Performing, Sensing, Being: Queer Identity in Everyday Life

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Justin J. Rudnick

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JUSTIN J. RUDNICK

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and the Scripps College of Communication by

Devika Chawla

Associate Professor of Communication Studies

Scott Titsworth

Dean, Scripps College of Communication

Abstract

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Performing, Sensing, Being: Queer Identity in Everyday Life

Director of Dissertation: Devika Chawla

Drawing from performance, affect, and queer theories, I explore how queer identity is storied, performed, and sensed in everyday life. I access performance and sensory ethnographic practices to examine how queer persons "do" their identities on a daily basis. I draw from data collected through ethnographic participation in a queer-friendly district of Columbus, Ohio in addition to in-depth interviews with fourteen self-identified queer persons I met through my fieldwork. My approach privileges observations and reflections of mundane moments of everyday life to position queer identity as a routine, repetitive, habitual, and otherwise performative practice. I question the emphasis on verbal disclosures of queer identity in both academic literature and lived experience by positing a distinction between "coming out" and "being out." Working from this distinction, I investigate the purpose of queer identity stories, how queer identity is embodied, the affect generated by queer identity, and the way a cohesive queer community is challenged by differences in identity performances.

Dedication

This project is dedicated to my parents. Your endless pride and unwavering faith inspire me to carry on, even when I lose faith in myself.

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Writing a dissertation is a humbling experience, but the support I have received throughout the process was outstanding. I am indebted to so many people that I fear I may never finish thanking everyone who deserves it, but there are a few who are worthy of mention here. Of course I need to start by thanking my committee.

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Chapter 1: Welcome to the Gayborhood

My first visit to the LGBT Community Center in Columbus, Ohio was a momentous occasion. I remember maneuvering my car through the busy streets of the Short North—Columbus's Arts District—with mounting trepidation. Parking in the Short North typically is atrocious, and May 23rd was no exception. What little parking that existed along the busy streets was already occupied by the time I arrived shortly before eleven in the morning. After circling around the block where the Community Center sat waiting for me, I resigned to circulating a wider radius. I secured a place for my car about a half-mile away from the center, down a winding, one-way street lined with posh urban townhouses surrounded with wrought-iron fences and sculpted topiaries. A rainbow flag hanging from a balcony swayed lazily in the late spring air. As I walked up the sidewalk to the busy street that ran through the heart of "gay Columbus," I imagined living in a neighborhood like this one.

My imagination was interrupted when I arrived at the busy intersection where my path veered to the left. I crossed the street and continued to walk the few blocks to the center. I noted shops and restaurants that would soon become regular dwelling places for me: Endeavor, the hipster-queer coffee shop in an old firehouse, its large door rolled up to invite the mild weather inside; Merger, the quintessential gay café and bar, with electronic dance music reverberating from its large patio; Yummy Boi diner with its cheap burgers and 70s-style restaurant décor. And there, at the end of my path, the LGBT Community Center, an unassuming two-story building on the corner of a city block. I paused outside the doors to the Center to look at the printed signs advertising the

different programs offered throughout the week. Yoga, coming-out groups, acupuncture, Alcoholics Anonymous, older lesbians organized for change, cancer support groups, LGBT Trailblazers—the list of activities was almost overwhelming. I took a deep breath, steeled my nerves, and pushed open the doors to enter.

The lobby of the center was largely vacant except for two fold-up tables in the very middle of the room surrounded by stackable chairs painted in 80s-style shades of teal, purple, and pink. Seated around the table were three persons. The first person I noticed was white and androgynous, and appeared to be around my age. The second was a white woman who I guessed was in her 50s, with long curly grey hair and thick glasses. The third seemed like a Latino man I thought might also be in his 50s. I took a hesitant step forward before the younger person greeted me with a "hello." I flashed a smile and asked, "is this the social group meeting?" "Sure is, baby," the older man replied. "Come on in!" I crossed the room and took a seat at one of the tables so I could face my three companions, my back to the entrance. The older man facilitated our introductions once I was seated. "What's your name, sweetie?" he asked. I replied, and in turn they each introduced themselves to me: Lex, Shari, and Gabby. Gabby slid a piece of paper and a pencil across the table to me, explaining: "We keep attendance so the center knows that people still want to come to the program. You can put down as much or as little information as you want." I glanced at the attendance sheet and saw columns for names, email addresses, phone numbers, sexes, and sexual orientations. I noticed there were no straight people signed in. My heart fluttered as I listed my own identifiers. I slid the paper back to Gabby as Lex cracked a smile and said "Welcome to the gayborhood!"

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Welcome, indeed. Welcome to Columbus, Ohio, the fifteenth largest city in the country with a population of over 800,000 persons.[1] Welcome to one of the fifteen cities in the U.S. with the highest population of LGBTQ persons—4.3%, according to some sources.[2] Welcome to the Short North, Columbus's Arts District, located right next to the downtown area and hub for the city's "bustling gay scene."[3] Welcome to my field, my home-away-from-home. Perhaps you have never been; this opening vignette might well be your first trip to the Short North, much like it was mine—in a way. Columbus is a short 70-mile drive from Athens, Ohio, the quaint Appalachian town where I have lived for the past four years. Despite my relatively close proximity, the queer side of Columbus escaped my attention for most of my time in Ohio. As fate would have it, I began to go "home" to the Short North only months before I began going there to "work." It is difficult to recall the feelings of that first visit—the apprehension, the uncertainty—though I am sure they were there. Over time, they were replaced with different feelings, more calm and sure. This is quite fitting, I think, when you consider the goals of my project: it only makes sense that, in a study of queer identity, you would go straight (no pun intended) to the source.

But my arrival in the Short North for fieldwork was the result of a long process of living and thinking. Tracing the trajectory of a research project of this magnitude is challenging, particularly when its inspiration was years in the making. This chapter is an introduction in four parts. I begin by reflecting on various experiences that inspired my early thinking about the performance of queer identity. Then, I situate the project within

the socio-cultural context of current events that occurred around the time I began proposing my research. Next, I review the relevant literatures that provided a scaffold for this project. Finally, I arrive at the formal research questions that guided the project. In this chapter I unite the various intellectual musings that led to my arrival at the topic of this dissertation: the performance of queer identity in everyday life.

Experiences and Inspirations

I "officially" came out of the closet at the age of twenty-two, after an unexpected and emotional conversation with my mother. I had just finished my fourth year of undergraduate education, and was gearing up for my fifth and final year the coming fall. Many chapters of my life ended after that conversation: my stint as a chemistry major, my relationship with my girlfriend, my competition in collegiate speech and debate, and my life as a straight man. All of these things were treasured aspects of my identity, and the turbulence resulting from their conclusions was both exciting and terrifying. I spent the ensuing summer figuring out what it meant for me to be gay, and the following year cultivating a growing confidence in the new personal and political position I occupied in society. My friends who watched the metamorphosis tell me I was like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon. I became more outspoken, more comfortable, and more fun. And through it all, I maintained a steadfast commitment to be unapologetically gay.

After earning my bachelor's degree, I moved to a new state to begin my graduate studies. The move promised new horizons for me, as it freed me from most of my conflicted relationships with the people who had known me as first straight, then gay. I vowed that I would come out to everyone I met in this new stage of my life, so there

would be no secrets—and no double lives. I stuck to this vow over the next few years, but quickly tired of continually coming out to people. Despite identifying as gay, most people seemed to assume I was straight. For a newly "out" gay man trying to nurture confidence in his stigmatized identity, those assumptions troubled me. The conversational turns of "well, actually, I'm not interested in women," or "actually, my *boy*-friend and I . . ." grew tiresome. Why couldn't people just recognize me for who I was? There had to be a way for me to project my (gay) identity so I no longer needed to have such awkward conversations with people.

This desire inspired me to begin painting my fingernails. I started subtly, with just a clear coat of polish to add a little shine. Then, I began painting French tips—classy, refined, a little understated, and easily unnoticed to the unsuspecting eye. Eventually, I grew brazen, painting my nails in bright neon colors to match whatever outfit I wore that day. My painted nails became an expected accessory, and if I ever arrived with unpolished fingers I was quick to hear about it. Over time, I became restless with my painted nails. I began experimenting with other cosmetics: first eyeliner, then mascara, eye shadow next, and finally eyebrow pencils. The resulting look achieved what I desired: my painted nails and painted face were overtly feminine, but on my otherwise male body they signaled something different. I finally looked as queer as I felt.

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The summer after my first year of doctoral studies was a time of reading, relaxing, and reflecting. In preparation for my upcoming preliminary exams, I immersed myself in a number of books and journal articles to help me think more deeply about performance

and identity. One book I was particularly excited to read was Tony Adams's monograph, *Narrating the Closet.* At the time, I had just met Adams, and only hoped to do the kind of work he accomplishes in the book. In his autoethnography of same-sex attraction, Adams theorizes the social construction of the "closet" from which LGBT persons must come out if they wish for their sexual orientations to be known. Throughout the book, Adams predicates his construction of the closet on a number of conditions. Working my way through the book, I found myself enthralled by these conditions, marveling at the brilliance of them—they resonated so strongly with my own experiences. Reading Adams's book was like a breath of fresh air. Someone was theorizing about my life.

As the book progressed, however, I became increasingly unsettled by its conclusions. I began to sense a reliance on verbal disclosures of sexual orientation, on confirming identities through words that seemed to render my painted nails and painted face pointless. What did my adornments mean if, at the end of the day, "until he says so—until he confirms it in discourse—he has not come out"?[4] It took me a few weeks of thinking to realize that Adams's conclusions made quite a lot of sense if you accepted one of his conditions: that same-sex attraction "cannot be accessed easily."[5] Adams, like many others, began with the assumption that queer identity is an invisible one, bearing no definitive markers. Sexuality, unlike race, sex, or gender, cannot be discerned through physical characteristics. Did this mean my makeup was insufficient to project my queer identity? I desperately hoped not.

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For the first two years I lived in Athens, Ohio, my friend Preston cut my hair. Preston was engaged to a colleague of mine in the department, and once a month I would go to their house and get my hair cut in their basement. Paul and I would chat about classes and research while Preston snipped away at my locks. It was wonderfully charming, the three of us gathered together, gay, and able to talk about things I couldn't easily discuss with the rest of my friends. I was sad to see them leave in the summer of 2014, but Paul landed a job and moved with Preston—now his husband—a state away. Their departure left a void in my life in a lot of ways. It also meant I needed a new hairstylist. I made my way through the many salons in Athens, each time leaving disappointed. Uneven trims, boxy cuts—one time, I left with what amounted to two ridges along the top of my head and instructions to "fluff it up so it doesn't show." Six months of bad haircuts and worse conversation soured my attitude toward the Appalachian salon scene. My hair and I needed some inspiration.

The following January, I began traveling to Columbus to have my hair cut. I tracked down a salon in the Short North and scheduled an appointment with one of their "director" stylists, Anthony—the most qualified (and most expensive) person I could find. Anthony was a rather attractive gay man in his late 30s. As he led me to his chair and started our consultation, he made the polite conversation you expect between a stylist and a client. After a few minutes, Anthony asked me about the "gay scene" in Athens—before I had the opportunity to come out to him. Somehow, Anthony sensed that I was queer. It could have been my eye makeup, my rainbow bracelet and ring, my outfit, my shoes, my earrings, my speech patterns, or some complicated confluence of all these

different signs that tipped him off. But in that moment, and throughout the rest of my visit, I felt refreshed and exhilarated, pulsing with a nervous excitement. How deliciously intoxicating it was to be assumed gay.

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Over the past seven years, these experiences have cultivated my growing interest in the embodiment of queer identity. I thought about how to reconcile my own experiences of performing my identity with what I perceived to be a disconfirming approach taken by academic literature. Why are verbal coming out messages given so much attention when queer embodiment is an equally (if not more) important aspect of everyday life? I became fixated on studying this paradox. I knew I was not alone in deliberately projecting my sexual identity through my body, but I wanted to know how other queer persons performed. My desire for answers was the early inspiration for my dissertation project. I wanted to research the performance of queer identity.

These personal experiences were, of course, only part of the picture. A number of events occurred in the months preceding my official entry into the field that reinforced the need for more inquiry into the performance of queer identity. In December 2014—when I was preparing to write an official proposal for this project—transgender teen Leelah Alcorn committed suicide. Leelah, who lived and died in Lebanon, Ohio, only two hours from Athens, posted an online suicide note where she explained how her parents disapproved of her gender and sexual identity and insisted that she continue "to do traditionally 'boyish' things to try to fit in."[6] Leelah's suicide drew national attention

from media outlets, and the queer community momentarily rallied around Trans* persons to demand more acceptance.

On April 24, 2015—two weeks after I defended my dissertation proposal—ABC aired Dianne Sawyer's interview with Bruce Jenner, in which the U.S. Olympic gold-medalist publicly announced that he was a woman. Once again, Trans* persons stirred media into a frenzy as questions surrounding gender, sexuality, and Trans* identity circulated around the country. Two months later, Caitlyn Jenner stunned the world with her *Vanity Fair* cover page, raising as many questions as she answered and launching innumerable conversations about privilege, womanhood, and transitioning genders.

And on June 26, 2015—the day after I finished teaching my summer class and began earnest fieldwork—the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that state bans on same-sex marriage were unconstitutional. The ruling officially ensured the legal right for same-sex couples to marry across the country. That Saturday, as I sat in the LGBT Community Center in Columbus, our conversation teemed with excitement and speculation. Yet again, the country was abuzz, and queer identity was in some way at the heart of conversations occurring around the world.

The questions pressing upon my mind during my fieldwork were pressing upon everyone that summer. They demonstrated how the political conversations within, outside, and about the queer community were undergoing drastic changes. More than anything, they illustrated how queer identity remains under scrutiny as queer persons continue to assert their right to visibility in everyday interactions. The conversations I participated in that summer taught me there is much to learn from observing how cultural

discourses intersect with our everyday lives. I practiced attuning myself to those moments when the global/cultural met the local/interpersonal, moments when stories were told, when bodies presented themselves, when atmospheres were encountered, and when identities were challenged. This project is, in many ways, a (re)collection of such moments gathered through the course of my fieldwork studying alongside queer persons in Columbus, Ohio. It comprises my ethnographic inquiry into the performance of queer identity in everyday life.

Queer Identity in the Literature

This project is, first and foremost, a treatise on identity. The communication literature contains a wealth of scholarship on the communication of identity, much of which is rooted in social constructionist and symbolic interactionist paradigms. As the pragmatist George Herbert Mead has argued, "the self is something which has a development; it is not initially there at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity."[7] Our identities inform our understandings of ourselves, but those understandings are enabled by our interactions with others. "There are all sorts of different selves answering to all sorts of different social reactions," Mead says, such that "it is the social process itself that is responsible for the appearance of the self."[8] Mead situates selves in relationships with generalized others, "the organized community or social group which . . . exercises control over the conduct of its individual members."[9] He posits a formation of individual identity constructed through social interaction with both identifiable interlocutors and generalized cultural scripts for self-intelligibility. In this

way, Mead illustrates the ways in which identity is contingent on communication and culture.

Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann elaborate on the construction of identity, culture, and their reciprocal relationship in their book, *The Social Construction of Reality*. According to Berger and Luckmann, "the self cannot be adequately understood apart from the particular social context in which they were shaped."[10] These particular social contexts are the grounds for the construction of both identities and cultures, as our everyday interactions result in repeated or habitualized actions. These repeated actions concretize over time, congealing into institutions that impose their structure upon subsequent social interactions. Berger and Luckmann note that reality assumes a "firmness in consciousness," to the extent that it "becomes real in an ever more massive way and can no longer be changed so readily."[11] Reality, in turn, contributes to the scripts through which we interpret persons and situations. For this reason, social constructionism and symbolic interactionism posit that "identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society."[12]

The performative turn in identity research offers another approach to this tension through the concept of performativity. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler is widely cited for her conceptualization of performativity, which she describes as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names."[13] For Butler, performativity is the explanation for how culture imposes itself upon identities, and how those identities revise culture in turn. Using gender as her primary example, Butler notes that "masculine and feminine positions are thus instituted through prohibitive laws that

produce culturally intelligible genders, but only through the production of an unconscious sexuality that reemerges in the domain of the imaginary."[14] Stated another way, culturally sedimented notions of masculinity and femininity impose an order on social interactions, but identities working within that order—or resisting it—revise the very cultures that make those identities knowable. The result of such a recursive relationship between individual and society is an understanding of identity as radically subjective, situated, and contingent, always in production and under revision.

Communication literature contains a wealth of scholarship concerning queer identity. In their review of queer identity research in communication, Karen Lovaas and Mercilee Jenkins note that contemporary communication scholarship focuses on how "ideas about gender, sex, and sexuality interrelate, produce, and reproduce each other."[15] Much of this scholarship draws on performativity, both as conceptualized by Butler and through the lens of J. L. Austin's linguistic performativity. Austin's legacy invests much of the communication scholarship on queer identity with an attention to coming out disclosures as performative utterances, and this emphasis on the discursive manifestation of queer identity lingers in our scholarship today. Tony Adams, for example, argues that "coming out happens only when same-sex attraction and/or a LGBQ identity is disclosed through discourse and action."[16] Similarly, communication scholar Jimmie Manning has created a typology of coming out messages that explains the different types of conversations in which queer persons come out—such as pre-planned, emergent, coaxed, confrontational, sexual, educational, and mediated disclosures.[17] Common across studies like these is an exclusive focus on disclosing queer identity, without consideration of the

embodiment of that identity. Studies like these demonstrate the continued academic interest in coming out disclosures as the primary form of communication about sexual identity.

One reason for this reliance on discursive communication is, I suspect, related to the legacy of psychological paradigms that inform much social-scientific research about the construction of queer identity. Psychologist Vivienne Cass's model of homosexual identity formation, for example, is widely cited in social-scientific inquiry about sexual identity. Cass's model is an apt description of the internal and interpersonal tensions that arise as queer identity is performed across various stages of identification. Cass posits six stages in the development of queer[18] identity that include identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis.[19] Though Cass's theory inspired a trajectory of psychological research about the construction of identity[20], Manning notes that "many scholars from multiple academic disciplines have since questioned whether these models are truly representative of the coming out process" because of their decidedly cognitive approach to queer identity.[21] Locating identity as a cognitive phenomenon limits considerations of the communicative nature of identities. As a corrective, communication scholars have focused on linguistic messages that convey identities. Yet the picture remains incomplete.

Cultural studies scholars, on the other hand, have generated a number of perspectives on constructing and communicating queer identity that are more sensitive to its contextual and embodied aspects. Queer and feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, for instance, notes that "phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it

emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds."[22] Ahmed subsequently offers a framework of queer phenomenology, in which she argues that "queer lives are about the potentiality of not following certain conventional scripts of family, inheritance, and child rearing, whereby 'not following' involves disorientation: it makes things oblique."[23] In situating her approach to queer identity within the everyday and through a phenomenological lens, Ahmed posits an understanding of (queer) identity that is thoroughly rooted in the lived, embodied experiences of queer persons rather than focusing exclusively on the disclosure of queer identity.

Cultural studies scholar Elspeth Probyn further problematizes discursive understandings of identity. In her book *Outside Belongings,* Probyn argues for a move away from "identity" and toward "belonging." "If I have argued against the idea of identity," Probyn notes, "it is because it can only describe the specificities of categories of belonging; it cannot reach the desires to belong and the ways in which individuals, groups, and nations render and live out their specificity as singular."[24] Belonging, according to Probyn, cultivates a performative and affective understanding of identity, one that "designates a profoundly affective manner of being, always performed with the experience of being within and inbetween sets of social relations."[25] Queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz embraces a similar approach in his theorizing of queer utopia, arguing that queerness is performative . . .

> . . . because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future. Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."[26]

Cultural studies therefore challenges reigning discursive perspectives on communicating identity in favor of a more embodied, material, and performative stance.

Despite an overabundance of research on disclosing queer identity, a growing body of literature in the communication discipline also attests to a performance perspective. Keith Berry, for instance, reflects on his own sexual identity performances in the context of a gay bathhouse in Chicago:

> . . . performances are patterned and diverse because of performers' idiosyncracies. I am diligent in monitoring towel placement and the related appearances of the belly. In turn . . . I find myself identifying with and/or through a "nonideal" body. My body disconnects me from many others, those who fit the ideal and those who do not.[27]

For Berry, the bathhouse privileges the embodiment and aestheticization of queer identity over disclosing that identity verbally. Bathhouse patrons do not speak their identities, they "do" their identities. Berry illustrates the way queer identity is a deeply embodied phenomenon. Similarly, performance studies scholar Jacqueline Taylor ponders her position as a "visible lesbian," interrogating the tensions she experiences as a result of being labeled an "exemplary lesbian." The specific troubles Taylor faces include:

> . . . the difficulty of being visible enough to be of use, the risk of being marginalized as excessively lesbian. The aching silences that surround lesbian lives. The hunger for visible lesbians.[28]

For both Berry and Taylor, sexuality resides on skins, and bodies literally attract and propel one another based on how identities are embodied and sensed. Their stories illustrate a more fervent push for communication scholarship to embrace a performative and queer paradigm. Performance scholar Craig Gingrich-Philbrook calls for such a push when he says "soon . . . queer theory and performance might reconsider their collective mythologizing of the divide between discourse/language and authenticity/the body."[29] This divide, which Gingrich-Philbrook describes as "a crack in queer theory's bureaucratic edifice," is the point from which my project departs.[30]

Guiding Research Questions

Queer, performance, postcolonial, and feminist scholars have consistently argued for an understanding of identity that is radically subjective and constructed. Feminist political theorist Sonia Kruks, for instance, advocates for a perspective on persons as "body-subjects" whose knowledge is "situated and perspectival" and whose "forms of cognition and motivations to act will be in some measure sentient and affective."[31] As the aforementioned literature suggests, a performance paradigm rests on such an assumption, arguing that bodies situated within shifting sociocultural contexts perform identities contingent upon those contexts. Such a paradigm challenges the scriptocentric approach of traditional discourse-based research, which, according to performance scholar Dwight Conquergood, "is so skewed toward texts that even when researchers do attend to

extralinguistic human action and embodied events they construe them as texts to be read."[32] This commitment to honoring the material, embodied nature of identity instead of maintaining an exclusively discursive focus informed my approach to this project. Broadly, three research questions framed my inquiry:

1) How do queer persons perform their identities in everyday life?
2) How do queer persons narrate their identity performances?
3) How do queer persons sense their own and others' identity performances?

These questions consider how queer bodies are called upon as vehicles to convey identities in addition to invoking the use of words. In short, I set out to answer how queer bodies perform and "become" out rather than/in addition to "coming" out discursively. The end result is neither a comprehensive nor more complete representation of queer identity performances. Rather, it is a fragmented and partial account of queer performativity, an uneasy tension of bodies in/and conversation.

Précis of Chapters

Throughout the following chapters, I address these themes more thoroughly to understand how queer identities are both embodied and narrated, performative and discursive. In chapter two, I review an integrated set of theoretical frameworks that informed my thinking about queer identity. I first address the limits of purely discursive understandings of queer identity before engaging with performance theories, queer theories, and affect theories to frame my approach to the project. I conclude the chapter with a conceptual discussion of performance and sensory ethnography, illustrating the intimate relationship between theory and method in interpretive ethnographic research.

Chapter three resumes this discussion of ethnography by chronicling my field experiences. I discuss my fieldwork practices, including the field participation and focused interviews that comprised my data. I then provide an account of my note-taking, which generated the material data I relied upon for analysis. Chapter three ends with an interrogation of my own position as insider/outsider and researcher/participant, thereby providing a reflexive consideration of my own queer identity in the project.

I begin my formal analysis in chapter four, where I question the function of identity narratives in the performance of queer identity. I first think through the importance of telling identity stories for queer persons before thematizing those stories to illustrate how queer persons continue to struggle for visibility in contemporary culture. I conclude the chapter with a reflection on the ways queer identity stories create and reflect a cultural context that renders queer identity unintelligible, thereby warranting continued research on the subject.

Chapter five is my pivotal thematic chapter. I begin with a collection of anecdotes that represent some of the many forms the performance of queer identity can take. I then abstract these anecdotes to construct a rendition of the cultural script that informs how persons interpret queer identity as understandable or not. In light of this script, I question the reliance on verbal coming out messages to discern queer identity, asking why disclosures continue to constitute definitive proof of queerness at the expense of queer embodiment. I conclude the chapter by discussing how embracing a duality of coming out and being out restores performative agency to queer persons who perform their identities in everyday life.

In chapter six, I turn my attention to performances of queer identity as sensory experiences. Drawing from affect theories, I trace the development of queer "atmospheres" that imbue spaces with an energy that makes queer persons feel at home. Next, I posit queer identity as a generative force which, rooted in experiences of shared oppression, connects queer persons together through an attractive force between bodies. I conclude by discussing how these affects present themselves in everyday life as queer sensings.

Chapter seven takes a different turn by challenging some of the assumptions I maintain throughout earlier chapters. As the only Trans* identified person I was able to speak with, Shari disrupts the grand narrative of queer identity in significant ways. In chapter seven I reconstruct our interview into an oral history of her transition experiences. The chapter ends with a discussion of how Shari's story unsettles notions of a queer community united by shared marginality.

I conclude this project in chapter eight, where I embrace an intersectional approach to queer identity to problematize notions of queer community. I wrestle with the resistance of queer persons to embrace a "queer" label, which I use as a motif to trace the ways that race, class, and cultural homogeneity bifurcate the queer population. I conclude the chapter by questioning the future, pondering the possibilities for envisioning a queer utopia and what the future holds for queer identity politics.

Chapter 1 Notes

1. "Columbus, Ohio."
2. "The U.S. Cities with the Highest, Lowest Percentage of LGBTs."
3. "LGBT," para. 1.

4. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 91.
5. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 55.
6. Fantz, "An Ohio Transgender Teen's Suicide, a Mother's Anguish," para. 6.
7. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 135.
8. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 142.
9. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 154–155.
10. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 50.
11. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 59.
12. Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 174.
13. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 2.
14. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 38.
15. Lovaas and Jenkins, "Introduction: Setting the Stage," 5.
16. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 90.
17. Manning, "Communicating Sexual Identities."
18. Cass uses the label "homosexual" throughout her essay, which was a common linguistic choice in the 70s and 80s before the label was challenged by the queer population because of its associations with pathology and mental illness. As I engage her essay here, I have chosen to substitute the word with "queer" in an effort to avoid invoking that linguistic history more than is necessary.
19. See Cass, "Homosexuality Identity Formation." Cass describes the stages of her model as such: *identity confusion* involves a perceived incongruence between a person's actions and their ascribed heterosexual identity; *identity comparison* involves a person feeling that the societal "rules" for their sexuality might not apply anymore; *identity tolerance* involves a perceptual change from potentially non-heterosexual to probably non-heterosexual; *identity acceptance* refers to a person's gradual validation of a queer identity; *identity pride* represents a person valuing of their queer identity and devaluing heterosexuality; and *identity synthesis* involves re-valuing heterosexual persons who also accept one's queer identity.
20. See Horowitz and Newcomb, "A Multidimensional Approach to Homosexual Identity"; Troiden, "The Formation of Homosexual Identities."
21. Manning, "Communicating Sexual Identities," 124.
22. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 2.
23. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 178.
24. Probyn, *Outside Belongings*, 152–153.
25. Probyn, *Outside Belongings*, 13.
26. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
27. Berry, "Embracing the Catastrophe: Gay Body Seeks Acceptance," 275.
28. Taylor, "On Being an Exemplary Lesbian," 65–66.
29. Gingrich-Philbrook, "Queer Theory and Performance," 356.
30. Gingrich-Philbrook, "Queer Theory and Performance," 356.
31. Kruks, "Going beyond Discourse," 144.
32. Conquergood, "Performance Studies," 147.

Chapter 2: A Theoretical Excursion

"Hey baby! It's a nice day today, why don't you get a chair and we can sit out here?" I found Lex seated outside the community center when I arrived shortly after 11:00 a.m. on a sunny Saturday morning. It truly was a beautiful day. The temperature was hovering in the 70s and a light breeze was gently blowing the few wispy clouds in the sky. Most notably, the unbearable humidity that had been lingering in the air for the past few weeks was gone. "That sounds great," I replied, and entered the center to get a chair, walking across the lobby to where Lex had set up the customary folding tables for socializing. I put my orange backpack and water bottle down on the table where I usually sat, grabbed a chair and my white mocha, and went back outside.

I placed my chair next to Lex on the sidewalk and under the shade of the community center. As I sat there sipping my coffee, Lex and I noticed that the sidewalks were sporting a fair share of runners who were undoubtedly taking advantage of the excellent weather. Most of the men running along the street were shirtless, and Lex and I enjoyed the show. "Mmm, he looks delicious," I commented to Lex as a younger guy jogged past us in short running shorts, his bare sculpted chest out for the world to appreciate. Lex and I chatted for about 10 minutes or so as our eyes wandered from runner to runner, and I sipped my iced coffee. Eventually, Lex asked if I was hungry. "Not really," I responded. "I've got my coffee, so I'll be good until we're done." "I don't think I can wait until three for pizza, I think I might need a little something now," he said. "If we found a place where I could get a big iced coffee, would you fly? Would you go get it for me?" "Of course," I responded. Lex fished out $6 from his wallet, and

instructed me to get the largest iced coffee I could get my hands on, with a little cream, no sugar.

With Lex's instructions in my mind and his money in my pocket, I got up and started my walk up the street. As I made my way to Endeavor coffee shop, I frequently cast glances at my reflection in the many store windows I passed. Typically, I dressed in an understated way when I went to the Saturday group meeting. I had to wake up early to make it on time, and I usually pressed the snooze button on my alarm more than I should have. Today was no exception; I had applied some eyeliner and mascara to accent my face, but my hair was hastily styled and I was wearing a simple pink V-neck shirt, white shorts, and black flip flops. For good measure, I was wearing my rainbow bracelet and rainbow-studded ring. But as I checked myself out in the windows I passed, I found myself wondering if I fit in here today. Was I pretty enough to be strutting up High Street? It was a silly thought, but I thought it anyway.

My mind jumped tracks as I entered Endeavor. A cute barista boy with big bright eyes, fine, short blonde hair, and a cap was working. He made eye contact with me as I entered and offered up a "hello" and a beaming smile when I approached the counter. "How are you doing?" he asked, and I responded in kind with "I'm doing pretty well, thanks, how are you?" My heart was fluttering from a combination of exertion (I walk fast) and excitement (he was so cute!), and I missed what he said in return—he had charmed me out of my wits. A female barista circled around him and approached the register in front of me, and asked what she could get for me. I ordered two iced coffees

and watched her fill two cups from a tap. She placed a plastic lid on each cup and slid them across the counter to me. “Here you go.”

As I walked back to the community center carrying Lex’s coffee, I (again) stole glances at myself in the windows. I noticed that the way I was carrying the two plastic cups of coffee looked rather effeminate; I was “double-fisting” them, one in each hand, and carrying them up above my waist. But because I was walking so quickly, like I usually do, I was pumping my arms slightly. The combined effort of my quick pace and my coffee-laden raised arms resulted in a weird swish to my walk, and I thought “I’m not pretty enough to walk like this today.” I enjoyed admiring the beautiful men walking (or running) along the street; did they enjoy looking at me in return? I felt conscious of the many ways I failed to project a “queer-enough” image this morning. I avoided looking at myself in the windows for the rest of the four-block walk back to Lex.

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Social psychologist Kurt Lewin notes that “there is nothing so practical as a good theory.”[1] This famous line is often touted in the spirit of justifying overly complicated scientific explanations for human behavior. Taken at face value, however, it still evokes a certain poetic reflection on the role of theory in the study of human communication. As the vignette at the opening of this chapter illustrates, mundane everyday experiences often inspire provocative and reflexive questions about our positions as subjects in the world. Alone, these questions give us pause to consider our actions, their motivations, and their consequences. Theory helps us connect our everyday experiences to the cultures

in which we participate in different ways. It enables an abstraction of our experiences that helps us consider our roles in (re)producing meaning.[2]

In this chapter, I trace the major theoretical perspectives that inform my study of queer identity. I draw on diverse bodies of literature that helped me make sense of my lived experiences long before I knew them. In many ways, coming to these theories was like coming home, meeting a family I did not know I had but immediately recognized as my own. This chapter is a framework that brings together performance, queer, and affect theories. First, however, I wish to address the limitations of a purely discursive approach to the study of queer identity. As I demonstrate below, a sole focus on coming out disclosures does a disservice to everyday experiences of embodied queerness. Addressing these limitations creates a space for performance, affect, and queer theories to intervene.

The Limits of Discourse

Some time ago, a colleague asked me about my theoretical perspective on "being." His question was in response to a statement I made during a research presentation, where I noted my interest in shifting academic conversations from a focus on "coming out" to "being out." At the time, I was sure he expected some kind of philosophical explication of "being," likely drawing from phenomenology. What I had to offer him was a simple response. What did I mean by being? "I don't know," I said.

Over the next few months, I reflected on this notion of "being." As a scholar of identity, I am curious about how identities are constructed, how they are communicated, and how they are perceived. The simplest way to approach these interests is to consider the communication of identity as self-disclosure. There is a wealth of research about the

disclosure of queer identity that is overwhelmingly framed as coming out. Linguist Deborah Chirrey, for example, situates coming out within philosopher John Austin's speech act theory, delineating the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary forces at work in the disclosure of sexual orientation. Chirrey concludes that understanding coming out as a speech act "necessitates *speakers* invoking aspects of their innermost sexual desires and feelings in the presentation of their public personae."[3] Similarly, Manning positions coming out as an interpersonal disclosure, offering a typology of coming out conversations that differ in the conditions under which the discloser's sexual orientation is shared.[4] Although these conceptualizations are integral to the study of identity performances, such discursive conceptualizations of coming out paint an incomplete picture of the lived experiences of queer persons. Treating the (repeated) act of coming out as *only* a verbal disclosure fails to capture the varied and nuanced ways in which queer persons comport and adorn their bodies to project their sexual identities into the public sphere. Although verbal and oral discourses occupy a necessary place in our research, on their own they cannot speak fully to the lived, embodied experiences of queer persons performing their identities in everyday life.

Disclosures of identity represent just one of many ways identity can be communicated. Butler, for instance, argues that identity also is performative, "real only to the extent that it is performed."[5] Butler asserts:

> If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. The distinction between expression and performativeness is quite crucial, for if gender

> attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex, a true or abiding masculinity or femininity, are also constituted as part of the strategy by which the performative aspect of gender is concealed.[6]

In arguing for the performative nature of identity, Butler illustrates the pitfalls of a purely discursive understanding of identity performances. From a performative perspective, being out assumes the characteristics of repetition, bodily projection, and both deliberate and unconscious displays of queer identity. Being out, then, encompasses more than deliberate verbal declarations of queerness, though such declarations certainly are encompassed by this perspective. My interest in being out as a performative process is thereby rooted in a commitment to challenging the privileged status of coming out as a strategy for the performance of queer identity. Academic infatuation with discursive understandings of identity performance, though warranted, is limiting.

In her call for transcending the limits of discourse, Kruks argues that discursive accounts of the subject fail to consider "the lived, corporeal aspects of subjectivity."[7] As she explains, a more appropriate approach would consider how "sentient, affective, and emotional experiences come to be a vital constituent of cognition, judgment, and speech."[8] Queer theories represent one such approach, as they seek to denaturalize those

identity constructs that discourse continually presents as naturally or biologically fixed. For example, Butler argues that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."[9] These expressions, or embodied performances of identity, transcend the limits of discourse by performatively accomplishing what words alone cannot.

However, an emphasis on verbal or oral confessions of sexual identity continues to pervade scholarly research. For instance, Adams notes that often times queer persons are not out of the closet until they have *said* so.[10] This need to speak one's sexuality into being firmly positions the act of coming out in the realm of oral discourse. According to Adams, coming out is necessitated by queer persons recognizing the stigmatized, "discreditable"[11] status of homosexuality in today's society, which produces transgressive sexual identity as "not easily accessible."[12] The cultural assumption of heterosexuality, coupled with the presumed invisibility of sexual identity, constructs the proverbial closet that queer persons must come out from in order to be recognized as queer. Although verbal coming out disclosures constitute an important aspect of queer persons' identity experiences, such an emphasis on the verbal aspect of coming out reinforces a mind-body dualism, disembodying queer persons from their lived experiences and discrediting any embodied attempt to project a queer identity.

Identities are constituted and constrained by both discourse and the material world. Communication scholar Sachi Sekimoto argues that "the self is neither an autonomous cognitive entity nor a mere product of social construction."[13] Instead, she proposes a "materiality of the self," which "speaks to the condition in which the self is

made present in one's subjective awareness as a performative effect of both material and symbolic interaction."[14] A materiality of identity suggests that identity is both a discursive *and* phenomenological experience. According to Sekimoto, identity therefore becomes a series of performative effects "that elucidates the ongoing arrangement of meaning, of relationships among identities, and of engagement with the im/material world."[15] A materiality of identity suggests that identity is the result of discursive *and* performative relations between and among selves and culture.

The limits of discourse in the exploration of queer identity are clear. My goal, then, is to focus more on the materiality of sexual identity, an inquiry that demonstrates how "the body expresses itself writ large everywhere."[16] Any understanding of experience—especially experiences in which identities are negotiated—necessitates an attunement to both discursive *and* performative modes of communication in order to provide a truly rich understanding of the phenomenon. Materiality is a central concern in the field of performance studies. In the next section, I review relevant performance studies scholarship to center my project within this approach.

Accessing Performance Theories

Performance scholar Richard Schechner describes the discipline of performance studies as concerned with the study of performances as actions. In studying performances as symbolic action, performance studies resists easy disciplinary boundaries or definitions. Performance studies operates in between fields such as anthropology, sociology, history, and theater, to name a few. Or as Schechner notes, performance studies accepts a liminal, or "inter," dwelling by "opposing the establishment of any

single system of knowledge, values, or subject matter."[17] Despite an established resistance to any unified theory of performance, Schechner articulates four ways in which performance studies accomplishes its inquiry:

> First, behavior is the "object of study" of performance studies. . . . Second, artistic practice is a big part of the performance studies project. . . . Third, fieldwork as "participant observation" is a much-prized method adapted from anthropology and put to new uses. . . . Fourth, it follows that performance studies is actively involved in social practices and advocacies.[18]

Performance studies is thereby best described as an interdisciplinary approach to the study of human action as political, embodied, and aesthetic.

Likewise, performance scholar Bryant Keith Alexander argues that performance studies is concerned with "human activity as expression."[19] Framing communication as expressive action involves an interrogation of what Alexander refers to as "scripts of social discourse constructed with intention and performed by actors in the company of particular audiences."[20] The recursive movement between everyday lived experiences and cultural discourses begins to illustrate what performance scholars mean by "performance." According to Schechner:

> Performances mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body, and tell stories. Performances—of art, rituals, or ordinary life—are . . . performed actions that people train for and rehearse.[21]

In this sense, performances bridge the local and the global as performers draw on cultural scripts to enact their identities in everyday life through both mundane and ritualistic means.

Performance studies (PS) focuses on performance as an object of inquiry, a practice of investigation, and a mode of representation. Performance scholars D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera explain, "performance theory provides analytical frameworks; performance method provides concrete application; and performance event provides an aesthetic or noteworthy happening."[22] Performance scholar Dwight Conquergood explains that PS "struggles to open the space between analysis and action."[23] It takes as its subject the acting body, emplaced within temporal, spatial, and political contexts. By focusing on bodies in action, performance studies is committed to a radical subjectivity and reflexivity. It privileges subjugated knowledge "in terms of its corporeality and as occurring in relation to a material environment."[24] In short, the field of PS is an intervention into reigning social scientific research paradigms that privilege a "hegemony of textualism" to the detriment of communicative action.[25]

Performing

My discussion to this point has focused on performance as a conceptual and methodological interest. But attempting to place PS in the context of everyday life inspires the question, what does it mean for subjects to perform? PS scholars articulate numerous ways to think about performing as an action. Madison and Hamera note that performing is commonly treated as either "drama, as acting, or 'putting on a show,'" or those practices by which persons "fundamentally make culture, affect power, and

reinvent their ways of being in the world."[26] In other words, performing can be understood as intentionally putting on displays of cultural conventions, or as the unconscious, "ordinary day-by-day interactions of individuals as they move through social life."[27] It is this latter conceptualization of performing that is central to my conceptualization of the performance of identity.

Schechner notes that performances occur in eight situations, one of which includes everyday life.[28] According to Schechner, performances of everyday life involve "just living," the mundane actions that persons perform on a daily basis.[29] Although these performances might be unconscious and routine, they still evoke responses from audiences and draw on cultural scripts. Madison and Hamera explain that social performances "become examples of a culture and subculture's particular symbolic practices," because they illustrate the taken-for-granted assumptions of how persons are expected to act in daily life. Despite the unconscious and often unreflexive manner in which everyday performances are undertaken, they frequently evoke, reinscribe, and/or recreate identities in the process. Performativity explains the generative and subversive power of everyday performances, so I turn to this concept next.

Performativity

Schechner describes performativity as both "a category of theory as well as a fact of behavior."[30] Performance scholars trace the advent of performativity to Austin's speech act theory.[31] Austin distinguishes between two functions of language: to merely *describe* the state of things, and *change* the state of things, or produce some kind of effect or action. Austin referred to the former as "constitutive" language and the latter

"performative." For Austin, performative language is at its best when it is felicitous, or when such utterances are spoken genuinely instead of under false pretenses. His distinction between felicitous and infelicitous performatives inspired a trajectory of revisions to the notion of performativity.

Philosopher Jacques Derrida took issue with Austin's framework, arguing that all performatives are infelicitous because they are always repetitions of a previously articulated script. Derrida referred to this characteristic as iterability, "a quality inherent in language and therefore embedded in thought."[32] Schechner summarizes Derrida's revision of performativity as such:

> Meaning is not singular, original, or locatable. Meaning is not owned by the speaker, the spectator, or even the circumstance. Meaning . . . is created in process through the complex interaction of all speakers . . . and their specific personal-cultural circumstances.[33]

Derrida argued that all utterances are infelicitous because they all cite a previous utterance. His refusal to accept an inherent truth or originality within language paved the way for contemporary postmodernists and poststructuralists such as Judith Butler to refine an understanding of performativity rooted in citationality.

Butler's notion of performativity is particularly useful in tracing the construction and performance of identity. She explains performativity as a set of practices whereby:

> . . . acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body . . . . Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that

> they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.[34]

Butler challenges the reality of the self as fixed and internal, effectively arguing that the gendered/sexed/desiring body "has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality."[35] Rather than accept the premise that our everyday performances are merely reflections of some concrete and immutable internal essence, Butler argues that identities are instead produced by the performances we give.

Butler's notion of performativity largely assumes that all performances are in some way citations. In her book *Bodies That Matter,* Butler argues that "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names."[36] In this sense, the performances we produce are always already referencing prior performances that we have already rehearsed, often unknowingly. The result is an almost seamless assimilation of bodies and identities into the expectations of everyday life. This assimilation, Butler argues, is far from politically neutral. Instead, she asserts that the materialization of our bodies and identities such that they "fit" with cultural expectations involves "the regulation of identificatory practices."[37] By learning, rehearsing, and performing the scripts for our identities, subjects come to comply with the cultural expectations of those identities, effectively reinscribing those expectations as normative.

Gender Performatives

Butler's work on performativity begins with a challenge to the assumed natural status of sex and a critical look at the construction of gender. She questions, "can we refer

to a 'given' sex or a 'given' gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means?"[38] In posing this question, Butler attempts to dislodge sex from its status as a fixed and biologically-driven category. She argues that sexed identities are as discursive as gendered ones, to the following effect:

> Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive,' prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts.[39]

Butler then asserts that "the heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine,' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female.'"[40] Butler concludes that bodies themselves are constructions, such that sex cannot be reduced to an anatomical fact existing prior to or apart from discourse. Instead, sex is assumed to be a natural, binary categorization that justifies discrete and opposite genders in order to police heterosexual desire. This so-called heterosexual matrix thereby works to consolidate sex, gender, and sexuality into internally coherent and discrete identity categories.

Butler's work is an investigation of a milieu of cultural forces, which can be abstracted too easily from lived experience. The regulatory systems of sex, gender, and sexuality that Butler demystifies exist largely at the level of discourse, those systems of talk and text that circulate the social world. Despite their apparent intangibility, these systems take up residence on our skins. Bodies become conduits for cultural discourses

that regulate identity. More appropriately, they become cites/sites of contested identity claims. As a result of regulatory forces that render certain materializations of sex, gender, and sexuality as normal, queer bodies come to be materialized as abject. Butler notes that queer bodies are designated as "those who are not yet 'subjects,' but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject."[41] They are cast to "'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life . . . required to circumscribe the domain of the subject."[42] By denying queer bodies a frame of intelligibility, regulatory schemas of sex, gender, and sexuality "produce and vanquish bodies that matter."[43]

But just as performativity is the vehicle through which the sedimentation of identity occurs, Butler's conceptualization of performativity has been taken up by queer theorists to articulate a strategy of resisting that very sedimentation. Although she relies largely on citationality as an analogy for performativity, Butler also locates possibilities of resistance within performativity. "The public assertion of 'queerness'," she argues, "enacts performativity as citationality for the purposes of resignifying the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy."[44] This notion highlights the promise of performativity "to establish a kind of political contestation . . . [by] forging a future from resources inevitably impure."[45] These impure resources—the social scripts of sex, gender, and sexuality—come to subvert the cultural hegemony of heterosexuality through their liberating potential.

Performance theories, especially performativity, set the stage for understanding queer identity as performative accomplishments. Queer theories further bridge the divide between discourse and the body in their challenge of cis-gendered and heterosexual

identities as "natural." Queer theories address the ways that cultural discourses produce bodies that are un/recognizable. Below, I discuss the major contributions of queer theories to my study of queer identity.

Mobilizing Queer Theory

Queer theorizing is characterized by what Annamarie Jagose calls "a sense of potentiality that it cannot yet quite articulate."[46] In some ways, the difficulty in delimiting rigid disciplinary boundaries for queer theories is linked to their "definitional indeterminacy," their hesitancy to settle on a single agreed-upon definition of "queer."[47] As she traces the historical linguistic trajectory of terms used to refer to same-sex desire, Jagose notes that "'queer' is not simply the latest example in a series of words that describe and constitute same-sex desire."[48] Instead, Jagose argues that "queer" occupies a particular semantic position:

> In distinguishing itself from those terms which form its semantic history, 'queer' equally foregrounds 'a changing reality' . . . . Queer marks both a continuity and a break with previous gay liberationist and lesbian feminist models.[49]

Jagose concludes that the non-specificity of queer "guarantees it against recent criticisms made of the exclusionist tendencies of 'lesbian' and 'gay' as identity categories."[50] In short, "queer" is meant to eschew the categorical constraints of other terms that signify non-heterosexual identities. That the term is encompassing and resists definitional certitude is deliberate.

The resulting body of work that falls under the rubric of queer theory is varied and sometimes contradictory, but political theorist Susan Burgess argues that queer

theories in many ways are united by a commitment to resistance in the form of ironic parody.[51] According to Burgess, "queer irony appears to take nothing seriously even as it undertakes the very serious task of challenging firmly held beliefs and practices about sexuality that are typically not comfortably questioned."[52] The rise in popularity of queer theories both within and outside of the academy is tied to a growing discomfort with the contemporary gay and lesbian rights movement, which, according to lawyer and activist Dean Spade, has tended to favor the liberal, incremental approach of securing individual rights over the more radical, participatory, and expansive approach of political revolution.[53] As queer theories gained more notoriety and acceptance in academic and public discourses, they began to play a greater role in fundamentally altering the trajectory of identity politics.

Butler is often credited for initiating the entrance of queer theorizing into the academic arena. In her book *Gender Trouble*, she argues that the regulation of sex and gender serves the purpose of maintaining a social order that rests on the promulgation of heterosexuality. Butler refers to this force of regimentation as compulsory heterosexuality, which she explains as such:

> The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine," where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female." The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of "identities" cannot "exist"—that is, those in which gender does not

follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender.[54]

As Butler illustrates, desire comes to be regulated or, more accurately, policed, to mask the culturally constructed nature of sexuality. Heterosexuality comes to be viewed as natural—it is normalized and subsequently compelled upon us—by regulatory systems of sex and gender that seek to conceal their very construction. In this sense, norms of heterosexuality, masculinity, and femininity are forced upon bodies to keep them in line with those norms and to conceal how those norms are constructed.

These cultural assumptions are challenged by persons who resist and/or transgress the cultural norms of sex, gender, and sexuality. According to Butler, notions of sex, gender, and sexuality as biological certitudes are denaturalized by attention to those persons who are rendered "'incoherent' or 'discontinuous'" because they "fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined."[55] Because they either reject or are unable to uphold such rigid norms of intelligibility, queer persons demonstrate how understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality are social constructions rather than naturally occurring and biologically driven facts of life. The denaturalization of sex, gender, and sexuality creates possibilities of resistance and re-envisioning how those identities can be embodied. Such agency is, according to Butler, enabled through the "reiterative or rearticulatory practice" of embodying identities that transgress the norm.[56] By repeatedly calling upon and then failing (deliberately or unintentionally) the scripts for identity portrayal, queerness represents a slippage that revises those scripts for the future.

Performativity offers a theoretical explanation of how everyday performances can challenge cultural scripts of identity. Delineating performance strategies used by queer persons to embody their identities as resistance, however, proves challenging. The heterosexual matrix links sex, gender, and sexuality so that gender inversion—in such forms as male femininity or female masculinity—is "read" by audiences as homosexuality. Queer theorist Riki Wilchins suggests that "if being 'who we are' is off the gender binary and therefore appears to parody and therefore subvert gender roles, then we might embrace subversion."[57] But Butler is quick to point out that "cross-gendered identification is not the exemplary paradigm for thinking about homosexuality, although it may be one."[58] The challenge of queer theories—a challenge they issue and a challenge they are called to answer for—is to further explicate how gender and sexuality can be subverted performatively.

Given the social sanctions against homosexuality and transgender identity that are still embedded within our cultural institutions, everyday performances of queer identity are often cast as political interventions against regimes of compulsory heterosexuality and thereby fraught with risk. Yet performativity might be accessed for other purposes. Butler suggests that "there may well be a desire to know and understand . . . that is not prompted by a terror of punishment."[59] Queer persons might also perform their identities as a way to foster recognition—to project themselves as intelligible on their terms so that they are recognizable by persons attuned to those projections. In the search for visibility, the performance of queer identity might generate moments of embodied connection. Affect theories account for such moments when feelings of possibility and potential

present themselves to subjects. Such an attunement to the way that identity performances produce these moments was a crucial aspect of my fieldwork practices. Therefore, I next discuss the way affect theories inform my study of queer identity performances.

Affect and Queer(ing) Potential

In the course of our everyday meanderings, spaces/places/atmospheres become charged. There is a palpable shift in energy—a field almost electric in its pulse—that presents itself to us. Sometimes we anticipate the building of these atmospheres, the steady culmination of forces that coalesce into a tangible and sensual experience. Other times, the scenes are thrown together with an unexpected jolt that demands our attention. In either scenario, cultural anthropologist Kathleen Stewart states that "the subject is called to a state of attention that is also an impassivity—a watching and waiting, a living through, an attunement to what might rind up or snap into place."[60] These moments represent atmospheres, which cultural geographer Ben Anderson describes as "intensities that are only imperfectly housed in the proper names we give to emotions."[61] According to Stewart, our attention to them is "a tuning up to something, a labor that arrives already weighted with what it's living through."[62] In these moments, experience presents itself to us in the raw—and demands that we respond.

Affect then arises in the midst of this liminal dwelling, "in the capacities to act and be acted upon" that queer persons encounter in the responses to their identities.[63] Communication and cultural studies scholars Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg explain that "affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body."[64] Although

affect manifests itself as a surprising potential, it often arises in the everyday. According to Stewart,

> Ordinary affects . . . [are] things that happen. They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures . . . in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in publics and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like *some*thing.[65]

For queer persons, the experience of their bodies being rendered abject and cast outside of the cultural matrix that defines a person as normal (or not) creates a moment where those exclusionary norms might be challenged. As Stewart observes,

> abject and unlivable bodies don't just become 'other' and unthinkable. They go on living, animated by possibilities at work in the necessary or the serendipitous.[66]

In those temporal spaces where gendered norms are invoked in response to queer bodies, possibilities for a utopian revision of sexuality emerge.

In addition to resisting cultural norms of intelligibility, everyday performances of queer identity can also represent a desire to belong. Muñoz suggests that the possibilities created by queer performances include "worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic."[67] For Muñoz, queerness is "a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present."[68] This longing provides the catalyst for imagining a new and different world, one where the constraining norms of sex/gender/sexuality are subverted, thwarted in their concealed attempts at domination and suppression. Probyn argues that this desire to live and belong "propels, even as it

rearranges, the relations into which it intervenes."[69] In this sense, performing queer identity "can simultaneously provide a body . . . with predicaments and potentials for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm."[70] In their longing for a frame of intelligibility—a rendering of their bodies as other than abject—some queer persons offer up their bodies as performative contributions to a radical potential, an as-yet unvalenced possibility for something new, a utopic longing for recognition and acceptance.

According to Probyn, "belonging expresses a desire for more than what is, a yearning to make skin stretch beyond individual needs and wants."[71] As much as regulatory systems of sex, gender, and sexuality construct and constrain the potential of queer bodies to be intelligible within dominant discourses, queer persons are often intelligible to one another through recognition of some shared abjectness. Sexuality is rooted in desire, and desire is productive. Desire, notes Probyn, "is what oils the lines of the social; it produces the pleats and the folds which constitute the social world we live."[72] For this reason, Probyn favors the term "belonging" over identity because it more accurately captures "the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fueled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state."[73] This kind of belonging is embodied by queer persons for several reasons. For some, queer identity is projected in resistant response to a collective ethos that denies their inclusion. For others, the embodiment of queer identity constitutes one of many possible world-making practices. Ahmed references these world-making practices as "ways of extending bodies into spaces that create new folds, or new contours

of what we could call livable or inhabitable space."[74] Queer identity therefore can be embodied in the process of identification, a way of attuning oneself to the identities of others on the outside, a move to form attachments with those who also yearn to be seen, felt, or known.

Ahmed posits that "sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as 'who' or 'what' we inhabit spaces with."[75] Because affect is often sensed abruptly, reactions to its emergence "are thrown together, really, and out of a grab bag of disparate elements."[76] This thrown-together-ness has complicated attempts to represent the experiences of queer persons in those moments of affective upheaval. Indeed, any attempt to represent such encounters is fraught with difficulty due to the ephemeral and deeply sensual nature of the encounters and their attending affect.

Performance and sensory ethnography are well-suited to the task of "chronicling how incommensurate elements hang together in a scene that bodies labor to be in or to get through."[77] These two approaches to ethnographic research attempt to portray lived experiences such that "what pass for representations are apprehended as performative presentations, not reflections of some *a priori* order waiting to be unveiled, decoded, or revealed."[78] My interest in performance and affect theory inspired me to access similar research practices in my study of queer identity. To conclude this chapter, I discuss the theoretical foundations of performance and sensory ethnography.

Placing Theory in the Field

Performance and affect theories have a rich history in the social sciences, and ethnographers often access these perspectives in their fieldwork. As a particular approach

to ethnographic research, performance ethnography represents a way of learning about social life by privileging the participatory, performative, and enacted aspects of the research process.[79] Performance scholar Omi Osun Olomo (Joni) Jones explains that performance ethnography "rests on the idea that bodies harbor knowledge about culture, and that performance allows for the exchange of that knowledge across bodies."[80] I was naturally drawn to performance ethnography because of this idea. Queer persons harbor, or appropriate, cultural meanings about queerness, which we then perform both in the mundane and extraordinary moments of everyday life.[81] These performances allow for the exchange of knowledge, a kind of "transaction of queerness" between and across bodies that re/creates our understanding of what it is to be queer.

Performance ethnography upholds the commitments of non-representational theories because it embodies what performance scholar Baz Kershaw calls a "paradox of boundless specificity."[82] It resides within a complex ontological and epistemological duality of local and global, micro and macro-level practices. Performance ethnography is inflected by phenomenology, as it "emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds."[83] The work is messy, as performance ethnographers "try to surrender themselves to the centripetal pulls of culture, to get close to the face of humanity where life is not always pretty."[84] The requisite attention to particularity, embodiment, and repetition results in "autoethnographic, vulnerable, performative, and critical" research.[85] It is both personal and cultural, both near and far. Performance ethnography examines bodies in culture.

Even more enticing is the way performance ethnography is a decidedly political approach to research. As Jones notes:

> Performance ethnography's attention to embodiment (and the attendant politics of embodiment) situate the practice deeply in a political frame. Embodiment is political; a stance is already implied through the sociopolitical narratives embedded in bodies. . . . In this way the embodiment of performance ethnography is literally about saving, honoring, rejecting, and critiquing particular bodies.[86]

Performance ethnography enabled me to consider how queer bodies are situated within a social, historical, and political context that unquestioningly produces some queer bodies as more desirable, others as abject, and the rest as invisible.[87] Sociologist Norman Denzin notes that performance ethnography also "seeks to understand how people enact and construct meaning in their daily lives," which further enabled me to situate my inquiry in the everyday. [88] Accessing performance ethnography allowed me to examine the ways queer persons move about their social worlds, creating and exchanging meaning in and through their daily performances.

I was also concerned with affect and feeling; how were these performances *sensed*, both by myself and others? Performance-based research practices certainly address these concerns, but I was drawn to sensory ethnography to help me engage with the senses more concretely.[89] Sensory ethnography inflects performance methods with a crucial focus on and awareness of the senses, or how participants "hear, taste, touch, smell, and see a phenomenon at the purely visceral level."[90] Such a focus on sensory experience asks the ethnographer to privilege "the experiential, individual, idiosyncratic

and contextual nature of research participants' sensory practices."[91] At the same time, sensory ethnography is an intellectual probing into what anthropologist Sarah Pink denotes as "the culturally specific categories, conventions, moralities, and knowledge that informs how people understand their experiences."[92] Sensory ethnography is another way to access what Madison calls a "paying attention to the 'being with' in body-to-body *presence* with Others that makes the present realizably present," making it an intimately complementary approach to performance-based research practices.[93] Sense-based and performance ethnographic practices enable a more evocative and enriching investigation into social worlds at once shaping and shaped by performances of identity in everyday life.

Sensory ethnographers inquire into the ways that persons access sense-based knowing in social interaction and self-representation by investigating what Pink calls "sensory subjectivity" and "sensory intersubjectivity."[94] According to Pink, sensory inter/subjectivity involves "the ways individuals use sensory knowledge and practice" and how identity "is continually being negotiated through our intersubjective relations with others and our material/sensory environments."[95] In attending to both the construction and interpretation of the senses, sensory ethnography enables a particular sensibility to the role that place, space, and affect play in the performance of queer identity. My reliance on sensory ethnography as a field practice inspired more attention to the manifestation of affect than traditional visual-centric ethnography would. Although traditional participant observation methods remain a useful entry point into investigating central concerns of human experience, a sensory approach helped me to understand queer

identity performance "as multisensorial and as such neither dominated by nor reducible to a visual mode of understanding."[96] I drew on relational and cultural knowledge that was "embodied through sight, taste, sound, touch, and smell" as well as its attending "bodily movement."[97] Privileging all of the senses—and their interconnectedness both subjectively and intersubjectively—prepared me to explore queer persons' performances of identity, their (our) encounters with the atmospheres that emerge as a result of those performances, and their (our) interactions with the accompanying affect. In short, sensory and performance ethnography enabled a more nuanced and richly descriptive inquiry into the ways identity, affect, and performance are intertwined.

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In this chapter, I traced the theoretical perspectives that informed my study of queer identity. Recognizing the limits of a purely discursive approach to communicating queer identity facilitated my approach to performance, queer, and affect theories. These lenses provide a theoretically sound explanation of performing, sensing, and being queer, and they also guided my research practices in the field. In the next chapter, I expand on those research practices, providing a storied explanation of how performance, affect, and queer theories inspired my approach to fieldwork in my study of queer identity.

Chapter 2 Notes

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1. *Field Theory in Social Science: Selected Theoretical Papers*, 169.

2. James Anderson notes that, in the relationship between theory and practice (or method), theory represents "a journey through what we must believe to be true before we can demonstrate the truth of our claims." Here, I am drawing on this idea to suggest that theories—particularly, the theories I delineate in this chapter—illustrate my presuppositions about the nature of reality that must be accepted before entertaining my approach to fieldwork. *Communication Theory*, 2.

3. Chirrey, "'I Hereby Come Out,'" 35.

4 Manning, "Communicating Sexual Identities."

5. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 527.

6. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 528.

7. Kruks, "Going beyond Discourse," 147.

8. Kruks, "Going beyond Discourse," 147.

9. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.

10. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*.

11. See Goffman, *Stigma*, 5. Goffman explains that stigmas involve dual perspectives in that they may be discredited (where stigmatized persons assume their differentness is already known about or evident) or discreditable (where the stigma is not already known by others or immediately perceivable).

12. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 55.

13. Sekimoto, "Materiality of the Self," 56.

14. Sekimoto, "Materiality of the Self," 56.

15. Sekimoto, "Materiality of the Self," 55.

16. Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 185.

17. Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 24.

18. Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 1–2.

19. Alexander, "Performance Ethnography," 414.

20. Alexander, "Performance Ethnography," 414.

21. Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 28.

22. Madison and Hamera, "Performance Studies at the Intersections," xii.

23. Conquergood, "Performance Studies," 145.

24. Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 55.

25. Conquergood, "Performance Studies," 147.

26. Madison and Hamera, "Performance Studies at the Intersections," xii.

27. Madison and Hamera, "Performance Studies at the Intersections," xvii.

28. See Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 31. Schechner notes that "performances occur in eight sometimes separate, sometimes overlapping situations" which include: everyday life; the arts; sports or popular entertainment; business; technology; sex; ritual; and play.

29. Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 31.

30. Schechner, "What Is Performance Studies Anyway?," 362.

31. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

32. Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 125.

33. Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 125.

34. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185.

35. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 185.

36. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 2.

37. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3.

38. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 9.

39. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 10.

40. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 17.

41. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3.
42. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3.
43. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 17.
44. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 21.
45. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 241.
46. Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 2.
47. Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 1.
48. Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 74.
49. Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 75.
50. Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 76.
51. Burgess, "Queer (Theory) Eye for the Straight (Legal) Guy."
52. Burgess, "Queer (Theory) Eye for the Straight (Legal) Guy," 404.
53. See Spade, *Normal Life*.
54. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 24.
55. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 23.
56. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 15.
57. Wilchins, *Queer Theory, Gender Theory*, 137–138.
58. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 235.
59. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 11.
60. Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," 2.
61. Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," 77.
62. Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," 4.
63. Seigworth and Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," 1.
64. Seigworth and Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," 1.
65. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 1–2.
66. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 117.
67. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
68. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
69. Probyn, *Outside Belongings*, 13.
70. Seigworth and Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," 7.
71. Probyn, *Outside Belongings*, 6.
72. Probyn, *Outside Belongings*, 13.
73. Probyn, *Outside Belongings*, 19.
74. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 11.
75. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 1.
76. Stewart, "An Autoethnography of What Happens," 660.
77. Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," 8.
78. Anderson and Harrison, "The Promise of Non-Representational Theories," 19.
79. See Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography."
80. Jones, "Performance and Ethnography, Performing Ethnography, Performance Ethnography," 339.
81. By "appropriation," I am making use of Judith Butler's term to resist the too-easy interpretation of performativity as a wholly conscious and always deliberate performance of identity. To the contrary, Butler suggests that gender (and by my

extension, sexuality) is a reiterative practice both deliberate and unconscious, such that over time meanings of gender and sexuality become sedimented and appropriated by bodies. In this sense, gender and sexuality are not passively layered on the body; rather, the body takes up or comes into gender and sexuality. See Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

82. Kershaw, "Performance as Research," 26.

83. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 2.

84. Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act," 2.

85. Denzin, "Toward a Performative Social Science," 105.

86. Jones, "Performance and Ethnography, Performing Ethnography, Performance Ethnography," 343.

87. See Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. I am referring here to Butler's work on identities situated within vexed social contexts. Butler asserts that to be a body is to be without a complete history of being because the stories we tell can only remember partial accounts of our histories. The implications of this assertion arise when we consider the ways that larger social and cultural discourses work to fill in the missing frames of our histories, exerting their power in a form of ethical and moral violence that renders certain persons unintelligible, or at best, knowable only through certain lenses.

88. Denzin, "Toward a Performative Social Science," 105.

89. Sarah Pink's work on sensory ethnography was very influential in my thinking about and doing of ethnographic fieldwork that accounted for the senses. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*.

90. Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 30.

91. Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 15.

92. Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 15.

93. Madison, "The Dialogic Performative in Critical Ethnography," 323. Emphasis in original.

94. Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 53.

95. Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 53.

96. Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 64.

97. Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 64.

Chapter 3: Somewhere Over the Rainbow

US-33 spans the seventy miles between my home in Athens, Ohio, and Columbus. Over the course of a summer, I became well acquainted with this stretch of highway. I traveled back and forth—140 miles round trip—too many times to count. Over time, the highway began to feel comfortable, familiar, like a friend with whom you spend almost (but not quite) too much time. I belted out showtunes on US-33. I spoke my thoughts into a voice recorder on US-33. I made phone calls to my family on US-33. And, on occasion, I drove in silence on US-33, the humming of my car on the pavement the only sound accompanying my thoughts about my visit. I experienced a lot of personal and intellectual growth during those long car rides, and US-33 was a constant through it all.

Some trips were harder than others. Around my fourth or fifth trip to Columbus in the same week, US-33 would inspire frustration, anger, or resentment. Steering my car onto the entrance ramp, I would feel my chest burn in anticipation of the road construction, the rush hour traffic, and the mounting fuel costs that yet another long drive was bound to bring. Sometimes the dread of a drive would be so overwhelming that I would lose an entire day preparing for it, staying in my pajamas as long as I could, eating unhealthy amounts of junk food, binge-watching a mindless television show, and putting off getting ready until I could wait no longer. On these days, the only thing that could get me on that dreaded highway was the hope that this time, maybe, I would experience something that would make my research click. Maybe this time, I would be able to write *the* fieldnote. And upon that note, I would build my dissertation.

Of course that was never the case. But even on my worst days, US-33 always beckoned. The highway delivered me to the Promised Land without fail. In a way, my drive on US-33 was as much a going home as it was leaving it, which I sensed with greater urgency the longer my fieldwork continued. By the time August arrived, I began to feel a strange pull to the city at the end of the highway. There, in the heart of Columbus, I knew what I would find: a district, artistic and thriving; a people, enchanting and desirable. And underneath it all—or perhaps weaving through it—an unmistakable *queerness*. A community I had sought for years was nestled there, at the end of the concrete rainbow. US-33 brought me there.

The more time I spent in the city, the more it began to feel like *my* home—and the more foreign my home began to feel. I became acquainted with the hot spots around town. I learned where to find a great vanilla latte, where to get a great sandwich, where to go to think, and where to go to be anonymous in a (queer) crowd. Most importantly, I learned where to park. As my familiarity grew, it became easier for me to imagine myself here. What would it be like to live my life here, in the queer Mecca of the Midwest? Over time I came to dread leaving this city. For the summer of 2015, I was able to live an exciting, urban, queer life. It awakened something in me that might have been lying dormant until it sensed the right time to hatch. My visits to Columbus became a pilgrimage of sorts, a recurring journey to the gathering place of my tribe. And every trek to the city emphasized the slower, simpler, and straighter life I would inevitably return to. Of course, I appreciated the reprieve that came with my return to Athens and the ability to recover from the taxing work of participatory research. But there was something

refreshing, invigorating, exciting—even arousing—about being around so many of my own. And so every departure—no matter where from or where to—was a leaving/going home, along that winding stretch of highway 33.

Performance and Sensory Ethnography

How does a researcher go about an inquiry as radically subjective as this? Social scientific researchers have devised many methods to operationalize messages and emotions. But despite all those attempts, performing identity and sensing affect are communicative experiences that resist being counted, observed, or otherwise measured. Performing and sensing defy easy representations through traditional forms of research, and therefore necessitate non-traditional research practices.

Traditional modes of research and representation—even many qualitative approaches—attempt to construct sets of meaning from collected data. For qualitative researchers, the tools we use and the meanings we make are fragmented, partial, and emergent.[1] Although qualitative researchers acknowledge the partiality of experience, the historical legacy of scientific research encourages many qualitative researchers to distill their findings into a coherent research narrative.[2] These narratives are immensely valuable, particularly as they assist researchers in articulating the way an experience is communicated across persons to inform our understanding of the larger human experience. Such data-driven research has thrived since the social constructionist paradigm gained currency in the academy. But as any theoretical or methodological paradigm might, social constructionism came to occupy a well-established—and subsequently, unquestioned—position in philosophical thought.[3] The notion that

identities and realities were so many social constructions was radical in its birth, but as social constructionism took root its proponents stopped asking "what's next?" Cultural anthropologist Michael Taussig questions,

> If life is constructed, how come it appears so immutable? How come culture appears so natural? If things coarse and subtle are constructed, then surely they can be reconstructed as well?[4]

Taussig's questions illustrate the impetus for a different way of thinking about and studying human experiences, referred to broadly as non-representational theories.

Non-representational theories, according to cultural geographers Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison, "refer to disparate and potentially loosely connected bodies of thought which do not prioritise [*sic*] the role of representation in their accounts of the social and the subject."[5] Although closely related to social constructionist approaches, non-representational theories attempt to address a different set of questions: "how do sense and significance emerge from ongoing practical action?" And how do we "attend to events . . . that may lead to the chance of something different or a modification of an existing order?"[6] In this way, non-representational theories privilege the local, the particular, and the partial. They are committed "to speculation, curiosity, and the concrete."[7] The rise of non-representational theories has inspired the emergence of numerous, radically interpretive sets of research practices that privilege an emplaced, sense-based, and performative inquiry into everyday moments that are significant to persons and places of interests. Among these are performance and sensory ethnography, which guided my own inquiry into performing and sensing queer identity. I have already

provided a theoretical and conceptual discussion of performance and sensory ethnography in chapter two, but in order to illustrate what I was "doing," let me escort you through a few stories. Throughout this project, my recreations of the field are often disjointed and fragmented in tribute to the ways I experienced my research moments. These incidents and anecdotes best illuminate the performance and sense-based practices that shaped my fieldwork.

The Field Excursions

Before the official start of my fieldwork, I traveled to Columbus in early May for my monthly haircut. My salon is situated in the boutique end of the Short North district, and my stylist, Anthony, lives not far from the area. I knew I would be starting my fieldwork soon, but I had no idea *how* to start. Of course the LGBT community center was the obvious answer. I knew the programming at the center was likely to draw a diversely queer crowd, and I had already started looking into those meetings. But I also wanted backup plans, other locations that attracted queer persons that were unaffiliated with the community center. So on this particular visit to the salon, I asked Anthony for some suggestions.

"So where do queer folks go to hang out around the Short North?" I asked. Antony, holding a few fingers-full of my hair in one hand and his shears in the other, poised to cut, paused to make eye contact with me through the large full-length mirror in front of his chair. "What did you say? What people?" My heart fluttered for a moment as I registered what I thought was shock on his face. In our conversations prior to this one, we had only ever talked about "gay" things, in that "gay" was the only word we used to

refer to the queer population. This was the first time I had used “queer” in front of him, and I was now concerned it upset him. “Queer,” I said, “like LGBTQ,” hoping beyond hope that he was okay with my use of the word.

“Queer? Oh, I love that word. I don’t hear it often.” I felt my body release the tension that had built up in the moments prior as Anthony released my captive hair and placed his sheared hand on his now-popped hip to think about my question. “Hmm . . . where do queer people go?” he asked himself. “Have you checked out…” and then Antony proceeded to list off a few different locations in the vicinity of the Short North: coffee houses, sandwich shops, and bars, mostly. As he snipped my hair, he continued to rattle off the names of places I needed to check out, only two of which stuck in my mind long enough to write down later.

The following week, I visited one of the coffee shops Anthony suggested. The shop was located just a few blocks north of the salon, and almost squarely in between the distance that separated the salon from the community center. The atmosphere of the place was an eclectic blend of rustic, industrial, and modern, characteristic of the hip urban spaces I have seen in larger cities around the country. Barring the wall of windows letting in the day’s bright sunlight, the shop was very dark. There was rather loud electronic music pumping in the background, which took me by surprise. I fell in love with the location almost immediately, and it seemed others shared my enthusiasm. About the same size as the average Starbucks store, the coffee shop was populated with people engaging in conversation or working independently on tablets or computers.

As I began to consider the patrons, though, the seeming impossibility of my research started to unfold in front of me. Aside from my supposition that they were all roughly around my age (late twenties to late thirties), the group I saw was nearly as eclectic as the location that brought them together. There were "skater boys" in tank tops, shorts, sandals, and beanie hats; professionals rocking a "grunge-chic" look with slacks, button-up shirts, and beards long and full enough to rival the beards I saw in Athens; and people who blended in through their unremarkable appearance and demeanor. After a few moments, I noticed they were all men, and the longer I observed them the easier it was for me to categorize them as "hipsters." What was not easy was for me to categorize them as "queer." During this visit, I learned quickly that it was futile for me to keep going into the field without a plan. I had no idea what to pay attention to, what was important to note, or how to make sense of what I experienced. I had only my own instincts and intuitions, and I distrusted them. I needed a guide.

Five days after what felt like my first "failed" excursion into the field, I walked into the LGBT community center at 11:00 a.m. to attend a social group meeting. On the center's website, the group was pitched as a place to drop in for coffee, snacks, and casual conversation, and I figured this was the best way for me to try to meet people in the community. As soon as I walked in I was greeted by a boisterous man about 20-30 years my senior. He welcomed me to the group, introduced himself as Lex, and proceeded to chat me up for the next three hours. Other people were there, and we all conversed as a group while we shared a pizza.

The details of that first meeting are a blur to me now. What I do remember is that, after the meeting, Lex asked if I had any other plans. I did not, so he walked me across the street and down a block to a coffee shop where we proceeded to talk for another hour or so. I explained to Lex that I was relatively new to Columbus, and was spending the summer hanging around the queer parts of the city. Lex in turn told me stories about his move from New York, his acclimation to Columbus, and how he learned to get comfortable with limited means in a city that moved slower than the pace of his previous life. Somehow, over the course of our conversation, this loud, fifty-something, Puerto Rican/Italian transplant from Brooklyn decided that we should be friends, and all but elected himself to the position of my queer confidante.

Over the next four months—and even now, after the conclusion of my fieldwork—Lex was my guide. Over brunches, lunches, dinners, coffees, drinks, social gatherings at the community center, even the massive Pride celebration in the middle of June, Lex slowly introduced me to the Short North. We went to dive diners, upscale chocolatiers, and the well-known gay clubs. We even accompanied each other on excursions to my favorite outdoor shopping center. We must have made an odd pair, a stout fifty-something Puerto Rican/Italian man, often in sweatpants and a t-shirt, and a twenty-something tall white man in pastel shorts and bright polos. But together we traipsed around the Short North enjoying each other's company while he helped me familiarize myself with the area. Over the span of four months, we talked about all manner of things: his history of depression, my insecurities about my work and my job prospects; his abusive father, my chronically ill mother; his taste in men, my taste in men.

We seemed to come together by finding commonality in our differences. For most of my early days of fieldwork, Lex was a constant presence by my side, pointing out places or people. He was always interested in my perspective, and even quicker to offer his.

With Lex's help, the Short North came to feel like a home-away-from-home. Bolstered by his cheery demeanor and my growing comfort in the district, I proceeded to log over one hundred hours of fieldwork in Columbus. More likely than not, I would spend three or four hours in the city per day, sometimes as much as four or more days per week. Being with Lex freed me to observe my surroundings. Seated on a patio across from Lex and behind the safety of my sunglasses, my eyes were able to wander and linger, my ears to focus. I worried on occasion that I was doing Lex a disservice by dividing my attention, but he never seemed to care. I began to sense that, like me, he enjoyed the simplicity of our companionship.

As I continued to return to the Short North on my own, I paid more attention to how the persons I encountered navigated the area. I paid attention to how they (we?) moved, how they/we comported, how we interacted with each other, how we spoke, how we went, how we *did.* Over the four months I spent visiting the Short North, I met other queer persons who showed similar interest in my research. I made most of these connections through a coming-out support group for men hosted at the community center every other week. The very first time I attended the group, the men showed a surprising interest in my research and the opportunity to tell their stories. Motivated by a want to know how other queer persons sensed their—and others'—performances of identity, I began to conduct interviews with these willing storytellers. Half of my interviews were

with men who had been or still were attending the support group, and they continued to put me in touch with other people who they thought would enjoy the conversation. Initially I expected these interviews to be rather brief, but I quickly learned that my participants had an equally compelling impulse to tell their stories as I did to hear them.

I was able to interview fourteen self-identified queer persons through eleven interviews, which resulted in just over twenty-three hours of interview recordings. These interviews took me to a range of locations as diverse and sporadic as my observations both within and outside of the Short North district. My interview participants helped me understand what it was like for them to live queer lives in the greater Columbus area, but they also refined my appreciation of the Short North district. The interviews were mostly stories of their own performances of queerness and how they sensed similar performances from others. Most importantly, the interviews helped me reach a more sophisticated understanding of affect through their stories of sensing others' identities. With their stories, I was better able to sort through the sensory information that had been resisting my attempts to analyze.

Writing Fieldnotes

In conjunction with all of these experiences, I wrote. I always started with what ethnographers Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw call jottings or scratch notes.[8] These were incredibly short notations—usually on my cell phone—that would help me recall experiences I would want to write about later. My scratch notes often took the form of nonsensical—and certainly ungrammatical—bulleted lists, and often served as an outline for later fieldnotes. When I would return from an observation or interview

session—frequently the following day—I would turn my scratch notes into report-style recollections of what happened, what I experienced, and how I felt.[9] These reports were typically lengthy recreations of my time in the city, and in the early stages of my fieldwork they were devoid of reflexive thinking or analysis. My concern at the outset of my fieldwork was to get as many details onto the page as I could. I told myself the thinking could come later.

As my fieldwork progressed, it became an ever-present preoccupation. Within a few weeks my mind was swimming with questions and suspicions about what I thought was happening, theoretical materials I needed to read, and of course, reflections I needed to write. Even in the context of my quiet small town life seventy miles from my field site, mundane experiences—casual conversations with friends, late-night thoughts while I tried to fall asleep, even stopping for an HIV test—presented themselves to me as profound inspirations or serendipitous illustrations of what my research was doing. It only took a few such experiences before I began processing them through writing, denoting them as "representative anecdotes," or small tales from my life that inspired me to reflect on my research.[10] These notes were always narrative in structure, because their importance was in their story.

With every afternoon I spent in the city, and every interview I conducted, the urge to analyze grew stronger. I quickly reached a point where I was no longer observing simply to observe; I was experiencing, connecting, and abstracting. I began to write my way through these thoughts as well, dedicating some of my notes to more analytic reflections of my research and the connections I was beginning to make.[11] My analytic

notes began to help me think about, for example, how queer desire might generate affective forces that draw queer persons together, or how social class might prevent queer persons from feeling connected to their community. Sometimes I devoted entire notes to this kind of analytic thinking. I also began to incorporate analysis into my report-style fieldnotes. Regardless of where they appeared, my analysis notes were an attempt to wrap my head around the forces at play in my research.

My writing about these experiences produced a total of 175 pages of fieldnotes and 305 pages of interview transcripts. Most of my fieldnotes consisted of report-style recollections of the hours I spent in the Short North and the times leading up to and away from the interviews I conducted. Informed by my interviews, the fieldnotes I generated largely addressed the senses. How did I feel in different environments, doing different activities, with different people? And how did my experiences mirror (or not) what my participants told me? The interview transcripts contained more storied accounts of the ways my participants perform (or don't) their queer identities, how they sense themselves and others whom they perceive to be queer, and other stories about their identities they felt compelled to share with me.

Analyzing Data that Breathes

If my data sound messy, they are. No two fieldnotes are written in the same style, just as no two interviews follow the same trajectory. For ethnographers, this is neither a profound nor revolutionary observation. It is a fact of ethnographic research. But I make the observation here to explain the difficulty in describing my analysis. I could say that I borrowed from strategies of thematic analysis, familiarizing myself with recurring trends

in the data to arrive at a holistic scheme.[12] Certainly I did; the diverse stories I collected did not prevent me from seeking—and finding—commonalities, patterns in the data that distill something important about the experiences of my participants in relation to my research questions. But a thematic analysis is, to an extent, ill-suited for analyzing ethnographic data meant to breathe. Thematic analysis has a tendency to dilute the influence of context in qualitative data, but that context adds a richness that should not be overlooked.

I might say I bolstered this thematic approach to analyzing my data with a dialogic/performance analysis.[13] According to sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman, a dialogic/performance analysis acknowledges that "audiences will read the narrative texts they produce in all sorts of ways."[14] As Riessman notes, such an analytic lens "looks beyond superficial, literal, and consciously intended practices of language."[15] Instead, researchers approach their data with an eye to the ways in which "form and meaning emerge between people in social and historical particularity."[16] Such an analytic lens is more finely attuned to context and emplacement, and considers the intricacies of the communication process more than a thematic analysis might. A dialogic/performance analysis asks questions of context like these because it assumes that the stories we share tell us "as much about society and culture as they do about a person or group."[17] I certainly kept these concerns in mind, particularly because performances of (queer) identity cannot—or should not—be extracted from the environment in which they occur. But a dialogic/performance analysis of ethnographic data is complicated by the presence of non-oral-narrative data that require a different attunement to context and affect.

The point I want to make is that my analysis was a long and iterative process of "feeling out" my data. Pink notes that "the analysis of experiential, imaginative, sensorial and emotional dimensions of ethnography is itself often an intuitive, messy, and sometimes serendipitous task."[18] I could not provide you with a linear, stepwise, or otherwise structured description of how I came to know what I know from my data. I engaged in a recursive, iterative, inductive, deductive, and creative cycle of sense-making. Through prolonged and repetitive reading and thinking through my data, I developed a sensitivity to how experiences clung together, how stories supported each other, how my fieldwork addressed my questions, and which stories I felt compelled to tell. To the extent that we can consider analysis to be "a process of abstraction, which serves to connect the phenomenology of experienced reality into academic debate,"[19] I was constantly analyzing, always abstracting from my observations and concretizing my theoretical suppositions. At times, this was an almost intuitive practice where I would give myself over to reflexive contemplation and make connections between what I had seen or done and what I had thought and written. Other times, I would spend many hours poring over fieldnotes and interviews, reading and re-reading notes, listening and re-listening to interviews, scribbling more notes and annotating the notes I had. Most importantly, this process of analysis occurred simultaneous to my fieldwork. The results of my analysis process are the five "thematic" chapters that follow this one. Although each chapter addresses its own theme, the content of each is deliberately non-linear, as coherent as it is disjointed.

Insiders and Outsiders

As a qualitative researcher, I make no attempts at objectivity. I generally believe that "dispassionate interpretation is difficult if not impossible," because research—particularly ethnographic research—is subjective.[20] Our memories, experiences, and histories travel with us. Researchers bring their histories into the field just as we ask participants to share theirs, and my own histories were highly influential in my approach to this research. As anthropologist Renato Rosaldo notes, an attention to the ethnographer's positionality "refers to how life experiences both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight."[21] That insight seems to be the fruit of the ethnography tree, always dangling just out of reach. Anthropologist Ruth Behar states that the journey through ethnographic research is fraught with reflexive difficulty:

> . . . the desire to enter into the world around you and having no idea how to do it, the fear of observing too coldly or too distractedly or too raggedly, the rage of cowardice, the insight that is always arriving late, as defiant hindsight, a sense of the utter uselessness of writing anything and yet the burning desire to write something, are the stopping places along the way.[22]

Indeed, these tensions were all too familiar in my own ethnographic work. In the spirit of engaging in a reflexive contemplation of these difficulties, of the ways in which my own insight was enabled and hindered by my perspective, I am compelled to take a moment to reflect on how my own positionality was made present during my fieldwork.[23]

My reflexive interrogation revolves around a tension all too familiar in ethnographic research. Ethnographers such as Clifford Geertz have acknowledged the

many ways that "being there" and "being here" keep a researcher suspended in a liminal dwelling place.[24] I experienced this liminality as I balanced tensions of insider/outsider-ness.[25] As ethnographers inquire into the lives and cultures of different persons, we are drawn to those groups for a reason, an affective pull born from a vested interest in voicing their experiences. Regardless of what inspires us to research with our participants, ethnographic fieldwork can instigate a crisis of belonging through competing desires to be near to and far from the field. I experienced this tension in three ways: feelings of being sexualized in the research context; tensions of relational distance and intimacy; and barriers brought about by my feminist sensibilities.

Without doubt, my own sexuality was implicated in my research. After all, my ethnographic process involved the use of "performative interviews," where "teller and listener, performer and audience, share the goal of participating in an experience that reveals their shared sameness."[26] In these conversations, I inquired into the sexual identities of my participants. And though I should have expected it, I was surprised when my participants began to position my own identity in the research process. It started simply enough with Don, a forty-seven-year-old white gay man, who—after our interview concluded—texted me to say that he was impressed by the way I conducted the interview. "You handled yourself well today," he wrote. I responded, thanking him and saying "I love interviewing people; everyone has a story to tell, we just don't listen all that often." Don's next text response took me by surprise:

> You opened my eyes today. Thank you. I realized I was still hiding a little still. Especially when I told my tell of not looking in someone's eyes. You're cute, and you caught me off guard today. Thanks again.

Don's message was innocent enough, but I registered his compliment as a little bizarre. I tried unpacking why it was I felt so "off" when he told me I was cute.

Don is a gay man; I likely assumed more attraction on his part than I do to the straight women who often comment on my attractiveness. Don is forty-seven, and I am twenty-eight; he is not old, but the nearly twenty years that separate us might have inspired me to de-sexualize him in my mind. Perhaps more than anything, I found myself thinking that a researcher should not be addressed by a participant like this—a thought that immediately inspired me to interrogate my implicit assumptions about the researcher/participant division. I never thought I had an expectation for any sort of boundary between myself as researcher and my participants. My unease over Don's harmless comment suggested that I did, in fact, construct boundaries around what was acceptable talk in a research interview. My commitments to participatory research, to transcending power differences between researcher and participant, and to vulnerability in the research process were thrown into jeopardy; was I all talk?[27] How else had I been failing to uphold these ethics in my previous research? I was disappointed by the realization that I might not be the radically vulnerable researcher I thought I was.[28]

Don's harmless comment was just the first of a series of encounters where my own sexuality was called forth by my participants. The second person I interviewed was Kyle, a thirty-nine-year-old white gay man who was incredibly insightful and very funny.

Toward the end of our two-and-a-half-hour long conversation over coffee at a Starbucks, Kyle mentioned to me that he was able to find me on Facebook using my phone number. I was alarmed by his statement, not because he had looked me up but because it had been so easy for him to do so. I wondered who else would have such an easy time finding my online presence. I voiced my thoughts to Kyle, and his response was intriguing:

> Well, my curiosity was—and this is probably important, actually—but, could I tell by looking through your public profile photos if you were gay? So I could know what the tenor of the conversation would be.

In that moment I laughed and said, "I hope the answer was a resounding 'yes'!" Kyle also laughed, and in no uncertain terms confirmed that my photos left him with "not a doubt" about my sexuality. "I was very comfortable coming here today," he said.

Kyle's affirmation of my digital gayness was actually comforting, and I enjoyed the laugh we shared over it. But after our interview, Kyle sent me an email that was more difficult for me to reconcile:

> Hi, Justin...
>
> I'm not quite sure how to say it, but I felt a really startling connection with you yesterday.
>
> Not something I was seeking out or prepared for... I don't know fully what I felt - or think I felt - or what I mean, but I don't want to ignore my gut... Which I know isn't clear, but that's about the only way I can put it.
>
> Am I crazy?

Now as I look back on our interview, I can safely say that Kyle was not crazy. Our conversation was one of my favorites. Lively, funny, serious, and vulnerable, Kyle's responses to my questions were instrumental in shaping the trajectory of the rest of my research. He articulated his experiences in ways that helped me ask better questions in subsequent interviews, and he helped me make sense of the sensory experiences of queerness that had been eluding my ability to describe. But when I received his email, I could not resist the feeling that the "startling connection" he mentioned was more than a platonic one. I was unsure how to process it. I ended up thanking Kyle for what I agreed was a fantastic conversation, and the "startling connection" was never mentioned again.

My next interview was with James, a seventy-four-year-old white gay man and retiring lawyer. James moved with a refined ease unlike most of my participants, but he also spoke more freely about sex in our interview than the rest. He was an interesting paradox, both suave and vulgar—or was he just direct? As we talked over breakfast at a small posh café, James told me about how he discussed my attractiveness with a friend of his before we met.

> I sent him [friend] a picture of you and I said, 'I think I'm in trouble.' And he wrote back with a little devil picture, because he would be feeling you out at this point to see if he could make that work.

I was startled and unsure how to respond, so I laughed. James continued:

> I said, 'oh, I wanna read his paper!' It's more of an intellectual connection. But I do like your picture. It's nice. It's very sexy.

For the third time, in three consecutive interviews, my own sexuality seemed to have been brought into the picture. Each time, I felt a growing unease about how I was made to be sexual.

As I reflected on these experiences, it became harder for me to ignore the duplicity of my feelings. Here I was, inquiring into the sexual histories of my participants—strangers to me, in many ways—while also expecting to be positioned as an asexual being, an objective researcher figure without a sexual identity or appeal. The dissonance I experienced as I mulled over my feelings began to exacerbate the tension I felt between my position(s) as both insider and outsider. In many ways, my participants interacted with me as if I was "in the know," part of their community and savvy about their concerns.[29] As much as I wanted to benefit from that insider status, my sexualization in these interviews also kindled a desire to construct more rigid boundaries between myself and my participants. In a way, I wanted to exaggerate my outsider position. The tenor of the next few interviews I conducted took a noticeable turn as I found myself being more reserved and withdrawn from my participants. I decided I was uncomfortable being so open and inviting with them. I wanted to avoid establishing a rapport that would open up me and my identity to commentary.[30] So for a short time, I turned it off.

As much as I wanted to protect myself, I came to realize that ethnographic research is vulnerable work. Performance studies scholar D. Soyini Madison notes that "critical ethnography requires a deep and abiding dialogue with others as never before."[31] Placing ourselves in such a relationship with persons from whom we wish to learn something about the human condition can be an incredibly enriching experience. Yet,

identifying with, or as a part of, the community being studied requires a researcher to be vulnerable, and that vulnerability is never easy.[32] I might identify with participants, and they with me, but our interactions cannot be one-sided. In prolonged ethnographic research, participants will only share so many of their stories with us until they come to expect something in return, a "quid pro quo" expectation that only intensifies when the research(er) pries into the sensitive depths of a participant's history.[33] Moments of vulnerability in the research setting can take on many forms, but one thing remains constant: ethnographic research makes demands of the ethnographer that should not be taken lightly.

My experiences being and feeling sexualized in my interviews inspired an insider/outsider tension that I came to experience in another way. In previous interview-based research studies I conducted, my participants expressed little interest in maintaining contact with me after our interviews were finished.[34] In many ways, my prior participants have been complete strangers to me, and our relationships have amounted to little more than fleeting conversations. Occasionally, they might have asked me what inspired my inquiry, or what I planned to do with their data once I finished conducting interviews. Sometimes they might have asked me what I thought, but in an obligatory fashion when they seemed uncomfortable being the only one sharing stories. Without exception, every research participant I had spoken with prior to my dissertation fieldwork had left as easily as they had come. In contrast, the persons I met through my fieldwork in Columbus seemed more interested in maintaining a relationship with me that extended

beyond our research encounters. As my fieldwork progressed, I began to experience their interest in both enriching and emotionally draining ways.

One of the most challenging experiences during my fieldwork was negotiating boundaries with Rick, an intelligent and very sweet fifty-three-year-old black gay man I interviewed. I had not met Rick prior to interviewing him in his own home. I learned meeting a participant at their home when you have no idea who they are is an unwise practice, but Rick shared a car with his roommate and was less mobile than I was. My anxiety about our meeting slowly abated over our three-hour conversation, which, in addition to the expected questions about my dissertation topic, involved commentary about politics, urbanization, religion, and education. Over the course of our interview, I came to genuinely enjoy Rick's company. But our interactions prior to the interview had me on edge.

About a week before our interview, I was awoken at 3:45 a.m. by a phone call. In my groggy and startled state, I was unable to make sense of why I was being called so early in the morning. I thought for a moment that something had happened to my mom and I was receiving a call from a clinic back in Wisconsin. A few moments later, as I was lying in bed trying to calm my racing heart, my phone alerted me to a voice mail message. I immediately listened to it, but was unable to comprehend most of the message—whoever had left it was mumbling, and I was tired. I played the message again, noting this time around that the name on my phone was Rick's, and my confusion and concern began to transform into frustration and anger. The message made little more sense than it had the first time I listened, but I gathered something about "wanting to hear

your voice." Disgusted, I promptly deleted the message, silenced my phone, and rolled over to try to get back to the REM cycle from which I was interrupted.

When I woke up the next morning, I had a text message from Rick sent at 4:18am, roughly half an hour after he had called me:

> Hi I had just called…I was hoping to God that u wouldn't answer and it would just go to voicemail…to be honest, I was very curious to hear the voice of the person who is going to interview me about my sexuality…thanks Justin…. see u Friday…Rick

I had no idea how to respond. My training had not prepared me for such encounters. What do you do when a participant—a prospective participant, one whom you have not met yet—reaches out to you in the dead of the night because he wants to hear your voice? Rick's call and subsequent text message had violated many of my expectations, namely that I was safe from being contacted between the hours of midnight and 8 a.m. I thought he had to be nervous. It must have been anxiety that inspired him to pick up his phone and dial my number, anxiety and its accompanying irrationality. I was on edge and incredibly apprehensive about meeting with Rick. This, in addition to experiences I described earlier, inspired me to establish firmer boundaries with my participants.

Conversely, some of the relationships I formed during my fieldwork were relationships I continued to foster months after I concluded fieldwork. In addition to Lex and Shari, whom I visited every other Saturday at the community center until Christmas, I traveled back to Columbus on numerous occasions to visit Elliot. Elliot is a twenty-four-year-old white gay man, who was preparing to start his doctoral studies when I met

him over the summer. I was first introduced to Elliot at the men's coming-out group held at the community center. We said nothing to each other during the meeting, but at the end of the meeting we both realized we were not on the email listserv for the group. Elliot conjured up an envelope and wrote down his email before passing the paper to me. He had said some interesting things at the meeting and I thought he would be a good person to talk to. In a desperate attempt to secure another interview—this time, with a younger person—I took note of his email address. I felt creepy doing so, as if I should have just asked him for it, but I wanted to be sure to contact him for an interview.

Elliot graciously agreed to meet me for coffee and an interview, and our conversation was one of my favorite research moments. He was charming, funny, and very cute. In an ironic turn of events, I was actually attracted to Elliot, a realization that made my previous misgivings about my other participants seem rather hypocritical. But I so enjoyed my conversation with Elliot that at the conclusion of our interview I told him to contact me if he ever wanted to hang out again. To my surprise and excitement, he told me he would like that. "Yeah, that would be cool," he said. "Let me know if you're ever up here [in Columbus] again." Of course I made many more trips to Columbus that summer and fall, and on occasion Elliot and I would arrange to get coffee, see a movie, or visit the conservatory. We would come together over vegan pizza or masala chai, and wax poetic about the theory we were reading—for him, Gayatri Spivak; for me, Judith Butler. Over time, I came to cherish the intellectual conversations I was able to have with Elliot, who was removed from the happenings within my own graduate program. Up until

the demands of writing prevented me from traveling for leisure, Elliot was a sort of colleague-friend who inspired me to look beyond the confines of my own experiences.

Rick and Elliot illustrate the ways in which I felt a desire for both more rigid and more flexible relationships with my participants. Of course, this tension was still entirely within my own control. Despite my participants' willingness to open up to me in moments of incredible vulnerability, in many ways I was the one who maintained control over the depth of the relationship. My commute to and from Columbus only aided in my control, enabling me to distance myself from participants with whom I wanted more rigid boundaries while inhibiting my ability to cultivate relationships with the participants to whom I was drawn. By distancing myself (or not), I regulated the boundaries of our relationships with little concern for the wants or needs of my participants. This insider/outsider tension became even more pronounced when I tried to uphold my personal and political commitments to feminism in my research practices.

I have no delusions about the ease of conducting research with a commitment to feminist ethics. Anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran notes that quite often, feminist ethnography is characterized by failures, moments when "a project is faced with its own impossibility."[35] But I will admit I was naïve at the outset of my fieldwork. As I began my trips to Columbus, and later my interviews, people would ask me if I was only interested in the experiences of gay men. To the contrary, my deployment of the term "queer" was strategic for a number of reasons, namely that I wanted to avoid such a myopic perspective. I had no intentions of gathering a "representative sample" of queer persons in my research, but I did have a commitment to honoring, seeking, and

representing non-male voices. I envisioned a simple process of ensuring equal presence of men's and women's voices, but this proved to be neither easy nor critically queer.

As my fieldwork progressed, I worried over the lack of woman-identified perspectives in my data. To a large extent, the overabundance of man-identified voices was a result of my easy access to spaces that catered to men. The men's coming-out group was of course exclusively male, the gay bars in the Short North were visited predominantly by men, and most of the persons who floated in and out of the Saturday social group were men. In increasingly desperate attempts to secure more women participants, I began to ask friends and contacts of mine to reach out to women they knew. One of my close friends contacted a lesbian woman she knew who lives in Columbus, and received the following response: "I'm not surprised he's having trouble finding lesbian women, they're disappearing from Columbus." That the lesbian population was disappearing struck me as an ominous data point, but I was determined to continue my efforts.

I decided to be more proactive myself. The LGBT community center website advertised a girls' game night that met twice a month, so I decided to send the group facilitators an email. I explained that I was a doctoral student working on my dissertation research and hoping to attend the group to meet people. I wrote that I was sensitive to the need for women to have a safe space to meet and I did not want to disrupt their environment. I asked if it would be alright for me to come and say hi, and see if anyone would be interested in meeting with me outside of the group. I crafted the email that I thought a feminist gay man would need to craft to "gain access" to a space for queer

women—and I was surprised when my request was denied. “After talking to a few of our regular members,” I was told, “we feel that girls game night is not the right venue for you to conduct your research . . . we provide a safe space for women in the Columbus area.”

I was disappointed by the coordinator’s response, but I understood her rationale. Although I am gay, I am still a man—and girls’ game night was a safe space for women. I wanted to avoid invading what was supposed to be a safe and nonthreatening place for women when my sole purpose was to do research. What I did not expect was the coordinator’s subsequent suggestion to go “to bars that cater to lesbians and bisexual women.” To me, this presented an interesting paradox: how ironic, that I was barred from her safe space, but directed to attend other safe spaces for lesbian women. I had to chuckle at her suggestion. Even though the bars in the Short North are supposed to exist for everyone under the rainbow, I suspected that lesbian bars exist, in part, to help lesbian women avoid gay men. Gay men like me.

I had reached a stalemate, a sort of double-bind. I knew I would not invade these spaces for women. But this same urge to align myself with women was actively inhibiting my ability to ensure that women were present in my research. I wanted to privilege queer women’s points of view because, in many ways, queer women might be more attuned to the ways their perspectives are situated at the margins of both heterosexual and queer culture.[36] In this final manifestation of insider/outsider tension, I questioned just how inclusive the queer community could be when it was situated on the nexus of so many fault lines of difference.[37] As a fellow queer person, I assumed that I shared an insider status with queer women, a mutual vested interest born out of our

shared queerness. I did not anticipate how my male or masculine status might in many ways make me an outsider, distancing me from queer women because of the privilege historically afforded to queer men's voices in the LGBTQ rights movement.[38]

My efforts to secure a stronger female presence in my data were ultimately unsuccessful. Pleas to my participants to spread the word to their female contacts, urgent messages to my own connections, even attending a queer burlesque show, all proved futile. Eventually the constraints of time won out, and I was resolved to extract myself from the field and make the most of the data I had collected. In a final attempt to honor the women who shared their stories with me, I resolved to privilege their voices in my analyses. The frequency with which you hear stories from Tanesha and Camilla, and the way Shari's story is depicted in its own chapter, is my honest attempt to bolster their contributions to my data and uphold my commitment to feminist research practices.

Reflections on my own positionality do not end here. I begin many of the following chapters with autobiographical vignettes that chronicle my position in relation to the research from a variety of entry points. In addition to introducing the central theme of each chapter, these stories serve as honest and vulnerable recollections of my own certainties and insecurities. They are reminders of my doubts and triumphs in the field, my ongoing process of sense making, and the choices I made as a researcher implicated in the lives I was researching.

Having chronicled my research practices, I begin my formal analysis in the following chapter. In "Wayward Stories," I consider the importance of telling queer identity stories. I then organize the queer identity stories from my data into two types:

stories of struggle and stories of invisibility. Together, these stories illustrate the importance of narrating queer identity for uniting queer persons together as a community. They also establish a theoretical and political impetus for the consideration of queer performativity in everyday life.

Chapter 3 Notes

1. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln describe qualitative research as a bricolage, "a pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation." In this sense, a qualitative researcher brings together multiple and disparate "tools, methods, and techniques of representation" to construct a multifaceted product akin to a montage. See "Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research," 4.

2. John Reinard, for example, categorizes ethnographic research as an attempt to arrive at a "portrait of a people" in the process of developing grounded theory. Although his description of ethnography likely would be challenged by contemporary ethnographers, it alludes to the vestiges of scientific research that continue to permeate discourses of and about qualitative research. *Introduction to Communication Research*, 243.

3. Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison note that social constructionism is "less a specific body of work and more a general ontological and epistemological stance" that occupied a position as "the dominant mode of social and cultural analysis" throughout most of the 1980s and 1990s. "The Promise of Non-Representational Theories," 4.

4. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, xvi.

5. Anderson and Harrison, "The Promise of Non-Representational Theories," 2.

6. Anderson and Harrison, "The Promise of Non-Representational Theories," 24.

7. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 1.

8. Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw succinctly describe jottings as a "brief written record of events and impressions captured in key words and phrases." They note that jottings are particularly useful in those moments when field researchers "decide that certain events and impressions should be written down as they are occurring in order to preserve accuracy and detail." My own use of jottings was much aligned with their suggestion, and I frequently used a notes application on my phone to record these impressions for later elaboration. See *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, 29.

9. These notes are best described by James Clifford's notion of "description," one of "three distinct moments in the constitution of fieldnotes" that involves "the making of a more or less coherent representation of an observed cultural reality." See "Notes on (field)notes," 51–52.

10. In many ways, these representative anecdotes resemble what Devika Chawla calls an "assemblage of encounters," collected stories that emerge in daily life and illustrate the affective dimensions of daily habits. See "Habit, Home, Threshold," 153.

11. James Clifford discusses the role of analysis in conjunction with moments of description, explaining that the process of engaging in thick description involves "a turning away from dialogue and observation toward a separate place of writing, a place for reflection, analysis, and interpretation." See "Notes on (field)notes," 52. Although Clifford rightly assumes that the two (description and analysis) occur simultaneously, it became useful for me to distinguish these two types of notes nominally, given that my analytic reflections, to a large extent, emerged later in the process of my fieldwork.

12. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke note that thematic analysis is one of the most widely used analytic strategies in qualitative research, and they argue that it "is the first qualitative method of analysis that researchers should learn." See "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," 78. Their approach to thematic analysis involves a six-step method of analyzing qualitative data: familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Although this multi-phase approach to analysis is surely helpful, it continues to rely on overly structured coding practices akin to those used in grounded theory, which, to varying degrees, risk abstracting the data to a point where the particulars no longer stand out as particularly evocative. For this reason, I took a more relaxed approach to coding in an attempt to resist establishing a rigid set of themes that would discourage a narrative representation of my findings.

13. Catherine Kohler Riessman posits this dialogic/performance analysis as akin to thematic and structural analysis, not equivalent but a "broad and varied interpretive approach to oral narrative that . . . interrogates how talk among speakers is interactively (dialogically) produced and performed." See "Dialogic/Performance Analysis," 105.

14. Riessman, "Dialogic/Performance Analysis," 112.

15. Riessman, "Dialogic/Performance Analysis," 124.

16. Riessman, "Dialogic/Performance Analysis," 107.

17. Riessman, "Dialogic/Performance Analysis," 105.

18. Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 119.

19. Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 120.

20. Hay, *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography*, 35.

21. Rosaldo, "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage," 19.

22. Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*, 3.

23. D. Soyini Madison notes the importance of considering positionality in a way that moves beyond merely accounting for one's subjectivity. Although a researcher's subjectivity is certainly noteworthy, she argues that accounts of positionality should include attention to "how our subjectivity *in relation to others* informs and is informed by our engagement and representation of others." See *Critical Ethnography*, 10. In the spirit of her call for more reflexivity, I have chosen to forego a discussion of my own identities in favor of explicating how the interactions between myself and my participants resulted in affective responses that subsequently came to bear on my approach to fieldwork.

24. Here, I am channeling Clifford Geertz, who probes what it means for an ethnographer to prove s/he has "been there"— "there" being their field of study—in order to establish some kind of authorial credibility. This is certainly a consideration I have been acutely conscious of throughout my fieldwork and writing process. But I am also toying with another of his motifs, "a paradoxical sense of simultaneous distance and closeness, otherness and oneness" felt in the field. See "Being There," 15. It is this sense of a "being here/being there" duality upon which I focus my attention here, a simultaneous presence in and absence from the field.

25. There is a wealth of research on negotiating insider/outsider status in qualitative research, including how that negotiation manifests itself in practices of rapport building, positionality, and the irreconcilable liminality of existing between "insider" and "outsider." For examples, see Blix, "'Something Decent to Wear': Performances of Being an Insider and an Outsider in Indigenous Research"; Sherif, "The Ambiguity of Boundaries in the Fieldwork Experience"; Court and Randa, "Whose Interview Is It, Anyway?"; Berger, "Now I See It, Now I Don't."

26. Denzin, "Toward a Performative Social Science," 80.

27. In many ways, I am referring to the commitments of participatory action research (PAR), outlined by Fine et al., "Participatory Action Research: From within and beyond Prison Bars." PAR—much like other critical approaches to interpretive research—is committed to democratic social research by considering participants to be experts in their own lives and researchers working alongside participants. My own research practices might not have emphasized an equal commitment to "giving back" to the community, at least not in its present form, but I did enter the field with a determination to remove the distance between myself as researcher and my participants. As these vignettes suggest, however, my determination faltered on more than one occasion.

28. See Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*.

29. This observation is unsurprising when viewed through the lens of Erving Goffman's work on stigma. Goffman makes a distinction between "the own"—those persons who share a stigma or a stigmatized identity—and "the wise"—those persons who do not share the same stigma but who are sympathetic to the stigmatization. See *Stigma*, 19. As my fieldwork progressed, I came to view myself more as a "wise" person, especially considering my own coming out and being out experiences were less fraught with difficulties than were those of my participants. However, by virtue of our shared queerness, my participants treated me as their "own," which I firmly believe made the process of establishing rapport much easier.

30. Charles F. Springwood and C. Richard King note the ways that rapport in ethnographic research has become an increasingly problematic concept. In particular, they wonder about the ways fieldwork relationships come to be characterized by "confrontation, prevarication, obfuscation, disagreement, and even repugnance." See "Unsettling Engagements," 405. Although I want to refrain from describing my own fieldwork relationships in these terms, Springwood and King's suggestion that ethnographic rapport might no longer be an exclusively beneficial aspect of ethnographic

research became a felt experience during moments such as these throughout my fieldwork.

31. Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 10.

32. See Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*.

33. Juliet Corbin and Janice M. Morse note that, in qualitative research, participants might "make requests that go beyond the social norms" of what is expected in a research setting. Although their focus is on unstructured interview research, ethnographic practices expose researchers to a similar risk. As Corbin and Morse explain, "participants sometime share intimate information, but the researcher gives something in return: a sense of presence or of being with the participant in the story." See "The Unstructured Interactive Interview," 349, 342. This is part and parcel of qualitative research, but the stories I share here are meant to illustrate the many ways I was unprepared for the kind of presence my participants would come to expect from me.

34. See Chawla, *Home, Uprooted*.

35. Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, 98.

36. Lila Abu-Lughod notes that feminist scholars "want to reclaim and redefine objectivity to mean precisely the situated view. There is no such thing as a study which is not situated, they would argue. Women's point of view is in some sense privileged because, like any subaltern view, it could never pretend that it wasn't a view from somewhere." See "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?," 15. In a similar manner, I wanted to privilege the perspectives of queer women who likely had a clearer sense of the complexities of performing queer identity than would queer men who, despite their marginalized status as queer, benefit from a sex (and possibly gender) privilege that renders itself invisible.

37. This is a concern I address in the final chapter of this dissertation, but I preview it here. Colin Walmsley notes, with striking detail, the way that mainstream assimilation has further widened the social class divide between upper and lower class queer persons. Many people—myself included—fall into the trap of assuming a united queer community, when an intersectional lens would suggest that the queer "community" is too easily divided along other lines of identity difference for us to make this assumption. See "The Queers Left Behind."

38. Queer scholars and activists, such as Sarah Schulman and Dean Spade, illustrate the problematic history and trajectory of the contemporary gay rights movement in its liberal, incremental approach to securing individual rights and privileging those voices from within the community chosen by persons in power. Their critiques point to the many ways that the interests of affluent white gay men have been disproportionately represented in the movement's politics. For more thorough discussions of this trend, see Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*; Spade, *Normal Life*.

Chapter 4: Wayward Stories

I am sitting at a table in the very back of Endeavor, a hipster coffee shop just off High Street in the Short North district. Tanesha is sitting across from me, telling me a story and attempting to overpower the music blaring from the massive speakers elevated above our heads. A broad smile spreads across her face as she finishes her story, and I laugh at her witty resolution. We had reached the end of my interview questions a few minutes ago, but our conversation continued as she elaborated on more ideas that came to her through the course of our chat. Now, finished with her most recent recollection, she smiles at me expectantly, waiting for my next inquiry. I tell her I have no more "official" questions for her, and her smile falters momentarily before she resumes beaming at me. "It was a good interview!" she says. "I really benefitted from it. I'm glad I did this! And I hope you got a lot of good information."

I did. But in the moment, I am struck by her statement that she benefitted from the interview. Tanesha is the eighth person I have interviewed, and the most recent in a series of participants who have confessed they found their interviews to be almost therapeutic. At first I simply considered these admissions proof of my superb interviewing skills. Now, however, I sense that increasingly familiar voice in my head asking, *is that the whole story?* This question has emerged with increasing force with every interviewee who thanked me for interviewing them, and this time I cannot ignore the pressure to investigate it further.

Fortunately, I feel a comfort with Tanesha that has eluded me in most of my previous interviews. Tanesha, a twenty-one year-old Black lesbian woman and

undergraduate college student, has been meeting with me periodically since she wandered into the social group meeting at the community center about a month before this. Over iced coffees and vanilla lattes, we have shared our career ambitions, our skepticism about higher education, our intrigue about queer politics, and our growing discomfort with the LGBT rights movement's stagnation following the marriage equality ruling. Tanesha no longer feels like a stranger to me, and I sense that she might entertain my unplanned questioning.

"Why do you say you benefitted from the interview?" I ask. "I didn't expect that, and it surprises me every time it comes up." Without pausing to gather her thoughts, Tanesha conjures an answer for me:

> I don't really get to have these conversations that much. I really enjoy talking to other queer people. I can't have a conversation like this with another straight person, because most of the time they're confused through the conversation. I start throwing out terms like 'cis,' and then they're just like, 'well wait, back up.' But we can just keep this conversation going because we understand what we're saying; we understand what all these terms are. So yeah, it's always nice to have these conversations. Because you can't always do it with straight people.

Tanesha's response sent my mind reeling. I had seriously underestimated the value my participants placed on our interviews, but her words brought back flashes of similar sentiments:

> That's a very good question. Like I said, I hoped I would learn something about myself tonight. (Rick)

I knew it would be a great talk. Just doing this was therapeutic for me. (Gary)

Admittedly, I had not expected these reactions. Thinking, talking, and writing about queer identity became a routine occurrence for me during my graduate studies. English scholar James Mulholland explains that academy was fertile ground for the rise of queer theory, whose budding disciplinary framework in the 1980s "enabled a massive national transformation decades later."[1] For me, that transformation made conversations about queer identity a commonplace occurrence. I grew accustomed to such conversations, and the novelty faded. Tanesha helped me realize that what I had been taking for granted was far from commonplace for many queer persons. "For you, this is just another conversation," she says, "but not all queer people are having these conversations all the time." Tanesha's simple observation begins to put things in perspective for me. There is more to the telling of these stories than I first suspected.

Months later, these stories flood back to me in a fit of irritation. I am being interviewed by someone on campus about my dissertation, in an attempt to publicize a fellowship I was awarded. My interviewer, JoAnne, though undoubtedly well-meaning, berates me with varied versions of the same question: *why does this matter?* Despite my best and most articulate attempts to convey the urgency of my research, I cannot help her—a presumably straight white woman—understand the frustration, the struggle, or the risk of everyday queer performances. Recognition, visibility, authenticity—these themes simply fail to resonate with her. As our conversation continues, JoAnne tries ever more incessantly to get a response that satisfies her need for meaningful contribution. I try, with mounting frustration, to satiate her appetite. Ultimately I am unsuccessful; after the

interview, I receive an email from JoAnne stating that she and her editor have decided to delay publishing the essay until I have more time to think through the significance of my research. That time never comes.

I would like to believe this was an innocent and well-intentioned effort to afford me time to immerse myself in my data, offer more than preliminary findings, and strengthen the reputation of a fellowship award for the university's many external stakeholders. But I cannot ignore the pressing feeling in my gut that instead, my encounter with JoAnne was a symptom of a larger cultural illness: a failure to respect the everyday experiences of queer persons as notable, significant, or worthy of investigation. That day, so shortly after the marriage equality ruling came down from the U.S. Supreme Court, an ill-fated prophecy seemed to have come true. The fight for equality was over, heterosexism was dead, and queer persons could now live normal lives—to the fullest extent that the heterosexual world allowed.

My participants' stories spin a different narrative. In contrast to the assumption that everyday performances of queerness matter little, my participants shared stories of being rejected by their families, abandoned by their friends, betrayed by their religions, and—for some, a fate worse than any other—being praised for "acting straight." Over time, I began to see these stories for what they were: illustrations of an ideology of heteronormativity that, despite mounting evidence to the contrary, continues to pervade our culture. In ways I hope to illustrate below, these stories set the stage for everyday queer performances. They describe the conditions that occasion a need for queer

performativity and the background that enables queer recognition. The stories that follow, in short, answer JoAnne's question, *why does this matter?*

In this chapter, I delve into the intricacies of narrating queer identity. To do so, I weave together a collection of wayward stories—stories that seemed to meander through my interviews until I realized they had a destination. Stories about the margins, collected from the margins. I begin by examining the importance of telling queer stories, using narrative theory to illustrate how stories construct identities. I then probe into stories of struggle, questioning how narratives of Other-ness are central to the identity stories of queer persons. Next, I move through stories of (in)visibility, narratives of cultural unintelligibility that illustrate the ways in which queer persons are unseen within cultural frameworks of compulsory heterosexuality. Finally, I situate these stories within a framework that argues for an increased need for such stories to be told. The story contained within these pages articulates the need for inquiry about queer performativity. In effect, this chapter is a narrative of narratives.

The Need to Tell Stories

In her book, *Giving an Account of Oneself,* Butler notes that "there is no 'I' that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence, no 'I' that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral norms."[2] Her statement argues that the self arises, or is constructed, in relation to others within a set of cultural constraints that determine the intelligibility of identity. As Butler elaborates, "the 'I' has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation—or set of relations—to a set of norms. . . . The 'I' is always to some extent dispossessed by the social conditions of its emergence."[3] In

this way, giving an account of oneself necessarily involves an interrogation of the cultural forces at play in the construction of our identities. As Butler states,

> . . . the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our "singular" stories are told.[4]

Butler illustrates the power of identity narratives to unveil the conditions under which identities are constructed and communicated. Social researchers, however, should not equate personal narratives with accounts of the self. "Telling a story about oneself," Butler argues, "is not the same as giving an account of oneself."[5] But those accounts will take a narrative form "which not only depends upon the ability to relay a set of sequential events with plausible transitions but also draws upon narrative voice and authority."[6] In this sense, giving an account of oneself involves narratives that illuminate the circumstances under which a subject is brought into being.

The stories my participants shared with me are such narratives. The sharing of their identity stories—stories of their histories and the construction of their queer identities—was a profoundly important experience for many of them. Take, for instance, Gary, a 50-year-old gay white male, registered nurse, and hypnotherapist. Gary first came out to his wife in 2007, and they are still married. He has had romantic relationships with men since then, but Gary told me he stays married to his wife—who lacks the financial resources to support herself—because he feels he owes it to her. Despite his existing marriage to his wife, Gary puts little effort into hiding his sexuality.

Gary agreed to stop and meet me at Applebee's on his way from Ohio to Florida, where he was meeting his wife, son, and in-laws for a short vacation. When he arrived at the restaurant, Gary was adorned in a tank-top, shorts, flip-flops, and a lot of jewelry—including earrings, a black leather bracelet with a small silver charm etched with a black equal sign, and a silver ring with a rainbow prism on it. His signs were familiar to me, and not much different than the "gay gear" I wore myself, but he also sported a silver cross that hung around his neck. During dinner, Gary told me all about his first sexual relationship with a man at the age of seventeen, his subsequent denial of his sexuality, his marriage, the church he started, and his eventual coming out. In the midst of these stories, Gary shared a lot of heartbreak and struggle, including his abandonment by his church congregation, his mother's refusal to accept his queer identity, and the shame he felt about his marriage to his wife. Toward the end of our interview, Gary made a comment that he thought our conversation had been very therapeutic. Surprised, I asked him why he thought so.

> Well, in therapy, in a therapeutic intervention, the way to get someone to release unresolved energy or unresolved tensions or unresolved issues is to get them to speak it, or, better said, to express it. People need to express it. Either verbally, or they can beat it out in a punching bag. So your research participants are given that opportunity to talk about that stuff, especially such a broad and thorough discussion of it. Why is it therapeutic? Because we get to express it.

I certainly never thought of myself as a therapist, nor my interviews as therapeutic, but Gary's explanation illustrated the power of sharing those stories. The ability to entrust his tumultuous history with another queer person was an enriching experience for him.

Sharing his stories with me, however, was only part of the picture for Gary. He also told me that he wanted other queer persons to know about his queer identity and his history. When I asked Gary why it was so important to him, he replied:

> To make up for what I did when I was 17 [referring to breaking up with his boyfriend and burying his queer identity]. (Sigh) This is my way of living authentically. This is my way of saying, my life is what it is. I did what I thought I had to do, I did what I thought was the right thing, both then and now. It's part of my story. And for people not to know now, would be… they need to know now. That way there's some explanation as for where I was at 17 to now. That's why.

Gary illustrates the ways that personal narratives can give an account of the construction of identities. Rather than demonstrating a simple need to tell a story, Gary explains that sharing his stories describes the conditions under which his queer identity emerged, was suppressed, and ultimately liberated. His stories rationalize the choices he made in terms of aligning or not aligning himself with the queer community, and they orient him to other persons.

Gary exemplifies how being called upon to account for oneself can be a performative means of (re)constructing the self. The importance of this kind of identity-accounting was stressed by other participants as well. James told me that sharing and

receiving such narratives of queer identities was profoundly important to him. He reflected on the earlier stages of cultivating his queer identity by noting:

> One of the reasons that I connected so easily with you is because when I was in that process, the willingness of gay people to take time just to sit down and talk to me, simply about being gay and the life, was transformational in one sense.

Transformational in what sense? When queer persons are asked to account for their identities, the stories they tell (re)produce meanings about being queer. For newly out queer persons, exchanging identity stories might be an introduction to cultural scripts for performing queerly. For others, exchanging stories might be a way to draw closer to a queer community. For instance, Camilla—a 51-year-old lesbian Latina woman and nutritionist—explained why sharing her stories was so important:

> I've always been, since I came out, very proud of who I am. Because I finally got it! I know there was something going on, and I didn't know what it was. And I dunno . . . I tell this to people, and they wonder, even some lesbians, but I'm just very proud!

Camilla's identity narratives articulate her pride in her queer identity. Exchanging those stories with other queer persons is therefore a citational practice where Camilla can reinscribe her identity in relation to other queer persons to whom she feels connected. Through the repetition of storytelling, Camilla is able to rearticulate herself, storying her identity to suit the context and arriving at new understandings of her queerness.

Telling identity stories is crucial to the construction and performance of identity. In his book *Making Stories,* psychologist Jerome Bruner argues:

> The construction of selfhood . . . cannot proceed without a capacity to narrate. Once we are equipped with that capacity, we can produce a selfhood that joins us with others, that permits us to hark back selectively to our past while shaping ourselves for the possibilities of an imagined future.[7]

Bruner illustrates the capacity of narrative to construct identities, both for ourselves and for our audiences. In telling identity stories, subjects are able to (re)create themselves in their own minds. The telling of those stories also enables other with whom we share stories to construct and project an understanding of our identities. Bruner explains:

> A self-making narrative is something of a balancing act. . . . We seem virtually unable to live without both, autonomy and commitment, and our lives strive to balance the two. So do the self-narratives we tell ourselves.[8]

In this sense, identity narratives establish a subject as both an autonomous and individual self, and a relational, connected being.

Since identity stories are both personal and relational, they also illustrate the cultural contexts within which identities are situated. "Narrative acts of self-making," Bruner states, "are usually guided by unspoken, implicit cultural models of what selfhood should be, might be—and, of course, shouldn't be."[9] Bruner's words underscore the importance of critically examining identity narratives. My participants expressed how they valued the opportunity to share their own stories, as doing so was therapeutic for them. Their stories also connect them to larger cultural forces that in many ways demonstrate the frames of reference that render queer identity un/intelligible. Stories of the struggles that shaped the trajectory of their identities. Stories of the need for visibility

in a culture that affords little. Stories of uniting a minority community scattered within the majority. These are the identity stories my participants told. It is to these stories that I turn next.

Stories of Struggle

Don and I have been talking for about an hour in the bustling coffee shop just a few blocks from the community center. Don is seated across from me. The look on his face suggests that his thoughts are elsewhere, reliving moments from his past as he scans his memories for stories. I asked Don to tell me a story about how people had reacted to his coming out. He settles on an example he thinks is fitting. "When I first came out to family," he says, "they were all very receptive . . . and then I got a little backlash, 'what if he's a pedophile, I don't want my kids around him.'" He gives me a sly smirk before finishing with, "That was a short-lived thing." Don tells me he wasted no time in shooting down that stereotype when it circulated among his family members. He talks about it now as if it is no big deal. As we talk, I try to think of whether I have been accused of being a pedophile. I don't think so.

Don stayed in the closet until 2010, when he was 42. "I said it to myself in a mirror when I was 13," he tells me. "But I never wanted to have that name as the leading name for me, the gay brother, the gay cousin, the gay kid down the road." Don lives in a small city forty minutes outside of Columbus, where he grew up, but he comes to Columbus frequently. I was surprised that he would drive so far so often, my own hour-and-a-half-long commute this morning fresh in my mind. He brushes aside my surprise. "I come here all the time," he says. "Columbus is gay friendly."

Don is a landscaper; he started working independently in 2007 after being laid off from his job. He speaks fondly of his large hosta beds, and he obviously is proud of the work he does. I ask Don if he has other stories of people reacting poorly when they learn that he is gay. Having just spoken about his landscaping work, a story comes to him quickly.

> I had a client one time that I told. They were mentioning something and I said "Well, I'm gay." Then halfway through doing something in their yard, they informed me they didn't want me anymore. I said, "That's fine, but you agreed to a certain quantity, so you're getting charged for the whole time I would have been here." And they were fine with that.

Don's story surprises me. I struggle to think of situations where I have faced similarly overt discrimination because of my sexuality, but Don was able to recall them easily. And he was not alone among my participants. As I gathered more stories of struggle, I began to wonder what those stories *do*. Are they simply illustrating individual occurrences of micro-level discrimination? Or might they harbor more sinister and disciplinary processes of social control?

French philosopher Michel Foucault traces the development of homosexuality as an identity category throughout history. Critiquing what he refers to as the "repressive hypothesis," Foucault argues that numerous sexualities in fact *proliferated* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[10] He asserts:

> Sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a

> personage . . . . Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny . . . . The *sodomite* had been a temporary aberration; the *homosexual* was now a species.[11]

The transformation of behavior to identity, though it purported to suppress deviant sexualities, instead served to propagate them. Such "machinery of power," Foucault says, served to give non-normative sexualities "an analytical, visible, and permanent reality: it was implanted in bodies . . . [and] made into a principle of classification and intelligibility."[12] Although Foucault only asserts that such classification and intelligibility *does not repress* deviant sexualities, Butler argues that cultural conscriptions of intelligibility do *control* sexualities. The surge of varied sexual identities in the past 200 years undergirds a cultural infatuation with labeling, demarcating, identifying, and categorizing, with the intent to sort out the "indecent" from the "proper."

Perhaps this is why sexual identity continues to be so important to queer persons, in a way that it is not for non-queer persons. Experiences of being sought out, labeled, defined, and categorized as "Other" create a bond between queer persons, a bond rooted in struggle. Camilla suggested this to me in a crowded university coffee shop. Over the noise of the engulfing conversations and the many students milling about the space, I asked Camilla if she thought heterosexual persons felt the same connection to one another as many queer persons did:

> No, I don't. I think subgroups connect. I think a struggle connects people. I think when you have to struggle to be who you are, it creates that connection with people. It may be just my experience because of who I am, but to me, when you share something so huge that leads to a lot of struggle, you're connected. And I think if I go deep with those individuals, eventually that connection happens.

Despite the advances made by the LGBTQ rights movement, stories of struggle continue to constitute the larger narratives of queer identity. Although such struggles might serve to unite a larger queer community—a theme I take up in more detail in chapter six—the more toxic effects of those struggles on queer persons should not be overlooked.

The sources of struggle are many and varied. For instance, Elliot told me how his brother uses religion to cast Elliot as deviant. "He believes—in some messed up, lost way—that he still loves me and wants the best for me," Elliot said. "But the best for me, in his opinion, is for me to be a secluded, not-sexual being who doesn't ever experience love." Similarly, Rick relayed a story to me of how his family interacted with him as if he was contagious when they came together at his father's funeral:

> Somehow I became this pariah, like this leper. I remember at my dad's funeral, my ex [partner at the time] was there, and my aunt treated him terrible. She was just downright rude and nasty to him, you know? Never knew him. And my cousins, like, backed away from me, like that. And it made me feel bad. Somehow, it's like I'm sick, because I came out. And it's like, who I make love to, who I choose to love, has nothing to do with the cousin that you loved, the little boy that you knew—I'm still me.

My participants' stories of struggle illustrate Foucault's challenge to the repressive hypothesis. Rather than repressing deviant forms of sexuality, the increasing desire of cultural authorities to categorize persons by sexuality "did not exclude sexuality, but included it in the body as a mode of specification of individuals."[13] The expanded categories of sexual orientation continue to allow for multiple ways of sorting persons into deviant sexualities. Queer persons thereby continue to remain Othered; there is just a more expansive repertoire of slots into which they can be sorted.

Stories of (In)Visibility

Elliot and I are seated outside on wrought-iron chairs, enjoying the shade from the canopy that is shielding us from the day's harsh sunlight. Small birds flit in and out of my line of sight and one even lands on the table between Elliot and me. "They're awfully brave," I say. Elliot watches the bird fly away as a smile dances across his face. His eyes crinkle in the corners and he takes a sip of coffee from an oversized white mug. He resumes humming along to the Billy Joel song echoing out from the speakers overhead before belting out the famous line, "I haven't been there for the longest time!" I chuckle at his bravado. Elliot appears rather jovial despite having just told me about a group of ex-friends who had tried to "pray the gay away" after he came out to them. It had been his example of a bad reaction to his coming out, which he asserts is still important for him to do—Elliot wants people to know he is gay. I ask him why.

> I guess, just because it's heteronormativity. Everyone just assumes that it is the opposite, and it does impact the conversation. I know that (a) people don't typically peg me as gay or whatever, and (b) most people are assumed to be

straight anyway. I want them to know. Because otherwise I'm likely being seen for someone who I'm not.

Elliot is the first person I have met this summer who has used the term "heteronormativity," but the way he invokes the word recalls similar stories of in/visibility from other participants. In articulating the importance of performing their queerness, my participants were almost in unison in saying: unless we make it known, our queerness goes unnoticed.

What is it about sexual identity that makes it so difficult to ascertain? As he reflected on his earlier days of being an out gay man, James told me,

> I think I was probably a lot more obvious to the world than I thought I was. But then, I find straight people don't pick up on the cues as readily as our community does.

The apparent difficulty in recognizing signifiers of queerness is far from uncommon. Don, for example, was unable to recall a time where someone recognized him as gay without him directly telling them.

> Don: Mm mmm. Not really. Mm mmm. Because people don't look for it. When I see myself, I DO meet so much stereotypes, but in their eyes I don't meet the stereotypes.
>
> J: So you just don't project your identity the same way that some other people do?
>
> Don: Being around other gay people I do, but in the straight world, they don't want to see it. It's easy to not see it.

Don highlights two issues at play in the in/visibility of queer identity: that straight people do not want to see queerness and that queerness is not easy to see. Although I take up these ideas in more detail in subsequent chapters, the stories of in/visibility further exemplify the importance of queer performativity. As such, they warrant a brief exploration here.

Tony Adams begins to account for the reasons queer identity might defy easy observation. Adams explains the conditions under which the proverbial "closet" comes to exist. One of those conditions is that "LGBQ identity cannot be easily accessed."[14] He elaborates:

> If coming out is predicated on *revealing* same-sex attraction and/or a LGBQ identity, then a person must recognize that this attraction and/or identity are not easily accessible—recognize that the attraction and identity are secret (to others).[15]

That sexual orientation can be more or less "easily accessed" is of paramount importance to understanding queer performativity. "LGBQ identities," according to Adams, "lack definitive and permanent characteristics."[16] This lack of definitive characteristics makes queer identity an elusive one, complicating the ease with which queer persons can project that identity and be recognized.

Such complications in processes of identification are only exacerbated by social systems that "frame a person as straight until proven otherwise."[17] Drawing on Butler's notion of compulsory heterosexuality, Adams notes that such contexts make "the act of identifying as heterosexual unnecessary but simultaneously require a [queer] person to

come out—that is, confirm same-sex attraction through discourse or action."[18] Compulsory heterosexuality reinforces assumptions of heterosexuality and eradicates the need for heterosexual persons to disclose their sexuality. By extension, it necessitates that queer persons openly and outwardly identify as queer if they wish to eschew such assumptions of heterosexuality. Under the assumption that queer identities lack definitive characteristics, queer persons are continually rendered invisible. For my participants, this invisibility only reinforced the importance of queer performativity.

This was especially true for Kyle, who worried over his in/visibility during a conversation we had at Starbucks. "I used to be more concerned that I didn't present as gay," he said, continuing:

> That probably affected the way I stood, the way I used my hands. I don't think about it anymore, but when I was still dating around, occasionally someone would say, "you don't seem gay." And you know, that's a very individual assessment. And that would irritate me because then I would think, "what should that seem like?"

Kyle noted that not presenting as gay bothered him, but it also affected the ways he comported his body. By considering why he did not "seem gay," Kyle began to imagine how he might otherwise performatively constitute his identity differently—or more apparently.

Similarly, Tanesha reflected on how her family seemed to almost resist recognizing her queer identity:

J: Do you think your family knows?

Tanesha: I dunno! I mean, I won't hide it from them, so if they ask . . . (trails off). But I just don't see why they ever would.

J: You think it's not even on their mind?

Tanesha: Yeah. And I think a lot of them like to pretend that it doesn't even exist. If I met someone, and they were around my family, I wouldn't say "hey, this is my friend," I'll say "this is my girlfriend." And if they have questions, sure, we can talk about it. But they probably won't wanna talk, so . . . (laughs). Nope.

Tanesha's family refuses to acknowledge her queer identity, and she imagines they would be hesitant to inquire into it. Although different from Kyle's story, where he was told he did not appear gay, the communication patterns of Tanesha's family also reflect ways that queer identity is made invisible. Their stories illustrate some of the ways in which compulsory heterosexuality positions queer identity as unintelligible.

Far from accepting such invisibility, my participants expressed frustration and sadness when they failed to perform "queer enough." Tanesha said:

> Sometimes it is kind of annoying when people don't look at you and just assume that you're LGBTQ. They have to get to know you more, or you have to tell them. Just walking down the street, it would be easier for me if people knew.

Tanesha never told me exactly what would be easier for her if she were recognized as queer. But Camilla—who also worried that she passed as straight—hinted at a more definitive reason. "I feel like I really have a need to be part of the community," she said. "I just wanna belong, and if they don't recognize me, I don't feel like I can belong."

Tanesha and Camilla demonstrate the problems that accompany queer unintelligibility. Their stories also begin to articulate an impetus for queer performativity and desire for queer recognition—themes that I address in the chapters to come.

And So the Story Goes

My interviewer JoAnne is not alone in her inability to empathize with the struggles of queer identity. In many ways, the assumption that "the fight is over" is characteristic of incremental politics: just as feminism is thought, in some circles, to have won equality for women, the marriage equality ruling has many persons assuming that LGBTQ equality has now been achieved. Not only is this conclusion patently false, it also perpetuates an apathetic mindset about the difficulties that queer persons continue to face in our daily lives. I do not wish to suggest that all queer persons face overt and debilitating discrimination on a daily basis—though this continues to be a reality for many. I do take issue with the ways that misidentification, queer invisibility, and the politics of recognition are relegated as only minor concerns, if they are considered concerning at all. The failure of the heterosexual majority to recognize the inherent damage done in refusing to acknowledge the commonplace identity politics of the queer minority represents more than just indifference. It is a willful attempt to keep queer persons in a subjugated social position.

The stories presented in this chapter illustrate precisely this point. They speak to the cultural contexts that position queer identity on the outside, unseen. One remedy to this relegation is the telling of stories. As personal as it is political, queer storytelling represents an attempt to narrate the conditions under which queer identities are

constructed and cast aside. As communication scholar William Rawlins argues, sharing stories allows persons to "probe the enveloping circumstances that frame and give meaning to the events depicted . . . . What is selected for inclusion and exclusion is important."[19] For my participants, the importance of telling their stories, having them heard, and being offered a platform from which they can speak about their histories of struggle and invisibility was of paramount importance. The absence of community and the omnipresence of heteronormativity have substantial consequences for the daily lives of queer persons. Telling identity stories embodies the work that is so vital to queer persons, yet so difficult to accomplish given the cultural constraints that discipline queerness. Without the opportunity to tell their identity stories, queer persons risk suffocating under the smog of heterosexual culture.

So the impetus for queer performativity lives on. Queer persons wish to be recognized as queer, because failing to be seen is damaging to their identities. Failing to be seen dishonors their histories. Failing to be seen robs them of their place in society. These slights should not be taken lightly. The ramifications are substantial, and they strike to the core. As my participants' stories suggest, the stakes are still high in the game of identity politics. And queer persons are still gambling.

In the next chapter, I continue my investigation of queer identity politics by investigating "queer performativity in everyday life." If the stories presented in this chapter illustrate the importance of queer performativity, the following chapter is a detailed account of how queer performativity is a deeply embodied accomplishment. I question how my participants articulate, and then perform, a cultural "script" for

queerness that informs their understandings of performing and recognizing queer identity. I conclude by troubling a reliance on verbal disclosures of identity in the interpretation of queerness.

Chapter 4 Notes

1. Mulholland, "Academics," para. 8.
2. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 7.
3. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 8.
4. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 21.
5. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 12.
6. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 12.
7. Bruner, *Making Stories*, 86–87.
8. Bruner, *Making Stories*, 78.
9. Bruner, *Making Stories*, 65.
10. See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 49. Foucault refers to the "repressive hypothesis," broadly speaking, as the argument that "modern industrial societies ushered in an age of increased sexual repression."
11. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 43, emphasis mine.
12. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 44.
13. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 47.
14. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 55.
15. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 55.
16. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 88.
17. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 86.
18. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 86.
19. Rawlins, *The Compass of Friendship*, 49.

Chapter 5: Queer Performativity in Everyday Life

Sam and I leave the volunteer tent and make our way over to the "Youth Village," the section of the park designated for young persons at Pride to meet each other and hang out. Sam and I both are sporting neon orange "Pride volunteer" shirts. A rueful smile plays across my lips as I consider how our branding makes my queer identity more ambiguous. There is nothing about the shirt to differentiate me from the straight volunteers milling around the park, the same neon orange shirts blazing in the crowds. Thankfully, I have my "gay gear" to clear up any confusion: my rainbow bracelet, the rainbow-studded silver ring, a rainbow silicone wristband, and my oversized faux-diamond earrings adorn my body. For good measure, I did my makeup today: thick, dark eyeliner and multiple applications of my best mascara give my eyes a bold, dramatic look. I glance down at my hands and think—or maybe hope—that I look queer enough, though for whom, I cannot say.

Sam looks around with wide eyes, and I feel a sudden rush of gratitude for her willingness to accompany me at the last minute. "Thanks for volunteering with me today," I tell her. "I really didn't know what I was going to do by myself for four hours." Sam looks back at me, her short-cropped hair shining under the bright sunlight, and cracks a smile. "I'm glad you suggested it, because I didn't know what I would have done all afternoon on my own." We share a quick laugh over the way my hasty invitation for her to join the Pride volunteer staff was a mutually beneficial idea. A short distance ahead, a large printed sign identifying the Youth Village greets us.

A young woman, probably no older than 24, shuffles between the three raised tents in the Youth Village area. She wears short-cut denim shorts, sandals, and a purple volunteer shirt. I think for a moment that she must have some kind of official position because of the different color. She has long, straight, red hair that falls down her back to her tailbone and freckles scattered across her face. Sam and I approach her, and as the woman looks at us I beam a smile at her and say, "We were sent to help out at the Youth Village. Did we find the right place?" "Excellent!" she replies. "You did! I'm Maggie." She extends her hand to us and we exchange handshakes as we introduce ourselves. Maggie is bubbly, her energy almost infectious, and I think she must be well-suited to working with youth. She seems responsible for this particular area of the park. Over the next four hours, Sam and I help Maggie set up some of the entertainment. Maggie informs us that the "official" programs for the kids start tomorrow. All we have to do today is hang around, talk with anyone who shows up, and slowly get the different booths set up for the next day's affairs. Once things seem to be set up as well as they can be, Sam and I take advantage of the lull to observe our surroundings.

The Pride festival is underway. Hundreds of people are snaking their way through the vendors, decked out in their queer best. From my vantage point at the outskirts of the park, the crowd seems to be an unending wave of rainbow colors and flesh. Men and women walk topless among the crowd; others wear short skirts and shorts that reveal a lot of leg; still others parade around in undergarments. And everywhere, the colors of the spectrum are splashed across bodies, whether on clothes, accessories, or painted on skin. I see outlandish costumes; hair dyed in every color; tattoos and piercings all over body

parts; leather straps, strapless tops, and assless chaps; breasts, chests, and barely-concealed genitals. A fringe community out in full force, unapologetic. The queerness of it all makes my head spin.

I sit down at a picnic table, at the margin of a space tethered to a queer center, and begin to worry. The park has become a homonormative space this weekend, and in the rainbow-washed sea of bodies and booths I feel a mounting sense of unease blossom in my chest. The impossibility of my task looms ahead of me as I recognize how truly difficult it will be to give an account of queer performativity rooted in my own observations. What certitude I had vanishes, replaced by dread. Everything I see, anything I surmise to be queer, seems rooted in a stereotype. I realize, as I look upon the crowds of presumably queer persons, that all I can do is assume. How can I possibly account for performances of queer identity when I cannot be certain that the identities I think I see are queer? Seeds of this final thought take root in the pit of my stomach, and I slump on my picnic bench under the weight of the impossible.

Rehearsing the Script

Months later, the naiveté of these earlier misgivings is remarkably clear to me. My fears were rooted in a myopic and one-sided understanding of performance. I set out thinking I could reduce the performance of identity to a single script, one that could be taken up by any queer person easily. Decontextualized, simplistic, and hardly aligned with the performance perspective I have since come to appreciate more fully. But the evolution of my understanding was a slow process indeed.

In this chapter, I trace the trajectory of my thinking through the performance of queer identity. A number of questions presented themselves to me during the course of my inquiry: How do we embody a queer identity freed from its discursive shackles? What does the cultural script of queerness look like? Why does a steadfast commitment to trusting verbal disclosures of identity over embodied ones thrive within the queer community? Finally, how can we distinguish between the act of *coming* out and the process of *being* out if the disclosure reigns supreme among performances of queer identity? As I answer these questions in turn, I weave together disparate and perhaps contradictory stories into a narrative that will, at best, only appear cohesive and coherent, itself a performance, performing.

~ ~ ~

What might queer performativity look like in everyday life? Before I proceed with an articulation of the cultural script for queer identity, I wish to illustrate everyday performances of queerness. To do so, I present an "assemblage of encounters," a series of performative renditions of the everyday that illustrate the ways in which queer identity is performed.[1] My participants and I star in these encounters, which enact the nuanced cultural "norms" I articulate later in this chapter.[2] By (re)presenting our experiences in this manner, I turn the lens inward. Rather than focus our attention on the ways in which we read others' bodies, we begin here by enacting queer readings of ourselves. I chose not to intersect these brief performances with moments of analysis. Instead, the subtle mechanisms of the performances are teased out through the analyses presented later in the chapter. By providing an uninterrupted account of our own performances, our own

identities, I demonstrate how we access the cultural script for queerness when performing our own identities.

~ ~ ~

At work, Gary wants clients to get that sense, or feeling, or knowing, you know? Rarely do they actually come out and say it, though it happened there the last two weeks with a client. She'd been with Gary's facility for a couple days—they're a 28-day program—and she said "do you drive a Prius?" Gary told her yeah. "Oh I knew it! You're a part of the family!" Gary laughs. She knew because of his car! Of course, it's got the equality sticker, and the coexist, the rainbow sticker, so whoever drives that car is either a really strong ally or something.

~ ~ ~

Don has the diversion of eyes. Holy crap, he's had that forever. Shoot. Ten years ago, he would not be looking you in the face. And still, as you see, he diverts his eyes. Yeah, that's a major tell. Also, something straight people would think was gay was the way he crosses his legs. There is a "male" way of crossing your legs and a "gay" way, which, it's not. It's whether you're muscular and your thighs are too big and you can't cross your legs one way or another.

~ ~ ~

Justin styles his hair very carefully, especially if he's going to be around other queer persons that day. He wants them to recognize him, he wants to feel part of the community, so he'll make sure he has this aesthetic. Everything is strategic. He's also started wearing more makeup. Eyeshadow, eyeliner, mascara—just a few weeks ago he

bought his first eyebrow pencil. And he loves the way he looks when his face is all done up! There's no mistaking it when he paints his face.

~ ~ ~

James probably dresses a little bit better than the average male. He probably dresses a little more colorful. He's not afraid to stand out in terms of his dress or appearance. He's comfortable with bracelets, necklaces, and he's comfortable in conversation—if it's relevant—identifying himself as gay. He probably has more interest in body image and appearance than the typical straight guy. How else does he perform? Probably his manner of walking. He can also pick up some of what he considers gay speech patterns in his own speech. It's interesting, his wife videotaped him and his brother as they were chatting and getting ready to go on a bike ride, and he's listening to this tape, and he says "oh shit! That's a gay voice!"

~ ~ ~

Tanesha has a rainbow dog tag that she wears. She has these jean shorts that, ok . . . so, she took scissors and cut little designs on one leg, so it shows a little bowtie pattern. And she painted the shorts rainbow colors along the leg. Those are her favorite shorts! She has mostly rainbow accessories, more so than clothes. She would love to get more rainbow clothes. And if she was really feeling "extra" that day, she'll take a plain old t-shirt and start decorating it.

~ ~ ~

Before Kyle came out, he was laid off and without work for a full year, so he had all this time to, you know, do a lot of self-reflection. During that year he was trying to do

things that would help him identify even though he really already knew. It was physical things he could go to that would help him make that decision in his mind. He remembers carrying this leather messenger bag that he never carried anywhere, until he went to the community center every Wednesday. He would carry that with him, because he thought that was part of his "uniform." It was this accessory that made him fit in. Just a plain old leather bag from Fossil. He thought "this is the gayest thing I've ever done!" He had this little gay kit, and if he had had jelly bracelets to wear he would have done that too. He can remember sitting at the front desk at the community center and being irritated that no one was identifying him as gay in some way.

~ ~ ~

It's very rare that Gary actually tells someone that he's gay. Very rare. So how does he do it? It must be through certain identifiers that are out there. He does just a little bit of breaking gender norms. In northwest Ohio, especially with his parents' generation, he and I are breaking the gender norm with our earrings. Yeah. And he sure as hell is breaking the gender norm with that toe ring! That's so fucking gay!

~ ~ ~

Justin wants to know what things about him made Don's gaydar ping. Well, says Don, you have earrings, you're perfectly coifed. Don would say Justin is shiny. Shiny, Justin asks? Shiny, Don replies. Don's heard that many times from straight people, from watching TV and stuff: gay people are shiny. Because they take care of their appearance. And yeah, Don says, your voice is higher, so you just ding bells. It's nothing to worry about, it's just natural for you. You don't have to worry about it.

~ ~ ~

Others have told Gary, as soon as he starts talking they can tell. He uses his hands. A girl in his sociology class five years ago said "you talk with your hands, and as soon as you start talkin' and doin' this stuff, give it up. You're too animated! You're gay!" Just think how boring it would be to be straight, Gary says!

~ ~ ~

These renditions of queer performativity in everyday life illustrate a wide array of cultural resources used to signify queer identity. They evidence the ways in which signifiers such as emphatic gestures, jewelry, gender inversion, clothing and accessories, rainbows, body comportment, speech patterns, and cosmetics contribute to frames of queer intelligibility. Although not an exhaustive account of the elements that comprise queer performativity, the encounters do demonstrate the body's centrality in communicating queer identity. They articulate embodied approaches to represent an identity commonly thought to have no definitive physical identifiers.[3] In essence, they perform queerness.

What more is there behind the performance of queer identity? Have we arrived at a sufficiently detailed account of the cultural frames of intelligibility? I might be compelled to say yes, but any account of performance is inherently incomplete without considering an audience. What new insight might we glean from turning our lens *outward?* How are frames of queer intelligibility enriched by considering the ways in which we perceive bodies other than our own to perform queerness? To answer these questions, I turn next to the task of articulating a cultural script grounded in those

observations. If the accounts above constitute self-reported performances of queer identity, then my next endeavor constructs the frames through which we ascertain others' queer identity. In some ways, the following cultural script mirrors the performative stylings represented above. In other ways, the script expands upon those stylings. What we arrive at is a multifaceted framework for "reading" queer identity that simultaneously embraces and challenges cultural frames of intelligibility.

Setting the Stage

Gary and I have spent the better part of two hours working out how it is we recognize other persons as queer. "How do you tell?" I ask him. "You have to make some assumptions," Gary replies. "What role is that person playing, what roles are they putting out there?" The idea of there being roles for queer persons espouses a convenient theatrical connotation. That queerness is something one can "put on" seems problematic, but the strategic deployment of certain identifiers, communication patterns, and physical projections cannot be overlooked. Elliot, for example, told me:

> . . . occasionally, I splurge a little bit. Otherwise I feel that I would garner no interest from other men. They'd just be like, "no, what's up with that dude? Nah, he's straight." And I'd be passed by.

In this case, Elliot perceives a certain script he can draw upon in those moments where he wishes to "splurge," to signal his queer identity more clearly or forcefully. What lines make up this cultural script? How are they accessed by queer persons to perform their queer identities? Answering these questions requires that I distill the components of a cultural script of queerness as they emerged during my fieldwork.

Heterosexual Failures

I approach the entrance to the diner and look around me. I see no sign of Lex anywhere, so he must be running late. Sure enough, I pull out my phone and see a text message from him. "The bus is running slow today," it says, "but we will see you soon." I stow my phone back in my pocket and lean against a streetlight, my eyes squinting under the harsh summer sun. It's rather quiet for lunchtime in the city, but I wonder if 11:00 a.m. is too early for most people to be getting lunch on a Wednesday. I crane my neck around to look through the diner's large window. It is relatively unoccupied. At least we won't have to wait for a seat.

I turn back to face the street as a bus slows to a stop directly across from me. A few moments later, I see Lex begin to cross the street, joined by the man I assume is his boyfriend, Toby. Lex waves to me as he crosses the street to where I stand and I return the wave with my own and a closed-lip smile. Lex steps up onto the curb and opens his arm for a hug. "Hey baby! This is my boyfriend, Toby." Toby extends his hand, and I take it in my own. His hands are somewhat large, with wide fingers and a firm grip, "man hands" in their proportions. I note the difference between his hands and my own, with my slender fingers and hesitant squeeze. I don't like shaking hands. It's a constant reminder that I'm not quite masculine enough. The adage "you can tell a lot about a man by his handshake" comes to mind and sets me on edge. Ever since I was a child, I have waited to feel the strength of the other person's grip before reciprocating, always mindful that my own grip is just a moment too late to be considered genuine. In contrast, Toby shakes my hand powerfully, no hesitation to undermine his introduction.

The moment I met Toby, I felt my own queer identity manifest in my failure to perform to the standards of straight men. My adolescence was riddled with moments of "heterosexual failures," but over time I came to recognize those heterosexual failures as moments of queer successes. In this sense, queerness came to be signified by an inability to perform straightness. My participants expressed similar stories of how heterosexual failures signal queer identity. Consider, for example, this story Don told me about the lengths to which some queer persons go in order to perform straight:

> There are gay people that have studied to not be that way. If you were sitting in on many of our meetings, many guys have spoken of making sure that they never bent the wrist when they were talking. They always kept it up, or they kept their hands together. They watched themselves closely. Now they don't care.

This story positions queerness in relation to straightness, such that the absence of one indicates the presence of the other. Performing straight, then, is to not perform queer, just as performing queer is to not perform straight.

Heterosexual failures are represented by more than just the absence of straightness, however. Some queer persons are unable to perform straightness convincingly, such that their attempts seem infelicitous. Don, for example, explained to me why he thought his neighbors—to whom he has not officially come out—should know he is gay anyway:

> I never talk about women in a sexual way. It just wasn't comfortable. I feel I would look stupid doing it, if I tried saying "oh, she's hot!" That would out me really quick.

According to Don, performing heterosexuality—in his case, by expressing sexual interest in women—would belie his own queer identity. He simply could not convincingly project that identity.

Tanesha told me a similar story of a friend of hers who, prior to coming out, also seemed infelicitous in her heterosexuality:

> She told me about a time she was hanging out with her friends, and they started talking about some guy, maybe Zac Efron. Some famous cute celebrity guy or whatever. So I asked her, "do you think he is cute?" And she said she did. But she talked about guys in a very awkward way, it just wasn't authentic. The way she presented it, I was like, I'm not buying this! You don't find him attractive whatsoever! You don't actually believe what you're saying right now.

These stories illustrate the way that heterosexual failures become performances of queerness. The inability to convincingly or felicitously perform the script of heterosexuality constructs a script of queerness, the code by which queer identity is read.

Early conceptions of performativity help explain why the infelicity of heterosexual failures comes to signify queer identity. Austin distinguishes the perlocutionary force of language as "the performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to the performance of an act *of* saying something."[4] In other words, Austin's speech act emphasizes "what we bring about or achieve by saying something."[5] According to Austin, language is performative to the extent that it produces an effect on an audience and/or changes the circumstances under which the utterance occurred.

Of course, Austin argued that language can only truly be performative when it is invoked under felicitous conditions, such that the speaker intends some kind of performative change to occur. Subsequent revisions to thinking about performativity, such as the work by Derrida and Butler, argue that all language is infelicitous and still performative because it always represents a copy of a previous utterance. For example, Derrida argues:

> Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written . . . can be *cited* . . . in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring.[6]

According to Derrida all communication is performative. Signs are always referencing signs that came before. The result of this iterability is that communication contexts are always shifting, constantly creating infelicitous performances.

In the course of everyday life, the contexts in which we perform our identities are constantly changing. So what calls attention to the infelicity of heterosexual failures? Butler argues that the heterosexual matrix—the direct and causal relationships assumed to exist between sex, gender, and desire—contribute to such readings. Sexuality, for example, is performative in the sense that it cites a cultural norm—but that norm is itself a citation. The result, according to Butler, is that "gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy."[7] Because regulatory systems of sex, gender, and desire conceal their own construction, the felicity of hegemonic manifestations of those

identities goes unquestioned—until such moments as a person fails to uphold the cultural norm. In those moments, the queer person's failure is contrasted with hegemonic sex/gender/desire. The believability of the fictitious "original," however, is not challenged. Rather, the queer person's perceived attempt at upholding heterosexuality is viewed as a failure—in effect, infelicitous. Heterosexual failures therefore come to signal an unbelievable heterosexuality, in turn interpreted as queerness.

Queer Associations

Lex, Toby, and I enter the diner and take a seat in a booth close to the door. Lex and Toby sit across from me. The server brings us menus, takes our drink orders, and I scan the menu as Lex and Toby strike up the conversation. Toby notices my rainbow bracelet and tells me he really likes it. I look down at the bracelet on my wrist before smiling back and thanking him. "I ordered it from Amazon, and I love it," I say as I twist the bracelet around my wrist. I notice that Toby is wearing his own "stigma symbols."[8] He has two rainbow colored jelly bracelets around his wrists, and a silver necklace interspersed with small rings in rainbow colors around his neck. The rainbow colors convince me he's wearing them to identify as queer. Toby confirms my thought a moment later. "I want to get some new gay gear," he says. "I'm going to look for a bracelet like yours."

The rainbow has become an emblem of sorts for the queer population, denoting the many identities united together in their non-straightness. The rainbow's association with the queer community inspires many queer persons to access it as a way to signify

their queer identity. My own rainbow accessories frequently draw the attention I received from Toby that day in the diner. Kyle, for instance, brought them up in our interview:

Kyle: I noticed your jewelry before I sat down.

J: Oh wow!

Kyle: So if I didn't know you, I would see that you're wearing a ROYGBIV bracelet.

J: Yup.

Kyle: That's usually not by accident.

The rainbow is emblematic of the queer community, its connotations performed as queer persons adorn themselves with all manner of rainbow-colored objects. But the rainbow is not the only queer association used to identify queerness.

Much like certain behaviors, interests, activities, mannerisms, and other communicative patterns are gendered, queer identity carries with it certain patterned associations. Many queer persons resist such associations, denoting them as stereotypes that belittle the queer community. As stereotypes, however, they still serve to identify persons as queer through their associations with the queer population. Elliot, for example, mentioned events and spaces as a queer association:

> If I'm associating myself with something like Pride, it's [sexual identity] probably fairly evident. So I guess the environment can be something that could cause it to be known or not.

In addition to the queer spaces Elliot referenced, Rick described some of the interests he thinks are typical among queer men:

> The first thing you always wanna do is see if there's a love of art and film, literature, things like that. That could be an indicator. And you look for a little touch of sensitivity.

According to Rick, interest in the arts and a touch of sensitivity, at least among men, signal queerness. They have assumed a sufficient degree of familiarity among queer persons that they have become emblematic of queer culture.

At this point I run into a familiar resistance against relying on such stereotypes. Surely, the associations I make above are not exclusively queer. Many heterosexual persons attend pride celebrations, sport rainbow accessories, or cultivate interests in the arts. How do we maintain the existence of such queer associations when there might be very little about them that is queer? These associations, stereotypical though they might be, continue to serve as frames of intelligibility for queer identity. Consider this exchange between Lex and Victor, after I asked them why they relied on queer associations like those mentioned previously:

> J: So these things you were mentioning, like gestures, body movements, who you're seen with, where you are; why do those things mean you're queer?
>
> Lex: Because it's not something straight people would do.
>
> Victor: Because it's their mentality, I would say.
>
> Lex: I don't think straight men would act that way.
>
> Victor: Well, we don't know really how straight men act. We don't know what they do behind closed doors. We don't know all about them!

Lex: No, but what we see on the street, what we see in public, whether it's a façade or not, that's how they act.

Lex's response, "it's not something straight people would do," is a simple illustration of the way that queer associations construct a frame of intelligibility, a script for queerness that makes identifying and performing queerness possible. Through a historically constructed affiliation with queer persons, such associative symbols have become representative of queer identity.

Body Aesthetics

After we finish lunch, Lex suggests that we walk down the street to Merger for a drink out on the patio. We arrive, put in our drink orders, and Lex and Toby begin to plan out the bus route Toby will need to take to work this afternoon. As they look up bus stops and call the city transport office, I take in the surroundings. The patio is filled with patrons enjoying the summer sun beneath the shade of large umbrellas. Merger is reportedly one of the most popular queer bars in the Short North, but the clientele today is rather uniform in its style. Most of them are well-manicured, with perfectly arched eyebrows, trendy clothes, and meticulously styled hair. They remind me of the "metrosexual" look that became popular some years ago as I notice the higher -end designer clothes adorning thin and sculpted bodies. There's a queer aesthetic among the patrons sharing the patio with me, though it might be more easily described as "upscale gay" than queer. Am I observing queerness, urbanity, or something altogether different?

Distinguishing between urban trends and those adopted by queer persons is difficult, particularly when the queer persons in question are situated within a trendy

urban environment. Yet trend continues to be an identifying script for queer persons in contemporary culture. Just the other day, a gay friend of mine posted a picture of himself on Facebook, bragging that a woman at the airport complimented him for his fashion and said she was disappointed that she could not introduce him to her daughter. His is not an isolated story; Victor also referenced a way that trend is sometimes used to signify queer identity:

J: How do you know if someone is queer?

Victor: Just the way you carry yourself, your dress, if you're neat. If you're a man and you're neat and stylish, right away they assume you're gay.

Victor called attention to the way that style can imply queerness. Though his example references gay men only, it illustrates the way that queer persons perform their identities through trend.

My participants articulated a kind of "body aesthetic" that contributes to the cultural script of queerness. Although trend seemed to be the easiest way to describe what they were referencing, they provided a variety of stories to illustrate the way that queer bodies are adorned or stylized to perform queerness. Elliot, for example, described that he has some clothes that are "less straight" than others:

> Sometimes it has to do with the clothes I wear. Like this shirt, I find to be not a super "straight" shirt. I'm not gonna say the color is too gay, but it's not a macho, neutral, boring tone.

That Elliot wore his "gay shirt" to our interview was humorous to me, but it represented the body aesthetic I noticed during my fieldwork. Kyle also referenced this aesthetic, making the connection between trend and identity even more apparent:

> I have a [gay] coworker who gets his hair cut every four days, wears pastel shorts, matching shoes, you know, ultra-tight shirt that he can barely sit down in, who identifies almost through trend. You know, like visually. So he would be someone I could pick out very easily in my mind as trying to identify as gay just by what he's wearing.

Kyle described in finer detail the aspects of trend that make up a queer body aesthetic. He also noted the presumed intentionality of that aesthetic, explaining that he assumed his coworker deliberately embraced those trends to identify as gay. Together, these examples demonstrate the ways that trend and style contribute to a queer body aesthetic that enables the identification of queer identity.

Trend and style seem rather limiting when considered on their own. Can queer persons truly perform their identities through the clothes they wear? I would argue yes, but a queer body aesthetic cannot be reduced simply to one's wardrobe. There is more to styling the body than donning designer labels. Tanesha, for example, shared with me a trend she began to notice among queer women in particular:

> When I see a woman that has very out-there dyed hair, it's starting to become a way for women to identify that they're LGBTQ. It's slowly getting there, and not everyone's picking up on it, but it is starting to become a way. If you see a woman—mostly white women—that has all blue hair, or all purple hair, you'd be

> surprised to know how many of them were attracted to girls, or experimented, or actually identify as LGBTQ. It's really common now. It's almost like the new rainbow.

According to Tanesha, non-natural hair color has assumed a queer connotation, particularly among queer white women. Her example illustrates yet another way that queer bodies are decorated in order to signify queerness, or to assist queer persons in performing that identity.

Of course, no account of a queer body aesthetic could be comprehensive. Styles are as varied as the cultures that create them, and body aesthetics are as diverse as the persons who embrace them. Queer identity continues to be scripted by prototypical body aesthetics that, though varied, contribute to the frames of queer intelligibility. Queerness is performed and reacted to through these various body aesthetics as much as it is performed and reacted to through queer associations or heterosexual failures. Queer body aesthetics might be difficult to distill, but they are illuminating nonetheless.

Gender Inversion

Once Toby settles on the bus route that will take him to work later this afternoon, he and Lex return their attention to me. I recall Lex telling me on a previous visit that Toby started his new job recently, so I ask him how he likes his work. "It's good," he says. "I started wearing my gay gear to work last week. I was nervous that people would give me trouble for it, but they don't bother me." I consider Toby's concern over wearing his rainbow accessories to work, and for a moment I feel sad that he has to worry about such a thing. I wear my own accessories frequently, with little thought to how they might

affect me in the safety of my classrooms. Before I can say anything more, however, Toby continues: “I think my manager is a lesbian.”

Toby’s statement replaces my sympathy with curiosity. “How do you know? I ask him. “I can just tell,” he replies. I laugh out loud as I consider the straightforward way in which he rationalizes his suspicions. I recognize the opportunity to probe further into how he recognizes this coworker as lesbian, so I continue. “How so?” I ask. “What makes you think that?” Toby’s response is all too familiar. “She’s really butch. She has short hair, and she’s a bigger woman. She doesn’t wear men’s clothes, but she dresses really manly. She’s just not very feminine.” I nod, knowingly, as though I’ve heard it all before—because I have. This woman’s female masculinity has given her away. Whether she is actually queer, I do not know. But Toby seems to have all the proof he needs.

Heterosexual failures, queer associations, and queer body aesthetics all contribute to the cultural script of queer intelligibility, but none more so than gender inversion. In their book *Female Masculinity,* gender studies scholar J. Jack Halberstam notes that “we do not name and notice new genders because as a society we are committed to maintaining a binary gender system.”[9] It is precisely this gender binary that provides the structure, so to speak, for Butler’s heterosexual matrix. “That gender reality is created through sustained social performances,” Butler argues, “means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character.”[10] Essentially, the gender binary that permeates our culture perpetuates a system of sex and gender convergence that leads persons to assume maleness from masculinity and femaleness from

femininity—until those moments when a person's performed gender and presumed sex sufficiently contrast each other. In those moments, bodies fail to exist within the heterosexual matrix, enabling a queer reading of that person's identity. Reading stereotypically feminine characteristics from a presumed male body (or, in contrast, reading stereotypically masculine characteristics from a presumed female body) was the most frequent script articulated by my participants. Rather than interpreting masculinity and femininity as such, there appears to be a cultural impetus to interpret masculinity and femininity on presumably oppositely-sexed bodies as homosexuality. In effect, sex and gender meld together, and queerness emerges in those instances where sex and gender seem to conflict.

For queer women, masculinity comes to signify lesbian identity. Camilla, for instance, was adamant about the ease with which she could identify queer women based on how masculine they presented. When I asked Camilla how she recognized other queer persons, she said:

> I know, I'm always looking, especially for girls. More butchy girls are obvious. It's harder to look at more feminine women and figure out if they're gay or not. But more of a masculine look in women is very obvious.

Tanesha gave me a similar explanation for identifying queer women based on their masculinity. "It kinda depends on the way they look," she said, "but stereotypically, it's short hair, maybe a less feminine demeanor, and then they're constantly labeled as a lesbian." These stereotypes Tanesha alluded to were elaborated on by Victor and Lex:

> Victor: Butch-ness. When I see a lesbian more butch than me.

Lex: Yeah, I would say that, yeah.

Victor: Like, she got more mannerism of a man than a woman. The way she dresses, you can tell. If she got her hair cut like a man, she wears no bra but her shit's [*sic*] pulled back and she's like—

Lex: —right, no chest. No breasts. I would say it's easier with a butch-type lesbian. They may be more masculine than me, you know? And chances are they're not a straight woman.

These examples illustrate the way that traditionally masculine—or, at the very least, non-feminine—characteristics are read from presumably female bodies to signify queerness. Through such signifiers as hair, clothes, demeanor, or chest binding, masculine women's bodies are read as queer. This script of gender inversion, according to Butler, is a result of systematized homophobia, which "operates through the attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abject gender to homosexuals, that is, calling gay men 'feminine' or calling lesbians 'masculine'."[11] Although Butler wishes to abandon the causal relationships between sex and gender, she notes that such relationships continue to be structurally determined for regulatory purposes. Regardless of the authenticity or political ramifications of such causal inferences, the conflation of a person's sex and gender continues to result in queer readings of their sexuality.

A similar script, albeit reversed, exists for men. Feminine characteristics read from assumed male bodies constructs a male queerness such that, as Don pointed out, "more femininity equals gay." Leonard, a 54-year-old, white, gay male who worked as a manager at a home improvement retail store, articulated the queer male script similarly.

"We do make that assumption," he said, "just because someone has feminine mannerisms or effeminate interests, we assume they're gay." Lex and Victor explained what some of those feminine characteristics entailed:

> Lex: Maybe with their speech, with what they say, like sweetie or baby or honey, they may pick up on that.
>
> Victor: Well, quite naturally, when you're not with a girl and you're around a bunch of guys you're gay. Why is that always a given?
>
> Lex: And it could be when they do this [puts his hands on his hips], or, not that I ever sit like that, but crossing your legs—
>
> Victor: —or your wrists?
>
> Lex: —or your wrists.

Such mannerisms and expressions assume a feminine undertone, and when performed by men they are interpreted as signals of queer identity. My participants frequently referred to these "tells" of male queerness as flamboyant, flaming, or queen-like. When I probed further, feminine characteristics were offered as descriptions.

The characteristics for queer men, however, were less physical than what they described for queer women. Instead, the script of male femininity involved more stereotypically feminine communication patterns than body comportment. Elliot described some of the patterns that led him to suspect other persons are queer as such:

> I find that the way straight men interact with other men is very different. I find a lot of them to be, not necessarily closed, but . . . maybe the best way I can describe it is, the men that I typically think of as gay are more open in their

> interactions with other guys. Maybe they're more smiley than a straight person might be.

Similarly, Kyle explained that his script for queer males comes back to "openness and the communication style, the more sensitive communication." He later elaborated on what he meant by openness:

> A lot of times, I find that I can't not make eye contact with you, but it's direct eye contact. Even the straight guys I work with don't make prolonged, direct eye contact as much as a woman might, or as much as a gay man might. Or the kind of open body language, just being receptive.

Based on these examples, gender inversion for queer males seems to involve communicative openness, a sense of sensitivity, and perhaps being more expressive—traits commonly associated with feminine communication styles. These styles, in addition to the feminine mannerisms articulated above, comprise a script for male queerness.

Abstracting the Script

Cultural scripts are of paramount importance to any performance-based account of everyday life. How is it that persons, as social actors, come to know their roles within society and how to perform those roles? The construction and dissemination of cultural scripts has therefore received substantial attention from performance scholars. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, sociologist Erving Goffman traces the ways that cultural scripts are accessed by persons in everyday life. Goffman defines the kind of cultural script I refer to as a part or routine, "the pre-established pattern of action which is unfolding during a performance and which may be presented or played through on other

occasions."[12] Such parts or routines are able to be accessed by persons because they are pre-established. Rarely, according to Goffman, do persons arrive to any interaction that does not already have a cultural script ready-made to aid them in their performance. "When an actor takes on an established social role," says Goffman, "usually he [*sic*] finds that a particular front has already been established for it."[13] This ubiquity of cultural scripts is accepted *a priori* by performance scholars. Schechner, for instance, notes:

> Most of daily living is taken up by performing job, professional, family, and social roles. Each of these, in every culture, comes equipped with ways of behaving and interacting. Everyone masters to some degree or another the social codes of daily life.[14]

Mastering such cultural scripts aids persons in navigating social situations and more or less successfully performing the roles expected of them. Beyond assisting in the performance of social roles, these cultural scripts also enable the performance of identities in everyday interactions.

Relying on Judith Butler, performance scholar Elizabeth Bell explains that "performances of identity are iterations—repetitions of sedimented historical conventions."[15] The conventions she refers to can be thought of as frames of intelligibility, those cultural scripts that, according to Butler, are involved in "setting the limits to what will be considered an intelligible formation of the subject."[16] In this sense, the makeup of the cultural scripts we follow defines the boundaries within which subjects are understood or not. "All performances," Bell explains, "are citations—enacted references to ways of doing gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and ability that are bound

by constraints that are . . . always political."[17] Identity, therefore, is always performed in reference to the existing cultural scripts, even if those identity performances seek to resist or challenge the scripts upon which they draw.

The queer cultural script I outline above is grounded in my own research, yet it remains strikingly similar to other accounts of queer performatives. Sociologist David Hutson notes that "as individuals form gay and lesbian identities, they often do so through appearance choices that announce those identities."[18] In this way, appearance serves as a prelinguistic or prediscursive projection and communication of identity. Hutson explains that, in the case of gay and lesbian persons, sexual identity is ascertained through gendered performance lenses. "Men's association with gender and sexual identity," Hutson says, "led them to explore clothing that might mark them as visibly gay—either effeminate or nonheterosexually masculine, while women found that more masculine styles were available to them."[19] Though Hutson's research attends to appearance solely through dress, it is easy to envision the way that elements of the script above—heterosexual failures, queer associations, body aesthetics, and gender inversion—function similarly. To the extent that performances of queer identity can be linked to gendered identifiers, queer frames of intelligibility will continue to be rooted in cultural scripts similar to the one I articulate here.

As with all identities, the cultural scripts for queer identity are steeped in political contestations. Butler's delineation of the heterosexual matrix illustrates how the mobilization of queer frames of intelligibility reify normative understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. "For heterosexuality to remain intact as a distinct social form,"

Butler explains, "it requires an intelligible conception of homosexuality and also requires the prohibition of that conception in rendering it culturally unintelligible."[20] The heterosexual matrix functions to maintain a convergence of (binary) sex, gender, and sexuality, such that male is to masculinity and attraction to women as female is to femininity and attraction to men. Deviations from that convergence pattern, according to Butler, result in culturally unintelligible subjects who exist outside the realm of normative sex/gender/sexuality. How telling that gender inversion continues to script queer identity. By failing to perform normative sex and gender, subjects are assumed to perform non-normative sexuality. In effect, the very script that renders queer identity intelligible—to the extent that it is recognizable and able to be performed—also (re)positions queer identity along the margins of a heterosexual center.

As a result, scholars and lay persons alike are hesitant to embrace too quickly scripts of queer identity that rely on gendered identifiers. Adams, for example, asks whether a woman who has engaged in gender inversion "beyond legitimate, gender-transgressing contexts" has effectively come out.[21] He argues against it:

> The woman's (self-claimed) heterosexuality may be questioned, but this does not mean she has "come out." The woman comes out only when she confirms same-sex attraction and/or a LGBQ identity discursively (for example, by saying "I am a lesbian").[22]

Adams's reservations about gender inversion as a queer cultural script are rooted in the ways that "attributions of same-sex attraction stemming from gender inversion also perpetuate the myth that gay men are women trapped in male (sexed) bodies and lesbians

are men trapped in female (sexed) bodies."[23] For Adams, any queer script that turns on gender inversion reifies problematic binary conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality.

As easily as my participants were able to articulate a script of queer identity, there is little wonder that they were quick to chastise that very script for its limitations. "It's hard to get out of that mindset, to not perpetuate those stereotypes," Tanesha said. "Meeting people who don't perpetuate those opposite-gender stereotypes, and realizing that they were straight, is another confirmation to not assume people's sexual orientation based off of how they present themselves." Tanesha's misgivings are echoed by queer theorist Annamarie Jagose, who argues that "any commitment to gender identity works ultimately against the legitimation of homosexual subjects."[24] The cultural script of queerness might seem illuminating, but performatives such as heterosexual failures, queer associations, body aesthetics, and gender inversion inhibit queer recognition as much as they enable it. The limitations of a queer cultural script—particularly one that rests so heavily on gender inversion—contribute to the reservations about the embodiment of queer identity present in both anecdotal and theoretical discussions of queer performativity. What identity performances in everyday life constitute definitive "proof" of queerness? The answer, at least in part, continues to involve linguistic performativity.

Linguistic Performances and Definitive Proof

About half an hour goes by, and Sam and I continue to sit observing the festival around us and making conversation with Maggie and the youth who filter in and out. I am obsessed with figuring out what Maggie's sexual identity is. Aside from a multiple piercings in her ears and a small stud in her nose, there is nothing about her that performs

"queer" to me. Maggie tells us she is a teacher at a Jewish school and also works as a backup dancer for drag shows at one of the gay bars in Columbus. Sam and I cannot contain our surprise, and we spend a few minutes joking with Maggie about her dual identity: teacher by day, dancer by night. Maggie volunteers at a center in Columbus that provides after school programs for queer youth, and I begin to wonder if she is a heterosexual ally, someone who cares passionately about the queer community and enjoys being around it without identifying as part of it. The signs of her queerness are there, but in the midst of the extravagant queer performances at the Pride festival, I question my suspicions.

Eventually, an older man shows up carrying what appears to be a large wood panel. He places it against one of the picnic tables and tells Maggie that we can set it up. Maggie jumps to her feet and begins rummaging around the supply bins before extracting a plastic grocery bag full of different colored spools of yarn. She beckons Sam and I to help her with the wood panel. We pick it up and carry it to the place Maggie has indicated and stand it up. As we step away to observe what we have just placed, I notice that the panel is divided into six long vertical stripes, each painted a different color so that they make a rainbow. Down each colored stripe, a number of nails stick out of the board. Each nail is labeled with a different identity category, and I notice that each colored stripe seems to represent a different identity. There is a stripe for sex, one for gender, one for romantic interest, one for sexual interest, and two more that are difficult for me to categorize. I am familiar with many of the identities displayed across the board, but some are new to me. I sense a growing fascination with this rainbow board.

"What is this for?" I ask Maggie. She turns around from where she was removing yarn from the grocery bag to see what I am looking at, and then takes a few steps away from the board to observe it with me. "It's our identity board," she says. "The kids pick up some yarn and then weave it around the different identities that describe them. When the festival is over, it looks really cool. It'll be a big colored mess, but it represents all the different ways that people in the queer community identify."

What seem like a million thoughts erupt in my mind, but I decide instead to ask a simple question. "Do you think we should start, so they have examples?" "That's a good idea," Maggie responds, and before I can move to the yarn she steps forward and selects a deep green spool. She ties it around the first nail labeled "female," and proceeds to stretch her yarn through and around the rest of the nails. As she loops, I follow her string through "female," "cis-gendered," and "lesbian," where I feel my stomach flutter in triumph. Finally, I know. My hunch was correct. My suspicions, which I had been hesitant to embrace, were confirmed. In circling "lesbian," Maggie gave me definitive proof of her sexual orientation.

Despite the presence of a cultural script that produces discernable performances of queer identity, those signifiers are frequently mistrusted. Tanesha, for instance, felt that there can be no definitive proof that a person is queer "unless they actually say it." As she explained,

> . . . They could walk down the street, decked out in rainbows on the day of Pride, and it still won't prove anything. It just means, hey, that person *might* be, or they

> really like rainbow. It's not proof. Unless they tell you, there is no proof. But that's my perception, not to assume things about people.

Tanesha's resistance to interpreting persons' sexual orientation based on embodied cues reflects a larger concern among queer persons: in trying to ascertain another person's queer identity, we might misread the signs and ascribe to them an incorrect identity.

On the surface, this might not seem to be such a problematic assumption to make. How often do we incorrectly assume some part of another person's identity, only to be corrected later? James, however, spoke to the reasons why such incorrect assumptions about queer identity are more than innocent mistakes:

> It's still a stigma. And if you are wrong, and the person strongly identifies as straight, you may be provoking anger, you may be provoking violence, and I think there was something called "etiquette" when I was raised as a kid—today we call it political correctness—but the idea is you treat people with respect.

According to James, incorrectly ascribing a queer identity to someone who does not identify as queer could place you in a threatening and potentially dangerous situation. In effect, the cultural script for queer identity is not reliable enough to warrant the risk.

A similar mistrust of the queer cultural script was a common expression among my interview participants, and a frequent sensation I experienced in my fieldwork and continue to experience in my daily life. Despite being able to articulate the characteristics of queer embodiment, so many persons—queer or otherwise—are hesitant to assume queerness absent of "definitive proof." Verbal disclosures of sexual orientation maintain a privileged status in the realm of queer identity performances. In response to my

question "what does it take for you to know someone is queer?" Gary replied: "That person would have to reveal it specifically, and more explicitly, to know for sure." Similarly, Elliot, who wore his "gay shirt" and "gay haircut," stated:

> Sometimes I'll tell people that I'm gay, which I think is the clearest signal that you can give. By just stating it I am talking about something that is inside of me irrespective of however it is that I choose to exemplify that on the outside.

It would appear that, in spite of a richly detailed and easily articulated script for queer embodiment, verbal disclosures of sexual identity continue to perform more convincingly. A trust of language supersedes a trust of the body.

Adams attributes this reliance on discursive performances of identity to the lack of definitive characteristics that signify queer identity. "Attraction," Adams argues, "is much more complex, hidden, and inaccessible than appearance-based, gender inverted attributions suggest."[25] He continues to illustrate the reasons why a cultural script for performing queer identity continues to necessitate disclosures of sexuality:

> These characteristics of same-sex attraction make some people uncomfortable: lacking definitive, permanent aural and visible characteristics, it must be pinned down and negotiated through discourse and action; I can say I am queer today, straight tomorrow and bisexual the next, and there will be no (visible) trace of my transition.[26]

For these reasons, Adams argues that for coming out to have occurred, queer identity must be disclosed through either discourse or action. But what actions constitute adequate conditions for performing queer identity? According to Adams, actions that explicitly

indicate same-sex attraction—such as "intimately kissing someone of the same sex"—sufficiently perform queer identity, more so than less explicit signifiers like heterosexual failures, queer associations, or gender inversion.[27]

In keeping with Adams's reservations about ambiguous queer performances, my participants also shared anecdotes about how such actions were trusted as much as overt disclosures. Kyle, for instance, told me a story about a time he expressed physical intimacy with his husband in a restaurant:

> We were in Cincinnati over my birthday weekend, and we were in a restaurant that I don't have a lot of experience with. I put my arm around him [husband] and I felt like everyone in the room was looking at me. I feel like that was really identifying my sexual identity to a room full of strangers.

Similarly, Leonard described his own experiences with performing actions that unquestioningly signify queer identity:

> I have a few friends that wanna be very boisterous about it, walk down the street hand-in-hand. I've never initiated that, but I have had boyfriends that wanted to walk down the street arm in arm, hand in hand, so I just go with the flow.

My own experiences reinforce the stories of my participants. My queer identity is more frequently acknowledged in those moments where another person is implicated in that performance. Walking through downtown Minneapolis hand-in-hand with a former partner; having an intimate conversation with a romantic interest, physically separated by only a few inches; my queer identity was performed more vividly in these situations than when I have simply painted my nails, decorated my eyes, or donned my queer wardrobe.

Queer identity, it would seem, is more convincingly performed when other persons are co-performers of our queerness, reinforcing the idea that identities are relational and emerge interactionally.

The simultaneous existence of a cultural script of queer intelligibility, and its hesitant acceptance by queer persons, produces a complex paradox. Why, if we distrust ambiguous performances of queer identity, is it so easy for us to articulate a script comprised of them? What is it about overt declarations or interpersonal actions that makes them more trustworthy than individualized, embodied performances? Perhaps, as Adams would argue, disclosures or confirmatory actions are trusted more because queer identity performances are only ever conceptualized as "coming out." If we were to envision a move beyond the continual process of repeatedly *coming* out, and instead imagine the embodiment of queer identity as a performative process of *being* out, we might be able to accept a queer performance script that embraces the ambiguous embodiment of queer identity. A distinction between coming out and being out creates exciting possibilities for theorizing queer identity performances, particularly in its ability to transcend the limits of discursive conceptualizations of queer identity.

Coming Out and Being Out

A group of about ten young persons has gathered around the Youth Village area of the park and Maggie is expertly including them all in conversation. Some of them seem to know her already. I wonder if she has worked with them at the after-school program. I decide to stand up and stretch my legs. The picnic table we've been sitting at is not the pinnacle of comfort I'd like it to be. Sam gets up with me and we pace along

the edge of the Youth Village, within earshot of the tents so we can hear if we're needed, yet far enough away to converse privately. Sam, always watching people, has much to say about the senses of Pride so far. As she shares her observations about the goings-on around us, I receive a text from Lex. He and Toby have arrived at the park and want to meet up with me. I quickly tap out a reply and proceed to scan the swarming crowds around us for a sign of their arrival while I chat with Sam.

After a few minutes, I spot Lex and Toby in the distance. I wave at them until they see me and as they approach I hear Lex call out his characteristic greeting, "Hey baby!" I hug him and Toby when they reach me, and I introduce both of them to Sam. As we discuss our impressions of the Pride festival, I notice that Toby is decked out in his "gay gear." Lex, however, is in his usual jeans and t-shirt, carrying a black draw-string bag on his back. "You don't look very festive," I say to Lex. "Toby's all gay today, what about you?" Without missing a beat, he replies "honey, I don't need to go all gay anymore. If they can't tell by now, they're not looking hard enough!" We all laugh, but I start to think about what Lex has just said. He rarely puts on a queer performance like Toby does. How does he perform queerness?

On numerous occasions during my fieldwork, Lex articulated this stance on performing queer. "I'm not hiding it," he said. "But I'm also not advertising it." I had heard this from a lot of queer persons in the research I had done prior to my dissertation, but I gave it little consideration. During my fieldwork this notion of being out without deliberately performing so emerged with such force that I began to wonder what it meant. For example, Tanesha once told me "If someone wants to know, they can know, I won't

deny that," but she also said little about going out of her way to perform her queer identity. Similarly, Elliot told me "on the whole, it's not something that I necessarily bring up all the time. But if it comes up, I'll definitely share it." This kind of reciprocity is a frequent strategy used by queer persons to disclose their sexual orientation, but it also raises questions about the difference between coming out and being out.[28]

Linguistic performances of queer identity are considered almost exclusively in terms of coming out. As Adams notes, the act of coming out assumes a place from which one must come out: the proverbial "closet." However, the existence of the closet is predicated on a number of conditions that, if unmet, fail to produce the social and cultural context within which coming out is possible or necessary. Most of these conditions rightfully go unquestioned, as they assume taken-for-granted characteristics of the social marginalization of queer identity.[29] One of the premises Adams offers, that "for the closet to exist, same-sex attraction and/or a LGBQ identity cannot be accessed easily," precludes any consideration of queer identity performance that does not involve revealing a secret or otherwise hidden identity.[30] Adams argues:

> If coming out is predicated on revealing same-sex attraction and/or a LGBQ identity, then a person must recognize that this attraction and/or identity are not easily accessible—recognize that the attraction and identity are secret (to others).[31]

Surely, discourses about coming out assume the secret status of queer identity. In her analysis of coming out disclosures through the lens of speech act theory, Chirrey notes that the act of coming out "is to interpret or recast it as an admission of former wrong-

doing . . . in the sense that the gay or lesbian person has not been truthful about who they are."[32] Coming out, therefore, is frequently viewed as what performance scholar David Terry calls a confessional performance. The performer is (re)produced as a confessor and the audience as voyeurs, or "affirming witnesses of . . . therapeutic transcendences."[33] Coming out is cast as the overt confession of a secret, hidden, and stigmatized identity that one must verbally declare in order to transcend the constraints of a culture that enforces a compulsory heterosexuality upon its subjects.

This narrative is a common one for many queer persons. But Adams's conceptualization of the closet avoids addressing the possibility of a queer identity that is neither secret nor hidden. What could one say about the queer person who, for whatever reason, cannot "pass" as heterosexual? Or the person whose queer identity is intentionally on display, residing on the skin and emerging in everyday interactions with others? The existence of the closet is a necessary condition for coming out. But there is more to be said about the performance of queer identity for persons who have no secret to harbor, only identities to be performed in the mundane moments of the everyday.

Consider Camilla, who expressed her concerns over not appearing queer enough because she is a very feminine, gender-conforming lesbian woman. I asked her once how out she thought she was, given her tendency to be assumed straight. "I don't hide it," she said, "but there's no reason to offer any information, or probe, or let them know." I wondered whether her queer identity might in fact still be secret, if it was not clearly discernible and she rarely disclosed it, but then she told me this story:

> I will never hide it from anybody, so if people ask me I would say it. I mean, on Facebook it's pretty obvious that I'm a lesbian. I love to go to women's and lesbian festivals. If anyone goes out and sees my car, it's pretty obvious. So if it's a social context, I'm pretty immediately clear. I don't tell them I'm a lesbian, but I talk about it as, you know, my ex-partner, or if I have a girlfriend now, I just naturally talk about it. It's always been really important, and I'm very proud of it.

Camilla adorns her car with various emblems—bumper stickers with rainbows, or the blue and yellow Human Rights Campaign symbol—which, in her mind, make her queer identity readily apparent as soon as her body can be associated with her car. In her conversations, she makes casual references to her daily life that make her queer identity apparent to those who pay attention. She attends homonormative events that call forth her queer identity. She maintains a digital presence where her queerness is unmistakable, yet she does not overtly declare that she is a lesbian woman. Given such ample evidence that her queer identity is performed in her everyday life, that it is not a secret, and that she has no shame, can we make the argument that Camilla is still in the closet? Existing discursive frameworks for queer identity suggest that Camilla has not come out. And perhaps she has not, at least not to every person who has come into contact with her. But I argue she simply *is* out.

Don shared a similar story with me about his neighbors. He has lived next to them for more than a few years, and maintains a friendly relationship with them. He frequently gifts them with plants he has grown in his gardens, and they have shared numerous

conversations over the fences dividing their properties. Yet, because his neighbors are religious, Don has avoided actively declaring his sexuality to them.

> I'll tell you about the neighbors. They sort of go to the same church. My one neighbor migrates from church to church. When he doesn't like something that's going on he goes to another church. So, very religious. The church that they are at does not like gay people, so I've never said the words. But they have to know. They're silly if they don't know. There's never any females around, I don't talk about women, I'm not living any differently around them, I'm not hiding anything from them. Then again, being in that church environment, they probably are very naïve.

For reasons alluded to above, Don feels as though his neighbors would be foolish to not recognize his queer identity. Yet he suspects they might not acknowledge it because of the lack of discursive proof. Is Don still in the closet? Discursive conceptualizations of queer identity might suggest that he is. In the absence of verbal confirmations of a disclosed queer identity, Don might not have come out to his neighbors. But is it fair to say he is not out in his daily life, that he does not perform his queer identity in other ways?

A performance paradigm assumes performer and audience. As they trace the history of the field, Madison and Hamera point out that every iteration of performance studies—whether the elocutionary movement, oral interpretation, performance as social behavior, performance as experience, even performativity—has, in some way, framed performance as a "communal experience, listening and watching together, but also

responding together."[34] Early conceptions of an audience concretize it into physically present persons, and I believe such physical manifestations of a responding Other to whom we perform our identities is invoked by purely discursive perspectives on performing queer identity. After all, disclosures of identity by definition require an Other to whom one discloses. Such an approach affords an unreasonable amount of privilege to the audience's role in the success (or failure) of an identity performance. Deciding whether or not a queer person has performed their identity successfully based solely on whether the intended audience confirms that performance gives the audience exclusive control over the performance, which—by virtue of being a performance—should be a collaborative accomplishment. This is what I perceive to be the inherent limitation of solely discursive understandings of identity performance: little or no agency is afforded the performer, whose very identity risks erasure by an unsuspecting or malevolent audience.

One corrective is to embrace more fully a perspective on identity performances more strongly rooted in performativity. Similar to the way linguists have framed performative language as always repeating a previous utterance, Butler conceptualizes performativity as "a reiteration of a norm or set of norms."[35] In a move to challenge the hegemony of verbal discourse, Butler forwards instead a construction of matter, "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface."[36] Such a process of materialization surely involves an audience of some kind, but we are freed from the confines of a present human audience member who passes judgment on the performance of our identities. Instead, performativity points to

the ways in which we perform cultural scripts and embody frames of intelligibility. Such performances, Butler notes, make up "the acquisition of being through the citing of power, a citing that establishes an originary complicity with power in the formation of the 'I'."[37] In this way, performativity requires no physically present audience member in order for identities to be embodied. Queerness is instead performed at the discretion of the performer through the repetition of cultural scripts that signify queerness, for an Other or for the self. Performativity restores some sense of agency to the performer, and frees queer identity from some of its social constraints. Queer persons are therefore afforded the ability to *be* out, without the need to *come* out for their identities to be manifested in daily life.

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Queer identity is a complex performative accomplishment, and any account of it is necessarily partial, situated, and shifting. Performing queer identity draws on a vast array of cultural resources, resources that render queerness intelligible to queer persons just as they render queerness unintelligible within larger social systems. These cultural resources are steeped in discourses of both linguistic disclosures and embodied signifiers. In performing queer identity, queer persons access these scripts to (re)produce themselves. In some ways, queer persons maintain and reinforce the cultural script that makes them both knowable and unknowable as subjects. In other ways, they challenge and revise that script. The interplay between script and self is difficult to trace, but what I hope is clear after this analysis is that any understanding of queer performativity is necessarily flawed if it privileges either discourse or embodiment over the other.

Performance scholars Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson note that "embodiment makes all performance possible."[38] To the extent that we consider identity performative, it is only fitting that an attunement to embodiment should hold an equally important position as does verbal discourse in our theorizing about identity. The answer to the identity question in performance studies is neither discourse nor embodiment. Instead, it is liminality, a neither/nor and both/and, what Conquergood calls "a struggle to live betwixt and between theory and theatricality, paradigms and practices, critical reflection and creative accomplishment."[39] Discourse without the body is divorced from lived experience, just as the body without discourse is meaningless action. Only an attention to both—discourse residing in/on bodies and bodies performing discourse—can help us understand the performativity of identity.

In the following chapter, I extend my discussion of performing queer identity to consider how those performances are "sensed" by other queer persons. I question how particular spaces assume an atmosphere of safety and domesticity for queer persons, and how a similar sensation passes from body to body between queer persons as they encounter one another in everyday life. "Queer affect and intensities" embraces a sensory approach to the study of queer identity by questioning how those identities might generate fields of affect that aid in seeking and sensing a queer community.

Chapter 5 Notes

1. Chawla, "Habit, Home, Threshold," 153.
2. Butler, *Gender Trouble*.
3. See, for example, Adams, *Narrating the Closet*. Adams's point about the invisibility of queer identity features prominently in later sections of this chapter.
4. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 99.

5. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 108.

6. Derrida, "Signature Event Context," 1483.

7. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 43.

8. See Goffman, *Stigma*. Goffman uses the phrase "stigma symbol" to denote those symbols that represent a person's stigmatized identity to others.

9. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 27.

10. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 192.

11. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 238.

12. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 16.

13. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 27.

14. Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 208.

15. Bell, *Theories of Performance*, 188.

16. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 17.

17. Bell, *Theories of Performance*, 188.

18. Hutson, "Standing OUT/Fitting IN," 214.

19. Hutson, "Standing OUT/Fitting IN," 221.

20. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 104.

21. See Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 89. Adams uses as an example a woman who engages in gender inversion at a Halloween party, a context he defines as a "legitimate gender-transgressing context" because of the suspension of certain cultural identity scripts associated with dressing up in costume. Outside of such a context, though—such as in everyday life—Adams argues that gender inversion is an insufficient performance of queer identity.

22. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 89.

23. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 89.

24. Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 84.

25. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 90.

26. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 90.

27. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 93.

28. See, for example, McKenna-Buchanan, Munz, and Rudnick, "To Be or Not To Be Out in the Classroom," 290. Among other disclosure and concealment strategies (such as selection, ambiguity, deflection, and avoidance), our participants reported reciprocity as a common strategy for managing their sexual identity disclosures. We defined reciprocity as the "intentional disclosure of private information in response to others' disclosure of or request for personal information."

29. For a thorough discussion of the conditions that create the "closet," see Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 43–59. Adams bases the construction of the closet on the following conditions: (1) "a person must be aware of and have the ability to describe her or his sexual attraction as 'same-sex attraction' or understand what it might mean to identify as 'lesbian,' 'gay,' 'bisexual,' and/or 'queer'; (2) a person must recognize that "same-sex attraction . . . possesses a marginal social status"; (3) a person must recognize "that same-sex attraction . . . might possess a stigmatized, devalued status"; (4) a person must realize that "a marginal and devalued attraction or identity may encounter negative criticism from others if discussed"; (5) "same-sex attraction and/or a LGBQ identity

cannot be accessed easily"; (6) a person must acknowledge that "same-sex attraction will continue for an indeterminate amount of time"; and (7) a person "embraces same-sex attraction and/or self-identifies at LGBQ." As I discuss, an unquestioning acceptance of condition 5 prevents one from imagining the performance of queer identity as a more habitual, performative practice fundamentally different from coming out of the closet.

30. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 55.
31. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 55.
32. Chirrey, "'I Hereby Come Out,'" 32.
33. Terry, "Once Blind, Now Seeing," 225.
34. Madison and Hamera, "Performance Studies at the Intersections," xiii.
35. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 12.
36. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 9.
37. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 15.
38. Langellier and Peterson, "Shifting Contexts," 157.
39. Conquergood, "Performance Studies," 151.

Chapter 6: Queer Affect and Intensities

In this chapter, I explore moments and mechanisms of queer affect. These moments and mechanisms broadly represent how queer identity is sensed by queer persons on a deeply embodied level. The undertaking is not a simple one; how do you describe what is best explained as a gut feeling? That is precisely what I attempt here: to capture an intuitive sensation as a thematic. In the course of my fieldwork, moments of intensities—moments that "feel like something"[1]—presented themselves to me and emerged through the stories of my participants. Although I often traced their origins to performances of queer identity, there is something altogether different about these moments that cannot be encompassed within a performance perspective alone. Instead, I explore the spatial atmospheres that inspire moments of queer sensing. I consider queer identity as a force that unites bodies. I ponder what Kathleen Stewart calls "ordinary affects" that emerge in the liminal spaces between queer bodies, and I reflect on the role of desire and arousal in queer affect.[2] This chapter is a necessarily fragmented account of possibilities, senses, and the tethering of queer bodies suspended in moments of mundanity.

To begin, I take you through an experience from my fieldwork. The story is told from a different perspective this time, by substituting my own "performative-I" with you, the reader.[3] This shift in perspective cultivates a more intimate engagement with the narrative by positioning the reader (you) directly in the story. Textual representations of affect can be difficult, as words often fail to adequately represent the way our senses are stimulated in the field. This difficulty is exacerbated when the field representation is not

your own. By placing you within one of my own recollections, I attempt to close the gap between story and reader. My goal is for the narrative to inspire reflections on your own encounters as you labor through one of mine.

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The street is electric, vibrating with an energy both familiar and strange. All around you people move to their next destination. The sidewalks are densely populated, pedestrians in their evening club attire meandering this way and that. The pulse of the night life begins to quicken your own as you wait for a walk signal. You look around, and your senses struggle to sort through the chaos around you. Everywhere, patrons from the Pride festival are now out on the town for an evening of merriment and debauchery. The weather is mild for a summer evening, warm and still except for a slight breeze that brings a cooling reprieve with it. Neon lights illuminate the scenes, and your skin registers the distant thumping of club music reverberating into the street. Over it all, you note the buzz of thousands of indistinguishable conversations echoing from the bar patios lining the busy street. The rest of the city might be winding down, but the Short North is gearing up for a party.

The white walking sign flashes from across the street and you make your way through the crosswalk. When you reach the other side of the street, you turn right and walk the remaining city block that leads you to Merger, the popular cocktail lounge where most of the queer population will be congregating tonight. Sure enough, a large crowd has amassed on Merger's outdoor patio, intimidating in its density but enthralling in its energy. You wait just outside of the gated patio and begin to scan the streets for

signs of the friends you are meeting here tonight. You check your phone to see that Lee has already made her way inside the bar, so you take a deep breath and begin to squeeze through the crowd.

As you squirm through to the entrance, you rub too closely for comfort against a number of people. You offer an apologetic "sorry!" and a smile to each of them, feigning confidence each time. These invasions of your personal space are a necessary evil of visiting a gay club on the eve of Pride and you remind yourself that a drink or two will take the edge off. You finally see the entrance ahead, and breathe a sigh of relief at the short distance that separates you from Lee. Your relief is premature; the stream of people you were following into the building comes to a stop, and you are forced to wait as people shuffle around. You take advantage of the moment to scan the crowd and inadvertently lock eyes with a man to your right. You feel the impulse to look away, but for some reason you are captivated by his stare. A year passes in an instant as his gaze moves down your body and back up. He smiles a smile that makes your breath catch in your lungs. You stare into his vivid green eyes and return what you hope is a sly grin, as flirtatious as you dare to be in the absence of the liquid courage waiting inside. He winks one of those shining eyes at you and instantly your body feels tethered to his. The crowd melts away around you, as if you were the only two people on the patio. Your skin tingles with excitement. And then, in one disenchanting moment, the pressure keeping you in place lightens, the line of people ahead of you steps forward, and the bright green eyes turn back to the conversation they broke from so long ago. A smile stretches across your lips as you make your way through the rest of the crowd to the inside of the club.

Lee waves at you from the bar. Magically, she has secured seats for two, and you take one of them as she slides you a drink. You begin to chat about the evening, but your mind is back on the patio, reliving a moment of profound recognition and affirmation of your identity. You found more than simple flirtation behind those blinking emerald eyes. A host of complex social and cultural forces render queer identity invisible, but in that moment your queer identity was seen, confirmed, and responded to. It pulled you into the orbit of another person, linking you together. Though you did not pursue it further, your exchange created a charged space of possibility. An affective moment emerged in that queer atmosphere, and it left an impression on you.

Queer Atmospheres and the Affect of Space

I feel light walking down High Street this afternoon. I am often unaware of the weight I carry between my shoulder blades, but I note its absence when I walk along the main street of the queer district. This lightness is a refreshing liberation from my constant vigilance. I recall Don speaking praises of the district:

> Columbus has big pockets that are gay friendly. It's more accepting in Columbus. In some communities you face a mob mentality, and it's not a good thing. You have to be careful. But in the Short North I don't have to be careful, and I'm not.

I am not careful here either, not like I am on the streets of my quaint Appalachian college town. Entering the Short North is like entering a bubble, or leaving a fog, to find an oasis. The rules of the space are different here. I no longer feel the need to police myself like I do back home. A familiarity hangs in the air, a comfort. As Rick said, "I'm like Miss Judy [Garland] in Kansas, I'm home!"

The Short North assumes an air of domesticity, a home-like quality that draws queer persons as if to a hearth. Though the district emanates this centripetal pull, the force originates from one place: the community center. The men's coming-out group that Elliot attends every other Monday is, as he puts it, a "very unintimidating environment." Elliot is shy and not very social. The coming-out group made him feel comfortable once he finally started going. Since then, it's been good for him. Most of the people he finds there are very supportive. Lex, Victor, and Toby feel the same kind of comfort when they show up for the informal social group every Saturday. They sense the center's calming atmosphere, how it encourages them to be themselves. They come to the center regularly to be around the same kind of people. The community center is a safe space, the material manifestation of a longing for a queer dwelling. For queer persons seeking a connection, a place to go, or a respite from the trials of living in a heteronormative world, the center beckons them home.

Atmospheres are difficult to pin down because they resist concrete description. Cultural geographer Ben Anderson notes that atmospheres "are real phenomena . . . [but] they are not necessarily sensible phenomena."[4] Philosopher Gernot Böhme notes that atmospheres arise in the shared interaction between a perceiver and a perceived. An atmosphere, Böhme says, "is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver, insofar as in sensing the atmosphere s/he is bodily present in a certain way."[5] Therefore, atmospheres arise from the dynamic sensing of some object, place, space, etc. by a subject who is aware of the forces around them. My first visit to the community center was full of trepidation but also excitement. Despite having no idea

what to expect, I knew the space was for me. Upon entering, I felt as though I had just moved to a new home: it felt familiar and strange. For this reason, Anderson argues that atmospheres are always unfinished, "because of their constitutive openness to being taken up in experience."[6] To impose limits or boundaries on an atmosphere is antithetical. Rather, atmospheres are radically subjective, existing in the liminal spaces between sensing subjects and their environments.

This is not to say that accounting for spatial affects is impossible. Rather, as Stewart notes, atmospheric attunements embody "a geography of what happens—a speculative topography of the everyday sensibilities now consequential to living through things."[7] Spatial affects can therefore be "mapped" in the trajectory of our daily lives, such that we cultivate a key for encountering, sensing, and interpreting the way spaces press upon us. Viewed this way, subjects are able to give an account of their "attention to the matterings, the complex emergent worlds, happening in everyday life."[8] As we sense spaces, they exert a force upon us that can draw us back or, conversely, propel us away. For queer persons, the spaces that draw us in assume an air of "safeness," and many queer persons continue to visit them on a routine basis as a reprieve from the toils of existing within a heterosexual culture. In similar fashion, Stewart argues that "what affects us—the sentience of a situation—is also a dwelling, a worlding born from an atmospheric attunement."[9] These attunements tell us something about the characteristics of the places around us, the ways in which our environments present themselves to us or press upon us such that we sense them. To a skeptic, such sensory information might seem of little consequence to matters of identity and cultural intelligibility. But cultural

anthropologists and geographers argue that such intensities are of paramount importance to understanding the ways bodies labor to exist in everyday life. “There are always pockets of things left hanging in the air,” Stewart argues, and “layers of habit, pipe dreams, and power plays skitter or languish all around.”[10] In short, the spaces around us are charged with meaning, and the way we move about them is far from emotionally or politically neutral.

Small wonder, then, that the queer persons I interacted with were able to articulate the many ways they sense the spaces to which they are drawn. Together we lamented the weight we seem to carry with us through the heteronormative worlds we traverse every day. Together we realized that the Short North feels different. It feels like we’re in heaven, according to Gary. “You’ve been to the community center?” Gary asks. “Or Merger, Merger is a really cool, trendy place. The whole neighborhood is.” Gary remembers a time—March 2011, specifically—when he was sitting on the patio of Merger, and a “NOH8” photoshoot was happening across the street.[11]

> We didn’t know about it, so we weren’t prepared, but I thought, “well this is just so cool. So really, really cool.” I felt like, for whatever reason, I could identify with it. I was identifying with it as like, welcome home. This is a safe place for you. I know I like it.

That day on the patio of Merger, Gary sensed the embrace of the environment, a sense of comfort and welcome. It wrapped him in a shroud of peace.

The Short North, though known to many as the queer district of Columbus, does not evoke the same feelings for every queer person who seeks out its refuge. As a trendy

downtown urban environment, it certainly strives for an aesthetic that appeals to young urbanites with disposable income. Perhaps this is why Kyle seeks out other places, other atmospheres. He is drawn elsewhere. The Short North, particularly the community center, provided Kyle with the space he needed to begin exploring his queer identity, probing into what it would be like for him to live queer. But over time, the area came to represent a queer ideal that he felt he could not embody. Kyle found himself drawn to another pocket of Columbus: the south side, a place where queer persons like him seem to gather. "I feel less anonymous down there," he says. "It feels comforting to know, to feel like there is a group of people who will notice if I'm gone." As Kyle describes his queer oasis, I begin to sense that the space has a different pull:

> There, in the south side, the regulars are different. You can see hardship on their faces. Maybe I respond to this, knowing that they're not the tank-top wearing, stylish haircut sporting queer person who hasn't had many hard days. They're the people who have struggled in a different way. Maybe I identify with that more. It's comforting.

The south side of Columbus offers Kyle a different kind of queer atmosphere. Distanced from the influence of the Short North, the south side draws together a different crowd of queer persons. Drawn by its counterculture feel, the queer persons of the south side district experience a different queer atmosphere.

Despite the differences in these two atmospheres, a common thread weaves through the narratives of both. "What makes it feel like community?" Leonard asks me. "A basic understanding of each other, and being accepting of each other." Prior to

moving to Columbus—a move inspired by his need for a queer community—Leonard lived in a prototypical small town in Ohio. “I had no clue where to interact with people who understood me, who would be accepting of me,” he says. He continues to explain his search for a queer atmosphere:

> Up here, I’d already been to the center multiple times, and met some people whose company and friendship I enjoyed. I wanted to be here, where I felt more accepted, where there would be more interaction with gay people. To feel that no matter who’s here, they’re ok with you. They wouldn’t be here if they weren’t. You just feel accepted.

Atmospheres refer to this ability of spaces to assume feelings like the ones Leonard mentions. Such atmospheres might arise from the persons who inhabit those spaces, but over time atmospheres linger independently of their originators. Kyle speculates that the queer atmospheres around Columbus—particularly in the Short North—originated from “a desire to create something” that mirrored the social positions of the persons creating them. “A lot of those neighborhoods are on the margins,” Kyle says, “so it’s a physical manifestation of the queer community.”

In this sense, the queer atmospheres I encountered in Columbus are remnants of a time when queer identity was commodified for the purpose of materializing a place on the margins for persons on the margins. They drew queer persons together and bound them through forces like community, comfort, and home. These atmospheres linger, imprints of queer persons of the past that continue to attract queer persons in the present. These lingering intensities represent the ambiguity of atmospheres, an ambiguity that

Anderson attributes to the "spatially discharged affective qualities that are autonomous from the bodies that they emerge from, enable and perish with."[12] Unsurprisingly, the affect of queer spaces continues to attract queer persons, through forces that unite the very identities from which those forces were born.

The Attraction of Queer Identity

Queer atmospheres exert themselves on queer persons in a way that draws them together, materializing a sense of community. Spaces and places come to assume an energy, an air about them charged with potential. To what extent does a similar affect emanate from individual bodies? Can queer identity, localized on the skin, also draw persons together? Camilla seems to think so. She had an issue with her brother after she came out and they did not talk for a whole year. He accused Camilla of being too worried about sex, and he framed her coming out as a very sexual—and selfish—event. She thinks that struggles like hers forge a connection between queer persons. "We all struggle with people who don't accept us," she says. "We have this core piece to ourselves that we share, and it creates a connection." According to Camilla, queer persons—to varying degrees—share an understanding of rejection. This rejection takes up residence on the surface of the body, marking queer persons like a tattoo. But this history rarely is evidenced by tangible, visible signs. Instead, it radiates outward, a beacon to those with the sensibilities to feel it. For queer persons who are attuned to that history of rejection, that legacy of marginality, a tethering of bodies occurs.

I am arguing that queer identity generates an affect that queer persons can sense from one another, an affect that can attract or propel. On the surface, this might seem

indistinguishable from group identity, or feeling part of a collective. Although there is an element of group identity that motivates queer affect, an emphasis on that group identity privileges an overly cognitive understanding of identity that minimizes the ways shared group identities are *felt*. Intergroup communication scholars Samuel Gaertner and John Dovidio note that social categorization is an essential tendency of human thought, and "is a powerful force in the development and maintenance of intergroup biases."[13] This kind of social categorization on the basis of sexual identity is an underlying factor in the generation of queer identity. But cognitive categorizing is an insufficient way to understand queer identity as it attracts or propels.

In contrast, Probyn argues that identities are best thought about as desires for belonging. According to Probyn, identity refers to "the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fueled by yearning."[14] Probyn's framework illustrates how identities, as they are expressed and sensed, move beyond social categorization. Perhaps particularly true for persons united in a socially marginalized or subordinated position, identities extend beyond the self in a yearning to connect with others who share a similar subject position. Consider, for example, this exchange between myself and Gary:

J: Do you think straight people feel the same way about other straight people?

Gary: Wow. I never thought of that. No! . . . I can't imagine they would.

J: So why do we?

Gary: (thinks) Maybe it's the heteronormative paradigm. It doesn't make any difference to straights, because they're the 90%, 95%, whatever. It's the norm. That is the privileged status. The "gaydar ping" is detecting that which is not the norm.

As Gary suggests, queer identity can be sensed—as differences, as reverberations, perhaps as affective auras that emanate from bodies longing for connection. Such affect holds particular significance for queer persons excluded in some way from heterosexual society. Probyn argues that there is much to learn by attuning to the "machinations and configurations of desires as they play out on the surface."[15] For it is on our surfaces—on bodies, and beyond cognition—that we sense and respond to one another.

Innocently assuming the presence of a cohesive queer community has been widely criticized. Journalist Evan Beck, for instance, argues that the traditional narrative of queer community "perpetuates a one-off identity which has never been further from reality."[16] Though I agree with Beck—and take up the problematics of a queer "community" in chapter eight—I do wish to entertain the idea that queer identity can be a uniting force, generating an affect that draws queer bodies together in some semblance of solidarity. That queer persons sense one another is indisputable. James explains it as such:

> A shared identity makes a community. Whether you're Welsh, living among non-Welsh people, or whether you're White and you identify as White and it's important to you, or whether you're Black, that's all community. Tribes form around a lot of different identities. Ours was around sexual orientation.

In the midst of a heterosexual majority, within a heteronormative culture, queer persons sense the intensities that resonate from each other. “When you’ve got people shooting off their bigoted ideas, that makes the world feel smaller,” Rick says. “So when I see someone who’s a potential ‘trooper,’ the world starts to uplift; the clouds start to go away a little bit.”

The importance of these affects should not be understated. Kyle, for instance, works in a small team of four, three of whom are gay men. The group has been immensely comforting to Kyle. “There’s so much you don’t have to say when someone’s been through the same pain,” he says. Working in such close proximity to other queer persons, with whom he can get lunch or coffee, exchange ideas, and let his guard down, reverberates with him on a deep level. As Kyle explains:

> It could very well be that the three of us needed a commonality with people that we had really not had until we all found each other. We have a common foundation that carries us a lot further, or gives us a starting point for our frames of reference. That was the most profound thing we needed.

What makes these affective moments so powerful? James speculates that the sense of community fostered by an awareness of others’ queer identities orients persons together instead of pushing them apart. “You really don’t want to be out in this world on an island by yourself,” he says. According to James,

> . . . we are social animals. We need to connect, and we need to connect with our own. And the LGBT thing is my own. I need to connect with it, be a part of it. That sense of belonging is one of the most important things.

Tuning up to others' queer identities becomes a strategy for survival, the accomplishment of a desire to connect with others. As a sensed experience, queer identity draws persons together.

Perhaps these intensities, these desires to belong, come to comprise a sense of queer community. The desire to belong propels bodies forward, seeking out connections with other queer persons. The result is a sense of similarity, unity, and connection. This is what Gary refers to when he says "we have the right to our own tribe." As he explains,

> Humans are, by their very nature, social beings. We live in communities. Our communities are divided into a lot of subcultures, and it's with one of those little subcultures where you really get to connect and dig deeper roots. Why do we need our own tribe? It all comes back to support.

Tanesha also senses a need to be "around her people." "When I go a long time without them," she tells me, "I feel so deprived!" Tanesha says she has reached a point where she needs to be around queer persons. The absence of a queer community presses upon her in a suffocating way, but knowing she is with someone like her makes her feel at home.

Thinking about identity as a desire to belong explains the ways in which queer identity generates an affect that draws persons together. These affects, as Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg note, are "hidden-in-plain-sight," rooted in the "fleeting and flowing ephemera, of the daily and the workaday."[17] They emerge in the in-between-ness of queer bodies, exerting a pull on each. These pulls continue to draw and propel queer persons to one another, and upon connection they forge an alliance, however fleeting, against the harsh realities of the heteronormative. Queer identity is therefore a

uniting force, the immaterial made present through an attunement to the ways it resides in/on bodies and stirs the senses.

Queer Affective Rhythms

Up to this point, my discussion of affect has largely involved establishing the presence of queer atmospheres and affective pulls rooted in queer identity. That spaces and identities generate charged auras sensed by queer persons is, I hope, well-illustrated. But how do queer bodies encounter those various surges of feeling? One can talk of feeling "at home," feeling "connected," or feeling like a "community," but those descriptions remain elusive. Language, with all its poetic potential, often seems an insufficient resource to describe those intuitive sensations that our bodies experience. Nevertheless, giving an account of queer affect in the realm of the everyday is not impossible, it is merely complicated. A body sensing the presence of a kindred identity in another body is an intricate phenomenon. Articulating those sensations requires a willingness to journey into abstract discussion, a desire to embrace metaphor, analogy, and allegory as sufficient descriptions of the human condition.

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Rick and I are sitting together in his living room, me on a plastic patio chair and he on the floor. The room is bare, the absence of furniture a striking symbol of his financial hardships and simpler life. If Rick's modest furnishings detract from my comfort, our conversation fills the void. Rick and I began with a lively discussion of politics, conservative ideology, education, and public transport. We carry on as if we have known each other for quite some time, when we met only an hour-and-a-half earlier.

Our conversation turns to the subject of affect and Rick offers examples that seem commonplace to me by now, drawing on motifs of comfort and home that so many of my participants have articulated already. As we continue talking, he acknowledges the difficulty in expressing what it is he wants to say. I try to put him at ease by confirming his trouble. "It's so hard to describe a gut feeling," I say. "You're not the only person who's said that." Rick earnestly nods his head, grateful for the encouragement. And then he shares with me one of the most evocative and richly detailed descriptions of affect that I have heard.

"I'm at a loss for words, Justin," he says. "But it feels like, when your body . . ." here he trails off, his eyes searching the air, pulling together the tendrils of thought that hover teasingly in front of him. "When you're communicating with somebody, and you relax . . . and you're relaxing, your blood pressure goes down . . . you don't . . . you stop sweating, you know? And you talk slower. You feel at ease." Again he stops, his brow furrowed in a look of either frustration or concentration. Finally, he shrugs his shoulders, exasperated, resigned to offer only the simplest of explanations. "How else can I explain it, Justin? It's just something you have to—I guess you would *feel* it."

So simple, yet so profound in the way it expresses a body's desire to connect with other kindred bodies. The presence of another person, with a legacy of queer subjugation and queer longing emanating from their skin, elicits a most involuntary response. A recognition, a spark, a field of possibility presents itself. This body remembers. This person knows. In that memory and knowledge we take refuge, however briefly, relishing the connection thrown together in the minutiae of everyday life. Earlier, I argued that

queer identity generates affect. Rick's story illustrates how that affect manifests itself in everyday life, to be encountered, picked up, and otherwise sensed by queer persons as their paths cross.

Speaking about queer affect with such certitude is a risk. The senses are real, but they seem premised on the ability to sense queer identity where there might not be. We might think of queer affect as "gaydar," the popular term for identifying queer persons based on a kind of sixth sense. Certainly, the kind of sensings occasioned by queer affect are very similar to what people think of as gaydar. Yet an attunement to queer affects transcends the limitations of gaydar as a stereotypical tool of queer recognition. Psychologists studying gaydar using scientific methods frequently report little support for the success of ascertaining queer identity, arguing that relying on stereotypes to discern queer identity "is unlikely to yield accurate conclusions."[18] Literary critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts this more eloquently. "Everyone knows that there are some lesbians and gay men who could never count as queer," she says, "and other people who vibrate to the chord of queer without having much same-sex eroticism."[19] Gaydar, then, is often eschewed because it "exacerbates this stereotyping process, covertly encouraging reliance on these stereotypes as categorization cues."[20] Conceptually, gaydar only scratches the surface of what is ultimately a complex matrix of forces, feelings, potentials, and possibilities. Social scientists often want to know whether assumptions of queer identity are accurate. Gerulf Fieger, Joan Linsenmeier, Lorenz Gygax, Steven Garcia, and J. Michael Bailey, for example, report that "some aspects of people's behavior and appearance serve as effective gaydar signals," such that "observers can detect others'

sexual orientations with high accuracy."[21] My concern, however, is how assumptions of queer identity generate intensities that are sensed more than they are seen.

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"For some people, there's just an aura about them," Tanesha says. Her statement surprises me. Throughout our many conversations this summer, she has expressed her resistance to assume that anyone is queer—or heterosexual, for that matter—until they tell her so. Tanesha eschews identity labels entirely; when I ask her how she identifies her sexual orientation, "not straight" is all she can say. "It takes a lot for me to suspect that someone is queer," she says. "I generally try to not make any assumption at all." But even Tanesha, who passionately wants to transcend identity categories, cannot deny that she senses an energy in other queer persons.

> There's just some kind of energy that they have . . . I don't know. You just kinda feel it. You just know. You have a conversation with them, or you spend some time with them. They don't ever have to mention that they are queer, and still, sometimes, you have this feeling. It doesn't have to be the way they talk, or the way they walk, or the clothes they wear. Sometimes, you just get this vibe. That's how it's been for me.

This "vibe" affects Tanesha. It compels her towards persons and inspires her to be more vulnerable with them. "We just feel safe around each other," she says. "I bond with them, and I feel more open and vulnerable to them."

Queer affect is a surprisingly intense presence. In everyday life, these intensities are often fleeting, transient. A momentary bond that dissolves as quickly as it emerges.

These encounters are no less profound, and leave an impression regardless of how ephemeral they might be. For instance, Camilla shared a memory of a time when she encountered the affect of a queer couple walking around campus:

> There was a gay couple, two gay guys here, when I first came out. They were young, and really cute. And I just looked at them, and I felt nice. I just looked at them and kept walking. They were in their own world. They didn't even know I existed. But it gave me this warm feeling. I had a sense of connection with them.

Gary feels the same way. Even momentary encounters with other queer persons make him feel "damn good." Gary tries to think of ways to express the affect generated between himself and other queer persons, and comes up with words like "happy" and "excited." He describes his encounters in terms of radar detection. "A vast majority of gaydar pings are never confirmed," he says. "It's just a ping, and we move on in the world, and that's the end of it. But for a moment, I feel good. I feel liberated. There's one of my peeps."

Queer affect is thoroughly rooted in the lifeworld, emerging from the relations between persons, and sensed in the moment by bodies attuned to its presence. The power of queer affect—both in how it is generated and how it is sensed—lies in its radical ordinariness. Stewart explains that these "ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of."[22] The experience of such profound connection with another person in the mundane goings-on of everyday life adds force to its experience. Such ordinary affects are "complex and uncertain objects," according to Stewart, and they are made profound

"because they literally hit us or exert a pull on us."[23] Broadly speaking, ordinary affects are not innately queer in the sense that I use the phrase here. What makes them queer is the way they originate from and linger around queer bodies. If, as Stewart says, ordinary affects are "pressure points and forms of attention and attachment" experienced in the everyday, then those ordinary affects are queered when our attention is called to the accumulation of identities that are typically excluded from the everyday. When experiencing queer affect, a body "performs the sensation that something is happening—something that needs attending to."[24] We feel the presence of queer bodies, as if they were performing their demands for recognition. The field of energy that radiates from them might be a call for response. Perhaps we are sensing our own yearning for connection. Regardless, queer affect is a sensory experience, an intensity of being. More than a stereotypical guess at a person's identity, it is a field of possibility.

Queer Desire and Arousal

I wonder if I have not already "straight-washed" my discussion of queer affect. Energy, force, charge, potential, possibility—these are nouns romanticized, to an extent, in their ability to appeal to the (heterosexual) masses. The mystery of a feeling, of the potential to be affected, holds a certain allure to persons regardless of their sexual identity. I suspect there is little resistance—though surely there is some—to the idea of queer persons feeling each other out, forming a community, uniting around their shared identity. Yet one cannot fully appreciate the sensations of queer affect without considering the way that queer desire and arousal—driven in no uncertain terms by sexual attraction and intimacy—are catalysts for that affect.

Ahmed traces how queer desire propels bodies into space, in ways similar to yet different from heterosexual persons. “The sex of one’s object choice,” she notes, “is not simply *about* the object even when desire is ‘directed’ toward that object: it affects what we can do, where we can go, how we are perceived, and so on.”[25] Based on this, both queer and non-queer persons feel directed towards others based on the cultural prescriptions about whom their desire is to be directed. The difference between queer and non-queer persons, according to Ahmed, lies in the ways queer desire opens possibilities for objects of desire otherwise unavailable to heterosexual persons. “Queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy,” she states.[26] In this sense, Ahmed argues that “queer orientations might be those that don’t line up, which by seeing the world ‘slantwise’ allow other objects to come into view.”[27] More than providing new or different objects of sexual desire, Ahmed suggests that queer identity is a generative force that produces intensities unfelt by heterosexual persons who simply are not attuned to them. Viewed this way, it comes as no surprise that desire and arousal, both of a sexual nature and not, are part and parcel of queer affect.

Elliot reflects on his own desire as it relates to sensing other queer persons. “Sometimes, I see people who are attractive, and I just think they *ought* to be gay,” he says. I laugh at the statement, but I relate to it so well. How many times have I seen an attractive man on the street, or at the bar, and thought to myself, it would be a shame if he was straight? Elliot continues,

I'm a fairly perceptive person, so consciously or unconsciously I pick up on some kind of interest another guy might show in me. I just feel this kind of attraction. It's still a little alien to me sometimes. But it's accompanied by an understanding of myself being gay, and that's always a great feeling. I'm like, "yes! Still gay!"

Similarly, Kyle explains how his own affective sensations were tied to his search for sexual intimacy. "My coming out and finding community was all at the same time I was trying to find sexual partners." He says this without any sense of shame or remorse. Sexual encounters were pivotal to the liberation he felt when he came out, a liberation that lingers today. "It's still hard for me to pull apart potential friends from potential hookups," he explains. "When you take sex out of the equation, I don't know that I care."

Camilla struggles with finding a queer community, in part because her partner doesn't trust other lesbian women. "It's important to me, but my partner tells me you can't have a lesbian friend because she's just going to want to sleep with you." Camilla looks a little frustrated, but she shrugs her shoulders in a gesture of resignation. "She has a point, though, her life experiences have shown her a little bit of that." When Camilla meets other queer persons, she immediately feels compelled to foster a relationship with them. "I'm like, hey! Let's do something!" But the reaction from other queer women is lukewarm. "It's almost like I'm a threat to their relationship." I wonder if desire might generate other affective forces, still orientating bodies in relation to each other but sometimes repelling rather than attracting.

Rick shared a different story. "There's this movie, years ago, called *Altered States,*" he says.

> Back when I was in school, this guy and I were talking about it. I had a book on it and all that, and he says, "hey, you wanna go for a drink?" And that's kinda, that's like, wow.

I smile at the wistful look that dances across Rick's face. I don't remember the last time someone I was attracted to asked me out for a drink. Still lost in hindsight, Rick resumes his story.

> So here's somebody you have something in common with, you talk, and they sit there and look at you, directly and intently, and you get . . . I'll say infatuated. This guy touches me, and I start getting a little aroused, and I think "okay, it's safe to go to the next step." It's hard to define. Do you know what I'm talking about?

Perhaps Rick is referring to how, as Ahmed states, "the queer subject within straight culture . . . deviates and is made socially present as a deviant."[28] Or, as Butler argues, that relishing in one's sexual and social deviation is a "reworking of abjection into political agency," a defiance of cultural compulsions to be straight.[29] Perhaps he is acknowledging the everyday affect of queer desire, the ways that "little shocks of recognition make their presence felt as seductions and intoxications."[30] Or maybe Rick's words illustrate the way that desire is a manifestation of a need for connection, the way Probyn notes that "interest . . . has to do with our longing for communication, touch, lines of entanglement, and reciprocity."[31] The stories of Elliot, Kyle, Camilla, and Rick illustrate the affect of queer desire as it plays out in the everyday. They remind me of various prickles and surges, the whispers and shivers of my body viscerally reacting to

another. The thrill and the risk inherent in the possibility that another person might be interested in the urges and impulses I've been taught to tame. The pursuit of a physical connection at once forbidden and enticing. A confirmation, an affirmation of the desires I was told I ought to abandon. Do I know what Rick's talking about?

I do.

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Affect is a powerful force, and in many ways central to the human condition. Sarah Pink argues that addressing the question of human experience requires "accounting for the relationships between bodies, minds and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment."[32] Doing so is a necessarily fragmented undertaking, but the resulting attention to affect enriches the ways we understand the experiences of persons as they are drawn toward or away from each other.

In the case of queer identity, the affect generated from the desire to be recognized is critical to drawing queer persons together. One explanation for why queer affect is such a magnetic energy lies in dialogic theory. As Buber explains, "every relational event is a stage," a potentiality that affords the sensing subject "a glimpse into the consummating event."[33] For philosopher Martin Buber, that consummating event is a genuine dialogic meeting between persons who are attuned to one another's presence wholly and completely, without reservation. He refers to such meetings as an "I/Thou" relationship, where persons are given over to relationality instead of making objects of one another.[34] Through the lens of Buber's I/Thou relationship, one can conceive of an attention to queer affect as a desire to achieve a state of mutual affirmation with an

Other.[35] Queer persons labor through a heterosexual culture that continually objectifies their identities as Other. The impulse to be sensed more holistically might then cultivate a sensitivity to queer affect that serves to orient queer persons toward one another. As Buber explains, such moments are a kind of threshold where "on the brink, the relational act goes beyond itself; the relation itself in its vital unity is felt so forcibly that its parts seem to fade before it."[36] For queer persons, that brink is the sensing of their otherwise invisible identity by other queer persons, who are sensitive to the intensities that surge forth from a shared marginality.

We arrive at an interesting dilemma. What can be said about sensing an affect that is not, in fact, generating from a queer body? The misappropriation of queerness based on such sensings is the largest critique levied against "gaydar." According to psychologists William Cox, Patricia Devine, Alyssa Bischmann and Janet Hyde, "the gaydar myth may not only promote the use of stereotypes to make inferences about orientation but may also indirectly facilitate discrimination—even aggression—based on these inferences."[37] Viewed through this lens, the assumption of queer identity—and subsequent reactions to it—might be surprisingly damaging. At the very least, reacting to the sense of a queer identity when it might not exist is a woeful misidentification of heterosexual persons that could place queer persons in difficult or dangerous situations.

I do not wish to undermine the risk involved in assuming a heterosexual person to be queer. But beyond that, I feel compelled to dig my heels into a political position that turns the tables on the gaydar myth. When queer persons are so often misidentified themselves, when compulsory heterosexuality renders all queer persons straight by

default, is it truly so scandalous to rely on sensing a queer affect even if it does not issue from a queer body? The outrage that some heterosexual persons express upon being assumed queer is ironic considering such misidentifications are a commonplace experience for so many queer persons. Who is (mis)identified more frequently and with more force, however, is not the concern. Identification, though central to the concept of gaydar, is only part of the picture when we discuss queer affect. The question of gaydar is "are you or are you not queer?" An attention to affect, in addition to answering this question, poses another: "how do I feel as a result?" As the stories in this chapter illustrate, queer affect has profoundly consequential effects on queer persons—effects that influence how persons move through space, how they interact with others, and how they dwell within their own bodies. The "truth" of a queer assumption is virtually inconsequential. What matters is the way that affect leaves an impression upon us.

I do maintain that queer affect is generated through an attunement to some kind of shared experience, a legacy of subjugation through which queer bodies have labored for centuries. In this sense, it is useful to recognize that affect accumulates over time. Discussions of affect—including my own, to a large extent—paint affect as a fleeting experience, and certainly it often is. Education scholar Megan Watkins challenges this perspective, arguing that "these states of being are not only momentary."[38] As she explains, "through the iteration of similar experiences, and therefore similar affects, they accumulate in the form of what could be considered dispositions that predispose one to act and react in particular ways."[39] For queer persons, this disposition to act and react in ways that sensitize them to queer affect is, I argue, born from a desire to be sensed in

more holistic ways, akin to the preconditions for a dialogic meeting. As sociologist Zali Gurevitch notes:

> In every interaction there must be a 'flicker' of recognition. . . . Ethically, we demand to be acknowledged in the full sense of what dialogue is, namely, recognition fully turned from things to the speakers themselves.[40]

Historically, this flicker of recognition has been denied to queer persons. Over time the desire for affirmation has coalesced with such force that queer identity generates an affect all its own. The historical legacy of marginalization inherited by queer persons results in an attunement to the way that affect has amassed. Watkins argues that affect collects over time, "accumulating as bodily memory."[41] It is this force, grounded in a historical crusade of identity politics, that orients queer bodies. More than gaydar, not quite emotion, wholly experiential, and resistant to linguistic depiction, queer affect is the impulse for one's own presence to sense and be sensed in new ways.

I have now offered analytic insights into queer identity stories, the performance of queer identity, and the affect generated by those performances. The following chapter is a detour of sorts, where I introduce a voice we have yet to encounter. "Shari's story" chronicles the life and transition of Shari, whose experiences unsettle notions of a cohesive queer community that linger throughout my analysis so far. Shari's story is a disruption of the grand narrative of queer identity, and provides an opportunity for us to question our assumptions about queerness and consider alternative perspectives on queer performativity in everyday life.

Chapter 6 Notes

1. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 2.

2. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 1.

3. See "A 'Performative-I' Copresence," 340. Tami Spry offers this phrase as a way to describe "a researcher positionality that seeks to embody the copresence of performance and ethnography as these practices have informed, reformed, and coperformed one another in the historicity of their disciplinary dialogue." The opening vignettes encountered in my previous chapters are my attempt to embody this positionality in my writing. It is also from this perspective that the opening vignette for the present chapter departs.

4. Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," 78.

5. Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," 122.

6. Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," 79.

7. Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," 2.

8. Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," 1.

9. Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," 5.

10. Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," 8.

11. The NOH8 (meant to be read as "no hate") campaign "is a charitable organization whose mission is to promote marriage, gender and human equality through education, advocacy, social media, and visual protest." The campaign is a photographic silent protest created by Adam Bouska and Jeff Parshley in response to California's Proposition 8, the notable ballot initiative that reversed marriage equality in California in 2008. See www.noh8campaign.com.

12. Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," 80.

13. Gaertner and Dovidio, "Theoretical Background and the Common Ingroup Identity Model," 50.

14. Probyn, *Outside Belongings*, 19.

15. Probyn, *Outside Belongings*, 19–20.

16. Beck, "The Myth of the Gay Community," para. 9.

17. Seigworth and Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," 7.

18. Cox et al., "Inferences About Sexual Orientation," 169.

19. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 63.

20. Cox et al., "Inferences About Sexual Orientation," 169.

21. Rieger et al., "Dissecting 'Gaydar,'" 135.

22. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 2.

23. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 4.

24. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 5.

25. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 101.

26. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 107.

27. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 107.

28. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 21.
29. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 21.
30. Stewart, "Still Life," 406.
31. Probyn, *Blush*, x.
32. Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 25.
33. Buber, *I and Thou*, 81.
34. Buber, *I and Thou*, 20.
35. Buber, *I and Thou*.
36. Buber, *I and Thou*, 87.
37. Cox et al., "Inferences About Sexual Orientation," 168.
38. Watkins, "Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect," 278.
39. Watkins, "Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect," 278.
40. Gurevitch, "The Dialogic Connection and the Ethics of Dialogue," 192.
41. Watkins, "Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect," 279.

Chapter 7: Shari's Story

As my own form of spiritual meditation, I read tarot cards. I learned the practice from a Catholic pharmacist I worked with from 2010 to 2012. I remember working night shifts while in graduate school for my Master's degree. On nights I worked with Bev, I would anxiously await the lull that came around 7:00 p.m., when I could ask if she would pull out the cards and tell me where my current path through life was taking me. Bev bought me my very first tarot deck and those cards continue to comfort me in times of uncertainty and worry. The beautiful imagery of the cards soothes my nerves as I piece together the narrative of where I am going, the universe's prediction of how my current choices will manifest themselves. I used to begin my readings by asking the tarot a pointed question, but over time the cards have come to tell their own stories. Now, when I read for others, I tell them: you might have something you want to know, but the tarot will tell you the story you need to hear in this moment. All it asks of you is an open mind and a willingness to listen.

Fate has a way of playing with us, a cosmic irony where we are called on to practice what we preach. As fate would have it, this mantra that I so easily invoke when reading tarot cards came to feature prominently in my fieldwork. I embarked on a research journey with specific aims in mind. Over time I began to sense that my participants had stories that needed to be told whether or not they spoke directly to my own research questions. As my fieldwork progressed, I slowly recognized my own need for an open mind and a willingness to listen to the stories that demanded an audience.

More than anyone else I met during my fieldwork, Shari embodied this yearning for a willing ear.

My relationship with Shari was somewhat agonistic in the early stages of my fieldwork. I saw Shari every Saturday, when we would meet at the weekly social gathering held at the community center. Her arrival at the group meetings would fill me with a sense of resigned surrender, because I knew that she would overwhelm whatever conversation I might be having with the rest of the participants. I could never be rude or short with Shari though, so when she inevitably launched into a rendition of some obscure historical drama I would turn a resistant ear to her and yield to the ennui.

One Saturday in early August, Shari surprised me. At the weekly social gathering, Shari, Lex, and I had been discussing all sorts of things—from Shari's past work with the railroad to Caitlyn Jenner's new television show—when Lex excused himself to go smoke a cigarette outside. I took the opportunity to pull out my phone and scan the app that would show me pictures and proximities for the local gay men, when Shari pulled me out of my reverie. "I like talking with you," she said. I was shocked, because surely I was not a compelling listener for her stories. "You're intelligent," she continued, "and I can talk about any crazy thing I want to. That's why I have a hard time being around people who aren't like me." She trailed off, and in her momentary silence I sat stunned. My senses caught up with me after a few moments, and I asked, "like you in what way?" She looked me in the eyes and responded, "questioning things. People don't question what's out there. I like to question things, but that makes people nervous."

I didn't know what to say. I had never considered that Shari might talk so much because she thought I was a gracious listener. I simply assumed she always talked at length because that's just who she was. Perhaps there was something else at play that I had not suspected. Maybe her eagerness to talk was some combination of both, of having a need and having an audience. Regardless, a wave of guilt washed over me. On so many occasions, I lamented Shari's contributions because they seemed to be off-topic, distractions from my search for meaning. They seemed to derail any fun conversation that was happening at the group meetings, and I was unable to exert any control over the conversation when Shari showed up. But when Shari confided in me, I felt something—a compulsion motivated by shame and regret—to pay closer attention to what she was saying. I felt that Shari had a story to tell, and she had been trying to tell it to me in bits and pieces for weeks. I decided it was time to start listening.

This chapter is my attempt to articulate Shari's experiences as a Trans* lesbian woman. In numerous ways, Shari's story departs from the narratives of my other participants. In other ways, her story mirrors theirs. Rather than risk diluting the richness of her experiences by incorporating them into other areas of my analyses, I chose to devote this chapter solely to her experiences. In doing so, I attempt to preserve the integrity of her stories. Along the way, Shari's story diverges from the larger narrative of queer identity, which tends to privilege an affluent, white, cis-gendered, gay male perspective.[1] Therefore, I conclude this chapter by reflecting on those divergences, questioning how they warrant both exclusion from and inclusion in larger conversations about queer identity. To the extent that my previous analysis chapters can be considered

coherent narratives, Shari's story is an interruption, a disruption, a reminder of the need to avoid the all-too-easy assumption of queer community and solidarity.

This is Shari's story.

Beginnings

I was first introduced to Shari through the LGBT community center in Columbus, at one of the afternoon social gatherings I attended every Saturday. The first time I met Shari, I couldn't decide what to make of her. At the very least, she was rough around the edges. A hardship clung to her, a history of difficulty and struggle palpable in her presence and speech. I could sense that Shari had not had an easy life. As the summer progressed, my suspicions were confirmed. The stories Shari would tell about her past often hinted at a troubled history, but she was always mysteriously vague in her storytelling. Shari only went in depth when we sat down for coffee at Java Jim one Wednesday afternoon in late August. I knew that Shari's experiences were going to be different from the participants I had interviewed before her. Shari is a Trans* lesbian woman and the only Trans* person I had prolonged interaction with during my fieldwork.

As Shari and I settled down in a booth, I realized that my interview questions were ill-suited to her experiences. I also knew enough about Shari to make my "demographic questions" useless. Instead, I opted for a question to get her talking, so I could figure out which direction to steer the interview as it progressed. "Tell me about your transition experiences," I said. And Shari took off.

> I had been hurt in the past, a lot, by my parents and my grandparents. But when I was growing up in the 60s, that's just something you did not mention. My father

was mentally ill—he was bipolar—and basically he never grew up. He tried "checking out" many times, attempting suicide. He would tell me about it. I realized over time that one thing you don't do—or shouldn't do—is dump on your children. Don't treat your son or daughter as a friend. They're your child. Treat them with respect, yes, but they're still a child. *Your* child.

I was shocked that Shari chose to tell me about her father's suicide attempts. I didn't really know what to expect from our conversation, and this was a surprise. I tried to display concern on my face, but Shari continued with little time for me to react.

Around the age of sixteen, I had a lot of confusion. I wanted to be a girl, but I knew about the humiliation. In the post-war era, they did not like Trans*. But I always had this drive to be a girl. I had these dreams as a lesbian, having sex. I was into other women by the age of thirteen or fourteen, and you know, you could still lock somebody up for that, just on their parents' say-so. So I stayed a guy. Eventually my mom discovered my stash of pornography. So did my grandmother. But you never said anything to anybody back then. Well, they told my uncle—that was a big fucking help. He took me to gay bars. One thing I figured out: I'm not gay.

Already, I noticed how Shari's story was different from other narratives. As Shari was confronted with uncertainty about her gender identity, persons questioned her sexual orientation. The intimate relationships between sex, gender, and sexual identity were played out in her earlier experiences and would resurface throughout the later stages of her transition.

Shari's story about her uncle taking her to gay bars and her subsequent affirmation of her sexual orientation led her to reflect on the turning point that ultimately inspired her to pursue transitioning. "My transition basically started after returning home from work, or from day to day experiences, and feeling really depressed, she said. "I would make a proverbial gun out of my hand, like this." At this point, Shari imitated a gun, the way children often do, with her thumb raised and her forefinger extended. She continued:

> I would mimic blowing off my genitals. And then I would put it to my temple. I finally got to the point where I got sick and tired of being sick and tired. I decided, I can't do this, you know? I had to do it. I kept trying to be a man, and it just wasn't working. I didn't have the same thoughts as other men; it was just different. And trying to mask that just got to be too much.

Shari tried to deal with her depression through alcohol. She has been sober for thirty-five years, but the alcohol took its toll on her. She lost her kidney to cancer, and the difficulty of her recovery inspired her to reassess her life's trajectory. "I was in the hospital," she said, "and that kind of brought it up." She elaborated:

> I had a lot of time on my hands. The drugs they were giving me were good, but they were making me woozy. And I realized that I was addicted to it. To that and alcohol. I was always looking for that high, just to be normal. And I wasn't normal. You know, to me, I wasn't. I cried a lot around that time.

Shari stared off into the distance, apparently lost in past experiences of pain and sadness. When she resumed her story, she did not make eye contact with me. She sounded like she

was trying to convince herself of what came next, as though she needed to remind herself of a redeeming aspect of her early experiences:

> I was not the easiest person to live with. And my partner at the time, she stuck by me. And I stuck by her. And I was faithful. But she worked in a doctor's office, so finally I stole some estrogen from there. I didn't know the dosage or anything like that, but I took it anyway. My breasts started to grow, and my partner kinda noticed a few bumps on my chest. That's when she found out. She put two-and-two together. We had talked before, you know, but you tell your partner and they don't wanna believe it.

Shari was irritated that it took her growing breasts for her partner to believe what Shari had already told her. Shari was also relieved that her partner finally knew. The support of her partner, delayed though it was, helped Shari seek out a psychiatrist for counseling and proceed with her transition.

Shari began seeing a psychiatrist who "dealt with sex issues." Her appointments were over twenty years ago and Shari no longer remembered the doctor's name. She did recall that the psychiatrist conducted extensive interviews with her before referring Shari to the endocrinologist who would ultimately prescribe hormone treatment. Shari recalled the relief she felt when her insurance covered the expenses of her treatments, including the psychiatric consultations—which, Shari explained, her psychiatrist fought for. "They only wanted to pay something like 50%," Shari told me, "but the psychiatrist told them where they could go!"

Shari continued to transition, but that progress wasn't easy. She legally changed her name in June of 1998. "I used a lawyer friend that I knew," she said, "and he didn't really care." Shari continued to feel a lot of anxiety, even after her name change.

> I was not this person that you see today. I was very fearful. And most of that fear was fear itself. I feared the unknown. You know . . . will I be accepted? I had a lot of anxiety when I first went public, dressed as Shari. One time, I was out shopping with my step daughter, and I was "spotted." I had a nice outfit on, cream-colored shorts—it was summer time. And a cream colored top. It made me look good. I was looking for clothes that would accentuate things, not expose. And I had on white pumps. And I was made up. Well we were walking around, and I heard this gal, this stranger, screaming, "That's a boy! That's a boy!"

Shari just kept walking. "I didn't look sideways or anything," she said, "I just ignored it." Shari wasn't going to acknowledge the outburst or how it made her feel. She explained to me that she just marched out, with her eyes forward. Like she looked in this moment, when she told me the story.

Over time, Shari's anxiety began to ease. She kept her visits with the psychiatrist, and kept "jumping through hoops" on her way to being approved for her sex reassignment surgery. "There were a lot of hoops," she said, "because a lot of Trans* people were committing suicide." Shari had to get a second medical opinion, and a second letter of recommendation before she was able to schedule her surgery, but the most difficult obstacle for her to overcome was the money she had to secure for her surgery. "I had to cough up three thousand dollars to hold the spot," she said. Shari was

on a waiting list for a year and it took her about a year-and-a-half to get her letters, save the money, and book her appointment.

In the downtime, however, Shari's resolve occasionally wavered. The road to her sex reassignment surgery was lengthy and over time she began to make financial choices that hindered her progress. "I was kind of trying to financially sabotage myself," she said, "to not get the operation." I didn't understand what she meant, but she explained:

> I got involved with this World War II airplane group. I volunteered when they brought in this B17, it was used in some movie, and a crew of mechanics came in. One of my main distractions in life was to keep myself pretending—and I'm a very gifted mechanic. So I started as a machinist. I never got my air, train, and power plant certificate, but I had my pilot's license. And I threw myself into that work. I bought all those Snap-On tools, all those boxes. I spent so much money, about two thousand dollars, on aviation tools. I had to come up with nine or ten thousand dollars for the surgery. And by getting into this aviation group, I couldn't afford it. I couldn't get any electrolysis. I tried to sabotage myself, so I wouldn't have the money for the surgery.

In an ironic stroke of fortune, Shari's involvement with the aviation group fell through after the 9/11 catastrophe. Shari explained that she tried funneling her attention and resources into other activities, but she realized she was still unhappy. "I was trying to ignore the obvious," she said, "but I was feeling betrayed every time I looked down at myself."

Shari recounted an experience that ultimately inspired her to continue preparing for her surgery with renewed vigor. “I had had these falling dreams most of my adult life,” she explained. “These dreams where I would fall, and I’d wake myself up before I’d go ‘splat.’” One night, her dream took a different turn:

> One night, around the time I was turning 49, I let myself fall and go splat. I woke up screaming. But it gave me my answer. I was no longer fearful to go through with the operation. It was like, well, I can’t look like this any longer. I was gonna end up committing suicide. And I didn’t . . . I wanted to live.

Shari stared into a horizon I could not see, reflecting back on these earlier experiences. I looked into her lined face, etched with years of pain, wishing to let her dwell in her reverie. The beginnings of her transition were fraught with difficulty, and a wistful melancholy danced behind her eyes as she recalled those memories for me. Shari’s beginning was not an easy one. Knowing you do not “fit” within a cis-gender, heterosexual cultural framework is an intimidating obstacle to face. Unlike my other participants, however, Shari’s conflict with the heterosexual matrix was complicated by her sexuality *and* her gender identity. The compounded disadvantage Shari experiences as a result of her gender and sexual nonconformity exacted a heavy toll on her emotional well-being. Ultimately, Shari undertook a journey that many—though certainly not all—Trans* persons embark upon. She opted for sex reassignment surgery.

Journeys

Shari’s decision to undergo sex reassignment surgery and her preparations leading up to it began a long and complicated journey both literally and figuratively. When she

decided she was ready to go through with the operation, Shari settled on a clinic in Canada. Her operation took her to a new country and began a new phase of her life.

"I looked at a lot of places to go for the surgery," Shari said. "Finally, I decided on a clinic in Montréal." Cost was one of the motivating factors for Shari to choose the Montréal clinic, as her other options would have cost twice as much. After she scraped together the money she needed, she scheduled her procedure for December 11, 2001.

> My partner at the time drove me up to the airport and I flew to Montréal. In order to get there, though, through the airport, I had to explain my reasons for coming. People thought the Canadian government was going to pay for the surgery. I said, no, I have to pay for this, and it's done paid for. I had my receipts, just so there was no snafu. Then I had to wait at the airport for two hours before my driver came to pick me up for the clinic. I was the last one to come in for the day, but it was kinda neat. They sent this limo, a stretch limo—it was a regular wide-door limo, very comfortable. It was a Lincoln, so it was very elegant.

Shari smiled as she remembered the limousine. I suspected that Shari experienced little luxury in her life, and the limo was a detail she remembered fondly. After picturing her transport from the airport, she continued her narrative with a new excitement.

Being in Montréal was an exciting experience for Shari. The Saturday afternoons we spent at the community center taught me that Shari had a thirst for knowledge and a desire to understand the world. Her time abroad was emotional for many reasons, but she seemed to relish her experiences in Montréal before her procedure.

> I found out Montréal is nothing but rivers. It's got all these islands. The clinic itself was on an island outside of town by about ten or fifteen miles. When the driver took me out there, we went across this single lane bridge. If you use your imagination, it's kind of like a drawbridge. It had the kind of architectural detail that made it period, you know? And the facility had everything. It had an in-house theater, a little house on the side—that was the caretaker's house. They had semi-private rooms, basically you shared a room with the girl that went with you. They had a big living room, a living area, and an open kitchen. It had an island—two islands—one where the sink was and one with the stove. It was a new experience.

Her first night at the clinic, Shari met some of the other patients who were undergoing similar procedures. "One of the girls in my room was a little older than me, about five or six years older, and she was a savant," Shari recalled. "She knew plants, every plant, by its Latin and common name." If Shari was impressed by this woman's knowledge, she didn't show it. A look of disgust quickly spread across her face.

> The first story I remember with her was that she did her own orchiectomy, which appalled me. She self-mutilated to remove her own testicles. I was thinking, I had to jump through all these fucking hoops, spend thousands of dollars, and here she is? But she had been in and out of mental health institutions most of her life. Her parents didn't want to deal with her, and she was always denied everything, so I was pretty sure that the place she was living recommended her for the surgery. She said one time, "When I go back home I know I'll be institutionalized again. But I wanna be with girls, not with boys. I don't belong with the boys."

Shari's face softened as she recalled the fate of her roommate. "They must have sensed it," she said, "that's why they allowed her to have it . . . she would be less agitated and easier to control, and it was a more humane thing for her."

Shari's train of thought then shifted to when she met her doctor. "His name was Philippe Benoît." Shari chuckled at her recollection. "He had that French accent so Philippe suited him well." I wondered whether Shari would look back on her memories of the doctor fondly. "You just kinda melted into his voice, the way he talked to you, because when he talked to you, he let no other distractions come in." Shari told me that Dr. Benoît explained himself really well, which relieved some of her nervousness. Her consultation with the doctor, however, was only part of her pre-operative briefing.

> The doctor inspected me, seeing what he had to work with. He was looking to see if he had to do any skin grafts to complete the vagina. Then they had us watch an actual video of the surgery. It was a DVD. We watched that, and there was no . . . I mean, we were up close and personal.

The video might have been too graphic. Shari gave few details about its content, but she thought it unsettled a lot of the patients. "That night, the night before my surgery, I heard my roommates moaning and crying." Again, Shari gazed into the distance for a moment, lost in a memory she didn't seem too happy to relive. "It was understandable," she said. "We were all kinda wondering . . . it was really . . . it was exciting, yet terrifying."

The following morning, Shari was the first of the new patients to have her procedure done. "I was next to the window," she recalled, "and if you're the one next to the window you're the first victim." Shari remembered meeting the anesthesiologist, who

asked for her weight before administering her dose. “I didn’t lie,” she said somberly, “because I didn’t wanna wake up during the procedure.” The last memory Shari had before her surgery was seeing the doctor and making a joke. “I said, ‘Oh, you got a rusty scalpel ready?’ I was a smart ass.”

Shari’s recovery was painful. “The first night I knew I was bleeding,” she said. “It felt like a pulled muscle.” She also had to walk around the very next day. I cringed at the thought of how much that must have hurt.

It’s a ritual they do on anyone if you’ve been on the operating table. They will get you up and out. Out of that bed right now. They don’t want you to get blood clots.

I was familiar with this, having helped my mom recover from many surgeries over the years. My mom developed blood clots after an operation when I was in high school, and ever since then her recoveries have been difficult because of the risk they might form again. Shari nodded knowingly when I shared this story with her. “It’s tough,” she said, “but I’m very stubborn.”

Shari is a very stubborn person indeed. She knows what she wants and she speaks her mind. I witnessed her brazen attitude at the Saturday social gatherings. I admired Shari’s strength. But as she alluded to the difficulties she faced after her gender reassignment surgery, I sensed within her strength a resilience born out of a need to continue fighting for herself. Fighting for her right to exist on her terms. Shari’s reassignment surgery might have given her a body she felt at home in, but it did not eliminate the discrimination she faced continually. Shari’s struggles were not so easily remedied.

Struggles

Prior to her operation, Shari worked for the railroad industry. The pay was great and helped her save for her procedure after her aviation group disbanded. But in the time leading up to her operation, her work environment became increasingly more hostile.

> Everybody at work started making comments about my hair being longer. I remember the comments, and just ignoring them or playing stupid with them. The day that I came out and started living as a woman full time, I could get by with that at work because I had bibs that I wore. You always wore them one size over. But after a while the guys at work started to put the dots together.

As Shari began transitioning to life as a woman, "passing" as a man became increasingly hard for her. She described an experience at work where she became the object of sexual harassment as a result of living "out":

> One day I was at work in the yard office up in Cleveland, and one of the guys from the Akron area saw me in all my glory. He told a buddy, who later came up to me at work and said "I hear you've been dressing as a girl." This was in a room full of men. And he reaches over and tries grabbing my breast, and I smacked it away. They were going on, and I was laughing, and finally it dawns on me. Why am I standing here? I'm laughing at myself.

The weight of this memory clung to Shari. She is a strong person, and I sensed her disappointment in the way she participated in her own subjugation. Shari decided she would not succumb to victimization again.

Over time, her confidence grew. “I have a sense of humor,” she said with a smile, “and I wasn’t going to show my weakness to them.” One of Shari’s coworkers approached her one day, a woman whom Shari described as “a strange chick, but aggressive in her attitude,” and thanked Shari for her bravery. She told Shari, “When you first came out, they quit picking on me.” Shari’s response was “well I’m glad. At least they’re leaving you alone.” Shari seemed to radiate with pride in reflecting on this story, as though being a diversion for the sexism at work was a badge of honor.

Shari was not immune to the harassment she experienced. Even the coworkers who showed support for Shari did so conditionally. “My first boss who oversaw me,” Shari recalled, “he made sure I had a bathroom for myself.” But that separate restroom came at a price:

> He made sure I was treated with respect and everything else. But he was . . . he was too chummy with me. Sexual advances. It made me very uncomfortable. He struck me as ‘one of the boys,’ and it made me very uncomfortable. But I didn’t say anything, because I was getting my ‘little happy spot.’

Her supervisor wasn’t the only person who gave Shari trouble. Her general foreman also became “more aggressive” toward Shari as she continued transitioning. “He didn’t like me,” Shari said, “and he made it quite known, just by his actions, not his words.” Worse of all, Shari felt as though she were without recourse.

> He did it by his tone and his actions. Which you can’t report, you know? This was in 2000, so you were shit outta luck unless you had a pocket recorder, and they didn’t pick up that well back then.

Ultimately, Shari ended up retiring from the railroad. “I was in a lot of pain from trying to find some happiness in my life without being a fucking asshole to everybody,” she explained. The struggles she faced at work ended up souring her attitude at home and at her AA meetings, and she decided the work wasn’t worth the stress it was causing her.

Work wasn’t the only area where Shari struggled, though. For all the harassment she faced, the railroad was, as she put it, the least of her concerns. “When you get these gender reassignment surgeries, they’re not all . . . they may look great and everything, but it doesn’t always feel great.” Shari’s hormone treatment and sex reassignment might have helped her look the way she wanted to, but her body didn’t feel the way she hoped.

> You know those nerve endings? They take where the top of your head is, and they transplant it down. Well, I found out mine is right next to my urethra. So every three months, when the doctor sticks a scope up there, I feel him pushing on it. And it hurts. It’s not pleasurable. So all the girls are saying “Oh, I can feel mine!” And I’m going, there was none for me. It was painful. So it’s not all what it’s cracked up to be. And if you don’t think that’s fucking frustrating, it is.

I grimaced at the details of Shari’s misfortune. I tried to imagine how frustrating it would be to go through so much trouble for the body you feel you ought to have and find that it’s not all you hoped it would be. More than that, Shari’s desire to experience pleasure in a way previously denied to her was, in many ways, unfulfilled. In light of all the hardships she experienced earlier, I pitied Shari. Would her life look different if her reassignment surgery had gone differently? Better? I wanted to ask, but I wanted to avoid stirring up feelings she might prefer to leave buried. Instead, I just watched and waited

for a few moments while Shari rummaged around in her bag for a cigarette lighter that eluded her.

I noticed that after Shari recalled her visit to the clinic in Montréal, she stopped mentioning her ex-partner, and I wondered when they parted ways. “Whatever happened to your ex?” I asked her. “We came about a split in . . . 2004?” Shari thought. “I still keep in touch with her.” Shari then recounted a difficult experience that her partner supported her through, in the early days of her transition:

> I had to cash a check because I needed some cash. The teller asked for my driver’s license, but I had this full beard in the picture. Basically I looked like a grizzly. And here I was, all dolled up, you know, dressed to the nines. Dressed to kill. The teller looked at the picture, and back up, and I said “Yeah, that used to be me.” My license didn’t have my new name on it, I didn’t have it changed by then. But my partner was very supportive of me. She knew I had anxiety attacks when I was first coming out, or first dressing out. She had gone to a lot of these Trans* meetings with me, so she was there physically, and I think she was going there to understand it herself.

Shari paused for a few moments, reflecting. “And I was supportive of her,” she finally said, returning to our conversation. “She always put all her money towards her kids—they always came first—so I’d always buy her something meaningful that she really wanted.” Shari had not described her relationship with her former partner very much and I wondered if they were ever married. When I asked her, she said no.

> We stayed partners for 22 years. I lived with her in northern Ohio, and we bought a house together up there. That was where I came out. I was trying to make our relationship work, and then I found out I couldn't.

I was at a loss for how to proceed. I scanned my interview questions—which I hadn't referenced since we began—and wondered what finally brought Shari to Columbus. Her beginnings, her journey to the clinic, her reassignment surgery, the struggles she faced in her personal and professional life—all these things lingered in northern Ohio. How did she depart? How did she arrive here? I decided to ask. "How did you end up in Columbus?" Shari drew in a slow breath of air, blew it out of her mouth, and began her next tale.

Relocations

Shari's eventual move to Columbus was just as difficult as the earlier years of her transition. Her relationship with her partner ended, she held onto a house she desperately wanted to sell, and many of her friendships faded. Shari tried not to take everything personally, but the constant blows wore her down.

> I ran the scenarios in my head. I was uncomfortable where I was at, I cried a lot at night. I just wanted to disappear. I was totally miserable. I got into my first lesbian relationship, and she really got underneath my skin. I couldn't get her out of my head. After we broke it off, I basically had an emotional breakdown.

Shari tried selling the house so she could move on, but the housing bubble had just burst and real estate was a dying business. "Nobody wanted to buy the house," she recalled, "or the offers would have left us in the hole." Everything Shari had grown up with, all the

humiliation and disappointment, was lingering around her in her northern Ohio town. Following a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, Shari decided she "had to get the fuck out of dodge."

Around 2003, Shari started driving to Columbus in search of a queer community. A friend of hers began a relationship with a woman in Columbus and Shari would drive her down to visit. When Shari's friend moved to Columbus to live with her partner, Shari decided it was time to pack up herself. "I couldn't face another winter alone," she said.

> I had made a bunch of lesbian friends down here, I found an apartment, and I just decided to move here to Columbus. I couldn't have stayed. If I had stayed in northern Ohio, I would have died. I would have checked out. Everything I had read told me that the cities you transition in, you eventually leave them. Because it's a chapter of your life you want to close.

So Shari decided to close that chapter of her life. For her, that closing meant moving to Columbus.

Columbus was Shari's "new gay start." She had already made friends in the city, and when she moved she decided to have her first birthday party. She chose Merger, the popular gay café and bar in the Short North district that I myself had frequented for the first time that summer. "I invited everybody," Shari told me. "If anybody showed up—or not, that's okay, too—I was going to try having the best time. And more people came then . . ." Shari paused, lost in a wave of remembered emotions, before continuing, "It blew my mind, and I was really happy."

Perhaps the most meaningful relationship Shari formed upon moving to Columbus was with Alane. Shari met Alane at an AA meeting, where Alane sat down right next to Shari—something Shari said didn't happen often. She remembered the very first thing Alane said to her: "'My name is Alane. Give me your glasses, they need cleaned.'" Shari laughed at the recollection.

> Nothing like jumping in with both feet! And that became our ritual. Every meeting, she would come in, and I would just hand my glasses over. She was a very colorful character.

Alane came to be a kind of motherly figure to Shari, looking after her and offering help when she could. Shari explained, for example, how she would do random labor for Alane.

> She finally convinced me to do work for her, and she overpaid me. She took care of me, even bought me tires the last time I needed them. And she never wanted anything in return.

Shari felt a strong connection to Alane. At one point, she even felt out whether there was a romantic interest between them. "She had no sexual interest in me, that was one of the first things I checked out." One time, Shari made a proposition: "I said, 'Okay, you're straight, right? Well, what if I kiss you?'" Shari smirked as she told me Alane's response: "She goes, 'I'll slug ya.'" Alane eventually convinced Shari to enroll in a vocational school for mechanical work. Shari knew she could do the work, since she had spent so much time working for the railroad. It was Alane's encouragement that finally persuaded her to pursue the training.

Shari wondered if Alane's quick acceptance was somehow related to Alane's own experiences at home. For example, Shari speculated that Alane's husband was a closeted gay man. "That's just my feeling, no one's ever said it to me," she explained. "He might be bi . . . he's just got a milk toast handshake." Shari frowned when she said this, but I was confused by the phrasing. "What do you mean, a milk toast handshake?" I asked.

> You gotta wash your hand after you shake his. I mean, it's just a limp dishrag. I know enough, even as a gal, we're not gonna see who has the strongest handshake, cuz a lot of these guys will just crush you. But if you give them a firm handshake back, they'll respect you more. It's part of the game of playing life. But he doesn't have that.

I chuckled after hearing Shari's explanation. I wondered if I also had a "milk toast handshake," remembering the time I shook hands with Toby and sensed my own delayed grip. I realized that Shari and I had not shaken hands, and I smiled as I thought I was probably better off for it.

Unfortunately for Shari, Alane became sick after a few years. "She took a nose dive for the worst as I was finishing up school," Shari explained. Alane was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, which eventually killed her. A sadness crept into Shari's eyes as she reflected on Alane's death.

> She was always worried about me, though. Told me I was going to graduate, figure things out, and all this. I was starting to get into it, because of her. I was very upset when she died. I was just chasing my tail by then. But I took stock of

> my life, and said, you know, I was there for one goal. So I stayed down here. I established myself.

Alane's death in 2012 affected Shari deeply. "My place has been in disarray since Alane died," she said. "I moved on impulse to this place, transferred to a bigger apartment, bought a bunch of toy shit—I just broke the bank." Shari had to ask her sister for help paying the rent a few times, but her reckless spending finally caught up with her.

> Just this last night, I was thrown another little bugaboo. I'm getting kicked out of my apartment. I finally got the notice. I just did dumb things financially. So I need to clean the place, figure out what's going to happen next.

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. I didn't know about Shari's eviction notice when I sat down at the coffee shop that afternoon. I mumbled an apologetic "Oh, wow, I'm so sorry," but it felt inadequate. Shari just shrugged her shoulders. "It hasn't been easy," she said. "I'm just thinking, how can I get back on my feet? I'll get there."

Looking Back, Looking Forward

It had been nearly three hours since I first sat down with Shari and asked her to tell me about her transition. Since then, her story wove through obstacles that to me seemed insurmountable. I knew her experiences were not isolated. I knew others face similar trials in their lives born from various manifestations of identity nonconformity, but I had never been privileged or humbled enough to hear them firsthand. Shari's story gave me a different understanding of what it means to be queer, outside, and unintelligible. I wondered if Shari had any reflections herself, insight generated by our

conversation today. “I’ve kept you here for a long time,” I said, though I knew I had been captivated by her story. “What would you like to end with?”

Shari thought for a while, in a silence that refused to be punctured by the noise of the coffee shop around us. Slowly, she raised her hands, folding them together before resting them on the table. Leaning forward slightly, Shari summoned a somber air around her. With her eyes fixed on her intertwined fingers, she proceeded to offer her own reflections on her history. “Lesbians don’t think of me as a lesbian,” Shari said. She raised her eyes to look out the large windows opposite us, and they focused on something in the distance.

> I think they’re threatened because I used to be a man. I get a lot of that from the F-to-Ms. And I think maybe they’re just going through puberty. We all go through puberty again. When you change the hormones, I guarantee you, sweetie, they get very aggressive. They would try to push me around a few times, back when I was up in northern Ohio. I would think, if you want some attitude, I can still mess you up. It triggers my defense mechanisms.

Shari snapped her fingers, as though indicating turning on a switch like one would turn on a light. “I still fall back to that,” she said, “That part hasn’t gone.” I asked her what she meant, and she told me a story:

> I saw a kid not too long ago—well, I saw him outside the window. Right where we have our meetings at the community center, they have another meeting there, an AA meeting, all for lesbians. A couple straights occasionally. And this kid was throwing rocks, trying to break the windows out. I went outside, turned around,

yelled in my best voice, said, “Hey, fucking asshole!” Really projected my voice. I know how to play the intimidation game. It’s foreign to me, though. It feels foreign to act like a male. It seems very odd to me.

Shari sighed, and her gaze reluctantly turned to me. “I kept trying to be a guy,” she said, almost ashamed.

That’s muscle memory. I was not socialized as a girl, I was in a male body, trying to be one of the guys in gym class, and I don’t know if they still play dodgeball in high school, or some form of rugby or soccer, and the kids play ‘smear the queer.’ You basically smear the guy with the whitest trousers. That would have been you, I bet. Don’t worry, I was in on that crowd, too. I enjoyed it. That was the only satisfaction I could get. But forty-five years of trying to be a guy does not help your cause towards being a gal.

I nod knowingly, because Shari was right—I was that kid. Always clean, always precise, always cautious, I avoided sports and failed in gym as much as I excelled in other courses. I thought about how strange it was to picture Shari in a different light. The athletic boy in school, or the bearded man at the railroad; I couldn’t imagine either.

As we neared the end of our time together, I wondered if Shari regretted anything. She had recounted so many stories of difficulty, pain, and suffering, surely she had thought about whether she would do it all over again. So I asked her, “Do you regret any of it?” She thought for only a moment before responding, “I regret that I didn’t do it all sooner.” Shari proceeded to tell me one of the things she learned: the quicker you transition, the better. “Today is a lot different than 1960, believe me.” According to

Shari, one of the most important differences is that information and resources are more easily available. “Parents are more informed on these choices,” she explained, “and Trans* folks have places to seek answers.” Shari explained that when she was younger, lesbians and Trans* persons were “locked up” for being different. “That’s how they dealt with it, they put you in the nuthouse and threw away the key.” Seeing how her father was treated for his own mental health, Shari grew up scared that the same would happen to her.

Shari carried that fear with her all her life. But she refused to let it define her. “All I’ve known,” she said, “is, basically, I’ve had to accept myself for who I am and deal with what I’ve got.” I asked Shari what she would tell someone who was coming to terms with their own queer identity today. Her response demonstrated the mindset that helped her labor through all the trials she faced.

> All I can say is, just accept yourself for who you are. It’s not always easy. It’s not! It’s just learning to accept. Acceptance is the key to everything. Doesn’t mean you have to like it. You don’t like it? Change it. And if you can’t change it, accept it. I like the way Jimmy Carter has put his cancer: well, just another thing in life. That’s the way I looked at mine. I mean, nobody wants to die. Even in the most serious suicide moods, when I actually had the barrel to my head, I was thinking, no. I don’t want to die. I still want to live.

~ ~ ~

I have argued that queer performativity challenges dominant discourses of sex, gender, and sexuality to reframe queer bodies as culturally intelligible. This claim is, I

hope, relatively evident in the stories and experiences shared throughout my earlier chapters. When considered together there might appear to be few ways in which the experiences of queer persons differ from one another. Shari's story, however, illustrates strategic departures from the grand narrative of queer performativity. Notably, Shari experiences a particular difficulty when she begins "dressing out," or dressing as a woman in the early stages of her transition. The marked difference in gender presentation that Shari performs points to the ways in which many Trans* persons experience often violent backlash from others. For Shari, this resulted in inhospitable working environments, severe depression, and alcoholism. For other Trans* persons, continued discrimination because of their gender variance leads to hyper-vigilance, physical abuse, and isolation.[2] Though other members of the queer community also lay claim to such forms of assault, Trans* persons face a greater risk. This, in itself, disrupts the narrative of queer performativity as I have been telling it.

For this and other reasons, transgender linguist Lal Zimman argues that the coming out experiences of transgender persons should be considered apart from those of the larger queer community. "Transgender people," according to Zimman, "experience coming out from two significantly different perspectives: before and after transitioning to the preferred gender role."[3] Shari demonstrates this point by noting how she came out and started dressing as a woman *before* her reassignment surgery and how she came out *after* that surgery. Of course, not all Trans* persons choose to undergo reassignment surgery as part of their transition, nor is such a procedure necessary in order to have transitioned from one gender to another.[4] Regardless, their stories illustrate some of the

ways in which the experiences of Trans* persons differ in meaningful ways from those of other queer persons.

A growing number of Trans* researchers and advocates argue that these differences are differences that *matter*. Anthropologist Don Kulick explains that transgender persons "affirm the permeability of gendered boundaries" in ways that lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons do not.[5] Similarly, criminologists Barbara Perry and D. Ryan Dyck argue that Trans* persons "challenge the ontology of gender and sex as norms, and, in doing so, render the norms of sexual desire unintelligible."[6] Queer persons, broadly considered, might challenge the coherence of the heterosexual matrix, but the threats to that matrix are not of equal magnitude. Shari transgresses a number of societal norms by dressing as a different gender, undergoing surgery to change her sex, continuing to work in a profession dominated by a gender she no longer physically embodies, and continuing to pursue and express desire for persons of the same sex she now identifies as. My own resistance to cultural prescriptions of (cis-gendered) heterosexuality seem feeble compared to Shari's. The point of this comparison is not to invoke a kind of oppression Olympics, where persons of different minority statuses are pitted against one another to determine who experiences more or less privilege. Instead, the differences in Shari's and my experiences point to a kind of "fault line" that winds its way through the larger queer community, threatening to fragment queer persons based on differences in their identities.

One such fault line evoked by Shari's story is one that threatens to separate the Trans* community from the rest of the queer population. As Shari explains, lesbian

women don't consider her to be part of their community. "They're threatened because I used to be a man." On the surface, Shari's comment might be mistaken for a simple instance of exclusionary identity politics, an isolated situation wherein a particular group of lesbian women rejected Shari for any number of reasons. However, her story represents a departure in more than just one way. Shari fails to live up to the traditional coming out narrative so common among queer persons. She does not embody the same features of queerness the way other queer persons might. Her performance of the cultural script for queerness is done in the interest of "passing" rather than resisting, in blending in rather than standing out. Her deployment of gender identifiers alludes not exclusively to a queer sexual attraction but also a gender nonconformity. In her attempts to embody the queer identities she resonated with, Shari challenges the strength with which my previous frameworks of queer performativity hold together.

Shari's experiences represent one iteration of a growing anti-Trans* movement in the United States, led by an increasing number of gay, lesbian, and bisexual men and women. A recent online petition, hosted through Change.org, is a prime example of this Cis/Trans* divide. The petition, titled "Drop the T," calls for LGBTQ advocacy organizations and media outlets to "stop representing the transgender community," because "their ideology is not only completely different from that promoted by the LGB community . . . but is ultimately regressive and actually hostile to the goals of women and gay men."[7] The petition has been rejected by such prominent queer advocacy groups and outlets as the Human Rights Campaign, GLAAD, Lambda Legal, The Advocate, and Out Magazine. But support for the petition illustrates a growing divide among the queer

"community," one that continues to threaten the unity and political strength of a marginalized population.

Unfortunately, these queer fissures were all too prevalent during my fieldwork. Despite what might appear to be a coherent narrative of queer identity woven through my previous chapters, an account of queer performativity devoid of considerations of race, class, or gender provides a dangerously partial perspective of queer identity. Shari opens the door for us to consider the ways in which an intersectional consideration of queer identity problematizes the easy assumption of queer community. In the next and final chapter, I consider the ways that queer community is jeopardized by fault lines of identity, asking what might be on the horizon of queer identity politics in light of the increasing difficulty for queer persons to unite under a single mantle for political mobilization.

Chapter 7 Notes

1. Dean Spade, for instance, argues that "The institutionalization of lesbian and gay rights that started in the 1980s . . . facilitated the abandonment of social justice struggles that concern the most vulnerable queer and trans people in favor of the advancement of narrow campaigns to include the most privileged queers in dominant institutions." See *Normal Life*, 65.
2. See Perry and Dyck, "'I Don't Know Where It Is Safe'."
3. Zimman, "'The Other Kind of Coming Out,'" 60.
4. Brenda Allen, for instance, notes that "transgender" can refer to "pre-operative, postoperative, and nonoperative transsexual individuals, as well as cross-dressers and intersexed individuals." See *Difference Matters*, 60.
5. Kulick, "Transgender and Language," 605.
6. Perry and Dyck, "'I Don't Know Where It Is Safe'," 52.
7. "Drop the T," para. 1.

Chapter 8: Queer (Dis)unity

The weight of Shari's story lingered with me weeks after our interview. As I continued my fieldwork, I began to notice more interactions that challenged the assumption of queer unity that unwittingly informed my experiences. The way I downplayed my education around the young men from the rehab shelter, for example. Or the sometimes apathetic, other times hostile way Lex would treat assumed homeless persons who approached him for money. As though lifting a veil from my eyes, Shari's story slowly began to unshroud my vision. Class-based exclusions, racial tensions, geographic obstructions, and sex/gender apathy fractured my image of queer community. The longer I stood on that platform of shared queerness, the more I saw its fissures.

If these fissures disrupt notions of a unified queer community, they do so because they illustrate how identities should not be thought of as unidimensional accomplishments. My consideration of queer identity has treated queerness on its own, separated from an attention to the many intersecting identities that inform a person's day to day life. In contrast, critical legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw champions an intersectional approach to identity that examines how persons "experience discrimination in any number of ways," arguing that the convergence of our many identities is erased by assumptions that our "claims of exclusion must be unidirectional."[1] Such an approach troubles my singular treatment of queer identity, and asks how queer performativity might be revised by considering race, class, gender, and the social incentive for cultural homogenization.

In keeping with such a commitment to understanding queer identity at its intersections, I conclude this project not with a closing, but with an opening—a deliberate troubling of my claims thus far. I trace the field experiences that unsettled my grand narrative of queer community. Rather than paint another picture of white, affluent, cis-gendered gay men, I take this opportunity to explore how queer identity is but one plane of a multidimensional field. I demonstrate how queer identity intersects with numerous identities to create complicated positions from which queer persons of different races, classes, and sexes interact with the world and those around them. My intent is not to undermine my representations of queer performativity presented in the earlier chapters. Rather, I wish to illustrate that an intersectional approach to queer performativity enriches our understanding of marginal positions and is necessary if we are to imagine a future of queer resistance. In doing so, I leave the threads of my story untied as an invitation for continuation and revision.

Unsettling "Queer"

There is no better way to begin such an unsettling than by revisiting a question posed early in this project: what, exactly, is meant by "queer"? Though I use the word almost exclusively to refer to a collective group of persons of gender and sexual minority status, my participants were remarkably reluctant to embrace the label themselves. At a Saturday social gathering, Lex and Vic expressed two competing interpretations of queer:

Lex: I don't mind it.

Vic: You never told me that.

Lex: Ha ha! I don't mind it. I don't mind queer, or—you don't like it, do you?

Vic: I don't like that word.

(Me): Why?

Vic: That or faggot.

Lex: Well I don't like faggot either, but I don't mind queer.

Vic: 'Cuz to me, in my opinion, it's insulting. Back in my day, when I was coming out, it was an insult. Faggot or queer, to me, the way they said it was derogatory.

Lex: Me, I'm ok with it. The queer community, queer friend, queer, you know, any—that's okay with me. Don't call me a fag, or faggot, or sissy or anything.

(Me): What do you think queer means?

Lex: Well I know the origin of what it used to mean. It used to mean "different." But somehow along the way, I think our community incorporated it to mean another synonym for gay. Back when I was coming out, queer meant to be different. And it is different, to be gay. I mean, we're not mainstream heteros. We're gay. We're homosexuals. So that's what I think.

Intergroup scholars Christopher Hajek, Jessica Abrams, and Tamar Murachver note that "by adopting a particular label, individuals acknowledge they share certain attributes."[2] Lex alludes to this in his exchange with Vic: "We're not mainstream heteros. We're gay." In a move of solidarity, Lex appropriates queer as a way to bring together a group of

persons situated at the margins of sexual culture. For him, queer denotes a commonality: a shared queerness.

Their exchange also illustrates the difficulties in uniting around a label with a troubled linguistic history. As Vic argues, the history of queer as a label is fraught with insult and derogation. Psychologist Jay Paul notes that "the meaning of sexual labels . . . is a personal process and also a declaration to the social organization of one's standing within it."[3] By embracing a common identity label, LGBTQ+ persons situate themselves within a population that shares certain attributes, not least among those a sexual minority position. However, uniting under a single-labeled umbrella is politically charged for a population increasingly insistent on having all sexual identities represented in a growing acronym. Jagose notes that "queer is not simply the latest example in a series of words that describe and constitute same-sex desire transhistorically but rather a consequence of the constructionist problematizing of any allegedly universal term."[4] Despite reclamation in contemporary discourse, queer as a label carries a history of hurt and defamation.

For this reason, personal and professional discourse is fraught with discussions about the tension between embracing queer as a way to unify the population and resisting queer as a pejorative term. When the Huffington Post, for example, decided to change the name of their column from "gay voices" to "queer voices," columnist Jay Peron wrote an impassioned critique:

> The word is painful. It was a point driven home to me with fists and kicks. It was the word vomited at me by bullies at school. It was one of the words, along with "faggot" and "sissy" that the gym coaches threw at us. If you didn't want to put

> on boxing gloves and hit another kid in the face you were a fag. You were queer. . . . I don't find the use of the term liberating. I find it traumatic.[5]

Peron's sentiments were mirrored by many of my own participants, who hearkened back to personal experiences of trauma and stigma in their sometimes passionate refusal to accept the label. "I think it's polarizing," Kyle said. "I've heard it used in a very derogatory way . . . my dad talked about 'fags' and 'queers' constantly when I was growing up, so my exposure to that word was very negative." Don also shared this view:

> I don't like it. It's a hate word. Same thing as fag. I mean, you want to call me gay, or call me names, cool. But just know that that's not a word just because you "say it all the time." It's a hate word. It's not a good word.

For these men, the hateful connotation made queer an inappropriate label. They refused to accept the word as a way to describe their identities because of its violent history.

Not all of my participants were quick to dismiss queer as a unifying term, however. "It's been recaptured," Gary told me. "It used to be a pejorative. Now, it seems like it's a catch-all, a cover for anything, LGBTQAI, whatever." Gary appreciated the term for its ability to bring together persons who are "in the family," in a way that fragmenting the identities into an acronym cannot. My youngest participant, Tanesha, also had a more positive perspective on queer:

> I think it's okay. I am careful on the age group I use it around. I feel like, if I'm meeting LGBTQ people who are a little bit older than me, it wasn't really okay during that time. I know that younger people have reclaimed that word and now

it's not offensive to a lot of young people, but I still do understand for some older people, it doesn't sit right with them.

Though Tanesha used the label freely during our many conversations, she attributed the polarized sentiments about queer to age and generational differences. Any reclamation of the word, Tanesha thought, was possible because of the temporal distance between an earlier time period where queer was routinely used as a hate word. For older LGBTQ persons, memories of queer torment still haunt them. For younger persons, queer has assumed a fresh meaning resistant to its older history of trauma.

How do we unite a population under a label imbued with such a complicated history? Queer, it seems, is just as encompassing as it is limiting, as liberating as it is constraining. This motif winds its way through the stories I tell in the chapters preceding this one: segregated spaces; Trans* exclusion; feminine invisibility. A more focused attention on this queer dis/unity unsettles otherwise coherent renditions of queer performativity even further. The stories that follow probe further into the ways the queer "community" struggles to come together over various lines of difference. They illustrate the way queer sexuality intersects with other identities in everyday life.

Black Objectification and White Erasure

Queerness intersects with racial identity in pronounced ways. Rick relayed a story to me about his experiences being objectified by other gay men. Rick is a Black man, and he was convinced that other gay men treat him like an animal because of it. "In cities, they have these sites on the internet where you can get together with somebody else,"

Rick told me. “And someone always says to me, ‘I wanna suck that big black dick of yours.’” My eyebrows surely shot up in surprise, and Rick continued:

> It’s like they got this image in their mind of a porn star, but we all don’t look like that! We’re not all hung like that either. There are these preconceived notions about race—and there are privileges to being Caucasian, with all due respect. They view Black men as bucks, like we’re an entity. It’s really, it’s benign racism.

Leonard, a middle-aged white gay man, perpetuated a similar objectification in describing his attraction to Black men:

> I don’t only like Black guys, but there’s something about them that is very attractive to me. And sure, they can’t have the thug mentality and whatever, that kind of thing, but I am attracted to them physically. I like their skin color. To me, it’s just interesting. Because I’m pale, I like something different.

These stories reflect the racial tensions inherent in performing queer. Queers of color are frequently cast as “exotic others,” objectified for the pleasure of white gay males. Niels Teunis, a scholar of sexuality studies, notes that such sexual objectification:

> . . . does not simply result from whiteness and racism, but is in fact a constitutive element of it. . . . Sexual objectification further constitutes the unequal expression of sexual desire, as it reflects the white normalcy of a gay community that is fighting for sexual freedom.[6]

Such objectification of and by queer men further entrenches a racial divide within the queer population, normalizing a white queer gaze and enforcing a racial divide between queer persons.

For my white participants, the intersection of race and sexuality could only be understood by reflecting on second-hand experiences of persons of color. “I’ve never been conscious of my race,” Kyle (a white man) said to me, “but the more exposure that I have to other groups, like Trans* women of color, I think about how much more marginalized I could be and how much less opportunity I could have.” Leonard, another white man, told me “I’ve been told, even by African Americans, that they’re not as open and accepting. Their families aren’t as open as Caucasians.” Leonard continued:

> From what I know, some of the Black community find it hard to come out, find it hard to be themselves. They stay closeted a little more so than we do. And one of my friends, he’s Asian—he was born in Vietnam—he’s only been out officially for about a year. And he doesn’t want his parents to know. He tells me that a lot of Asians are very unaccepting.

Similarly, James—an older white gay man in a relationship with a middle-aged Black man—reflected on the racial injustice targeted at queer persons of color.

> We were walking through German Village, and some woman started talking to us—she was all excited about having a “really interesting” couple in the neighborhood. It was not a hostile reference, there was no tension. But I can tell you that historically the gay community has discriminated against black gay people.

Leonard and Kyle were only able to discuss racial privilege by positioning non-white queer persons as subjugated and closeted, and James put a positive frame on an experience that some persons of color might likely perceive as a microaggression. Their

remarks indicate a kind of white erasure, rendering their own whiteness invisible as they discuss race through the perspective of persons different than them.

Muñoz refers to such racial myopia in both theory and practice as a "queer blind spot,"[7] arguing that queer theories are "decidedly directed toward analyzing white lesbians and gay men."[8] As a result, understandings of queer identity are largely homogenous in that they fail to account for the richly complex intersections of multiple identity vectors. For "queers of color," Muñoz argues, their "different identity components occupy adjacent spaces and are not comfortably situated in any one discourse of minority subjectivity."[9] Rather, the intersection of race and sexuality creates a hybridized identity, one that shifts contextually as a result of changing political landscapes pertaining to white privilege and heteronormativity. Muñoz concludes by arguing that "'queerness' and 'blackness' need to be read as ideological discourses that contain contradictory impulses within them—some liberatory, others reactionary."[10] Such a reading offers a radical—and racial—destabilization of the queer script, troubling the ease with which whiteness occupies its center.

The Invisible (Queer) Woman

Queer women have always occupied a tenuous position within the larger queer community. Queer rights activist Sarah Schulman notes that the invisibility of queer women is mirrored by the subordinated status of women in a larger patriarchal society. "Despite the gentrified feeling that women now have what we need," Schulman argues, "the reality is that American women have not gained access to the wealth of the nation and do not have control over the perspectives by which national cultural decisions are

made."[11] The routine erasure of women is a typical symptom of a sexist culture that devalues women's experiences, but I am continually surprised—perhaps naively so—at the way women are erased from queer culture as well. In chapter three, I discussed my own difficulty in soliciting queer women's stories. Here, I wish to elaborate on this female invisibility as it was perpetuated both by myself and my male participants.

While at the Columbus Pride festival, I began to notice that I wasn't noticing the women. It was a rare treat for me to be surrounded by so many queer persons and my senses were directed almost exclusively toward the queer men. I voiced this observation to my friend Sam, who patted me on the shoulder and said "I love you, but as a man that's so typical." Her gentle reprimand was the catalyst I needed to maintain a more critical attention to the presence (or absence) of queer women in my research.

In my early interviews, which were all with queer men, women simply were not mentioned. When I would ask participants about how they felt around queer persons, or their relationships with queer friends, the responses were always about gay men. When I began asking specifically about queer women, the responses were more blatantly sexist than I anticipated. Victor, for instance, told me:

> I don't hang around too many lesbian women. I like some of them, but I don't hang around with them because they do hate men, and I don't understand that.

When we talked about recognizing queer persons and how that recognition feels, I asked Elliot if he thought he had a hard time identifying queer women. He responded by saying:

> Well, there's never a time when I'm like, "oh, I hope that person's a lesbian." That *definitely* doesn't happen. I mean, it's great if they are a lesbian, but you know, *I* don't gain anything by that.

I felt a growing sense of unease as I heard more stories like these. I was familiar with the critique that the gay rights movement was a white, affluent, gay *men's* movement and I knew that critique was levied for a reason, but I was troubled when this blatant sexism confronted me in my own research. Female invisibility among the queer stories I witnessed spoke to the absence of women's voices in constructing queer narratives.

Camilla reflected on this in our conversation. Growing up in Uruguay, she encountered conservative gendered expectations typical of many Latin American cultures. "I was never allowed to really question anything," she said.

> [Being queer] wasn't even an option. I didn't even know anybody who was gay when I was a kid. I mean, I know I knew, but nobody told me who those women were. My grandma had two friends who lived together all their lives. Now, I know they were gay, but then, they were just friends. As a kid, I remember that men, gay men, were made fun of. In Latin America, being a gay man is horrible. But there's just not much said about gay women at all.

There's not much said about queer women, and what is said is largely from the perspective of queer men, in the interests of excluding queer women. On more than one occasion, Lex told me stories of how the Saturday social gathering was filled with queer women, and "all they would ever talk about was vaginas and lesbian stuff." He was relieved when the group dynamics shifted and those queer women stopped coming.

There is little surprise that the coordinators for girls' game night refused to let me come. Sexism runs rampant among the queer population, as though queer men have forgotten what they owe to queer women. Schulman, for example, chronicles the height of the AIDS epidemic, noting the many ways queer men relied upon assistance from queer women personally and politically. She argues:

> The sexist imbalance of the gay community was overwhelmed by the necessities of trauma. Men became endangered and vulnerable. . . . As men became weak, they allowed themselves to acknowledge the real ways women are strong . . . . Like Rosie the Riveter, gay women gained more equality within the queer community, more social currency and autonomy because men were threatened, wounded, and killed.[12]

This time of gender "equality," of course, was doomed to end once treatment for AIDS began to advance. "Men began to regain their collective health and with that their patriarchal imperatives," Schulman explains. As a result, "male power returned with t-cells and lesbians occupied a much more ambiguous and unstable social role."[13] This writing of queer history from a male perspective continues today, as queer women are relegated to the sidelines by their male counterparts. As long as scripts of queer performativity are written in similar fashion, they will continue to privilege the experiences of gay men to the exclusion of queer women. The story will remain incomplete.

The Price of Admission

Lex and I exit the coffee shop where we just spent the past hour sharing conversation over iced lattes. As we exit, Lex pulls out a pack of cigarettes and lights one up. We are standing in the shade of an awning just outside the entrance to the coffee shop when Lex is approached by an older man with a scraggly beard and dingy clothing. "Hi friend," the man says to Lex, "can I bother you for a smoke?" I am surprised at how forthcoming he is and by Lex's response. "No, I can barely afford my own." Without another beat, Lex and I are cruising back up the sidewalk.

I have been approached for money or cigarettes by persons in every major city I have ever visited and my refusals always involve an apology. Probably a product of my "Midwestern nice" upbringing, I am sure my muttered "sorry" does little more than ease my guilt. But I bristle at Lex's irritation—he is clearly bothered. "I hate that," he says.

> That's why I don't like going to that coffee shop. All these homeless people just hang out there, and they don't even bat an eye at asking you for money or cigarettes. And they wanna tell you this long sob story. Well guess what, honey, I'm hard up too. And you don't wanna hear my story. So why should I listen to yours? I'm just one paycheck away from being on the street myself.

I understand the feeling when money is tight; the inconsistent paychecks I receive as a graduate student make summer living a challenge. But I feel uneasy about his quick dismissal of homeless persons. Considering studies estimate that between 20-40% of homeless youth are queer kids, I am sensitive to how queer persons are disproportionately affected by poverty and homelessness.[14] Lex doesn't seem to share my concern.

This experience is in many ways a small example of a larger scenario: the economic divide among queer persons has been growing. Communication scholar Lisa Henderson argues that since the 1980s, "old strategies of political respectability redeployed to enfranchise some and excise others from new discourses of policy, rights, and access, enough to imagine a new regime of *homo*normativity formed in cooperation with heterosexual privilege."[15] For Henderson, the rise of neoliberal politics "killed queerness," in that it changed the landscape of queer politics from one of radically resisting the status quo to "playing by the club's rules" and assimilating into larger heterosexual culture.[16] The result was a growing chasm between queer persons based on economic resources and social and cultural capital. Hot on the heels of the U.S. Supreme Court's marriage equality ruling, anthropologist Colin Walmsley lamented that "while love may have won for middle and upper class gays, many transgender people, queer people of color and queer homeless youths instead find themselves left behind by a community that has become increasingly defined by the interests of its white, cisgender, middle and upper class members."[17]

This growing class divide became rather evident in my own fieldwork. Rick lives in a lower-class area in Columbus, filled with dark apartments and poorly maintained green spaces. "There's a very ignorant mentality around here," Rick told me.

> If you go to the Short North, or around the university campus, nobody gives two shits about [being queer]. But around here I'm kinda leery . . . some people around here are kinda poor, and our neighborhood is shockingly backwards.

One of Rick's neighbors is disgusted by their lesbian neighbors and told Rick he "doesn't want his kids seeing that." Rick feels uncomfortable being overtly queer around his home, and he avoids many of the places where queer persons gather in the Short North as well. As he told me, "It's basically a caste system."

> It is a barrier. Cuz gay men, they're shallow, and they're vain, narcissistic, selfish. There is that obsession with money, the material things and all that. I'm the songwriter, working a low-paying job that is basically blue-collar. And some people look down on us for that! They look down on me because I don't own a car!

The bourgeois gay culture of the Short North district mirrors cultural depictions of contemporary queer culture. Artsy, in a refined and not quite bohemian way, with exquisite shopping by day and a constant party at night. It is not Rick's scene and in many ways I think he is not invited.

The growing divide between queer persons who "have" and queer persons who "have not" problematizes notions of queer performativity. The image of queer persons in the cultural imaginary is largely affluent, with visions of queer men and women of wealth enjoying a bourgeois appropriation of the bohemian lifestyle. This image is dangerous because it perpetuates an unattainable ideal for many queer persons, a stereotype, as Henderson notes, "that imagines and distrusts queerness as itself an expression of elite derangement."[18] The question of how queer identity is performed, sensed, and responded to is answered incompletely without acknowledging how queerness continues to undergo "changing class configurations as queers enter and navigate the slipstreams of social and

cultural life."[19] As cultural capital continues to be unevenly distributed and disproportionately represented, affluent queers will continue to shape the script of queer performativity that lower-class queer persons cannot perform.

Queer Homogenization

In a number of ways, my troubling of the script for queer performativity has illustrated the limitations of a myopic vision of the queer community, a vision that paints queer persons as a homogenous culture without attention to race, gender, or class differences. Unfortunately, the homogenization of queer culture is a process that has been occurring for quite some time, much to the dismay of queer rights activists across the country. Schulman, for one, is adamant that the collective queer consciousness was replaced with a heterosexually-driven imagination during and after the AIDS crisis in the 80s and 90s. She argues:

> The visibility created by AIDS forced the dominant group to change their stance. They could no longer insist that homosexuality did not exist. What they could do is find representative homosexuals with whom they were comfortable, and integrate them into some realm of public conversation. . . . It was crucial to the containment crisis that acceptable gay personalities be identified and positioned as "leaders," even if they had no grassroots base. It's kind of like the CIA setting up a puppet government.[20]

There is little wonder that depictions of queer culture and references to queer performativity perpetuate an affluent, white, gay male perspective. As Schulman argues, it is precisely that perspective that came to dominate the queer imagination.

My participants voiced their encounters with this queer homogenization frequently. Elliot, for instance, reflected on the creation of places that attracted queer persons:

> There are places where gays know they can go because they're advertised as such, especially promoted by gay culture as it's portrayed in the media or whatever. I mean, you know the stereotype that gay men just like having sex and they're all shallow, vacuous people who just go to places to hook up. And that's irritating.

Similarly, James—my oldest participant—shared his thoughts on the performance of gay masculinity:

> As we are more accepted as a community, we're going to have more straight friends and we're mixing with those straight friends, so that's what I see as the catalyst for change. We're already seeing it in our community, where young gay males are all tops, and they're all masculine.

James also noted that queer trends find their ways into mainstream heterosexual culture. "I think there's an interesting interaction," he said. "We've seen it in dress, in trends, where the straight community follows our pattern, and adopts some of the things we do." Such processes of assimilation and appropriation have facilitated the emergence of a particular presence and acceptance of queerness in mainstream culture. Though incrementalist gay rights advocates support such "upward" movement, it is not without limitations.[21]

James reflected on what he saw as the opportunities and constraints of queer homogenization quite extensively during our conversation. “The gay community is less distinguishable from the straight community,” he said.

> I see more of a blurring. As straight people become more accepting, and our social relationships are less limited to the gay bar or the bathhouse, we’re going to blend. The lines are going to be far less rigid. Which will make it harder to identify a [queer] person.

James’s reflection illustrates the tensions of queer homogenization. Its potential to radically revise queer/straight relationships promises to change queer persons’ access to public spaces and public platforms. As particular versions of queerness make their way into mainstream culture, our ability to identify one another is challenged. As Ahmed notes, such assimilation enables us to “‘extend’ the straight line to some queers, those who can inhabit the forms of marriage and family, which would keep other queers, those whose lives are lived for different points, ‘off line.’”[22]

These stories demonstrate that the implications of queer cultural homogenization are rather profound. When such a narrow image of queer identity is projected around us, our abilities to perform queer identities are limited. Our senses are dulled. The stories we tell are all the same. The community that unites around this vision of queerness should not be outright condemned, but it should be seen for what it is: limited, exclusionary. What, then, is the future of queer performativity? Of queer identity politics? In the face of so many obstacles to queer comm/unity, what lies on the horizon? And is that horizon queer?

Queer Futures: An Opening

I began this chapter by voicing my desire to avoid ending what I perceive to be an ongoing story of queer performativity. Yet the story, as it has unfolded in this chapter, has become a dismal one far removed from the hopeful, resistant tone with which this project started. The here and now of queer identity might be disenchanting and the narrative depressing. What hope can be found in the story of marginalized persons seeking identification with one another through performative means sanctioned by the dominant group that suppresses them? This dilemma seems rather paradoxical. Yet that very paradox holds the possibility of revising queer performativity for the future.

Muñoz argues that queerness is a futurity, "a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present."[23] His vision of queerness as a utopia seems, at first glance, a romanticized and idealized notion: a minority group laboring through daily life in the search of a better tomorrow. It is the stuff of music and movies and stories ripe with the promise of happy horizons if only we survive the labor of the present. Despite the many challenges to queer performativity, its obstacles and its fault lines, there remains in the impulse for recognition and identification a utopic drive altogether queer.

The queer cultural homogenization brought about by assimilation into heterosexual culture is, as Muñoz argues, "a recent symptom of the erosion of the gay and lesbian political imagination."[24] One of the tragic effects of this erosion is a feeling of being unsettled, of not fitting here or there. "The present is not enough," according to Muñoz, because "it is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel

the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and 'rational' expectations."[25] Queer persons exist within largely heterosexual cultural contexts that feign social equality while maintaining a position for queer persons at the margins. As aspects of queer culture continue to be appropriated into the mainstream, queer persons continue to see glimpses of themselves depicted in larger culture. This appropriation and selective representation constructs a paradox of belonging: we are everywhere, but segmented. And in our everywhere-ness, we are displaced.

I believe this paradox of belonging is what sustains the impulse toward queer performativity and queer recognition. On some level, whether consciously or unknowingly, queer persons sense that all is not quite as it seems to be, not all that it should be. Despite cultural messages that praise the presence of equality, of having arrived at some unspecified destination, queerness remains at a threshold, neither in nor out, uncertain of what comes next. Queer performativity is, in a way, a tentative step across that threshold. It is a questioning of what lies just ahead, what awaits just beyond the here and now. It is a choice to venture into the future, in the hopes of catching a glimpse of an as-yet unknown horizon ripe with potential. As Muñoz asserts, "to live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer."[26] By embodying queerness, queer persons claim a position in the present with an eye toward the future.

That claim is itself paradoxical. Adams notes that coming out is a risky endeavor because "people might consider same-sex attraction and/or a LGBQ identity inappropriate and/or immoral."[27] Performing queer therefore challenges discourses of

queer stigma and shame as they intersect with cultural narratives of gay equality and acceptance. Further, Adams argues that gender inversion conflates meanings associated with sex, gender, and sexuality such that "any manipulation of sex and gender might motivate others to mark a person as having same-sex attraction or as LGBQ whether or not the person wants such ascription."[28] By conflating traditional and stereotypical understandings of sex/gender/sexuality, queer performativity mobilizes the heterosexual matrix to signify an abject and unintelligible body as knowable. Queer performativity is, as a result, a claim to a subject position within everyday life that is simultaneously rooted in the present and directed toward the future. It juxtaposes contradictory discourses about sexuality, identity, and intelligibility and directs attention toward what queer identity might become if we dare to imagine new frames of understanding.

This is, I believe, the resistant and revisionist promise of performativity. Butler has long argued that performativity creates possibilities of resisting cultural frames of intelligibility that render persons of gender and sexual minority statuses unknowable and abject. Yet, as I have argued throughout this project, gender performativity is often disregarded as a strategy for both queer signification and queer resistance. Although gender inversion is far from the exemplary paradigm for thinking about signifying queer identity, Butler maintains an intimate relationship between gender and sexuality, one that I argue enables the very cultural resistance that scholars are so quick to dismiss. According to Butler,

> The heterosexual logic that requires that identification and desire be mutually exclusive is one of the most reductive of heterosexism's psychological

> instruments: if one identifies *as* a given gender, one must desire a different gender. . . . [Therefore] the heterosexual matrix proves to be an *imaginary* logic that insistently issues forth its own unmanageability.[29]

Instead of continuing to prop up such a reductive distinction between gender and sexual performativity, Butler argues that "it ought to be possible to assert a set of non-causal and non-reductive relations between gender and sexuality . . . to establish their constitutive interrelationship."[30] Despite arguments to the contrary, rigid notions of gender expectations provide the very scaffold needed to undermine compulsory heterosexuality, thereby enabling queer performativity and the subversion of heterosexist frames of intelligibility. All of this is accomplished through the performativity of identity, particularly gender and sexuality. As Butler contends,

> Performativity describes this relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, this turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a "pure" opposition, a "transcendence" of contemporary relations of power, but a difficult labor of forging a future from resources inevitably impure.[31]

Forging a queer future—the very utopian project to which Muñoz was committed—therefore involves accessing those scripts that have historically kept queer persons at the margins of society, for the purpose of resignifying identities and creating futures more open to queerness.

Queer performativity is not a politically neutral accomplishment. But then, it never was. As long as power relations continue to structure binary sexes, binary genders,

and compulsory heterosexualities as the only fully intelligible identities, queerness will remain a contested subject position prone to assimilative attack and cultural erasure. But this very process by which the heterosexual matrix congeals is its own foil. For as long as queer persons are denied frames of cultural intelligibility, they will continue to resist those social structures that render them abject. They will continue to body forth their identities as they demand to be recognized. They will continue to generate and respond to the affect of queerness as they search for sympathetic others who share their desire to be known. Queer performativity has never been, nor will it ever be, free from the politics of identity differences that threaten to destabilize queer mobilization. By virtue of being so deeply entrenched within those politics, queer performativity promises to continue its revision of what it means to perform queer, sense queer, and be queer.

Chapter 8 Notes

1. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 149.
2. Hajek, Abrams, and Murachver, "Female, Straight, Male, Gay, and Worlds Betwixt and Between," 45.
3. Paul, "The Bisexual Identity," 56.
4. Jagose, *Queer Theory*, 74.
5. Peron, "Not Queer, Just Gay. No, Thanks.," paras. 4–6.
6. Teunis, "Sexual Objectification and the Construction of Whiteness in the Gay Male Community," 274.
7. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 8.
8. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 10.
9. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 32.
10. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 115.
11. Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 163.
12. Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 157.
13. Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 157.
14. See "America's Shame"; "LGBT Homeless."
15. Henderson, *Love and Money*, 2.
16. Henderson, *Love and Money*, 3.
17. Walmsley, "The Queers Left Behind," para. 7.

18. Henderson, *Love and Money*, 8.
19. Henderson, *Love and Money*, 10.
20. Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 115–116.
21. See Spade, for instance, who argues that "the compromises made in lesbian and gay rights efforts to win formal legal equality gains have come with enormous costs: opportunities for coalition have been missed, large sectors of people affected by homophobia have been alienated, and the actual impact of the 'victories' has been so limited as to neutralize their effect on the populations most vulnerable to the worst harms of homophobia." *Normal Life*, 15.
22. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 173.
23. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
24. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 21.
25. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 27.
26. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 26.
27. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 97.
28. Adams, *Narrating the Closet*, 90.
29. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 239.
30. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 240.
31. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 241.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Opening: Demographic Questions

What is your name?
Is there a pseudonym you would like me to use when referring to you?
How old are you?
Please, describe how you identify your sexual orientation.
Probe: Why do you identify that way? What does that label mean to you?
Probe: How long have you identified that way?
Please, describe how you identify your gender identity.
Probe: Why do you identify that way? What does that label mean to you?
What does "queer" mean to you?

Focus: ID Performance

1. Describe how "out" you consider yourself.
    a. *Probe:* Why do you think this?
2. How important is it that people know your sexual orientation?
    a. *Probe:* Why do you feel that way?
    b. *Probe:* Who knows your sexuality? Or, with whom do you share that information?
    c. *Probe:* How do you decide who gets to know about your sexuality?
3. How do you deliberately make your sexuality apparent to others?
    a. *Probe:* Please tell me a story of how you've portrayed your sexuality.
4. Describe some ways that you make your sexuality known to others?
    a. *Probe:* (If about talk) How do you tell them? What do you say?
    b. *Probe:* (If about show) How do you display your sexuality? What do you do?
    c. *Probe:* Please tell me a story of when you've done these things.
5. Describe to me how people "received" your sexuality? How have they responded? Think of examples of incidents.
    a. *Probe:* What stories do you have about people's responses to your sexuality?
    b. *Probe:* What favorable reactions have you experienced? How did you feel?

c. *Probe:* What negative reactions have you experienced? How did you feel & respond?

Focus: Attunement

6. Tell me about your queer/LGBT friend circle(s).
   a. How important to you is having queer/LGBT friends? Why?
   b. When you made new queer/LGBT friends, what was important to you? What were you looking for?

7. When you meet someone new, how do you determine their sexuality?
   a. Would you tell me a story about a time you "figured out" someone's sexuality?

8. Tell me how you recognize someone as being queer/LGBT?
   a. How does it make you feel when you recognize them that way?
   b. Why do you think you feel this way?

9. Describe how you feel when someone recognizes you as queer/LGBT?
   a. Please tell me a story about someone who you knew recognized you as queer/LGBT without you telling them.

10. How important to you is being surrounded by other queer/LGBT persons? Why? Why not?

    a. Please tell me a story about being with (or not) other queer/LGBT persons.
    b. Where do you go to be around other queer/LGBT persons?
    c. Why do you think those spaces appeal to queer/LGBT persons?
    d. How do you feel in those spaces?

Focus: Intersectionality

11. Tell me what you think of the relationship between gender (masculinity/femininity) and sexuality?

12. How do you think your many identities (i.e., race, class, etc.) affect how you show your sexuality?

13. If you're comfortable, please tell me how you identify your race.

14. If comfortable, please tell me how you think about your social class.

Closure:

15. Is there anything else about these matters that you would like to share with me? Anything you think I should have asked, but did not?

16. What questions do you have for me?

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