adolescence, she is convinced that the cultural context of her teenage years prevented her from even thinking about sexuality:

Coming out in Uruguay is simply unheard of. I have not come out to my friends in Uruguay—they wouldn't understand. There is no concept of a “college phase” of experimenting with women there. Here [in the US], you might face fear and rejection for being gay, but in Uruguay it isn't even acknowledged as a possibility. Without any frame of reference, you think you're the one who's crazy.

Martina's contrasting “there” and “here” highlights the focus on place. She implies that it's better to at least have the space for the possibility than to altogether repress exploration. Even “fear and rejection” sound preferable to feeling so isolated you wonder if you might be “crazy.” Martina recalls the repressive atmosphere of her childhood and home country with exhaustive emotion. She describes the marked shift in geographical priority after coming out: “I needed to be somewhere with a visible and accepted gay presence once I realized I was gay. I would never have come out—I might never have even known—if I'd stayed home. [Uruguayan] society doesn't even let you *think*

in those terms, even if signs or thoughts do show up.” It is suddenly of pivotal importance that Martina locate herself within a discursive framework and geographical boundaries that would allow and affirm exploration of her sexuality.

Though her place and family of origin are only across the country, Deja still feels worlds away. The endemic poverty and violence associated with her rough urban neighborhood contribute to an atmosphere that Deja feels is overtly religious, homophobic, and generally damaging to her sense of self. She sees her home as a place to which she can’t return: “[My mom and grandma] are making it so I can’t tell the rest of my family, so I don’t know how I could ever really get married [to a woman]. That’s why I’m like, ‘I’m about to graduate’. That’s why I won’t move back to LA because I won’t be able to live my life there.” Deja’s language is important: she needs to live where she can be her authentic self (“to live my life”). Unfortunately, Deja feels geographically restricted by the impositions of more than one context. Though she identifies as a lesbian, she is theoretically open to the possibility of dating men. While her family’s pressure pushes Deja in one direction, the queer black women with whom Deja has grown closest push her in the opposite direction:

Now, I just feel like I want to leave here [*laughing*]... so I can go somewhere and date whomever I want to date, so it will end up the way it ends up. But I feel like for me politically and socially, I wouldn’t [date a man]. But I feel like it’s something that I could possibly do. It would be easier. But a big part of me is like, “don’t take that easy way out!” and it’s like... whatever I do, I’m going to have to explain to somebody.

Deja pessimistically acknowledges the futility of reinventing herself or reimagining her future in the same geographical context she is currently located.

Even Jessica, who had about as positive a coming out experience as one could hope for, has begun to factor geography into other major life decisions. The universality of this consideration brings into sharp relief that, despite individual background and origin, the overarching societal structure ultimately determines what decisions we make for our adult lives and figurative futures. This is not something that Jessica ever agonized over, unlike Deja and several other participants. Now that she is a college senior about to graduate, however, reality starts settling in:

It's not something that I used to think about but now that I have to think about what I'm actually going to do it is something that plays into my choices. I'm not going to a grad school in Alabama where I'm afraid everyone's going to be not open. But then again, being in a graduate school environment, I feel like anywhere I go is going to be relatively better than what's around. I almost feel like it's my duty to go someplace that isn't as welcoming as Ann Arbor, just to try to make it better. It's scary because I probably won't have this community that I have now, which has been my past four years.

Jessica's preponderance is pretty loaded: she contrasts her own stereotypic—though, likely, founded—impressions of the American South with those of the academic haven of graduate school. While Jessica's atypical history of affirmation and support may not have been enough to counter the initial consideration of geography, it is undoubtedly the foundation for her strength and motivation to be an agent of change. Importantly, Jessica concludes with a reinscription of the importance of community in supporting a healthy and positive queer identity.

### **Ritual Against the Durkheimian Tradition**.....

*The world, in truth, is a wedding. ---Erving Goffman*

Ramona Oswald defines ritual as “the performance of relatively invariant sequences of formal acts, utterances, and symbols that derive their meaning from pre-existing external authority” (Oswald 2001:39). Because humans construct their identities “in relationship with real and imagined others,” ritual functions as a mechanism for enacting and interpreting communally-shared meaning (40). According to Oswald, the literature on ritual almost monolithically focuses on the sense of belonging that is created or enhanced through participation. The single exception to this trend asserts that ritual enhances a sense of unity and belonging because “it is performed against an implicit or explicit other” (Baumann 1992). Situating LGBT people as marked others can function as a way to unify heterosexuals (indeed, more than one participant used and then self-consciously retracted the term ‘straight community’ from their narrative, showing the slippage between recognizing some essence of unity among members of the unmarked category and reinscribing the idea that communities are formed around concrete identities and that ‘straight’ can't be an identity. Dylan voices this in her nuanced understanding of the flip-side of labeling: “There's just something

more comfortable about having nice little names and nice little boxes to put things in. I also think it makes it a bit easier for them [straight people] to alienate them [queer people] because you have a name for it and contrast it from this other thing. You have a nice little name for it so you can say, ‘okay, go over there.’” This recognition is one way of looking at resistance to labels: claiming a label for your sexuality (since heterosexuality needs no label) is functionally marking yourself as the other whose outsider-status could serve as the rallying point for communities of people you may have at one time felt a part of.

Oswald’s analysis shows that many standard institutionalized ritual practices in a given culture actually function to systematically exclude LGBT people and construct them as outsiders-others. To see if Oswald’s observations would hold for my participants, I was interested in their experiences with family members during the University’s winter break for the holidays and New Year. The broad cultural emphasis on family, togetherness, tradition, and religiosity this time of year makes difficult family dynamics particularly salient for us all. To get a sense of what my participants thought about and experienced during these weeks away from school, I sent everyone a brief questionnaire via email. About a third of my participants sent them back.

These participants who did go home to visit their families of origin emphasized the importance of “quality time”, “catching up”, and “enjoying family traditions.” While participants did go home for reasons of their own, they also did so to appease family members. Heather writes that it is important to spend the holidays with her family “mostly because my mom would be devastated if I didn’t go home during the holidays.” While home, Heather struggled with what she described as the “verbally and emotionally abusive” dynamic between her parents. Her controlling father insisted on her working in the “evil bakery” her family owned. She writes, “I think my dad got some kind of secret pleasure out of me having to break down and do what he wanted (he’s always wanted me to not go to college but instead work in the bakery).” While these difficult family

dynamics remained unchanged, Heather did find some things with her sisters “completely shocking and amazing.” She came out to one of her sisters right before break and was excited when that sister “didn’t act weird, and she asked me questions that nobody else did.” Heather wrote that she found it difficult to respond to my question about whether she would change anything about her break, “because there’s a lot I would change. Even in the things that are seemingly good, like seeing my sisters and mom, there are little things I’d change, like their attitudes.” Ultimately, Heather would choose to spend her break differently if she could be fully in control of her decisions: “I’d choose to spend [the break] with some of my close friends and maybe their families. I’d at least want to spend more time with them and less time with my family.” This preference supports Weston’s observation that LGBT people often build more meaningful ties within their community and that this community can take the place of kin in different ways over time.

Similarly, Allison wrote that although she found it important to reconnect with her immediate family members, she would prefer to spend more time with her girlfriend and her girlfriend’s family instead. She wrote at length about the day after Christmas when her family stayed together inside their ski cabin. She fondly recalls, “it was the first time in a very long time that my family seemed that ‘close.’” Allison’s use of scare quotes around ‘close’ possibly indicates her somewhat removed, critical assessment of the expectation for families to behave and feel for one another in a certain way around the holidays.

Dylan, too, would prefer to spend the holidays with close friends or those family members that are more accepting of her trans identity. She writes, “I would like to spend [the holidays] with those that I care about, but things are strained right now with my mother and I have no feelings toward my stepfather whatsoever. I do, however, still care about my mother and know she would hate to not see me for so long so partially I went back home to help her feel better.” Dylan’s ambivalence about whether to go home or not is significantly dependent on the current family

dynamic about her trans identity. She remembers last year, writing: “I was allowed to dress as I liked, the first time I was able to do so around family. . . . I still had issues with depression, but being able to be myself lightened these, and being openly accepted by my whole family there was a great feeling.” This year was different: prior to the break, her mother and stepfather forbid her from wearing women’s clothing around them. She ultimately characterizes the way she felt about her winter break as “depressed, repressed, and—in general—very confined”, adding “these feelings got worse the longer I was out there.” Clearly, LGBT identity can compete with familial inclusion and acceptance. During the holidays, these feelings might be exacerbated by large gatherings and religious or traditional events.

Emily’s responses quite explicitly support Oswald’s analysis as well. In response to my question about how she would ultimately characterize how she felt about her break, she wrote, “tense, awkward, out-of-place, like I was intruding or imposing. It’s not like anyone was being too blatantly rude to me, with a few exceptions from my mother, but I felt really distant from them the whole time and felt like I didn’t really belong there.” All of the women who responded to my written questionnaire wrote that—while they thought holidays with family were important—they thought spending this time with “loved ones” (broadly defined), their partners, or the comparatively more accepting families of those partners would be more enjoyable for everyone. The decision to spend traditional holiday time with families of origin or with “families we choose” was one Weston saw most LGBT people having to make: “individuals too often found themselves faced with the unwelcome dilemma of making an either/or decision when they would have preferred to choose both” (Weston 1991:33). When Weston was writing, the idea that the queer community could reinvent traditional ideas of family to fulfill the same roles and needs was innovative and promising. Today, however, the women I interviewed desire to move beyond having to make this choice and to harmoniously synthesize what are too often discordant parts of their lives.



*Summary*

This chapter focused on the places where and the people with whom my respondents felt most included and comfortable. The positionality of non-heterosexual people in society appears to be unique and complex: vacillating between spaces of marginality and inclusion, their relation to the whole is as dynamic and fluid as identity itself. College was held up as an ideal and escape by some; for others, it served as the catalyst that facilitated their exploration of sexuality. Not everyone felt the need to participate in some sort of queer community, while others who would have liked to do so struggled for inclusion because of competing intersections of identity (namely, race and religion). There were various instances of intra-community discrimination along racial lines as well as between factions of the LGBT community (especially for bisexuals). In the absence of community, some women found creative ways to establish meaningful connections in existing social circles or in virtual or artistic spaces. Some women sought revelatory significance in romantic relationships. Additionally, sexuality impacted experiences of community bonding (such as family events like weddings and holiday celebrations) in ways that challenge traditional sociological theories on ritual.

## Chapter 4

# Performing Resistance: Reimagining and Reinventing Identity through Storytelling

*I am not outside the language that structures me, but neither am I determined by the language that makes this "I" possible.*

---Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

Narrative analysis as a mode of social inquiry presupposes a particular significance, functionality, and potentiality in storytelling: specifically, that “Stories are not only the way in which we come to ascribe significance to experiences we and others have had; they are one of the primary means through which we constitute our very selves” (Andrews 2000:77).

In “Toward a Sociology of Narrative,”<sup>28</sup> Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey propose a precise definition of what is meant by the term *narrative*: selectively appropriated past events and characters, ordered temporally, bearing some relation to one another and constituting some overarching structure (Ewick and Silbey 1995:200). Noting the recent attention to storytelling in the contemporary literature, they see narrative analysis celebrated on two related grounds: epistemologically, in the capacity for revealing silenced, flattened, or misunderstood truths and politically, in their subversive or transformative potential (199).

Ewick and Silbey point out several ways in which narratives are “socially organized phenomena,” in which are found significant and spontaneous patterns of the *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, and *why* of storytelling. With a nod to Goffman, they argue storytelling appears neither spontaneously nor systematically across social interactions. Rather, the “context of elicitation” determines *when* a story is desired, expected, mandated, or prohibited (206). Culturally and

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<sup>28</sup> The early and influential article from which my thesis title’s subheading “Subversive Stories / Hegemonic Tales” is borrowed.

institutionally dependent content rules define *what* counts as intelligible, relevant, and believable, that is, what constitutes an appropriate or successful narrative (207). As interactive productions, stories also rely upon norms and expectations of social organization in determining *how* stories are told. In assigning the roles of storyteller and audience, rules of participation are laid out, defining “*when* and *by whom* a narrative might be interrupted, interrogated, or elaborated upon” (208). With a shift in implication, Ewick and Silbey assert that storytelling is strategic—ultimately demonstrating *why* narratives are told.

Narratives are alternatively referred to as “social practices” and “cultural productions,” thoroughly implicated in the (re)production of their context’s meanings and relations of power. Hegemonic potential is manifest in that narratives can function as mechanisms of social control with an ability to “colonize consciousness” all the while concealing their essentially social organization (214). Stories typically recognize, articulate, and reproduce the ideological assumptions in which are rooted hegemonic social structures. While the authors insist these situation-specific conventions are something of which all socially competent actors are at least aware, they note narratives are most effective and hold the most potential when the actor fluently and purposefully bears them in mind whether to fulfill or challenge expectations. Herein lies the subversive power of narratives.

If hegemonic narratives seek to foreground the connections between the particular and the general, subversive narratives might be defined by a fine, though critical, distinction: emplotting, rather than effacing, the connections between the particular and the general (218-219). Subversive stories do not “aggregate to the general,” depicting particulars as examples of a common phenomenon, but rather “recount particular experiences as *rooted* in and part of an encompassing cultural, material, and political world that extends beyond the local” (219). Ewick and Silbey continue to define narratives capable of countering hegemony as those that break the silence of “colonized consciousness,” bearing witness to what is “unimagined and unexpressed” (220). They

suggest a series of conditions that “may generate the counterhegemonic narrative:” the social marginality of the narrator, a demonstrated concern for and understanding of *how* the hegemonic is constituted, and those circumstances in which a particular institution creates both a common opportunity to narrate and a common content to that narrative (220–221).

This thesis approaches the narrative form as both an investigatory tool—the means with which to study beliefs about and experiences with identity and community—and an object in itself. I see duality and reciprocity here as well: careful and methodical attention to the language and form of my participants’ narratives gave me insight into how, as a collective, they might be challenging or resisting pressure to conform to the hegemonic expectation and how the incorporation of such ideology manifests itself at all levels of the autobiographical. Through their narratives, several respondents voiced ideas and experiences that—in themselves and in the form of their expression—pressed against the boundaries of cultural intelligibility—at least *my impressions* of those boundaries. That I purposively included only undergraduate women at a particular university invites consideration of that institution’s influence and implications.

### **Subversive Stories** .....

I am very interested in the counter-hegemonic potential in my participants’ narratives. I refer to stories that function in this way as subversive stories: “Stories that are capable of countering the hegemonic are those which bridge, without denying, the particularities of experience and subjectivities and those which bear witness to what is unimagined and unexpressed” (Ewick 1995:220). Throughout my interviews, I tried to encourage my participants to reflect both on memorable experiences and conceptions of their identity. Everyone seemed comfortable and confident engaging in this introspection.

There are two types of subversive stories that I am interested in: stories that depart from dominant hegemonic culture, and those that counter the solidified expectation for those departures.

That is, subversion is inherent in my participants' narratives in that they are telling me about same-sex desire and the reimagining of family and community to which it is tied. These narratives of subversion have been well analyzed and thoughtfully interrogated. It is perhaps the very advent of this attention that has contributed substantially to the formation of a model and expectation of the right way to be subversive. Stories that don't fit these molds—even while the molds are still being made—may not immediately be recognizable as legitimate deviations. It is this second type of story I am most interested in: that which does not fit within our expectations of how to deviate from hegemonic norms. There were multiple instances of this layered subversion in my participants' narratives. At times, these stories were organic and undigested experiences, unaccompanied by explanation, justification, or any apparent unease with contradiction. At other times, it was my respondent herself who emphasized the double subversion of her story (even naming her desire voice this as her motivation for participation in my study).

I believe the single subversiveness of my participants' narratives is made apparent and expounded upon throughout the preceding three chapters. In this section, I will present and describe different types of double subversion illustrated through the words of my respondents.

*"It Was A Lot Different For Me"*

As my participant arguably most active and fully integrated in LGBT campus life, Jessica is well acquainted with generalizations about coming out, relationships with family and friends, finding community, and identity labels. While her participation in the very groups relatively more marginalized respondents described as exclusionary and irrelevant contributes to the congealment of these generalizations, Jessica is actually quite vocal about deconstructing them. It could be argued that this critical self-awareness was integrated into her approach to organizing and leadership, though she didn't offer me any particular reasons to believe this.

Jessica is a member of the University's LGBT Speaker's Bureau, which sends panelists by invitation to campus and regional classes and organizations to tell their coming out stories and field audience questions. All panelists participate in a series of training seminars to learn how to articulate a cohesive story that the audience will find relatable. Participation in the Bureau is deeply meaningful for Jessica: "I think that I'm really, really lucky—that's why I love telling my story to straight people and to non-straight people, because the things that people hear about always, like in any type of situation, what people talk about are the bad things." Her emphasis on enjoying telling her story "to straight people and to non-straight people" is interesting because it implies that those tellings are different types of experiences and may serve different purposes. Discussing one's queer identity in formal spaces is inherently subversive, but telling a story that seems unfamiliar and unusual is doubly subversive. Jessica acknowledges that she had a counter-hegemonic coming out experience—that is, it was entirely positive and affirming—and asserts the potential to help other queer people in telling such stories: "I want people to know that it's not always bad. I had a really easy time with it. For queer people who aren't out, it's extremely important [to hear the good stories, too]. For some people, coming out is a really scary thing and not something you should rush into, but I want people to know that's not the only way it goes." I would agree with Jessica that hearing stories like hers benefits queer people, but I would go one step further to argue that there is real potential in telling these stories to straight people. Hearing enough of these stories could reshape common notions of what it has to mean to come out, ultimately influencing the reception of queer loved ones.

Though Jessica is reflective about the potential influence of telling counter-hegemonic stories and can identify what elements made her story different (e.g. unreligious liberal "hippie" parents and upbringing), she does not attribute *why* her experiences seem atypical: "I think it was a lot different for me. I know some of my friends had really difficult times in high school. They got

made fun of, even if they were just perceived to be gay. That never happened to me. I don't know why." The full potential of her subversive story is unfortunately prematurely stunted here: we can't even imagine how to replicate her experience without these attributions.

### *Reading Normal*

Later in this chapter, I demonstrate the potential presented by the circumstances of the academic institution. Many of my participants describe how academic discourse not only gave them the words to voice their experiences, but also legitimated their ideas and their *selves*. Dylan thinks of herself as intellectually oriented and enjoys luxuriating in ideas, though the outcomes of such immersion go against the grain.

In an effort to understand her newly acknowledged identity as a trans lesbian, Dylan both talks to 'specialists' and consumes research in publication:

When I later started to meet with some people who had some knowledge on this sort of thing, I then realized the process I went through to figure out all this about me wasn't the way it normally happened. I did a lot of reading—not the usual things written by people who have this—but lots of articles and papers and things. Some by trans people, but some just by researchers and psychologists. It made me feel a bit more comfortable because I felt weird reading other people's stories because I didn't feel like I could relate to it as much because their experience was completely different.

Dylan meets with people who—because they have “some knowledge”—are recognized as authorities on trans issues. Dylan's interactions with these specialists taught her what was typical and what was “normal”... and that her experiences didn't fit within the model. Shifting attention to a different realm of discursive authority, Dylan began reading academic and scientific articles. She seems to establish a hierarchy according to the shared identity of the author (“some by trans people, *but some just by researchers and psychologists*”), but immediately admits not being able to relate to narratives by trans people. In the end, Dylan is able to find herself across genres, disciplines, and authorial identities by connecting to the work's intellectual orientation. She is unable to fully connect with stories or personal narratives because they bring into sharp relief all those ways she doesn't fit.

Dylan's acknowledgment of and frustration with being unable to find a relatable model is itself imbued with counter-hegemonic potential. Her resistance to locate herself within this framework both begins to chip away at the monolith of expectations of trans subjectivity and presents the opportunity to reimagine different ways of being and being understood.

*Bearing Witness to the Unimagined*

The final type of subversive story I will describe is that that “bears witness to what is unimagined and unexpressed” (Ewick 1995:220). This is the type of subversion that I'm afraid I would be least likely to recognize in the interview setting. The very act of recognizing it as such presupposes a nuanced and developed sensitivity for the contradiction, disintegrative, and unintelligible in the stories being told. I began to think of the following story as subversive only after turning it over in my head for days afterward, trying to make sense of it. Without motivation to return and interrogate or an openness to resistant reception, this story might never have registered as a site for rich analysis. I want to acknowledge the probability that there were other moments like this one that I simply didn't recognize for what they were.

Radhwa is a Bengali immigrant who was raised in a strict Muslim home. Though she thinks of herself as non-heterosexual, she has not had the decisive sexual experiences she feels she needs to substantiate claiming a bisexual identity. In her later years of college, she befriended another Bengali bisexual woman with whom she grew very close. Radhwa grows even more animated and emotionally expressive when describing this relationship:

My best friend right now, here in college, is also bisexual. She and I have a very close relationship—we're practically like a married couple, actually, but not in a sexual relationship, and never have been. But she and I are very close; [the relationship] really is like a married couple. We hang out, we support each other. When I get stuck, she is my sounding board. We usually spend at least one night of the week at each other's place, so twice a week we'd be at one of our respective places.

My ears perk up at her application of “married couple” as a descriptive. To probe her further, I tell Radhwa her relationship sounds very intimate and intense. She easily agrees and goes on to tell me,



“Most of our friends describe our relationship by saying we’re dating, but not romantically. It has a lot of the same elements . . . a lot of the same elements I would want in a partner.” Radhwa’s use of terms like “married couple”, “relationship”, “dating”, and “partner” quickly become less metaphorical when—practically interrupting herself—she rushes on with a story:

I actually did propose to her, in all serious, and we do have plans to go to Canada to get married. It would be official in Canada at the least. I don’t know how it happened—it happened during my birthday. She told me she’d been looking for a ring but hadn’t quite found one. She was planning on proposing to me on my birthday.

Initially, I encourage her to tell me more but don’t ask very pointed questions because I’m hesitant to say anything that might stifle this openness. When I push for an explanation of some sort, Radhwa defends her relationship by launching into a lesson on the cultural relativism of female friendships (which is well taken). She grows noticeably calmer and seems dismissive: “We have a lot of things in common, but we also drew the lines fairly quickly and it’s never crossed that. It’s okay.” The conversation shifts into her convincing me (and herself, it seems) that while sexuality might continue to be an “unresolved” area of her life, she “wouldn’t be completely heartbroken” if she never had a same-sex dating experience before facing what her life “will be or have to hold” (an arranged marriage, among other things).

My first response to Radhwa’s story was curious intrigue in such transparent contradiction, with perhaps a hint of sympathy and shared disappointment. I interpreted Radhwa’s story as an illustration of understandable self-deception, but began to challenge myself to imagine what else it might be. After all, Radhwa didn’t see her relationship as deceptive, contradictory, or unintelligible—and wasn’t she the expert? She had made herself so open to me, wanting her story to be heard and understood (“in all seriousness...”). I struggled to imagine what purpose Radhwa’s experiences and interpretation might serve. Radhwa has come to some effective conclusions: she understanding of herself as a non-heterosexual has surely been informed by such close interaction with a bisexual woman who shares so many of her other identities, she has made peace with not

having an explicit same-sex dating experience (peace attainable, perhaps, only after standing on the brink of its realization), and has a considerably well-defined idea of what characteristics she wants in a partner (the best she can do, perhaps, in light of the arranged marriage waiting for her on the other side of graduation). I have come to a place where I am able to take Radhwa at her word: she is not lying to me, I just might not have been able to imagine or understand what she was telling me.

### **Circumstantial Potential of the Academy**.....

After differentiating *hegemonic tales* from *subversive stories*, Ewick and Silbey define three conditions that may encourage counter-hegemonic storytelling. First is the social marginality of the narrator, second is a functional knowledge of the rules governing hegemonic tales and an ability to challenge and play with them, and third is the circumstances in which stories are told (Ewick and Silbey 1995:220–221). They assert that particular institutions not only offer the opportunity for targeted populations to tell certain stories but also imbue those resulting narratives with a common content and form. The institution of the university serves to offer not only a common opportunity to speak, but also provides a situated and attentive audience. Through my body of interviews, I have found the location of the university functioning in much the same way as Ewick and Silbey outlined (providing—through officially sanctioned university events, no less—the necessary speaker preparatory training, venue, publicity, audience, and encouragement to tell coming out stories, discuss histories of mental illness and depression, and disclose experiences of sexual violence). These opportunities break the silence around taboo subjects, which is itself subversive, but in so doing simultaneously construct intelligible subjectivities around the issues at hand. My respondents articulate a duality to these opportunities, finding them at once freeing and confining.

### *Academic Discursive Practices*

Most of the women I interviewed have spent some amount of time—if it wasn't an innate

part of their personality to begin with—reflecting on identity from an intellectual distance. Before talking openly with family and friends about their sexuality, many of my participants sought literature or media that could give them insight into what they were feeling and thinking. That so many of my participants expressed comfort in intellectualizing personal problems is likely both an effect of and a reason for pursuing a college education.

Radhwa did not grow up thinking she would go to college. She lived in a tight-knit Bengali immigrant community that supported the arranged marriage of their young Muslim daughters. But Radhwa excelled in school to the degree that she grew bored with the lack of challenge and sought outlets for her creativity and love of learning. She learned how to articulate her desires in such a way that she would still be read as obedient and faithful, but could still get what she want. Contrasting her argumentative style with that of her younger brothers, Radhwa says, “I present a logical scenario and I present the evidence that works in my favor.” This discursive style is what made moving away to college a possibility for Radhwa—something that she decisively acknowledges. Radhwa’s story is demonstrative of the real effects and potential of particular discursive styles.

When she finally allowed herself to begin thinking about her gender and sexuality, Dylan immersed herself in personal narratives, novels, and academic writing. Through these various texts, she began to weed through what felt applicable to her life and construct a framework within which she could locate herself. Dylan describes this process:

There was kind of a comfort in intellectualizing it a bit and then take that intellectualization and being comfortable with the idea of how it all might work in theory and thinking, well how do I feel within that? There were lots of theories I disagreed with and just kind of tossed them out and just built up an idea of what other ideas were out there. It helped me figure out things about myself and also just kind of normalize it a bit more.

She describes immersion in this discourse—through independent study and guided by the authority of certain persons in medical and education institutions—simultaneously facilitated and constrained her identity development as a trans lesbian. While it gave her the words and affirmation of a history

necessary to begin the work she would do, it also enforced norms she didn't feel spoke to her individual experience that could be further isolating.

Scholarship on gender and sexuality may not have figured in so centrally some women's internal development, but it did facilitate conversation and more open external relationships. Madison has identified herself as intellectual for as long as she can remember. She enjoys healthy debate with family, even on touchy issues like politics. Madison has made the decision to not come out to her family at this point in her life, but these discursive practices have still been instrumental in her familial interactions: "I don't compromise my politics with my family. I just don't necessarily feel obligated to give a justification based on my own identity." In fact, I got the impression from Madison that her ability and willingness to critically engage her parents on such issues served as a justification for her decision to not come out.

Sue, too, has made the decision to not come out to her traditional Chinese parents. Sue describes growing up in a home in which the intersections of Catholic chastity and Asian social norms resulted in a complete silence in the realm of sexuality. She was homeschooled for every year of her education except her senior year, when she attended a prestigious secular private school. During this year, Sue experimented with different types of extracurricular projects and social groups. This broadening knowledge base coupled with her predisposition to intellectualize ideas led Sue to begin broaching these forbidden topics with her family:

Since I've gone to college, I've been able to talk to my parents more openly in the realm of academia. I've found that they're not as homophobic as I originally thought. [Academia] has given me a grounding. It's given me a position: rather than, "these are my feelings," I can say, "this is a study."

This approach is one utilized by several of my participants. The general consensus seems to be that this discursive framework allows them to raise taboo topics in a way removed enough to protect them as individuals (and by consequence, their relationship with the family they are in conversation with).

*It's In the Words*

The language these women used to describe this axis of their identity and their feelings of sexual desire varied. Collectively, my body of participants hit on every recognizable variation of labeled female same-sex desire—and even came up with a few more. They were all thoughtfully reflective regarding why they used certain words and not others.

Most of my participants expressed some resistance to using any terms that reified an essentialist, binary model of gender: Jessica said, “I don’t identify as bisexual because it puts it in a binary. . . . If the word ‘queer’ were more strictly defined as something, than I probably wouldn’t like that either [*laughing*]. I just like it because everyone has their own definition for it.” Jessica’s preference for ‘queer’ because of a perceived openness was echoed by most women I interviewed, though a smaller portion actively used the word as a self-identification label. Most women differentiated between labels they used within and outside of the queer community, preferring to only use such ambiguous labels when there would be the opportunity to explain or answer questions such words would be expected to incite. Jessica utilizes the University’s LGBT Speaker’s Bureau as a forum to educate on the uses of the term ‘queer’:

I tell people [when presenting on Speakers Bureau] what that means to me and why I don’t use another word. A lot of people ask questions like, ‘is that a bad word? Am I allowed to call people that?’ I think people are more just really curious because they don’t know what it means either. . . . If they were looking for a term, then I just explain why I use the word queer. Usually, I just explain it and don’t put a label on it.

The impetus to *not* label was quite common. Almost everyone, however, had an idea of what names resonated with them, but noted tension and distortion when they took these names outside of a specific context where they might not be readily understood. Many women mention in passing what labels they might otherwise use if they didn’t feel they’d be subject to stereotypes or distortion. Jessica describes one difference in naming that she bases on sex: “If I were a man, I would probably identify as gay. It’s something that’s fluid and when I put a label on myself other people put me into the box of what they think that label is. If I identify my sexual orientation as anything, it’s queer.

Just because it's harder for people to box.” Notably, the only woman who identified primarily with the label ‘gay’ grew up in Uruguay where, she says, it's used as an umbrella term for all same-sex desire regardless of gender.

Perceptions of what certain labels connote are culturally and context specific. For example, Jessica's group of queer friends finds the word ‘lesbian’ to be old-fashioned and awkward and actually uses it as a joke amongst themselves:

Most of my friends use queer. We all joke around about it and we're like, ‘yea, lesbians!’ and we all use that colloquially, but none of us actually identify with that word I don't think. If we do, we don't like using it just because it's kind of like... eh, not a dirty word, it just doesn't sound nice.

The idea that the word ‘lesbian’ sounds like a “dirty word” is something Jessica identifies as rooted in the historical use of the term in clinical literature to pathologize female same-sex desire. She provides an example of how such dated terms can not only feel awkward but even change the atmosphere in a classroom setting for the worse:

I'm taking this class called ‘Gender, Sexuality, and Addiction’ and the other people in the class, who I assume to be mostly straight, either say ‘lesbian’ or ‘homosexual’. I really don't like it, but in an historical context, those were the words that were used. Like in the articles we read and stuff, that's where people are getting their information from. The other day, this girl was like, ‘you know, the culture of butch lesbianism’ [*laughing*]... like, what is that? Me and this girl I used to live with were cracking up in the back row.

Ironically, the two girls laughing in the back row are the ones who most outwardly and explicitly identify with the subject matter at hand. These examples demonstrate that the words we use and the meaning we assign to them are geographically, culturally, and historically determined.

### *Teaching Identity*

A significant number of my participants have actually formalized their interest in identity-based issues by studying it in college or even declaring a major in a related discipline. The specific academic areas represented include LGBT Studies, Women's Studies, Asian and Pacific Islander Studies, South Asian Studies, and Latin American and Caribbean Studies (as one might suspect, the specific woman associated with each discipline listed matches a central identity they hold).

Heather is a biology major but has really enjoyed the handful of Women's Studies classes she's been able to take—most of which focus on sexuality. She describes how she's integrated this new knowledge into her home life:

I think I've opened up [my mom's] mind a lot, but I still don't know if it's enough to tell her. I've been able to do it under the guise of classes because I've started taking Women's Studies classes. I never talk to her about any academics except about that one—it felt really good to clear some things up for her [when I shared a paper I'd written arguing for gay marriage].

Heather recognizes that she is intentionally utilizing academic discourse to facilitate conversation with her mother (“I've been able to do it *under the guise* of classes...”). Heather is the first person in her family to attend college, and sees herself as a role model and inspiration for her three younger sisters—though not without some guilt for having left them in a difficult home environment. Her feelings about the distance college has put between her and her mother seem comparatively more straightforward: Heather sees herself “clear[ing] some things up for her” rather than mutually engaging with one another (after all, Heather sees her mother's previously held views on homosexuality and religion as so extreme and unfounded that they just simply aren't worth considering).

Deja reflects on her decision to major in Women's Studies as a welcome intervention in an otherwise difficult and conflicting background:

My first semester, I took [an introductory Women's Studies course]—and that's when I knew. I was like, “okay, this is going to be your major, I love this...” I was able to put a name and a theory to things that'd been happening to me all along. That was really important to me. . . . It's really helped me name some of the things I've seen around my neighborhoods growing up and really helped me figure things out and have more confidence in myself.

Deja emphasizes the effect of elements specifically rooted in academic discourse: she appreciates being able to locate her experiences within a theoretical framework. She also underscores the role of language (being able to “put a name” to her experiences and “name” parts of her background) in gaining understanding and confidence.

## Intersecting Narratives of Stigma.....

Sexuality was not the only axis of identity my participants addressed that is generally conceived as a stigmatizing mark in our society. They also told stories of dealing with depression, self-injuring, losing their sense of religious identity, growing up in abusive homes, and surviving sexual assault. The ways in which my participants related these different stories varied in interesting ways. I found three narrative approaches functioning, each regarding a different plane of identity categories. First, participants seemed to discuss macro-categories such as race, class, or sex following the normative language and narrative trajectories. That is, they did not seem to be actively challenging, resisting, or complicating the way these issues are generally thought about in dominant culture. Clearly, this could be because this was not the primary focus of my study and my line of questioning may have led respondents to give more surface answers regarding these issues. Second, participants seemed to discuss sexuality and gender using the normative vocabulary for the most part. They seemed familiar with the hegemonic framework and the exhibited some pressure to locate oneself within it. Notably, I found many consciously resisting doing so by providing explanations for why they see things differently than their perceptions of hegemonic models, challenging stereotypes, and rejecting labels to describe their experiences and emotions. Third, participants discussed what might be considered the most stigmatized categories—mental illness and sexual violence—by seemingly avoiding any hegemonic framework altogether. Where these stories came up, respondents often did not even demonstrate any recognition of the existence of models for these experiences and struggled comparably to find the language to move through these stories.

### *Narratives of Sexual Violence*

*While a lot of things had been unhealthy and out of balance with my relationship with Courtney, she had respected the sovereignty of my body—regardless. Then there was this boy who I had met in church, who stood next to me every Wednesday for weeks and held my hand when we said the Our Father, who had received all the sacraments—which good Catholics were supposed to do—and he was attracted to women—which was another thing good Catholics were*



*supposed to do. And he hadn't had respect for my sovereignty as a human being and my right to decide what happened to my own body. ---Madison*

The individual and collective effects of sexual violence echo deeply and widely at many levels: through the social, physical, emotional, and cognitive aspects of one's life. For non-heterosexual survivors, there may be an added layer to the implications of such trauma connected to their sexuality. Some women describe experiencing homophobia as an additional type of "cultural victimization" (Balsam 2003). The intersection of different types of trauma can have tremendous effects on an individual's emotional health and well-being. Though most research shows individual women do not themselves establish such connections, the pervasive cultural assumption that being a sexual assault or child sexual abuse survivor is correlated to developing a lesbian or bisexual identity remains (Hall 1998). While such assumptions and connections are deeply problematic, there is potentially much to be learned in studying the intersections of sexual violence on identity and women's love and desire. One place to begin such study is in a narrative analysis of survivor discourse and the telling of coming out stories. Both of these discursive practices (which are also performative processes) grapple with many of the same issues of pragmatic usefulness, political implications, taking up intersectionality, and seeking solutions to problems with retrospect and memory (Naples 2003).

One of the most meaningful and decisive benefits of grounded theory on my research was an unexpected focus on sexual violence. About half of the women I interviewed told stories of growing up in abusive or controlling homes, having had influential experiences based on witnessing the abuse of a close friend or family member, or having themselves survived a dating violence or sexual assault situation. A couple of these women were moved substantially enough to become involved in the anti-rape movement on campus (such as Madison and Allison) while others didn't even have the language to adequately describe what had happened to them (like Heather). The handful of other women fall somewhere on the spectrum between the two: their experiences with

sexual violence factors prominently into their story in different ways, but may not be a part of their identity around which they organize their social lives or group involvement.

For Deja, coming to college was an escape in every possible sense of the word: from her rough urban neighborhood, her disappointing schools, and her dysfunctional family. Of her home life, she says, “My family was really dysfunctional. My mom and my dad were never married. My dad left when I was about fifteen. Up until that point, he was very abusive to both my mom and myself: physically and especially verbally to me, but more physically towards my mom, but both.” I ask her how these personal experiences growing up might have influenced her current conception of family. She answers,

In high school, I don't remember what I thought family was like. I probably didn't think very much of it. I think probably in high school I was like, “I don't ever want to get married!” It still affects me. It has this effect where when I think about getting married, I don't think about it positively. I feel like, why would I get married with somebody when it's just going to break, like, just end. I feel like the married life is so boring and I feel like... it's to the point where I feel like I wouldn't get in something I feel like I have no way out.

In short, Deja's narrative is more of feeling trapped and oppressed. Nonetheless, these brushes have underscored for her the type of life she does not want all the more acutely. Madison also described growing up in a climate completely controlled by her father: “I lived my entire childhood in fear of his violence—and he doesn't acknowledge any of that, which angers me. I don't think I could really have a genuine relationship with him until he acknowledges and apologizes for these things.” While he does not seem to understand the impact of his early actions, Madison is moved enough to effectively call off any possibility for a meaningful relationship until things change. One manifestation of this father-daughter dynamic is her exclusive use of his first name throughout her entire story. Heather's father treated his wife and daughter similarly, and was the major impetus for her move out of state to be the first in her family to attend college. Heather is proud of her accomplishments and relative success, but is haunted by the sense she is abandoning her sisters to the fate she fled:

[My dad] likes to control people. I think the idea of me becoming my own person and breaking free from that, well, he really hated that. He wanted to control us and keep us down. I think breaking away inspired my sisters and even my mom. I always wanted to protect my sisters and I still am like that in a lot of ways. Now that I've been here three or four years, I still feel guilty sometimes... knowing what they're going through.

Growing up in this environment convinced Heather that she did not want a family. Confronting her bisexuality and learning to think about family in new ways, however, has convinced Heather to be a little more open-minded about what her future has in store for her. She was also challenged to seriously interrogate her expectations for relationships and family in her role as friend and confidant to the first woman to whom she was attracted. Heather rented a room from this woman and her husband for many months and was privy to the domestic discord. Her friend's unhappiness in this relationship was further contextualized by her history of childhood sexual abuse.

In narrating her own story of unease and discomfort regarding some areas of her sexuality, Heather is quick to assure me that she herself was never a victim in this way. She does not extend her assessment to an influential recent dating situation in which she agreed to meet a boy whom she met on a popular social networking site for a casual date on campus. Heather is visibly embarrassed and makes sure to beat me to any negative judgment I might make, blaming herself: "How dangerous is that? I was so stupid... but I was so depressed." She continues to make a connection between feeling depressed and blaming herself for abusive or manipulative dating situations: "The reason I sometimes second guess that whole thing is that sometimes I go through these really depressed spells where I start hating myself and I start to wish someone just wanted me—and he always wanted me, so maybe I should just call him up." She practically spits this last sentence, sarcastic and brimming with self-disgust. What Heather is second-guessing is whether she has any right to exonerate herself from what happened during that first date:

We'd be sitting there and I'd be like, "no, please don't do that" and he just would keep doing it. He didn't care that I was saying no, thank you. Finally, it got to the point where I was like, "fine, why don't I just take some Nyquil and lay here and you can have sex with me" because I started feeling really bad about myself. He was like, "well, I think I'd feel like I was raping you and I don't want to do that." I was like, "fine, then don't force me!" So yea, I guess at one point I had it in my to [hook up with a random guy]. . . . He stuck my hand in his

pants and I touched his... wiener *[giggles uncomfortably when the word leaves her lips]*. It really freaked me out—I don't know why, because I'd done all sort of stuff before... I'd had sex with my boyfriend.

Even though Heather's date throws out the word "rape" to describe something he does not supposedly want to do, she does not think of what happened that evening in the context of sexual assault. Importantly, this story is given as a very misguided answer to a question I ask Heather about her judgments of other college women's supposed sexual indiscretion and casual hook-ups with men. Instead of justifying her opinion, she admits to "having it in [her]" to be that way too, though her example is one of forceful molestation and not consensual sex. Since this is the first dating experience Heather has had since her friend and love interest moved away to attend medical school, she thoughtfully contrasts the two experiences. She says, "I don't think about being forced" but she thinks about "feeling that way" on her date: a way she never experienced with her female friend. The disconnect between the two situations is stark and weighs heavily on Heather.

Madison is also a survivor of sexual assault and similarly reflects on its meaning within her greater conception of sexuality, relationships, and family. Madison is a volunteer for the University's sexual assault center and comfortably relates a distilled version of the story she has told many times before:

After dinner, he sexually assaulted me and I quote 'escaped' from his car and got a concussion when I fell out of his car and he drove away. I called my mom from the phone inside the restaurant and asked her to come and get me. That night was when I stopped trying to believe in God. A lot of things became a lot less clear with that realization, but one thing that became more clear was that my sexuality was part of who I was and it wasn't something that was right or wrong. It was just who I was.

The magnitude of the effects of her rape could not be more clearly defined or emphatically stated: indeed, it left Madison unwilling to continue to try to force her belief in God, which had previously been a very defining part of her life and identity. Similarly, she contrasts the dynamics of the relationship in which she was violated to her previous experience with a woman:

While a lot of things had been unhealthy and out of balance with my relationship with Courtney, she had respected the sovereignty of my body—regardless. Then there was this boy who I had met in church, who stood next to me every Wednesday for weeks and held my hand when we said the Our Father, who had received all the sacraments—which good Catholics were supposed to do—and he was attracted to women—

which was another thing good Catholics were supposed to do. And he hadn't had respect for my sovereignty as a human being and my right to decide what happened to my own body.

Madison thinks it's an incredulous irony that her rapist otherwise is exactly the sort of man her friends, family, and, indeed, society in general would approve of—and irony capable of unmasking the layers of lies she's been inundated with. Madison's insight is influenced by her academic interest in gender studies and her deep, formalized involvement in the anti-rape movement. She continues,

Even though this boy and I had the same amount of social and emotional power, he still felt he had the right to take physical control over my body. Reflecting on it now, I can see he was imbued with power socially because he was a man-identified male—whereas, Courtney and I were perceived from the outside as having the same amount of social and emotional power.

While Madison has the vocabulary and emotional maturity to analyze and interrogate these experiences, Allison is palpably uncomfortable with a story her mother recently relayed to her:

[My mom] told me that my dad had some experiences that made him not like gay men... something about my dad being at Boy Scout camp and getting... I mean, not molested officially, but... sexually... assaulted, I guess? By the guy that was in his tent. Um... and I really don't know what that means. They could have been fooling around for all I know and felt self-conscious about it and turned it into... I don't really want to know. My dad has only talked about it [to my mom] after he's been drinking. . . . I was just like, "I don't want to know... that's information that does not benefit my life, so don't share it with me."

Allison is laughing by the end of her story, a reaction she's made clear elsewhere in her interview is a response to being intensely uncomfortable or at a loss for the appropriate response. Just as Heather answered my question about college hook-up culture, Allison's casting this story as part of the private sexual lives of her parents is deeply rooted in some pervasive myths about sexual violence. Ironically, Heather is a leader with her cooperative house association's sexual harassment response team but is reluctant to see her father as a victim. She questions her father's honesty and recollection and even passively accepts the story as justification for her father's apparent homophobia in his adult life.

Kiara, on the other hand, is cautiously self-reflective about the connection between sexual violence and sexual orientation. She believes being a survivor of childhood sexual violence was the impetus for her comparatively early sexual curiosity, but is careful not to suggest it as an explanation for her lesbian identity:

When I was younger, like six or seven, I was molested and raped by some men, some men that were in my family and in my life. I don't want to include those experiences in shaping my sexual orientation, but at the same time, I don't want to ignore them. I do feel those experiences shaped my sexual curiosity at such a young age unlike a lot of other children and made me more interested and curious to try certain things other kids wouldn't because they didn't have that curiosity from certain life experiences.

Kiara is seems surprisingly at ease telling this story. After all, it has become part of the fabric of her story of strength and resilience. She is visibly less at ease telling me about her first sexual experiences with her first girlfriend in high school, searching for words to describe the situation: "I still wasn't very comfortable, a lot because she was very, very forward with sex. We only had sex once but that took a lot of her being really, really forward. That made me uncomfortable. That forcefulness." The sex that took place between Kiara and this early girlfriend might also have been unconsensual. Because I know Kiara has the vocabulary and knowledge to label her own experience, and because I am being careful not to press her to tell me more than she is comfortable with, I don't push her. Emily, too, recalled an ambiguous sexual experience with a woman that bordered on assault. The first—and, consequently, only—time she had sex with her first girlfriend was tense and problematic in numerous ways. Perhaps tellingly, Emily is quick to point out that this experience wasn't what it sounded like and wasn't what I might be thinking: "I lost my virginity to [my first girlfriend], but we only had sex that one time because she had several anxiety issues she had decided not to tell me about and when we had sex, she panicked. It didn't have anything to do with sexual abuse..."

### *Narratives of Mental Health*

*"It's even hard just thinking about it.  
Coming out was kind of nice in some ways, but in some ways it made me  
deal with a lot of inner demons that I'm still struggling with." ---Dylan*

With the single exception of Deja, Dylan was the only woman who took the time to reply at length to my invitation to bring something new up or leave me with some parting message at the end of our interview. Though she had introduced me to her history of mental health issues, she

wanted to emphasize the specific intersection with sexuality. For Dylan, the effect of this combination is palpable: it adds just enough extra that she feels entirely consumed, overwhelmed, and even hopeless. She goes on to say,

A shit ton of things have happened over the past few years . . . and all that kind of got tied in with this. Now, I'm at this point where I'm trying to untangle it and it's just very difficult because this aspect of my identity—my sexual orientation and my gender orientation—is just so tangled with that that a lot of times it just ends up depressing me.

Ending an interview on this note was disheartening to say the least, but the gravity of the message is clear: the specificities of mental health issues experienced by non-heterosexual people are compounded and intensified by their gender and sexuality issues. Often, these people might feel further isolated from loved ones, cut off from meaningful community and inclusion, guilty, ashamed, or acutely aware of what constraints these parts of their identity might have on the rest of their lives. In the field of psychology, these indicators of risk are associated with mental, emotional, and cognitive wellbeing and impact social and academic success, rate of suicide and parasuicidal behaviors, and more. That this is the case has been well established in the literature, extending even to those without a genetic predisposition for depression and other mental illnesses.

Martina has the self-awareness to know she is not the type to typically be depressed. Because she has always had a pretty easygoing attitude and resiliency, she is frustrated with the effects surrounding her coming out, saying, “This is a cliché, right? I’m a living cliché.” Martina became very depressed and disconnected due to her strained relationships with family and friends in both the states and Uruguay. She’s visibly annoyed with herself relating this part of her narrative.

Allison, on the other hand, was rather comfortable discussing this history with me, including details about self-harm. Attending a prestigious private arts academy (a secular boarding high school), she spent her most formative years immersed in a place with similarly intense and driven young people who all accepted a degree of dysfunction as just part of the territory: “You find out later that, you know, that people had their issues, but at the time, everyone tried to keep to

themselves because people were getting sent home for different things. You couldn't really trust anyone... if you opened your mouth about it." As a dancer, Allison was very familiar with the drama associated with eating disorders among her cohort. While nearly everyone had gone through periods of restrictive eating or purging, everyone was equally private about it and feared being ratted out by jealously competitive hallmates or classmates. Despite the public knowledge and culture that tolerated if not promoted these behaviors, Allison and others like her still suffered in isolation. When they were caught, students would be temporarily expelled and sent home. Having left to family finding the help needed, the school largely exonerated itself from involvement. Allison recalls her most difficult and darkest period:

The only [precipitating factor] I can think of is the pressure from the school, and trying to do well. Dance especially is very competitive, both emotionally and physically. . . . I think I just felt really embarrassed that this [thin] girl got the leads and everything, and I was just in the corps for everything and I just looked like a piece of crap trying to dance. So it led to, you know... eating disorders. I lived with a roommate who was bulimic so that was how... [trails off]. I was sent home for cutting. I drank every time that I could. It was just really bad.

Though she attributes her problems coming to a head to the intense competition and unrealistic standards of the dance department, Allison does not make any direct or illuminating connections to her sexuality.

I still engaged in self-destructive behaviors. I don't know if I did that at home... I definitely did when I went back to Interlochen, but I don't remember those four days from when I got the email to when I went back. I think I was just so excited. But I was still destructive once I got back, even though I was happy. I think a lot of it was stress: stress from dancing, just trying to outdo everyone else. I'm a really competitive person to begin with, and so to be in that environment just magnified everything for me.

Here, she dispels the idea that engaging in self-harm is indicative of depression (she kept doing it, "even though [she] was happy"). Despite her own reasoning and reflection, it is notable that it was within the span of her two-week suspension that Allison discovered almost instantaneously her attraction for a female hall director: "It just kind of hit me one day that after [my female dorm director] wrote me an email. I interpreted it a different way than I think how she intended it... and



it just kind of smacked me in the face that, ‘oh my god, I think I like her.’” While Allison discusses the impact of eating disorders on her psyche, this was not even the explicit impetus for her troubles:

I actually had to call my parents from Interlochen in the middle of the night saying, “I have to come home now because I was caught cutting.” [The counselor] took me out of my room, brought me down to health services, stuck me in a room, and she sat on one bed and was like, “you need to call your parents,” and I asked her, “what do I tell them?” and she was like, “I don’t know, that’s up to you.” So, I had to call them and think of what I was going to say and... I was so terrified that all I could really do was laugh.

Finding the words to describe what was happening to her and what she was feeling was hard enough, but putting them together in such a way that would be comprehensible to people outside her specific school environment compounded the difficulty. Though she remembers her parents being very upset, Allison denies being able to recall any particulars: “[My parents] were pissed. I think that I blocked a lot of it out, just for self-protective purposes, but it was pretty much the longest car ride home that I think I can ever imagine.” I push Allison on these “self-protective” measures in which she engages and though this terminology surfaces at several instances in her narrative in various ways, she is not able to provide much insight. Even Allison herself doesn’t seem to understand this process: “When my parents say something, I don’t consciously make the decision, ‘I’m going to forget this’, but I don’t hold onto it. I hold onto everything else....” Judging herself to be the type of person to generally hold on to grudges and, she seems a little perplexed about this atypical reaction to which she flees under extreme emotional duress. Allison continues to weave the ideas of laughing at and being unable to recall details of painful situations throughout her narrative of those pivotal two weeks:

[The suspension] was for two weeks. They call it “emotional leave.” I had to go home, I had to see a therapist, the therapist had to write a letter to the school, my parents had to write a letter to the school, then I had to write a letter basically asking for forgiveness, saying, “please let me come back, I’ve changed.” . . . It’s all kind of a blur. I don’t really remember. It was kind of a joke, but at the same time it was really influential. . . . I can hardly remember anything. It was just very unhealthy, everything that I engaged in, over the two weeks. It was anything but an emotional break. My parents dragged me down to Kalamazoo to see my therapist a couple times and again, that was a joke.

Several times in the span of a few minutes, Allison dodges my probes and manages to skate through the most difficult parts of her narrative (saying, “I don’t really remember . . . I can hardly remember

anything”). Throughout, her tone is a bit indignant. While she acknowledges that her behavior was unhealthy and that the suspension itself was intensely emotional for her, she tone vocalizes frustration with and disdain for the way authoritative figures handled her (her concluding summation is that “it was kind of a joke”).

After listening to her story of these pivotal weeks in her sophomore year of high school, I asked her where she felt she was today in regards to these issues. Allison’s answer is subversive in that she freely and unapologetically incriminates herself, giving credence to negative stereotypes of self-harm:

[My reasons for cutting] kind of varied. Each time I did it, it’d either be because I didn’t feel good enough, or because I felt too fat, or I was punishing myself for eating an apple that day or something dumb like that. After I started dating Summer, it turned into a way to kind of get back at her... indirectly let her know that if she wants to continue to engage in these [social interactions that made me jealous], that’s fine. But I’m going to cut myself because of it, and you get to deal with the aftermath. It was very conscious. I think I tried to play it off to her that it wasn’t conscious, but it was very double-sided to me. I knew exactly what I was doing and why I was doing it. And I knew how bad I wanted it to be when I cut myself. But, for her, I tried to downplay it a little bit.

The literature on parasuicidalities insists that those who engage in self-harm tend to do so for a particular reason (rather than using it as a tool according to circumstance) and should be taken seriously and not as histrionic and flagrant cries for attention.<sup>29</sup> However, Allison’s explanation sounds refreshingly believable and transparent. Perhaps therein lies some potential for honest insight unrivaled in more politically correct research and mental health patient narratives.

Emily’s narrative similarly offers an alternative take on a familiar narrative of mental health. There has been a lot of publicity and buzz around the negative effects of popular SSRI-class antidepressants on libido, but none have anticipated effects like Emily’s:

I had problems with depression my first year of high school. It got really, really bad so I was put on Prozac. It completely erased my sex drive . . . so I had no idea at all. . . . I got off of it, my moods leveled out, and I felt

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<sup>29</sup> Recent literature on parasuicidalities suggests the necessity to consider the specificity of certain identities and subjectivities on behavior. Speaking specifically about lesbian and bisexual self-injurers, new research maintains “Self-injury must be understood, not as a symptom of individual intrapsychic disorder, but as a coping response that arises within a social context” (Alexander and Clare 2004:83). The authors suggest that such behavioral responses can be generally understood as context dependent, though experiencing abuse, feeling invalidated, and experiencing oneself as different or unacceptable are especially salient factors in the lives of women broadly, and queer women specifically.

fine. I felt fine for the first time in a long time. Then I realize I have a crush on my really good female friend. I kind of had an emotional crush on her before, but it hadn't occurred to me that I wasn't straight until I had my sex drive again. That threw me off. A lot of people spend their first year of high school figuring it out... *but I was blind-sighted.*

Here, Emily's latent bisexuality was suppressed as a side effect of her medication. Because of our culture that assumes heterosexuality even in spite of some evidence to the contrary, she didn't question her feelings until her attraction and desire was made manifest in new and explicitly sexual ways.

Madison also spoke to the influence her sexuality had on her overall mental health. Not only was Madison grappling with recently emergent same-sex attractions, her troubled place within the Catholic Church, and navigating the unfamiliar social milieu of the Southern elite, she was also deeply affected by the sexual assault that took place on her first date with a boy she'd met in a church youth group. She juggled these crises by retreating into academics and sports at her boarding school:

I would sit on the edge of the bathtub and literally shook from being so exhausted... from not sleeping and being terrified all the time—and from keeping that all inside. I didn't tell anyone about it—I didn't acknowledge it at all. I just kept as busy as I possibly could, all the time—because if I didn't have to think about it, I didn't have to deal with it.

Madison develops insomnia as well as experiences post-traumatic nightmares. She describes staying awake into the early morning hours so that she'd finally be exhausted to be able to fall into a dreamless sleep. She makes the important distinction and relation between keeping secrets from others and keeping secrets from oneself: these two acts are different things, but often bleed into one another, as they did for her.

### *Summary*

This chapter explored the implications of storytelling for social science, epistemology, politics, and both individual and collective identity. Locating these conversations within an institutional site (here, the university) fulfilled one established condition for encouraging counter-

hegemonic storytelling: this provided both a common opportunity to narrate and a common content to the stories. Other inherent characteristics of this site (e.g. an intellectual atmosphere, academic courses, assigned reading, a socially and politically progressive campus climate, etc.) could serve as tools for respondents: the women I spoke with described being able to explore their own identity and present controversial attitudes and opinions by couching such information in academic rhetoric. The ability to utilize aspects of the university environment to legitimate their opinions or deflect criticism facilitated the development and integration of respondents' sexuality. This chapter included the discussion of sexual violence and mental health: two additional, intersecting narratives of stigmatized experience or identity that arose spontaneously through my interviews. Ultimately, it is within this chapter that my central and overarching claim unfolds: I found the women I interviewed to be simultaneously participating in and challenging normative expectations for coming out, hegemonic models of identity development, and traditional ideas about LGBT subjectivity through these narrative processes.

## CONCLUSION

*Almost any biographer, if he respects facts, can give us much more than another fact to add to our collection.  
He can give us the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders.  
--Virginia Woolf, *The Art of Biography**

Though research on gender and sexuality is slowly establishing itself in all areas of the academy, there is still much to learn about women's love and desire. To sit across the table from these women and hear about their lives is to learn that—while there has been an undeniable shift in politics and social tone—the battle on the ground for acceptance, affirmation, and inclusion is still raging on. These women are also coming to age in an era with an unprecedented visibility of LGBT identified people. Taken together, today's generation of queer women are presented with a plethora of new and unexplored issues. As social researchers grapple with the structural, cultural, and political implications of these issues, we must remember who it is at the center of the storm: our subject. Qualitative interview-based studies with a feminist epistemological orientation constitute a significant step forward in fostering agency and self-definition in marginalized communities.

Looking back, there are some strains of my thesis that blend harmoniously into existing scholarship on LGBT peoples. There are others that rise above the choir: it is these voices that social researchers should follow in the quest to discover what is new or what is changing. Significantly, the stories my respondents told were presented in a chronological frame but resisted engaging in discourse that reified concrete and static categories of identity (e.g. by asking participants to tell “coming out” stories). The fact that my participants relayed their narratives in such close proximity to the general events they were discussing is significant because most interview-based identity studies are collecting retrospective life histories, which are subject to all of the noise introduced by memory. Over time, these stories likely adapt to societal pressure to iron out contradiction, ambiguity, and inconsistency and congeal to hegemonic models of queer subjectivity.

If research on sexuality has historically received less than its fair share of support within the academy, than research on female sexuality is comparatively more lacking. For many decades, those who studied sexuality attended to male sexual behavior, or approached communities of men and women as a homogenous sample. Only recently has female sexuality begun to be given its due—perhaps in part because such work must walk the thin line between ignoring women and essentializing gender.

My research figures into a conversation on sexuality that presupposes that those differences found between men and women are effects of moving through the world thus gendered, and not to be attributed directly to differences in biological sex. My work is also a voice added to those that attend to differences between identity and desire. Reliable and generalizable sex research has always been inherently difficult and problematic: the heterogeneity of experience and perception among the women in my sample demonstrates that a wealth of viable information is overlooked when the study population is concretely and narrowly defined according. Historically, sex research has defined its population of interest based on assumptions of static and stable sexual identities. My study shows that even women who do not identify with culturally recognizable versions of “lesbian” or “bisexual” or who do not follow normative prescriptives for coming out do have much to offer in the way of understanding sexuality and desire.

Having articulated a fundamental distinction between identity and desire, the women I interviewed tell stories that—individually and collectively—alternate between reifying hegemonic models of queer subjectivity and introduce possibilities to live and love outside of the existing matrix. They thoughtfully commented on what they perceived to be the inefficacy and futility of LGBT labels, preferring the space to explain themselves and illustrate their ideas with stories from their lives. They all felt the pressure to locate themselves within this matrix, and consequently did adopt labels in certain circumstances with the self-awareness to articulate their motivation to do so.

This dynamic use of labeling is demonstrative of these women's knowledge of the rules and expectations of the normative system, and their ability and willingness to use those rules to their advantage. This knowledge, coupled with their social marginalization, are two factors that introduce counter-hegemonic potential in their narratives. A third factor is the locating of this study within the academic institution of the university, which presents participants with both the common opportunity to narrate and a common content to their narratives. These three factors all supported my respondents' ability to tell subversive stories that introduced new possibilities for queer subjectivity. Such stories bore witness to the unimagined and unexpressed and have the potential to shift our understanding of what it means to be a queer woman. These subversive stories were told within and alongside hegemonic tales, which reified existing notions of what LGBT lives look like and how narratives of such experiences look like (e.g. "coming out" stories).

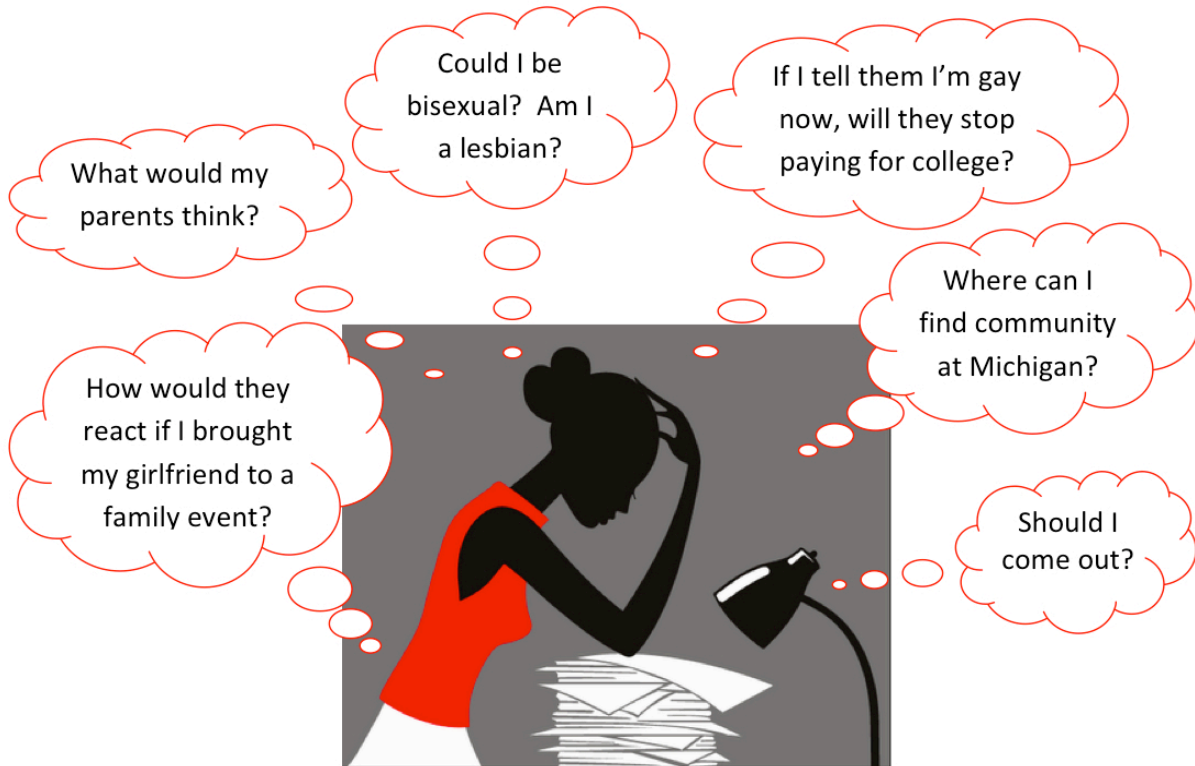
#### *Implications for Future Research*

Looking forward, I'd like to outline implications for future research and propose recommendations for others doing this work. There are aspects of my project that I would absolutely replicate in future work: I found open-ended interviews a great way to gather a broad and deep range of information from participants. I found it essential to establish a level of trust and mutual sense of responsibility for the interview with my respondent. While sharing in being a sexual minority was a significant first step, I think my relationship dynamic with my participants would benefit substantially from the opportunity to meet frequently over a course of time. I would also encourage careful reflection on the part of the interviewer to avoid language that might encourage participants' conformation to hegemonic models LGBT subjectivities or narrative practices. Devotion to providing as open a space as possible within which participants can tell these personal stories is an essential step toward redefining what's common knowledge about both individual and collective sexuality, and the power to shape these realities by the stories we tell.

# \$ GET PAID \$

## Participate in an interview study

Conducted through the Departments of Sociology and Women's Studies



**Your story matters!** If you've thought about questions like these, or if you've had important experiences with your family or friends because of your sexuality, **please consider sharing your thoughts with me.**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to answer particular interview questions or leave the study at any time for any reason. Your privacy and confidentiality are taken very seriously and will be maintained. Interview length is determined by you (ideally 30-120 minutes). Participants must be 18 years or older.

Fall '08 College Women  
Interview Study  
womenstudy@umich.edu  
(248) 495-0128



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(248) 495-0128

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(248) 495-0128



## Consent to Participate in Research Study

---

- This study is a student-initiated project that involves research that will be used in an undergraduate honors thesis jointly submitted to the University of Michigan Departments of Sociology and Women's Studies.
- The purpose of this study is to learn more about how coming to college is involved in student's understanding and experience of their sexual orientation.
- If you choose to participate in the entire study, you can expect to be interviewed between 1 and 2 times between September 2008 and January 2009.
- At each interview, you will be asked to consent to being interviewed. If you consent to the interview, you will be asked to consent to having the interview recorded on a digital tape recorder.
- Each interview is semi-structured, which means the interviewer has prepared a list of open-ended questions. You will be free to direct the interview as much or as little as you'd like. The interviewer may ask you follow-up questions on things you previously said. Each interview will last between 30 and 120 minutes.
- You will be paid a \$5 cash incentive for your participation and time at the end of each interview. You will receive this incentive regardless of the length of interview or if it was terminated prematurely. Showing up to a mutually agreed-upon interview appointment guarantees payment of the \$5 incentive.
- During each interview, you can expect to be asked open-ended questions about coming to college, your sexual orientation, coming out, friends, family, and college life.
- You may refuse to answer any question at any time, for any reason, without consequence.
- You may end the interview at any time, for any reason, without consequence
- Potential risks of this study involve becoming uncomfortable or emotional with the content of interviews and reputational damage affiliated with involvement.
- Potential benefits of this study are getting to discuss important issues like sexual orientation and college in a comfortable and respectful environment as well as contributing to knowledge about women's perspectives on college and sexual orientation.
- Your data is indirectly linked to your name and protections are in place to secure your data.
- Should you withdraw early from this study, data collected in previous interviews may still be used.

- Data gathered in the course of this study will be kept securely until the completion of my thesis, after which point all data (written and electronic) except the thesis itself (including drafts) will be immediately destroyed.
- If you consent to having interviews recorded, a typed transcript will be made. Consenting to having your interview recorded is not mandatory for participation in this study. The transcript will not contain your name or other identifying information and will be stored on my personal password-protected laptop. Recordings will be destroyed within 72 hours of your interview. If you do not consent to having interviews recorded, any notes taken during the interview will be typed (they will not contain your name or other identifying information) and will be stored on my personal password-protected computer.
- For questions and information related to interviews or this study, you may contact the student investigator, Jamie Budnick, any time at [jamie.budnick@gmail.com](mailto:jamie.budnick@gmail.com) or by calling #(248) 495-0128. The faculty advisor for this study is Professor Pamela Smock; she can be reached at [pjsmock@umich.edu](mailto:pjsmock@umich.edu)
- Should you have questions regarding your rights as a participant in research, please contact the Institutional Review Board, Behavioral Sciences, 540 E. Liberty #202, Ann Arbor, MI 48104, #(734) 936-0933, email: [irbhsbs@umich.edu](mailto:irbhsbs@umich.edu)
- Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to continue participation at any time, for any reason, without consequence.

Please sign and date below if you consent to the terms above.

---

Clearly Print Name

---

Print Date

---

1. Signature – Consent to participate in study

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2. Signature – Consent to having your interview recorded

*\*You may still participate should you not consent to being taped*

## Research Study on Non-heterosexual College Women, Community, Kin, and Integration

*Principal Investigator: Jamie Budnick*

*Faculty Advisor: Pamela Smock, Ph.D.*

### Semi-Structured, Open-Ended, In-Depth Interview Question Outline:

---

#### General Questions:

- Tell me a little about yourself.
- How did you learn about this study?
- Why did you decide to participate in this study?
- What are you hoping to get out of participating in this study?

#### High School Questions:

- What was high school like for you?
- What sort of groups were you involved in through high school?
- What was your high school town or city like?
- How did your high school handle LGBT people or issues?
- Where do you feel you fit in best in high school?
- In high school, what did you think about or expect from college?
- In high school, how did you identify your sexual orientation to yourself? To others?
- Tell me about the summer between high school and college.

#### College Questions:

- Why did you choose to come to the University of Michigan?
- What was the move to college like for you?
- What do you think about the city of Ann Arbor?
- What do you think about the classes/people/clubs at the University of Michigan?
- Have you ever taken courses that taught about gender or sexuality? Why have you decided to take/not to take such courses? What have they taught you?
- Have you changed since coming to college? If so, how? If not, why not?

#### Friends/Family Questions:

- Tell me a little about your friends/family.
- Are you “out” to your friends/family? To you want to ever be “out”?
- What does being “out” to family and friends mean to you?
- How did your friends/family react when you came to college?
- What is your personal definition of “family”? Do you think your definition is different from other people’s definition? If so, how and why?

#### Sexual Orientation Questions:

- How do you identify your sexual orientation now? Have you always identified that way?
- Tell me about the process of labeling your sexual orientation.
- How do you feel about your sexual orientation?
- When you came to college, did you want to change your sexual orientation?
- When you came to college, did you feel freer to embrace your sexual orientation?
- Do you believe everyone has a set sexual orientation that they are born with? Why or why not?
- Who and what has influenced the way you have come to think about (your) sexual orientation?

Participant Demographics – Reference Sheet								
Name	Race / Ethnicity	Year in College	Academic Concentration(s)	Geographical Region	Type of High School	Religious Background	Primary Identification Label	Secondary Identification Label
Deja	Black	Senior	Women's Studies	West Coast	Urban Magnet	African Methodist Episcopal	Lesbian	Queer
Allison	White	Junior	Kinesiology	Northern / Western Michigan	Secular Private	Catholic	No Label	Lesbian
Jessica	White	Senior	General Studies	Metropolitan Detroit	Suburban Public	None	Queer	Gay
Dylan	White	Freshman	Art & Design	East Coast	Suburban Public	Protestant	Heterosexual Lesbian	Lesbian
Kiara	Black	Senior	Sociology + Philosophy	Detroit	Urban Public	Baptist	Lesbian	Lesbian
Radhwa	Bangladeshi	Junior	Classical Studies + South Asian Studies	Detroit	Urban Public	Muslim	Non-heterosexual	Bisexual
Emily	White	Senior	English	Metropolitan Detroit	Suburban Public	Catholic	Bisexual	Bisexual
Martina	Uruguayan	Senior	General Social Science + Latin American & Caribbean Studies	West Coast	Religious Private	Catholic	Gay	Lesbian
Heather	White	Junior	Biology	Midwest	Rural Public	Lutheran	No Label	Bisexual
Talia	Black	Senior	Performance Arts Technology	Ann Arbor	School + Secular Private	Baptist	Lesbian	Lesbian
Sara	White	Freshman	Undeclared	Northern / Western Michigan	Suburban Public	None	Lesbian	Queer
Madison	White	Sophomore	Engineering	Ann Arbor	Secular Private	Catholic	Bisexual	Queer
Sue	Chinese	Junior	Anthropology + LGBT Studies + Asian/Pacific Islander Studies	Ann Arbor	School + Secular Private	Catholic	Bisexual	Queer
Priti	Indian	Sophomore	Undeclared	West Coast	Suburban Public	Hindu	Lesbian	Bisexual

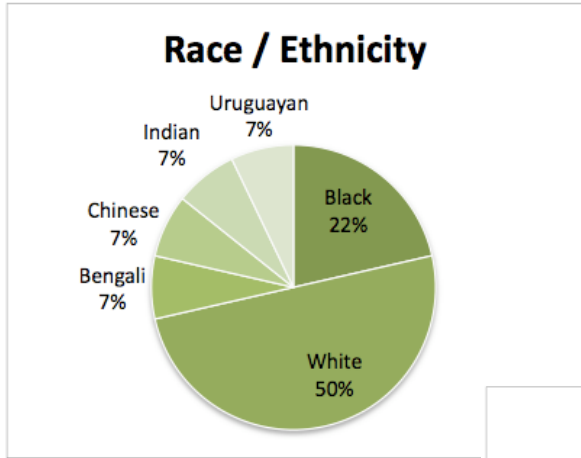


Figure 1

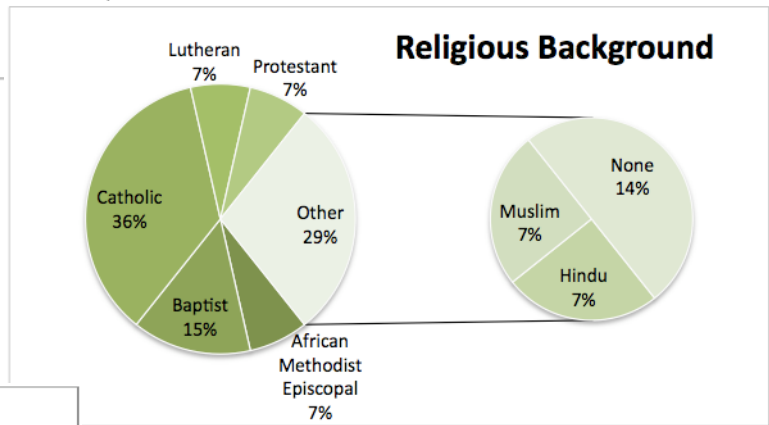


Figure 2

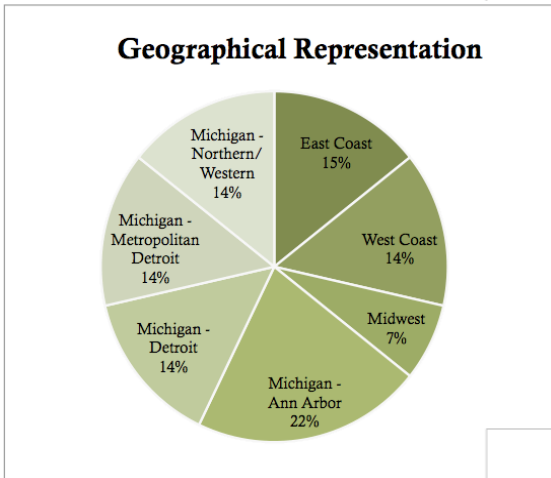


Figure 3

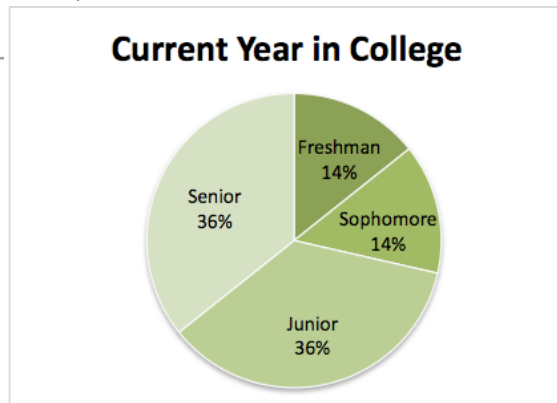


Figure 4

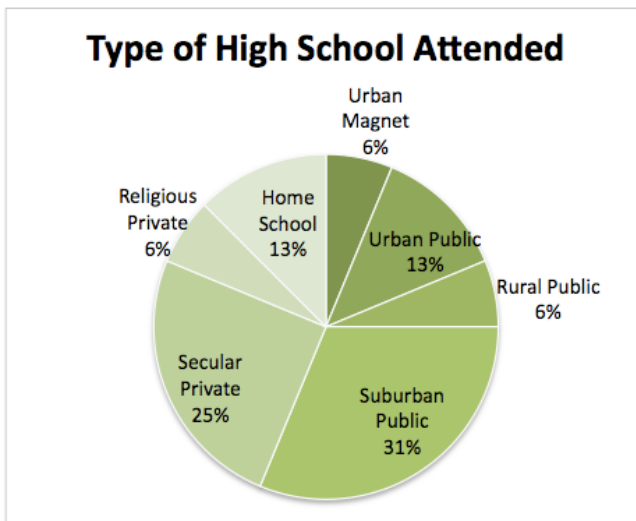


Figure 5

### Academic Concentrations

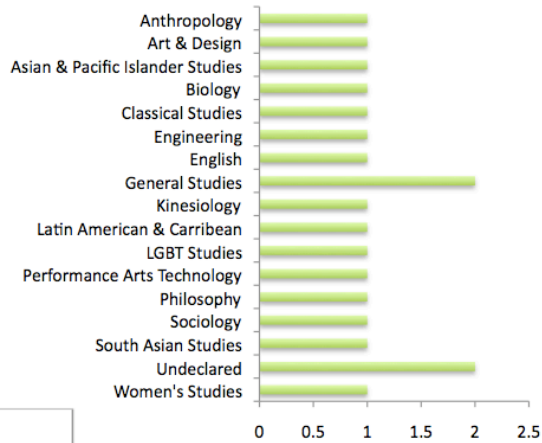


Figure 6

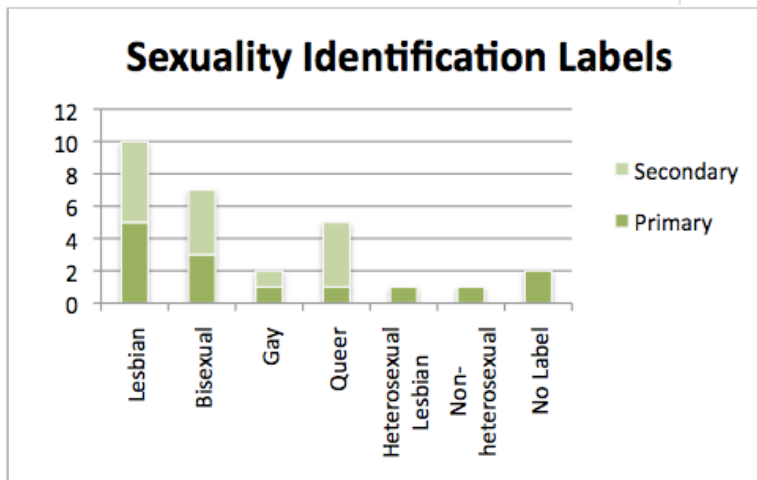


Figure 7

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