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doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/2426646>

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COMING OUT NARRATIVES: REALITIES OF INTERSECTIONALITY

by

MARNI ALYSON BROWN

Under the Direction of Dawn M. Baunach

ABSTRACT

Coming out of the closet and sharing a disclosure narrative is considered an essential act to becoming gay (Jagose 1996; Meeks 2006). Although coming out experiences vary by time and place, sexuality scholars note the assumed difficulties when claiming a non-heteronormative identity, including stress, isolation, and rejection (Chauncey 1994; Faderman 1991; Herdt 1993; 1996; Savin-Williams and Ream 2003). In the late 1990s, a post-closet framework emerged arguing that coming out of the closet has become more common and less difficult; “American homosexuals have normalized and routinized their homosexuality to a degree where the closet plays a lesser role in their lives” (Seidman Meeks and Traschen 1999:19). Moreover, post- gay activists and writers such as James Collard (1998) contended that being and doing gay “authentically” involves moving past oppression and despair and living an openly gay life. In light of such arguments, this dissertation research was constructed to explore coming out experiences. I collected 60 narratives from self- identified lesbians and gay men living in Atlanta, New York, and Miami and analyzed these narratives using an intersectional framework.

Intersectionality highlights the ways in which multiple dimensions of socially constructed relationships and categories interact, shaping simultaneous levels of social inequality (Crenshaw 1989; 1995). Through the multiple and sometimes complicated intersections of race, class, gender, capital, place, religion, and the body, my analysis exposes institutional and interactional dimensions of power, privilege, and oppression in coming out narratives. Indeed, the kind of "American" or "routinized" homosexuality described by post-closet scholars privileges white, non-gender conforming, middle-class individuals, most often male and urban. Coming out stories that express or embody elements of non-normativity are marginalized and marked as different. In conclusion, intersectionality exposes how privilege functions as a dimension to coming out stories, leading to marginalization and oppression amongst already discriminated identities.

INDEX WORDS: Coming out, Intersectionality, Post-closet, Gay, Lesbian, Normativity, Privilege, Marginalization

COMING OUT NARRATIVES: REALITIES OF INTERSECTIONALITY

by

MARNI ALYSON BROWN

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor in Philosophy

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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2011

COMING OUT NARRATIVES: REALITIES OF INTERSECTIONALITY

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December 2011

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my beloved wife, Casey Brown. Your unconditional love and support has helped me get through this exhausting, daunting, and amazing experience. “I am my beloved and my beloved is mine.”

To my mother Genie, you taught me “to reach for the moon; if I fall I will be dancing among the stars.” Thank you for advising me to be honest with myself and to accept change.

To my father and friend Jeff, your trust and encouragement have been instrumental in my success.

Without my parents’ love I would not be the individual I am today. Thank you for loving me for who I am.

To my brother and best friend Jason, “who would have known that mom and dad only ‘breed gay,’ lucky them!” You inspire me! I love you.

To my Grandma Edna, the matriarch of our family and first influential feminist in my life, you have taught me that life is about love and education. I am forever grateful for our long talks.

I will be forever grateful to my chair, Dawn Baunach. Dawn, you provided me the space to grow with this project. Thank you for the support and encouragement to find my sociological self.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the help and encouragement of Griff Tester, Don Reitzes, Adia Wingfield-Harvey, Memo Konrad, Amanda Jungels, and Breeanne Cloudus. Your insightful contributions helped me turn this project into an intersectional work of sociological art.

Melissa Metcalf, thank you for the support, advice, friendship, and insight throughout the duration of this project.

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CHAPTER 1: HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

Sexuality has always mattered to western society (D’Emilio and Faderman 1998; Tiefer 2004); it plays a vital role in reproduction and capitalism while also defining gender roles and social interactions. Western sexuality is based upon Judeo-Christian doctrine, puritanical principles, and patriarchal rhetoric (D’Emilio and Faderman 1998; Seidman 1993; 2002). Sexuality defined by faith and biological gender roles views sex and gender as inherent components of human identity; “sexuality is the most natural thing about us” (Weeks 1986:4). Thus, in its myriad of purposes, including reproduction, family life, the division of labor, and intimacy, sexuality is rarely challenged (Fausto-Sterling 2000). Invisible yet dominant, sexuality is functional to the order of society (Richardson and Seidman 1993; 2002; Seidman 2002).

Historically and currently, sexuality has been discussed and understood in relation to gender and sex. All three categories—sexuality, gender, and sex—are contentious, existing at the heart of many social, political, cultural, moral, and religious debates. Social institutions such as medicine, politics, and religion attempt to remain the dominant force in defining the boundaries, rules, and regulations pertaining to sexuality, gender, and sex. Reproduction, family practices, and labor markets justify medical, political, and religious structures’ legitimization of sexuality, gender, and sex as natural and inherent to the human body. However, feminist, post-structuralist, queer, and social constructionist frameworks challenge assumption of sexuality as inherent and natural. Feminist, post-structuralist, and social constructionist scholars claim that sexuality is a social product, a social fiction, as well as a hegemonic construction created out of cultural meanings, social relationships, and power politics (Butler 1990; Lorber 1994; Martin

1994). Thus, sexuality is influenced by cultural and political power structures, creating social norms and scripts.

Social constructionism is a “multi-layered and multifaceted process” (Jackson 2006). It explains multiple experiences and positions in society by challenging all that is assumed to be natural. That is why feminist and social constructionist scholar Judith Lorber argues in her groundbreaking work *Paradoxes of Gender*, “for humans the social is the natural” (Lorber 1994; 2010:117). Natural rhetoric is privileged and disguised as normal, such as socially prescribed sexuality, gender, and sex. Therefore, sexuality, gender, and sex ideologies are perceived as natural—even masked as biological, preventing many from questioning everyday arrangements and practices. Sexuality’s major role in everyday interactions is thus understood as vital and necessary to the function of society but often goes unnoticed unless presented as outside social scripts and norms.

By challenging natural assumptions of identity, social constructionism recognizes that identity is a social process that continually evolves on macro, or structural, and micro, or individual, levels (Blumer 1969). Recognizing that social institutions such as religion and medicine have the power to impact social practices and the spaces we inhabit, social constructionism questions social institutions that have been associated with natural frameworks, promoting identity and presentation—specifically sexuality, gender, and sex—as finite and static. Conversely, social constructionism argues that identity is malleable and flexible, shifting and transforming with cultural, social, and political events.

Ebbs and flows in identity, whether it is sexuality, race, class, or nationality, are shaped by the interplay between the dominant voices, or cultural gatekeepers, of society and their marginalized counterparts (Collins 1995; King 2000). In response, social constructionists include

subjectivity in their analyses, asking who we are in relation to others and how our locations shape our social positions. Social constructionism is concerned with social and cultural meaning based on an individual's or group's social locations as well as everyday interactions. It argues that meaning and social significance exist at multiple levels, places, and spaces; resistance from individuals or groups in marginalized positions also plays a role in defining social markers and knowledge. Uncovering multiple truths challenges natural ideologies and demonstrates the social production of sexuality.

Sexuality's complex role in society is connected to various cultural practices, boundaries, and rewards, making it difficult to notice and question such ideologies. Hence, it is assumed that all individuals are born with a sexuality, sex, and gender—that these three categories are aligned and function harmoniously. For example, the social construct sex exists as its own act and category, but in conjunction with sexuality is used to define normal and abnormal activities. Sex—commonly defined as intercourse between a man and woman—is described as natural and functional to gender. Sex between males and females, heterosexuality, is highly valued and valorized, but also used to demoralize all “unnatural” or “other” sexual acts. Therefore, any individual that deviates from “natural” sexuality, sex, or gender is assumed to be transcending all three categories and does not receive protection or benefits from heterosexuality.

Heterosexuality

Much of mainstream United States history does not intentionally address sex and sexuality (Seidman 1991; 1993; 2002; Tiefer 2004). Relying on the governance of social institutions such as medicine, law, and religion, one might find male and female tasks and assignments, but very little discussion of sex relations and erotica (Lorber 1994). In this way, the study of sexuality and heterosexuality specifically is a rather recent occurrence with less

scholarly attention. With little discussion and intentional normalization, heterosexuality is often difficult to locate in society and on the body, as opposed to visible identity markers such as gender and race. Heterosexuality, like male and white privilege, is normalized and embedded into everyday arrangements, often going unnoticed. Thus, it is most visible through symbols, such as wedding bands and other identity markers. When studying heterosexuality, one must locate its symbols, privileged locations and oppressive positions, such as marriage, taxes, and medical benefits. Most visible through its intersections, heterosexuality is noticeable and easily read through one's gender (Levernez 1990). Hence, sexuality in general is concealable and wrapped in other identity factors. Because heterosexuality is normalized through polarized gender practices, heterosexuality and non-heterosexuality is most common when one's gender performance is read as inappropriate and heterosexuality has been violated. Heterosexuality's identity is thus pronounced as dominant through the oppression of non-heteronormative gender performances.

Studying and locating the origins of heterosexuality begins with a social analysis of nineteenth-century history (Ingraham 2002; 2008). During this time, men and women were defined and classified by what were considered the most significant and economically valuable social categories: gender, race, and class (Collins 2000; D'Emilio and Faderman 1998; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Lorde 1970). Sexuality was interwoven into gender and achieved, accomplished, or scrutinized at the intersection of race, class, and gender presentation (Ingraham 2002; 2008). These classifications have been and continue to be the most recognized and valued characteristics of identity—positions of both oppression and privilege. Western society valorizes the male gender, white race, and upper-class status (Connell 1992). The stories of white, wealthy men have been used to tell history, describe experiences, and create knowledge (Johnson

1997). Moreover, patriarchy, male domination and male centeredness, in conjunction with racism and white privilege, support capitalism by suppressing non-white poor men and women.

A study of nineteenth-century history society reveals that middle-class, white men were assigned to public responsibilities with material and economic benefits while middle-class, white women were subordinated to domestic tasks (D'Emilio and Faderman 1998; Faderman 1991). A meeting point for men and women was sex with the goal of procreation. Lacking love or intimacy, sex was not attached to an identity (Seidman 1996; 1997; 2003). Rather, procreation was a must as the United States was focused on building large families in order to manage labor and agricultural duties around the home. Thus, male and female sexual relations needed no label because this was the only recognized sexuality. However, women's movements, including feminist activity of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, ushered in great change due to the fact that many women joined the workforce during the war and began relying less on marriage for financial security and social identity (Wilchins 2004). At the same time, men began transitioning from agricultural to industrial work, shifting definitions of masculinity. As gender roles in relation to work and family life were altered, so was the function of sex and sexuality.

Notably, World War II challenged traditional notions of sexuality, gender, and sex (Chauncey 1994; Faderman 1991; Kennedy and Davis 1993). Women, particularly white women because women of color have always worked outside of the home, were working in factories while men were overseas (Faderman 1991). For some women, this was the first opportunity to work with other women outside of the home, make money, and share experiences. In fact, factory life fostered the development of same-sex relationships. As wage earners, often for the first time, in well-paying jobs, wearing "men's" clothes, performing "men's" work, and living and working with other women; many women fell in love and explored the hidden gay

nightlife that cities had to offer (Berube 1991; Faderman 1991; Rupp 2009). For the first time, women also had the opportunity to enlist in the armed forces or military, where romantic relationships developed within units, fostering camaraderie and unity. Concurrently, men that traveled overseas had the opportunity to experience other cultures and become exposed to other interpretations of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Even with new opportunities and understandings of women and men, however, as the war came to a close, America shifted into post-war culture with an emphasis on the nuclear family of breadwinner father and homemaker mother (Sullivan 2003). The establishment and maintenance of conservative and traditional practices in the 1950s—as recommended by the United States government and encouraged by religious and medical institutions—defined heterosexuality (Ingrham 2008). Heterosexuality, the identity and practice assigned to male-female sexual relations, became western society’s common, default, and reference sexuality—the “true” sexuality (Ingraham 2002; 2008; Tiefer 2004).

Similar to gender, heterosexuality is a practice consistently performed and used in social interactions (Wilchins 2004). Heterosexuality is accomplished when men and women hold hands, men open the door for women, women take their husbands’ last names, and men save up two months of income for an engagement ring. As a system, it is both systemic and systematic, functioning on multiple social levels, in turn making heterosexuality difficult to recognize and impossible to ignore (Johnson 1997). Thus, doing and being a part of heterosexuality allows for the regulation of all sexual and social interactions (Ingraham 2002; 2008; Martin 1994).

As an institution and a practice, heterosexuality maintains its dominance through its relationship with gender and the assignment of heterogenders (Ingraham 2005; 2008; Wilchins 2004). From the moment we enter the world we are labeled as girls or boys and society attaches

meaning systems to those heterogenders that correspond with an assumed heterosexual sexual identity (Ingraham 2002; 2008). Jackson (2006) claims that both gender and sexuality are strongly linked; gender is used to portray and demonstrate heterosexual acts and practices, such as dating rituals, marriage, careers, tasks, and responsibilities (Ingraham 2002; 2008). The gender-heterosexual relationship presents heterogenders as practices that are taken for granted, ordinary, and persistent, without explanation. Heterogenders instruct boyfriends, husbands, girlfriends, and wives to act according to gendered scripts.

Supported by religion, politics, sport, family, and other social institutions, heterosexuality established its dominance by explaining itself as intrinsic to all human existence (Ingraham 2002; 2008; Warner 1993). Heterosexuality is displayed, viewed, and made visible through gender at the intersection of other social markers—this association with other components of identity is what makes heterosexuality seem stable, overwhelming, and necessary to human interaction and social welfare. Moreover, heterosexuality has become associated with certain gender, racial, and class practices, articulating a specific western heterosexuality: monogamous, reproductive, gender normative, white, and middle-class (Martin 1994; Sullivan 2003). Therefore, when an individual comes out and declares a non-heterosexual identity, dependent on discloser and social institution, relationships and social positions have the potential to be altered. Social institutions and identities are revealed as constructs, unstable, and able to change. However, polarization is a powerful tool, creating divisive politics and legislation. In this way, social institutions, functioning with heterosexual undertones, often times do not recognize non-heterosexual identities and if they do, it is a selected non-heterosexual group. Heterosexuality remains powerful and dominant while non-heterosexual groups bicker over politics and representation.

Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity, the persistency and normalcy of heterosexuality in social interactions and social institutions, plays a vital role in shaping western sexuality (Warner 1993). Not only is heteronormativity a component and function of heterosexuality, but it is also a foundational component to homosexuality. Dating back to the nineteenth century, before the term heteronormativity was created, the concept existed; male-female intercourse was the only acceptable sexual relationship. Men and women that engaged in same-sex relations were thought of in the same light as sexual infractions that occurred outside the sanctity of marriage, such as adultery.

With industrialization on the rise, hostility toward same-sex relations became more common and aggressive (Chauncey 1994; D'Emilio and Faderman 1998; Kennedy and Davis 1993). Homosexuality was a sin, an abomination against Judeo-Christian traditions, and the law branded homosexuality as a serious crime. Along with criminal sanctioning, the medical community demonized gay men and lesbians; they were perceived as immoral, unhealthy and inferior human beings (Seidman 1993; 2002; 2004). Homosexuals lived in fear of social scrutiny and ostracization, and if their homosexual behavior was exposed they were in danger of criminalization. For women in particular, any relationships or activities that merely suggested homosexuality—meaning any woman that challenged any aspect of traditional womanhood—were seen as immoral and suspect (Faderman 1991; Kennedy and Davis 1993; Rupp 2009). It became apparent that in order to maintain one's livelihood, homosexual desires needed to be concealed and kept secret.

Significantly, the growing medical community denounced homosexuality as an illness, and psychiatrists placed homosexuality in the sphere of pathology (Valocchi 1999). Doctors and scientists intertwined gender and sexuality and argued that homosexuality violated “laws of nature” by confusing appropriate roles of men and women, thus pronouncing heterosexuality as the dominant sexuality. Effeminate men and masculine women, in terms of physical appearance and personality, became dangerous (Chauncey 1994; Faderman 1991; Kennedy and Davis 1993; Valocchi 1999). Additionally, heterosexuality maintained its dominance in the military, an institution that despised homosexuality and has a long history of excluding and evicting gays from the ranks. Gays were considered threatening, and homosexual behavior was thought to undermine military service (Berube 1991).

Despite the military’s exclusionary efforts, however, the military and homosexuals collided during World War II. Military personnel had to learn to tolerate gays as all men and women were needed in the war; however, gay relationships remained private and closeted and were only tolerated as long as they did not disrupt the unit (Berube 1991). This “secret” policy was a radical change in the lives of gay men and women. Many American service men and women discovered their homosexuality during the war and ended their isolation although military officials still policed effeminate men and masculine women (Berube 1991; Faderman 1991). Due to their gender presentations, these individuals were assumed to be the most authentic and dangerous homosexuals, requiring supervision. Thus, heteronormativity was maintained even with same-sex behaviors becoming more popular and accessible.

The 1950s represent the epitome of heteronormativity due to the fact that the closet emerged as a structure and tool to hide same-sex identities and highlight heterosexuality. Following World War II, Republican Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House

Committee Un-American Activities were concerned that western masculinity was under attack (Adam 1995). McCarthyism focused on restoring pre-war social practices, namely preserving traditional gender and sexual roles as connected to patriarchy and heteronormativity. From the establishment of the suburbs and the highway system to women returning from the factories and maintaining a place in the home, heterogender-tradition was held at the highest regard (Ingraham 2002). For those complicating the traditional values of the 1950s with non-traditional sexual or gender desires and roles, the closet became the safest place. Non-heterosexual identities such as gay and lesbian were often hidden, forcing many gays and lesbians to live double lives, using the closet for protection and safety.

At the same time scholarly research on sexuality was beginning to develop and progress. For instance, Alfred Kinsey (1948; 1953) reported the presence of homosexual behavior in males and females, but not necessarily in relation to any social, psychological, or biological factors; homosexual and heterosexual practices were evaluated on the same value-free scale (Valocchi 1999). Evelyn Hooker (1965) also provided the first empirical evidence that homosexuality was not indicative of psychological disturbance (Cain 1991; Valocchi 1999). Hooker's study is especially significant because it contradicted the "polluted deviant" model present in most psychological and medical textbooks of the time. Scholarly advancements in conjunction with political oppression ignited resistance and activism.

In 1951, the Mattachine Society emerged in Los Angeles, California with the purpose of deconstructing and reconstructing the 1950s lifestyle of gay people (Adam 1995; Sullivan 2003). The organization was determined to challenge anti-homosexual discrimination in the midst of McCarthyism, an ideology outlined by patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism, and racism. Even so, the 1960s homosexual still inherited the 1950s medical model of a sexual and gender

deviant. The idea was well established that the homosexual was an abnormal, dangerous, immoral type of person and the heterosexual was good, clean, and moral (Adam 1995; Seidman 2002; 2004; Sullivan 2003). In response, many gays took on the “assimilated” gay identity that developed out the social movement work of the 1950s. The Mattachine Society and Daughters of the Bilitis adopted an assimilated mentality, subscribing to the idea that in order to avoid social persecution a homosexual must slip into society with little disruption, including dress and behavior (Sullivan 2003).

The assimilationist model met resistance in 1960s and 1970s (Stein 1997). In conjunction with civil rights movement, gays and lesbians recognized social inequality on various levels. Gay social and political life questioned the medical pathology of the homosexual and negotiated a “gay place” in society (Adam 1995; Stein 1997; Seidman 2002; Richardson and Seidman 2002). Gays and lesbians became more verbal about social misrepresentation and discrimination, especially the inherited moral/heterosexual versus the immoral/homosexual sexual identity.

Women of the 1960s and 1970s were involved in various social movements (Faludi 1991; hooks 1984; Nicholson 1994; Sullivan 2003; Wilchins 2004). Many were involved in and simultaneously connected to civil rights, feminism, and gay liberation. The 1970s represented a time of social progress, challenge, and change, critiquing the exclusivity of second-wave feminist scholarship. While second-wave feminists of the 1960s sparked several conversations regarding women’s role in society—especially in relation to marriage, equal pay, the division of labor, and education—lesbian feminists and women of color of the 1970s often felt marginalized from second-wave feminist politics (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1995; Lorde 1984; King 1993).

1970s lesbian feminism revealed how normalized power arrangements between men and women privileged men and subordinated women (Bunch 1975). Bunch, along with Rita Mae Brown (1975), Atkinson (1974), The Furies Collective, and Redstockings (1975), argued that normative heterosexuality was perceived as natural when in fact it is socially occurring through the domination of women at home, in the workplace, and in the family; women are oppressed through heterosexuality (Bunch 1975). Lesbian feminists uncovered the deep-seated oppressive relationship between heterosexuality and gender; in order to deconstruct heterosexuality, gender oppression must be dismantled simultaneously. Even though gender can exist as a separate classification experience from sexuality, the two categories are portrayed as intrinsically connected, synced as one. Thus, for individuals that do not identify as heterosexual, oppression exists on multiple levels and is enacted through gender relationships.

However, gender and sexuality never exist alone or in isolation; intersectional analysis explains that gender, race, class, and sexuality are social categories dependent on one another for meaning (Crenshaw 1995; Collins 2000; King 1998). Yet, racial and gender normativity plague all aspects of social life, including marginalized spaces, communities, and movements. Men and women of color, of various ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and sexualities, were actively involved in civil rights, women's movements, and gay activism. Often discriminated for intersectional differences, the resistance movements of the 1960s and 1970s made great strides in social progress, yet they also misrepresented social equality by fostering "separate and different but equal" rhetoric and practices (Wilchins 2004).

The 1960s and 1970s challenged heteronormativity and mainstreamed the oppressive nature of heterosexuality, but with that came public harassment, political discrimination, and cultural resistance (D'Emilio 1983). A backlash presented itself as opposition to gay and lesbian

identities and communities. Bar raids were a popular way for police and local governments to exercise control, domination, and manage the powerless and disrespectful (Adams 1995). One significant bar raid took place on June 27–28, 1967, when police were met with resistance as they raided a gay bar called Stonewall Inn in New York’s Greenwich Village. Rather than listening to the police and succumbing to their control, drag queens, dykes, and everyday street people confronted the police and a new collective energy emerged. Despite their efforts and the growing gay rights movement, traditional gender roles, as imposed through conventional sexuality, marriage, and family, continued to be mainstreamed through popular television shows and movies, educational practices, and sporting activities.

Feminist and radical lesbian scholars continued retaliating through scholarship working to deconstruct heteronormativity and expose how women are oppressed by heterosexuality. Lesbian feminist scholar Adrienne Rich (1986) confronted the institution of heterosexuality, arguing that heterosexuality is not natural but present in every part of social life as a contrived manipulative practice, benefiting men’s lives. Rich’s work highlights the status of heterosexuality; heterosexuality is privileged because it has become a standardized institution (see also Ingraham 2002; 2008). Thus, if an individual is not heterosexual, one must confront heterosexuality in every aspect of social life, ranging from family relationships to colleagues at work. Similarly, French philosopher and feminist Monique Wittig (1980; 1982) argued that heterosexuality produces a category of sex, placing women in a sexual being position. The sex category status traps women into heterosexuality; “for sex is a category which women cannot be outside of...they are seen and made sexually available to men” (Wittig 1980; 1982:7). These classic and significant works challenged the institution of heterosexuality and heteronormativity while simultaneously adding visibility to non-heterosexual identities. Lesbian feminists of 1970s

and 1980s were the most common scholars and activists challenging heteronormativity because of the male privilege and patriarchal assumptions associated with heterosexuality. However, the course of gay and lesbian scholarship began to change in the 1980s when the HIV/AIDS epidemic changed the face of gay identities and activism.

HIV and AIDS have been socially constructed as a social problem, designed as a gay disease through the lens of heteronormativity and family values. HIV/AIDS became linked to homosexuality with the help of the media, politics, medicine, religion and physical illness. In the early 1980s, media and political accounts of HIV and AIDS emphasized its association with a lifestyle outside of the morally acceptable cultural mainstream (Pollock, Lillie, and Vettes 1993). For example, famous actor and celebrity Rock Hudson who later in his career came out of the closet, was diagnosed with the disease in 1985, further symbolically linking homosexuality to AIDS. Any opportunity to confirm a relationship between AIDS and homosexuality was seized by mainstream media and conservative political opportunists.

In many ways, HIV and AIDS rhetoric of the 1980s was used to remind heterosexual society of the polluted “homosexual model” that plagued 1940s and 1950s homosexual culture. In this way, heterosexuality was pronounced as the only healthy sexuality and homosexuality as a sickness (Seidman 1991; 1993; 2002; 2002; 2004). At the same time, however, this misconstrued and socially constructed relationship provided gay communities with an opportunity to unify under the umbrella of gay activism and create visibility. Gay life’s relationship with the HIV virus and AIDS pandemic, fostered grass root organizations and community activism. Because social traditionalists used AIDS as a political risk, activists (ACT UP, Queer Nation, and Lesbian Avengers) mobilized and unified communities transforming cultural politics (Rimmerman 2002).

Political unity and challenging heteronormativity encouraged already existing rifts in the larger gay and lesbian communities. Individuals and groups often aligned with assimilationist practices argued for tolerance and acceptance into the dominant culture (Sullivan 2003). Claiming that in general, little difference exists between homosexuals and heterosexuals; a focus on sameness was critical. On the other hand, liberationists busted out of the closets, claiming queerness and challenging traditional notions of sex and gender (Seidman 2004; Sullivan 2003). For liberationists, it was essential to protest that difference matters and existing social institutions are oppressive. In this way coming out is necessary in order to fight for social change.

Queer scholarship took note of assimilationist and liberationist discussions while also spending time on the deconstruction of heteronormativity. Contesting binary notions of sexuality and challenging the idea that heterosexuality is needed to understand homosexuality—queer theory explains that there are multiple ways to experience and understand sexuality and gender (Seidman 2002; Sullivan 2003; Warner 1993). Simply put, sexuality, whether one identifies as gay, straight, bi or queer, is more involved and evolved than who one sleeps with. While at the same time, experiencing sexuality can be just about whom one sleeps with. As Adam (1995) explains, queer activists and theorists value and retain the particularity and difference developed in gay and lesbian cultural forms. Queer writing, activism, and identities exist beyond what mainstream media, government, medical, and religious institutions choose to recognize or validate. Queer thinking encourages multiple meanings and truths (Sullivan 2003). Yet in order to recognize endless possibilities, limiting systems such as heteronormativity as connected to patriarchy, capitalism, and racism are necessary.

Queer theorist Michael Warner (1993) officially coined the term heteronormativity in his work *Fear of a Queer Planet*. Warner stated that all social and sexual practices, human

associations and behaviors, gender and community relations, and power structures are dictated by heterosexuality. Gay, lesbian, and queer scholars began noting that heteronormativity grants heterosexual entitlement, like white and male advantages, normalizing all experiences and practices as heterosexual—in effect “othering” anything and anyone non-heterosexual. However, unlike male and white privilege (McIntosh 1988) heterosexuality is concealed or embedded into other components of social identity and for those denouncing it, a declaration must be made.

Heteronormativity scholarship in highlights the overwhelming presence of heterosexuality, unequal gender roles, discriminatory sexual practices, and non-heterosexual identities (Ingraham 2002; 2008; Warner 1993). Heteronormativity scholarship demonstrates that all individuals are labeled as heterosexual, unless otherwise contested, pronouncing the sexual binary system. Therefore, heteronormativity in conjunction with liberationist politics, forces non-heterosexual identities to come out, declare, or share non-heterosexual narratives in order to separate oneself from heterosexuality (Jagose 1996). If one does not disclose or come out, one is assumed to be hiding, living in the closet, or living a lie (Seidman 2002; Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999). It is agreed upon by scholars, therapists, and activists that denouncing heteronormativity with a non-heterosexual identity is an important experience for those individuals that do not identify as heterosexual (Bates 2010).

Historians and scholars studying the history of sexuality argue that homosexuals have been and gays and lesbians continue to be one of the largest minorities experiencing social persecution (D’Emilio 1983; Herdt 1992; Weeks 1986). Since the early 1900s, Judeo-Christian doctrine, in combination with legal and medical institutions, has been ostracizing gay and lesbian acts, branding gays and lesbians as criminals or medically diseased (Chauncey 1994; and

D'Emilio and Faderman 1998; Faderman 1991; Jagose 1996; Kennedy and Davis 1993; Seidman 2002; 2003). Disapproval of homosexual practices and identities forced, reminded, and kept many gay and lesbians in secrecy, carefully managing sexual desires (Herdt 1992). Due to the negative and discriminatory energy directed towards homosexuality, coming out or recognizing one's same-sex desires and acknowledging one's non-heterosexual identity has the potential to be difficult, lonely, and sometimes painful (Herdt 1992; Savin-Williams 1998; 2001). Although same-sex love, intimacy, and companionship can lead to finding other gay men and lesbians and foster community-building, initially same-sex realizations can cause a profound sense of difference from family, community, and society.

As a result, the concept of the closet, a modern phenomenon, developed as a tool to protect gays and lesbians from social, familial, legal, medical, and cultural discrimination (Seidman 2002). Though the closet serves multiple purposes, such as hiding and protection, its function is dependent on the individual's positioning within social institutions. Meaning, the closet is shaped by one's social identity, particularly race, class, and gender. Thus, one must ask, in what ways can an individual access, use, and employ the closet? Considering race, class, and gender interactions present a myriad of outcomes, intersecting such dimensions with sexuality provides a variety of multidimensional narratives.

Post-Gay and Post-Closet Discourse

Beginning in the late 1980s, gay, lesbian, and queer discourse encompassed the changes and transformations in politics, culture, and society. Scholarship, political activity, and the media reflected one another, painting pictures and relaying stories of gay life, particularly ones that involve the relationship between sexual deviance and the HIV virus and AIDS. At the same time, the domination of a strong capitalist economy in relation to urbanization was becoming

even more vital to the modern gay identity and developing gay communities around the United States. Over the years, it has become more obvious that homosexuals are not just members of the American landscape, but a reference category for the heterosexual.

As gay and lesbian communities began to take up space in urban areas and secretly sprouted in other parts of the country, political structures, guided by conventional sexual and gender morals, began framing partner and family guidelines as specifically as possible. The government, guided by traditional, economic markets and companies with right-wing America's support, entered the bedroom with gay America. Together, social institutions such as media, capitalism, urbanization, and politics deeply connected the social forces that brought and continue to bring gay and lesbian life into the public eye and a part of mainstream culture.

The gay identity and life of the 1980s and 1990s had become associated with sexual promiscuity, AIDS/HIV, deviance, and gender perversion, strengthening the "good heterosexual" and "immoral homosexual" dichotomy (Seidman 2002). Gay life's relationship with illness and abnormality fostered grass root organizations and community activism. Because social traditionalists used AIDS as a political risk, activists (ACT UP, Queer Nation, and Lesbian Avengers) mobilized and unified communities transforming cultural politics; gay and lesbian groups retaliated, fighting oppression and discrimination (Rimmerman 2002). As a result, coming out stories in the 1980s and 1990s emphasized reclaiming a hidden "authentic self" (Seidman 2002) as a response to discrimination, past fights against concealment, and double lives.

Gay and queer activists and scholars that were involved in the reclaiming of an authentic-self-movement began transforming the discussion around the closet and coming out. Living the "authentic-self," life involved no hiding, no closet. Rather, the idea was to fully integrate one's

sexuality into every aspect of society, normalizing homosexuality (Jagose 1996). In a bold and contentious statement, British writer James Collard (1998) claimed, “we should no longer define ourselves solely in terms of our sexuality—even if our opponents do,” amounting to a new “post-gay” sensibility (53). Collard further explained that post-gay thought originated from Paul Burston (1994), a British writer critiquing gay politics and culture of the 1990s. Collard argued that no longer should a gay identity be defined by struggle, oppression, or anger. There have been times, as in movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, when these emotions and experiences were tools of resistance, but it is necessary to move beyond a place of despair. Collard argues that post-gay thinking is a step beyond struggle; oppression cannot be a point of unification. We, as gays and queers, must live freely, openly, and authentically integrating our sexuality into every aspect of our lives. Post-gay writer Mendelsohn claims it is our time to chant, “We’re Here! We’re Queer! Let’s Get Coffee!” (1996).

Collard made this post-gay claim on behalf of the idea that gay communities, such as West Hollywood, San Francisco, New York, Chicago, and Atlanta, had grown in popularity and accessibility. Gays, lesbians, and queers in an economic position to live in these spaces were able to be free and open; a safe space was abundant and prosperous. Still, gay men and lesbians have distinct and divergent experiences due to the intersection of gender, race, and class. For example, gender as a practice and identity operates as oppression and privilege in patriarchy. Furthermore, gender as it relates to race and class transforms sexual identity. Gender and sexuality are not isolated components, but present themselves and thrive through the intersection of race and class. Gay men and lesbians can share some common experiences, but historically and currently create communities of their own based on gender, gender presentation, race, and class. Hence, white, middle- and upper-class men continue to enjoy the most access to one

another and public places shaping gay, urban communities and spaces such as bars, parks, and cruising areas (D'Emilio 1983).

Looking back at scholarship produced in the 1990s, it is evident that expanding urban spaces and media markets along with legislative debates around military and marriage membership impacted gay and lesbian discourse (Faderman 1991; Jagose 1996; Seidman 1992; Warner 1993). Along with growing physical and public spaces, recognition of gay and lesbian “characters” increased heightening gay awareness and acknowledgement. Actor and comedian Ellen DeGeneres came out on her sitcom *Ellen* (Dow 2001), and other television shows such as *Roseanne*, *Will and Grace*, and *Queer as Folk* developed main characters with gay identities. Gay characters focused on “acting gay” and were creating gay archetypes with predominately white and middle-class presentations. These actors focused on portraying distinctively different identities from heterosexuality, defining what was gay from straight and strengthening the gay/straight binary. The gay identity was most readily visible on a white, masculine normative body.

Coming out of the closet assumes disclosure is difficult for some and easy for others, focusing on psychological responses, family reactions, religious and community support (Herdt; 1992; Savin-Williams 1998; 2001; 2005). Yet, just as significant, social positioning, including race, class, gender, location, and religion, are the most common factors that impact how, why, where, and when individuals share coming out narratives (Herek 1996; Moore 2006). With focus primarily on reception of the disclosed coming out information, little attention was afforded to social positioning. In fact, during the 1990s, coming out as a concept and process fostered an industry of self-help literature highlighting the function and use of the closet, advising not only lesbians and gay men, but also family, friends, co-workers, and schools on how to deal with

homophobia, shame, and life beyond the closet (Johnson 1997; Savin-Williams 2001; Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999:13; Sullivan 2003). As this literature developed, scholars began discussing and critiquing the closet as a tool of repression contending that the closet as dictated by heterosexuality, required gay men and lesbians to monitor and police their homosexual desires and self-manage their sexual identities in a way that heterosexual people never have to do (Foucault 1978; Jagose 1996; Sedgwick 1990; Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999). The commentary, also known as the “post-closet discourse,” challenges the role and use of the closet.

In conjunction with post-gay writing, the post-closet discourse also notes that more gay men and lesbians were out of the closet than ever before (Savin-Williams 2005). Youth were coming out at more rapid rates and at younger ages, and the media—including television, news, and movies—portrayed the lives of gay and lesbian individuals. Gay and lesbian communities, predominantly in urban enclaves, were active around the country, encouraging social gatherings, community events, and activist activities (Galatzer-Levy and Cohler 2002; Howard 1999; Rossi 2010; Savin-Williams 2005). Post-closet scholars argued that gay life had entered a new phase where gay and lesbian individuals, communities, scholarship, and livelihood are more accessible and a component of mainstream culture (Savin-Williams 2005; Seidman 2002). The closet and the role that it plays in gay and lesbian identities and communities had gone through a transformation. Post-closet scholars claimed that the closet became a “strategy of accommodation and resistance which both reproduces and contests aspects of society organized around normative heterosexuality” (Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999:10). In effect, a gay or lesbian individual can employ the closet as a tool, in that engaging in or resisting the closet involves agency. Entering and exiting the closet is a process of managing one’s identity based

on time, place, and location. Thus the individual uses the closet, moving through multidimensional spaces of homosexuality within a heteronormative society.

In accordance with post-gay and queer publications (Galatzer-Levy and Cohler 2002; Ghaziani 2011; Grov, Bimbi, and Parsons 2006; Jagose 1996; Lance 2002; Rankin 2003), public discourse surrounding Ellen DeGeneres's coming out, Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT 1993), and the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA 1996); gay and lesbian communities received unprecedented attention and discrimination. Post-closet scholarship recognized these social changes articulating "American homosexuals have normalized and routinized their homosexuality to a degree where the closet plays a lesser role in their lives" (Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999:19). Many gays and lesbians are out and proud. Gay, lesbian, queer, or non-heteronormative identities have become another component of life and reality. Therefore, post-closet scholars claim that many gays and lesbians have less of a need to control and mask their homosexuality now than ever before (Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999).

Post-gay and post-closet scholarship marks a significant turning point in gay and lesbian social life, history, and scholarship. It accounts for the normalization of gay and lesbian experiences within the context of heteronormativity. Yet, like other social systems, heteronormativity thrives on oppression and privileges relationships (Johnson 1997). As a result, certain individuals and groups reside in powerful and dominant spaces due to the oppression or subordination of socially prescribed inferior roles. Heteronormativity employs patriarchy, racism, and capitalism to not only shape heterosexual and homosexual categories, but also to construct normative heterosexual and homosexual identities (Ingraham 2002; Johnson 1997; Warner 1993). Hence, post-closet rhetoric is grounded in a system of stratification. Thus, when post-closet scholarship articulates an ideology of gay normalization, gays and lesbians that are

othered for their social positions of race, class, gender, religion, lack of capital, or are disadvantaged by location do not have a closet to hide in or have a smaller to closet to seek refuge in and therefore come out. When one is ostracized for a social marker, particularly a visible dimension of identity, the concept of a being in or out of the closet shifts, access to or from marginalization is transformed, and the standardized meaning of the closet is rattled.

Normalizing gay and lesbian experiences, according to the post- gay discourse, involves moving beyond oppression and discrimination, pushing despair to the side and removing it from gay and lesbian narratives. Yet, most individuals not privileged by race, class, gender, or gender presentation, move through society with marginalization, discrimination, or prejudice in some shape or form as a component of daily interactions. The body, a visible source of gender and race is always a narrative, at times illustrating stories of discrimination and prejudice. In this way, oppression can be a key opponent in shaping identity, fostering ones' sense of self, and invoking activism (Unger 2000). Thus, pushing oppression or discrimination to the margins fractures identity and diminishes multiple stories and experiences. Moreover, it discounts the patriarchal, racist, and classist actions and arrangements active in coming out narratives, experiences, and communities (Almihomed 2010; Moore 2006). I contend not all closets or experiences are treated equally. In this way, the concept of normalizing gay experiences is exclusive and limiting.

Despite awareness and recognition of gay and lesbian identities along with post-closet commentary, heteronormativity remains a powerful social force, connecting a wide-variety of social institutions and systems such as patriarchy, racism, and capitalism. Thus, engaging in and establishing a gay or lesbian identity involves renegotiating space and place in all social institutions. Therefore, the presence, normalcy, and oppression of heteronormativity, fosters

coming out narratives, a coming out declaration, or a presentation of a non-heterosexual identity in order to distinguish a gay or lesbian identity.

In this dissertation I challenge post-gay and post-closet discourse. I do this by analyzing coming out narratives through an intersectional lens. My research question is, “How do positions of identity, such as gender and race, shape the multiple dimensions of gay men and women when expressing coming out experiences?” Previous intersectionality approaches have focused on gender, race, and class—not fully considering other significant classifications of identity and social mobility. In this dissertation I extend the intersectional lens to incorporate matters of capital, place, and the body. These theoretical foundations are described in Chapter 2. My methodological technique, narrative analysis, is described in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 introduces the narrative analysis of coming out stories. Chapter 5 highlights the importance of capital, and Chapter 6 focuses on matters of place. The final analysis chapter, Chapter 7, introduces the concept of feminized masculinity through a focus on the embodiment of gender. The dissertation concludes in Chapter 8.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This dissertation takes an intersectional approach to the study of coming out narratives. How do the interacting dimensions of race, class, and gender shape coming out narratives? Intersectionality, a Black feminist theory and methodology, analyzes relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations; it is a necessary and significant form of sociological analysis (Browne and Misra 2003; Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989; 1995; King 1988). Stratification or ranking individuals by race, class, and gender, the most valued social categories, expresses common sentiment with the “Matrix of Domination” (Collins 1990; 1993). Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (1990) explains how women of color are intertwined in multiple levels of domination and oppression based on the inherent association of race, class, and gender, which contribute to interlocking systems of privilege and domination, or the Matrix of Domination (Collins 1990; 1993; 2004; King 1988).

In a world where many Black and minority experiences have been disregarded, neglected, or ignored from social and human history, Black feminism focuses its attention on voices that have been socially described as unimportant or devalued. In response to invisibility and marginalization, Black feminist scholarship reclaims visibility and incorporates Black women’s experiences into cultural knowledge and information. Black feminist work analyzes how the roles, expectations, and constraints of race, class, gender, and sexuality impact Black women’s lives.

Black feminist scholars, such as D.W. King, note that the intersections of class, race, and gender are crucial to understanding an individual’s role in society, especially a minority or socially disadvantaged individual (Browne and Misra 2003; Collins 1999; 2000; 2004; Harding 2004; Nagel 2003; Weigman 1995). Due to the overwhelming presence of white, middle class,

male experiences as normative and inherent to social structures, intersectionality focuses on how the social location of race, class, and gender privilege some through the oppression of others. Without accounting for the interactions of race, class, and gender, scholars run the risk of missing variations in gender experiences due to race or class. Recognizing that gender, race, and class exist in relation to one another, one can locate how social and systematic forms of oppression shape the lives of “othered” realities, particularly African American women, gays and lesbians, and marginalized identities that contrast the traditional notion that an individual is at the root of their demise or success in society.

Black feminist analysis highlights how the intersections of race, class, and gender reveal prejudice and mistreatment. In many ways, such discrimination is a micro response to the interacting macro ramifications of racism, patriarchy, and capitalism, also known as the “interlocking” systems of oppression (Collins 1993:558). These joined conglomerates of marginalization function through one another, constructing privilege and oppressed interactions and arrangements. Such systems (patriarchy, racism, and capitalism) of oppressions offer intersectional theorists a dualistic approach of dominant and subordinate positions with expected behaviors and relationships (Collins 1993). As such, intersectional theorists locate how those in dominant and normative roles shape meanings, knowledge, and truth for both privileged and oppressed groups.

Yet, not all experiences or categories are rendered equal. Individuals experience race, class, and gender differently dependent upon social location, time, and place. Significantly, race, class, and gender cannot be experienced in isolation but simultaneously, along with impeding dimensions of capital. Social capital, a feature of social networking, education, generational wealth, or economic disadvantage, can transform social mobility and opportunity. Because class

is racialized and gendered (Browne and Misra 2003), social capital impacts access to recognizable locations and education, shaping perceptions and constructions of family, and dictates relationships within society. Capital matters because the categorical descriptions and use of class has never been able capture or conceptualize opportunity dynamics in full detail (King 1988; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). Class does not account for economic-social mobility or inability; in that way, class is a representation of capitalism. Capitalism is connected to a multitude of systems—politics, racism, sexism, and cultural oppression—yet these relationships and mergers, which also reflect privileged and oppressed social statuses, often go unaccounted for and unnoticed (King 1988).

Capital and Class

Capital contributes to the Matrix of Domination by connecting privileged systems and oppressing marginalized positions. Capital refers to social advantages such as geography, education, networks, travel, and cultural knowledge. Capital positions, including both social and cultural (Bourdieu 1977), demonstrate how class creates one's social mobility and access to resources, opportunity, and education. Intersectional analysis most often considers the role of class, yet equally important should also include the role of capital because it captures movement within, throughout, and beyond capitalism. Through an intersectional lens, without considering the role of capital, both social and cultural (Bourdieu 1977), we do not have a clear image of *how* class functions in a stratified, intersectional society. Without the insight of capital, we as researchers are neglecting the importance of subordination and domination on all intersectional, hierarchal, and institutional levels. In other words, we are not able to dissect how capital privileges or disadvantages race, gender, and sexuality.

French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu is famous for connecting and applying social theory and practice. Bourdieu connected these two inseparable frameworks within the context of French 1960s and 1970s social life in order to investigate how knowledge, cultural understanding, and the body (race, gender presentation) are influenced by capital. His work situated an individual in a hierarchal society with capital at the center of the individual's identity. Bourdieu demonstrated how one's social position has the ability to capture and manipulate power, "moderating the myriad of struggles between classes and class fractions in a modern capitalist society" (1977; 1984:151). Thus, he explained that capital has the ability to move, push, and shift individuals in and out of oppressive and privileged places, spaces, classes and positions.

Social and cultural capital, the two most referenced forms of capital from Bourdieu's work, foster networks and relationships based upon both subtle and blatant racial, familial, educational, and generational privilege. Cultural capital and social capital are not interchangeable, but they reflect common and related privileged aspects of society. In this way, capital predominantly functions as an outcome of unearned advantages. Cultural capital refers to non-financial social assets, such as intellectual property that can promote social mobility. For example educational degrees, especially from prestigious institutions, are assumed to be culturally valued and valorized—yet gaining access into higher education is based on a stratified system of race, class, gender, location, and family. Education is valuable, a strong component of the "American Dream" discourse as well as key player in job placement, financial security, home buying, and family building. And education itself, access to and understanding of, is stratified; the best and most desired education is delivered to the most socially valued individuals and those

that can afford to pay for it. Thus, capital shapes the social possibilities of race, gender, class, and sexuality, transforming access or denial to life chances and opportunities.

Capital is often studied on its own, but is necessary and valuable to intersectional analyses and other areas of sociological inquiry. Race, class, and gender scholarship, has various components of capital embedded into its' work, access to social opportunities shapes identity. Yet, capital is not considered or discussed in the popular triad of race, class, and gender analysis. If analyzed and applied intentionally, capital will reveal powerful social dynamics and associations. More broadly than class, capital captures how those privileged by socioeconomic practices in relation to race, gender, and sexuality, move and manipulate social privileges, including the presentation of or access to a normative body. Although class is a common variable, category, and identifier, it is limiting and discriminatory. The current way class is used in sociological analysis often reproduces measures of social inequality by ignoring how dominant roles produce knowledge and normativity, restricting access to information, and construct hegemonic frameworks.

Normativity, visible on the body and constructed out of intersections of gender, racial, class, and capital privilege, creates unequal divisions and separations, while also assigning stratified positions and classifications. Applying an intersectional framework, with the inclusion of capital to race, class, and gender, reveals that class revolves, shifts, and transforms in relation to one's assignment to the means of production as well as the division of labor, both paid and unpaid labor. Both social processes favor hegemonic masculinity and white privilege, to be discussed later in this chapter.

Normative positioning and presentation presumably heightens acceptance and tolerance; normalcy allows for movement into the mainstream. Normative positioning coincides with

western social systems of governance, including but not limited to, patriarchy, racism, capitalism, and heteronormativity. Such systemic and systematic processes create ideal bodies and identities in order to establish norms, standards, and boundaries. When ideologies of femininity and masculinity are used to create social categories, binaries develop, such as heterosexual and homosexual, to support order in social institutions and structures.

Yet, normative positioning exists beyond gender—it is interwoven into the expectations of race, class, and sexuality. Understanding multiple dimensions of normativity demands an intersection of capital because such interactions will demonstrate *how* and *why* normativity is effective through interactions of gender, race, and sexuality. As such, capital, an intersectional and relational stratification of social advantages and disadvantages, considers the function of class. How does class impact how one understands social and cultural knowledge, such as the role of a gay identity in western society? How does class influence one's relationship with location, education, networks, travel, and the body (Bourdieu 1977; Portes 1998; Sisianen 2000)?

Beyond Racial Binaries

Race, like sexuality, matters; it shapes all social interactions. A dynamic phenomenon rooted in political and cultural struggle, race is treated as a biological fiction but in reality a social fact (James 2008). As a social product, western society has constructed the white body as neutral and invisible with the ability to dictate the dominant cultural narrative about racial standards and normalcy (Bonilla-Silva 2001; 2010; McIntosh 1988). In contrast, western society has marked the dark body with deviance and immorality (Moraga 1983). United States race relations are grounded in a white/non-white binary where the root of an object is established in relation to another object (James 2008). The differences are most effectively expressed through opposition and resistance, highlighting one object as privileged and the other as inferior. Thus,

the dark body is rendered silenced and invisible, contrasting the apparent white body. The white body is then pronounced as fair, beautiful, and clean (Moraga 1983). These racial frameworks have been used to justify unequal treatment such as “un-free” slave labor and rape (Bonilla-Silva 2001; 2010; Feagin 2000, 2010; James 2008). Belonging to a racial group, then, is an ongoing interplay of privilege, oppression, boundaries, and negotiations.

Sociologists value the race category because it demonstrates how an individual is recognized, valued, and rewarded in society. Race, like gender, is visible and for that it has the potential to shape every single social interaction. Social science scholars have been studying race since the early 1800s. However, split in western scholarship, race has been understood and used in the context of a white lens; social science research has come to demonstrate race as neutral on the white body. The white body is normalized and most visible in historical, political, and social analysis. In fact white is almost always the dominant or standard status (Sandoval 2000). Bonilla-Silva and Baocchi (2008) argue that social science research is based on white standards and minority groups are included as long as they encompass a large enough population. Sociology is no different, historically following a “white common sense” (Bonilla-Silva and Baocchi 2008). Using a white sensibility involves the ignorance of racial stratification in the application of sociological theories and methodologies. Sociologists may discuss white privilege or racism, but then use racial minorities as reference categories or dummy variables, legitimizing white as the dominant category.

Sociologist Mary Waters demonstrated in *Optional Ethnicities* (1990) how race has various meanings, applications, and possibilities. Waters explained that in general, white Americans of European ancestry have a great deal of choice, freedom, and options in *how*, *when*, and *where* to present ethnic identities. In comparison, Black, Asian, Latino, and Indian

Americans do not possess the same freedom; these ethnic identities are always present and visible on the body, socially controlling narratives and explanations. White Americans, however, can claim a specific ancestry *or* just be “White.” Depending on the situation and context, a white individual does not have to explain or hide one’s identity; information, history, and representation are available, visible, and multiple. In this way, white individuals do not have to educate, defend, or further inform others regarding a white identity—normativity and privilege are present (Lorde 1970; 1984). Thus, white individuals, including some variations of white marginalization—dependent on interactions of race, class, gender, and location—can affect the deployment of one’s cultural narrative. With less social policing, one can fade into social and cultural normalcy.

Privilege, as first explained by Karl Marx (1867 1977), describes advantage conceived at birth, denoting exclusive social advantage based on sex and class. This foundation still holds meaning today where one’s entitlement or lack thereof is dependent on where, to whom, and with what set of attributes one was born (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Krucks 2005). Thus, privilege is assumed to be unearned and socially created (McIntosh 1988). French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir reinforces this notion by declaring that no one is born privileged: “one is not born anything but becomes one” (1955; Krucks 2005). Hence, privilege is a social construct; bodies are ascribed as dominant or subordinate based on social values, practices, and institutions.

White privilege is described as an invisible backpack of advantages; it allows a white-skinned person to move through society more easily. McIntosh (1988) argues that privilege has colossal dimensions, but it is difficult to notice and recognize because hierarchies are systemic and systematic—interlocked, denied, and protected. A white person is reassured of their racial identity through multiple representations in various social institutions: band-aids are available in

colors to match one's skin, a plethora of media representations are available, and one's race is the standard in educational history books (Feagin 2000; 2010; Lorde 1970). Such privilege simply confers and asserts dominance because of one's race (Bonilla-Silva 2001; 2010; McIntosh 1988). Dominance provides cultural security and social guarantees which are experienced through ascribed gender, class, capital, and race practices.

White privilege is seductive; it socially controls how white is perceived as normal, morally neutral, and average (Bonilla-Silva 2001; 2010). Socially blessed with cultural hegemonic attributions, white normativity maintains racial stratification (McIntosh 1988). White privilege uses its relationship with patriarchy and capitalism to superimpose a racial hierarchy where an unequal distribution of rights and privileges are spread throughout society. Being white allows an individual to move through society without having to explain, define, or defend one's race. White experiences are used to create standards and guidelines in which all gender, sexuality, family, and labor are regulated and maintained. Specifically, the way in which white is interpreted and made purposeful dictates where and how bodies, dependent on shade, move through social structures and systems.

In the United States, a country which relies on racial dichotomous frameworks, (Guzman and Valdivia 2004; O'Brien 2008) bodies that do not traditionally align with the Black/White binary have often been pushed to the side or silenced. White sensibility is manipulative; through the black and white binary system, white pronounces itself as dominant, discriminates against Black bodies, and excludes various other experiences and identities. The intersections of ethnicity, sexuality, and race are visibly complicated for some and not for others. For example, white identities maintain privilege by self-selecting the role of ethnicity while it is central to

identities of color (Waters 1990). Ethnicity has been constructed in a way that it does not have to influence a white person's life, providing more choice and opportunity.

Ethnicity is a powerful intersecting force that reveals salient measures of inequality. With a myriad of raced bodies, western rhetoric continues to rely on the white and non-white binary system, pronouncing white as the norm, Black as other, and remaining bodies as unknown and different (Guzman and Valdivia 2004). Therefore, the role of ethnicity becomes incredibly important in the lives of some in order to build community and identity. At the same time, ethnicity continues to have distinct social meanings dependent on the body and context.

Ethnicity, like race, is used to categorize distinctions, but focuses more specifically on the intersection of history, culture, language, and location; here, capital begins to matter. Ethnicity has visible meanings for individuals of color as opposed to invisibility for individuals that identify as white (Waters 1990). In other words, ethnicity matters differently depending on the color of one's skin. In marginalized spaces, such as gay and lesbian communities, white identities are still a source of dominance. Many gay and lesbian individuals that identify and present a white identity employ the "ethnicity as option model" creating hierarchies and systems of stratification (Waters 1990).

In sum, race shapes coming out stories, indicating which experiences are seen and counted. Coming out also shapes race, as coming out has been explained as a mostly white experience and not expected or listened to in racial and ethnic minority communities. Therefore, most coming out narratives are framed within a white context, silencing or ignoring experiences from gay men, lesbians, and queers of color (Alimahomed 2010; Bates 2010; Hall and Fine 2005). When a white context generalizes a cultural narrative and experience, assumptions

regarding all social practices, including family, education, movement, and language, intersect at that cultural narrative.

For non-white individuals, it is common to consistently explain or defend one's racial and ethnic identity, lending oneself to constant examination of other markers such as class, sexuality, and gender. In this way, identity is always in question. Therefore, when a non-white individual comes out of the closet, they must walk through two multidimensional doors: one for sexuality and one for race. Surprisingly, however, post-closet scholars have been quick to ignore the intersectional and situated component to coming out. Black feminist Audre Lorde elucidates, "those of us who stand outside power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing" (1984:116).

Place Matters

Place, often defined by those that inhabit its dimensions (Relph 1976), is a distinction between here and there (Gieryn 2000). Place embodies natural, social, and built elements. Social and built dimensions take on meaning as individuals interact with all components of place, constructing boundaries and significance (Agnew 1987; Gieryn 2000; Hays 1998; Altman 1993; Relph 1976; Tuan 1977). In this way, race influences place, assembling significance and implications to social and built compounds; simultaneously, place impacts interactions, arrangements, and outcomes of race. As groundbreaking place theorist Relph (1976) argued, place encompasses physical settings and activities, deriving meaning from those that inhabit it; place and race co-exist, informing and co-constructing one another.

"Placeness" or a sense of place—connection, association, identification, and affiliation with a dynamic yet designated space—develops as individuals socially interact with recognized

physical settings and practices (Gustafson 2001; Jorgenson and Stedman 2001; Relph 1976; Tuan 1977). In that way, place embodies socially constructed norms, values, and standards, as attached to the intersections of identity; place harbors shifting life chances and opportunities.

Due to the malleability of not just race, but also gender, class, sexuality, and capital, there are a myriad of ways to attach meaning to place. Depending how an individual is situated in a specific place and interacts with the social and built world, everyday meanings, or existential significance, are established within one's environment—from neighborhood walking paths to frequenting coffee shops to attending local schools, theatre, and churches (Corcoran 2002; Relph 1976). Therefore, dependent on daily interactions, place constructs one's sense of self, in turn shaping all relationships. At the same time, as an individual interacts with a specific place, physical, economic, and emotional barriers are generated—often based on the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and capital.

Place has multiple meanings and outcomes due to the variability of interactions. In other words, when one takes skin color, region, and urban, rural, or suburban locale into consideration, stratified intersectional positions highlight the production of white privilege, marginalization, and otherness (Choo and Marx-Feree 2010; Collins 1990; 2000; Crenshaw 1995; Espiritu 1999; 1996; Glenn 2002; McCall and Orloff 2005; McIntosh 1988; Waters 1990). The United States is a place of multiple meanings, experiences, locations, and landscapes, with a foundation of white supremacy, patriarchal sensibility, and generational wealth. Race, gender, class, and capital practices thrive in specific places, branding locations with social norms and complicating intersectional dimensions with dynamics of social, built, and natural meanings.

Reflective of political, social, place-based, and historical events, a myriad of factors shape coming out narratives dependent on how people are socially situated. The social

construction of the closet and coming out, as told from an oral, visual, and written gay history, involves the intersection of multiple positions, processes, and institutions. In fact, if one is to hone in on the primary period of construction of the closet and coming out, the 1950s through the 1970s, intersecting dynamics of race and place such as white flight, demonstrate how shifts in racial demography fostered the development of gay communities.

In the 1950s following World War II, a small but politically powerful group of men claimed that white masculinity—as connected to patriarchy, traditionalism, and capitalism—was being threatened and terrorized, a claim which partially stemmed from events in the 1940s. For example, during World War II more women entered the paid labor force than ever before, in turn shifting the value of the American dollar and traditional gender roles. In addition, men and women that fought or cared for soldiers overseas were exposed to new cultures and practices. Upon their return, many individuals found themselves challenging traditional American ways. Lastly, the country was working through the disbursement of the G.I. bill and adjusting to larger populations of college graduates. Notably, the response to these changes came in the form of white, heterosexual middle-class families fleeing racially diverse neighborhoods, predominantly in cities, and moving into racially homogenous neighborhoods in the suburbs. Men were encouraged to marry, purchase a home, and raise a family. Cities and states established place-based dimensions such as highway systems and suburban communities with economic, labor, and political support. A “lifestyle” outside of the city became normal, expected, and ideal.

As a result, rural and urban environments began to drastically change; public and independent housing, transportation, and school districts shifted due to new racial and economic arrangements. Simply stated, the growth of the white suburbs coincided with expanding white school districts and businesses, pulling money out of cities and shifting economic opportunity to

the suburbs. While suburban life came to represent a monolithic white, heterosexual, middle-class family, cities became complexly stratified as class, capital, and racial inequality became visibly abundant. Most significantly, individuals and groups with visible ethnicities and variant identities continued to struggle with social mobility. Black, Asian, and Latino individuals, for example, are most often identified through skin color; visible markers that are shaped by numerous events and stories, such as “white flight,” dictating many white versus non-white interactions. In that way, race is historically, culturally, and geographically related, maintaining its stratified visibility through social, cultural, and economic value.

As previously mentioned, post-closet scholarship highlights “social patterns that indicate the declining social significance of the closet in contemporary America” (Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999:11). One such pattern is the presence and increase in “gay ghettos” and communities around the country (Brown-Saracino 2011; Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999; Seidman 2002). Gay ghettos, often explained as gay and lesbian neighborhoods in centrally located urban environments, tend to provide access to gay spaces such as bars, clubs, coffee shops, bookstores, and restaurants. However, visiting and living in a gay ghetto, which can provide a queer-friendly and progressively radical space comes with a social-capital price tag and open doors to the closet.

Historically, gay spaces have been located in transitional, soon to be gentrified neighborhoods, or minority areas already existent in metropolitan locations. Notably attracting masculinity since money was easier to locate, neighborhoods such as Harlem and the Castro would draw in crowds of same-sex couples. Businesses would begin to reflect the needs of the clients, or at least those that could afford to visit and live there. With time, a visible community became representative of a larger identity. Designated as morally open, gay spaces such as the

Castro district in San Francisco, Hell's Kitchen and Chelsea in New York City, Atlanta's Midtown, and Chicago's Boys town, were occupied by the intersectional positions that could gain access to them.

The growth and occupancy of "gay ghettos" is often used as one indication that the closet has declined and gay life has become visible and common. Yet intersecting what is considered to be a gay ghetto is contentious and can vary. In larger cities and urban spaces, such as those mentioned above, various gays and lesbians visit and frequent, yet most property ownership is occupied by white gay men and women, defining a visible and recognized gay place through a white, gay lens (Nero 2002). Thus, white gay men and women living in gay places and frequenting gay establishments have minimized the closet to such a degree that the coming out narrative is mute. Living without a closet is not only encouraged and supported, but the idea of not living authentically is looked down upon, as such designated spaces encourage full emersion. Brown-Saracino (2011) recently revealed in her study of a designated queer place, which houses a 70 percent Caucasian and 60 percent college degree-holding population, that full integration comes with a cost: a potential loss of community. Yet, gay Americans that live "beyond the closet" (Seidman 2002) are said to move through society more freely because they are not held back by restrictions of hiding and concealing one's gay identity.

A post-closet everyday experience would involve minimal discussion of one's sexuality; it is normalized into common routines and practices in such a way that living, as a gay American is no different than having gay American experiences. However, very few places foster and house a non-closet atmosphere or remove the need to come out. Designated places such as gay ghettos or queer spaces can provide inclusive environments, lessening the need for sexual narratives and descriptions, yet access to such environments remains at the intersection of

privileged bodies. In contrast to a racial minority that is continually disclosing information regarding one's ethnic biography from an already inferior position (Guzman and Valadiva 2004; Waters 1990), white privilege research demonstrates that individuals who embody White skin move through society with less scrutiny and more access to resources and opportunities (Bonilla-Silva 2010; McIntosh 1988; Waters 1990).

The South: One Place, Multiple Meanings and Possibilities

The South, as an identity, space, and place, is multiple and infinite. The South is a vast place with a myriad of locations and explanations. Consisting of varied social, built, and natural environments, southern studies scholarship spends a great deal of time analyzing the South through the construction of rural, urban, and more recently, suburban experiences (Bell and Valentine 1995; Lynch and Murray 2000; Mendelsohn 1996). Ideologically speaking, the South is often presented to itself and outsiders as distinct from the North, embodying place-specific gender (patriarchal), sexual (heterosexual), racial (racist), religious (Baptist/Evangelical), and capital (rural versus urban) practices (Bass and Terrill 1986; Glaser 1994; Himes 1991; Howard 1999; Reed 1972).

“Less than a nation, more than a region, the south has a sense of distinction from other parts of the country” (Reed 1972:12). According to the 2010 Census Bureau, the South encompasses 17 states, yet it is described in a singular way, most likely due to its historical and agricultural practices, racist ideologies, and overstated Christian rhetoric (www.census.gov). For its vast landmass and large population, describing the boundaries of the South depends on how those that live in this region define the territory (Odum 1947).

Sociologist and Georgia native Howard Odum (1947:3) defined the South as an “extension of the folk,” meaning it is the land and soil that embodies those that live there.

Odum's work further explained that the South personifies specific practices associated with the region, including language, gender, food, and economic arrangements. For example, the South is famous for rich soil and land, which in turn has supported southern plantation agriculture practices. Southern agriculture practices, best known for the production of cotton and tobacco, were deeply intertwined with race relations, trapping and abusing Black men and women into capitalist slave production. In this way, the South is more than land; it is a way of thinking, feeling, interacting, and seeing the world.

Southern history is contextualized by civil and international wars, industrial advancements, and changes in agricultural production. Such events have led to major shifts in gender and race relations. Historically, gender has been defined in patriarchal terms; even with women working outside of the home and bringing in paid-labor wages, women remain subservient to men due to heterosexual-Christian rhetoric embedded in all social institutions (Glenn 2002). Segregation was legally abolished in the 1960s, yet separate but unequal practices remain visible and active through agricultural and industrial production, impacting one's ability to generate wealth and capital (Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Shapiro 2004). Even so, resistance and radical marginality have been powerful; creating designated liberal areas through the southern region. As a result, constructed knowledge used in southern relationships and social interaction—including but not limited to racism, sexism, classism, and conventional forms of Christianity—have shifted, and traditional southern practices have resisted and been adjusted (Barth and Overby 2003; Eldrige, Mack, and Swank 2006).

The South has been painted as a unique region, separate and inferior to the remaining United States, explained as having second-rate education, technology, and an underdeveloped economy. In this way, the South has been marginalized from the mainstream United States

(Bass and Terrill 1986); however, urban spaces such as Atlanta, Charlotte, New Orleans, and Austin have become home to large corporations, including Delta Airlines, Bank of America, AT&T, and Coca-Cola, as well as increasingly prestigious universities and colleges, all shifting internal and external southern perceptions.

As the South becomes recognized as evolved, especially with the development of gay ghettos (Nero 2002), southern cuisine, fine art, the changing industrial and transportation practices, education, and class dynamics of the region's recognized cities have impacted notions of southern culture. In addition, migration and immigration have also had a tremendous impact on the labor force and working environments, shifting which individuals work where and how income and wealth are distributed. Despite economic growth and additions to the southern landscape, a historical backdrop consisting of one-party politics, Jim Crow ideologies, and heterosexism remains intact.

What remains in place today—racial, gender, and capital practices that favor few and disadvantage many— is disguised by Christian right-wing political rhetoric. As a result, southern identities continue to be explained by race (which side does your ancestry fall on?), religion (which church do you attend?), patriarchy (gender as difference), and heteronormativity (marriage and children). This combination of social and cultural scripts offers few acceptable forms of expression. Thus, the South remains a place of inequality and contradiction (Law 2001).

Patriarchy, Feminist Theory, and Gendered Embodiment

Patriarchal culture focuses on control and domination, particularly of the feminine, in almost all areas of human existence. At the core of patriarchy, a “power over” mantra is instilled and carried through in events, resources, knowledge, and humanity. Patriarchy assigns symbols and ideas that align manhood and masculinity with humankind and womanhood or femininity

with the marginal or position of other. In this way, patriarchy is a social system of society, a way of thinking, a guide for social relationships, and a set of ideas in which individuals participate—often without realizing it. With patriarchal activity often going unnoticed, male domination and female subordination are simultaneously reinforced. Under the guise of chivalry, when men open the door for women or men are assumed to be paying the check for dinner, the assumption is that women are not capable, strong enough, or economically equipped.

As a governing system, patriarchy functions through its relationship with race relations, heteronormativity, and capitalism, while infecting all social institutions with male-centered practices. Patriarchy, a systematic force of male domination and female subordination, relies on white male-centeredness and experiences. Home and work relationships are organized by gender as it intersects with race, class, and sexuality; the division of labor in the home is based upon assumed gendered rights, as decided by sex categories and patriarchy (Ingraham 2002; 2008; Johnson 1997; Lorber 1994). As such, hegemonic masculinity, or the ideal western, patriarchal masculinity, values stoic, aggressive, and competitive masculinity (Connell 1992; Kimmel 1994; Lorde 1970). Hegemonic masculinity supports men working outside of the home for paid labor and women maintaining in-home tasks for un-paid wages or no economic value. When participating in public life—work, sport, and military included—men are taught to be hegemonically masculine, which includes a visible heterosexuality, financial security, and a competitive disposition. Participating in such prescribed gendered activities is conditioned and limited by race and class, yet it remains idealized through economically rewarded public work actions, practices, and meanings (Connell 1992; Espiritu 1999; 2010; Johnson 1997)

Despite patriarchy rewarding hegemonic masculinity with power, authority, and economic resources, not all men enter patriarchy equally; it is a stratified system (Espiritu

1999;2010; Espada 1996). “Racialized patriarchy” is maintained and flourishes through its intersectional relationship with racial and economic inequality (Espiritu 1999). Racism and capitalism are deeply entrenched into the stratification of masculinities, impacting which men have greater access to wealth and income, purchase property, run for public office, and create a visible public life. At the same time, often less noted but equally important, heterosexuality is an invisible and powerful institution that is a “highly regulated, ritualized, and organized set of practices, such as proms and weddings” (Ingraham 2002:74). Such acts, also stratified, reinforce male dominance and female passiveness due to the fact that masculinity is associated with leadership, assertiveness, and public authority. Men are assumed to ask women to prom and be responsible for the public, social, and economic welfare of their female date. A wedding, for example, represents heterosexual marriage, an institution rooted in a gendered, economic contract; a man acquires a wife with the goal to create a family. In this way, patriarchal heterosexual practices are used in the construction of family and children’s gender roles (Ingraham 2002; Martin 1994).

Recognition and analysis of men and women in diverse and unequal social roles has always been a focal point of feminist studies. However, acknowledging the inherent association of patriarchy and heterosexuality began to take front stage in both social and academic feminist communities during the social liberation movements of 1960s and 1970s. Although glimpses of feminist scholarship, critiquing the lack of female visibility and power of patriarchal rule have been documented, male privilege has been coded as neutral in all social institutions, including education. With white patriarchy as the foundation of society, male-centeredness is present in almost all social practices, including social science research and writing. Challenging such persistent normativity and bias involves locating varied women’s experiences and challenging

men's dominant positions, demanding what Goffman refers to as "institutional reflexivity" (1977:302), and employing an intersectional analysis (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1995; King 1988).

Simply listed under the term "feminist studies," Feminist theory examines inequality, subordination, and domination by men. Feminist analysis considers how women are acknowledged through their relationships to men and in this way investigates how and why women are valued as different or inferior to men. Feminist scholarship, consistently determined to reveal male bias in scholarship, home, and social life has contributed greatly to social science's understanding of gender order, but it has been criticized for not exploring gender as a multidimensional category, including various masculinities. Feminist scholarship, primarily concerned with revealing unequal gender arrangements, demonstrates how social constructionism and social control shape women's lives, while men's studies, which emerged later in the 1990s, accounts for intersectional dimensions of patriarchy, stratifying male privilege and creating a limited view of masculinity.

The intersection of the social movements of the 1970s—namely feminism, civil rights, and sexual liberation—exposed the socially constructed and evolving relationships among patriarchy, heterosexuality, and masculinity. At the time, men, women, and variant gendered bodies were participating in multiple political movements—women's, gay, and transgender rights—and fighting for the expansion of human rights and opportunities (Wilchins 2004). Recognizing the flexibility associated with social life and practices made change visible and accessible, yet gender remained a polarizing political issue. Individuals and groups supportive of patriarchal traditions, including women maintaining unpaid work in the home, and less pay for equal work in the public work force, retaliated against the social movements of the 1970s.

Establishing patriarchal and conservative economic practices followed suit with the presidential election of Ronald Reagan (1981–1989). Reagan’s election represented traditional masculinity and subordinated femininity. Following the Cold War, Vietnam War (1955–1970) and Watergate scandal (1970s), traditionalists argued that America’s tough and economically sound persona had been threatened, perceived as unstable, and weakened. America needed to demonstrate a competitive force to be reckoned with, including “heavy doses of American entrepreneurial manhood” (Leverenz 1990:444; Jackson Katz and Jhully Sut 1999; Rotundo 1993). Politics and media merged in order to assist in the public’s election of a president, an actor himself that could “act” the correct masculinity. Relying on a glorified John Wayne masculinity with the help of Rambo, Reagan stepped up to the plate in order to act out an American manliness that embodied “courage, determination, bravery, resilience, guts, grit, and physical strength” (Leverenz 1990:443).

Notably, Marion Mitchell Morrison, the actor that played John Wayne and inspired Ronald Reagan’s character, portrayed a masculinity prescribed by the media and political elite. As a white, slender, tall man, with a tough exterior, John Wayne’s 1950s character was able to take down any danger in his path, representing an unbreakable masculinity. Marion was successful in his role, but in his everyday life, his tastes were eclectic, creative, and not representative of mainstream masculinity. In fact, when wartime rolled around, Marion stayed in Hollywood to pursue filmmaking as opposed to heading overseas to engage in combat, an act contradictory to his John Wayne character (Jackson Katz and Sut Jhully, 1999). Still, the prescribed aggressive, rough-and-tumble “John Wayne masculinity” remained valorized, even though it was a socially constructed act like all other gender presentations.

As masculinity was becoming more visibly scripted and ascribed to specific body presentations, feminism was helping women gain strength and popularity in the world of paid labor, sport, and education. Due to revolutionary gains made in the 1960s and 1970s, especially the passage of the Education Act of 1972, women were entering higher education at record-breaking rates and earning advanced degrees. The patriarchal system that privileged masculinity was hit by feminism and it had begun to rattle. Yet, it seemed nearly impossible to patriarchal practitioners that both men and women could succeed in similar spaces, equally. “Gender as difference” remained at the core of all social institutions and gender equality would contradict patriarchal sentiment (Lorber 1994). Almost all female advancement at the time was linked to feminist revolutions and labeled deviant by social traditionalists.

Susan Faludi, author of *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991) explained that women had gained access in the workforce and education, translating to women transcending the strict scripts of the gender binary system, and challenging assigned social tasks and responsibilities (1991). Yet, traditionalists were determined to prove that feminism would unravel the very essence of society. It did not seem feasible that women, too, could contribute in economically accountable ways to society. More importantly, if recognized, the very systems keeping men in power might prove faulty and unreliable.

Individuals and groups accustomed to gendered-power, particularly white, heterosexual, middle-class men, rebelled and resisted transformations to gender arrangements, blaming feminism for any and all disruptions in society (Faludi 1991). However, cultural and economic changes developed, creating visible social issues in childcare, education, social security, nutrition, and healthcare. Recognizable social problems created localized and street-level activity, but it remained uncommon for individuals in charge, predominantly wealthy, white

men, to step out of their particular standpoint or use a sociological imagination (Mills 1959) to assess why and in which ways these changes were occurring. Dominant groups argued that women's presence in the workforce and education could be attributed to feminism, which created new and visible social problems because it lured women out of the home. The source of social disorder and disarray was presented as a gender disaster; women were thought of as making strides to be like men and along the way were breaking down social norms and values. White women were urged to return to the home immediately in order to generate social normalcy.

Generally speaking, feminist research, disgraced by such assertions, responded with a continued investigation of women's socially controlled and complicated lives in these patriarchal clusters. As such, various aspects of feminist work reflected the unequal distribution of resources and mistreatment of women in social institutions (Johnson 1997; 2001). Despite academic, political, and cultural criticism, feminist researchers continued to study invisible and missing gendered voices, experiences, and realities. However, feminist analysis primarily focused on white women's roles, tended to neglect the possibility that not all men benefit equally from patriarchy.

As feminist work grew in academic departments across the country, often seen as the development of women's studies programs, gender and sex issues and practices remained hot political topics for debate. It was around this time, during the late 1980s to early 1990s, that masculinities studies began emerging in English, sociology, psychology, history, and philosophy departments. Talcott Parsons (1954) was the first sociologist to address masculinity as distinctly different role than femininity, claiming a "gender as difference" model; yet it was not until the 1990s that masculinity theorists claimed a model of multiple masculinities (Connell 1992; Pascoe 2007), including hierarchal-patriarchal experiences. It was thought that in order to

discuss gender and all its possibilities and inequalities that all genders, not just women, and multiple in form, needed to be involved in the conversation.

Men's studies scholar R.W. Connell (1992) noted that the development of masculinity's analysis reflected a time in gender research where scholars were highlighting the separation but connection between sex and gender categories (Lorber 1994; West and Zimmerman 1980). As such, men, masculinities, and male bodies needed to play an integral part and not just sit back in the normative gender role.

Feminist and masculinity scholars concurred that sex and gender, both socially influenced reflect different dimensions of the body and must be recognized as separate entities. Sex, a biological and anatomical classification, does not have to coincide with gender, a social presentation or act of masculinity or femininity. Scholars thus began to investigate masculinity as more than a sex role, but also a social identity and presentation (Connell 1992). Men's studies scholars (Connell 1992; Espiritu 1999; 2010; Levernez 1986; Kimmel 1994; Rotundo 1993) began discussing and analyzing masculinity on interactional, institutional, and intersectional levels. In general, it became clear that dependent on one's social position (race, class, gender presentation, age, and sexuality) men either benefit from or are disadvantaged by patriarchy. Although much feminist work had been accounting for female mistreatment in social institutions and social systems, masculinity studies began considering male stratification along with shifts in gender regulations and arrangements. As such, men's studies revealed various male realities, justifying and rationalizing how men, through an intersectional lens, have been gendered (Kimmel and Messner 2010).

Gender, expressed as masculinity and femininity, is an everyday routine act and practice, defined by sociologists as a social construction grounded in cultural, economic, and political

histories and events (Lorber 1994; West and Zimmerman 1980). As an assigned social identity and product of society, gender is often derived from a sex category on the basis of what genitals look like at birth (Goffman 1977; Lorber 1994) or on reproductive scans. Sex categories, also a social construction influenced by cultural norms and values, are explained in dimorphic ways (Goffman 1977), relying on a heterosexual framework of anatomy, chromosomes, physiology, and reproductive capabilities (Fausto-Sterling 2000).

Sex categories are aligned with gender statuses through the assignment of different masculine and feminine gender actions and practices, such as naming, clothing, toys, activities, and other gender markers (Lorber 1994; Martin 1994). Items and acts take on gendered meanings and implications, shaping sex, sexuality, race, and economic relationships, outcomes, and rationales. In these ways, gender becomes an institution regulating everyday interactions. Although gender has distinct classifications, it is often conflated and confused with sex—misperceived as a union of social inheritance and natural alignment. As Wilchins clarifies, “for although it looks like something we are, gender is a doing rather than a being; in this sense all gender is drag” (2002:12). “For humans, the social is natural” (Lorber 1994:13; Martin 1994). As such, the constructed normalization of sex *as* gender embedded into everyday accounts, interactions, language, and power dynamics, fosters little room or reason for questions or disruptions.

In a hetero-patriarchal context—where the merging of sex and gender persists—normativity and privileges surface, designating the male body as ideal and central to society. Western society’s patriarchal dictation has often relied on “gender as difference” biology, indicating that on average, male bodies are bigger, taller, physically stronger, and thus more valuable than female bodies (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Lorber 1994). As a result, sexed knowledge

informs gendered assumptions with male bodies as better equipped to compete or be aggressive and embody athletic and warrior identities. Social structures that require such skills, including sports and military, define and glorify these activities, designate certain practices and institutions as male, and reinforce systems of heteronormativity and patriarchy (Ingraham 2008; Johnson 1997; Messner 2002; Sabo 2001).

With intent, female bodies—also understood and explained through anatomy—are explained in contrast to male bodies. Yet, central to a woman's sexed body is reproduction. This assumed physical capability has become socially charged with the gendered assumption that all women have inherent motherhood talents, the desire to reproduce, and a drive to care for children and the home (Lorber 1994). From a very young age, girls are provided with toys such as baby dolls and dollhouses, and are subjected to movies, television shows, clothes, and language that reinforce heterosexual, monogamous marriage, motherhood, and caretaking as inherent and natural (Ingraham 2008). Male and female bodies are constructed as different, polarizing, distinct, and in need of one another (Connell 1992; Goffman 1977; Lorber 1994; Martin 1994). "Gender as difference" is seen as natural, real, and derived from a power stronger than social thought and ideology—a natural or biological occurrence that is static and fixed (Lorber 1994). Bodies that do not fit within "gender as difference" thinking and practice are deemed abnormal, immoral, and deviant (Seidman 2002).

Male privilege occurs through the oppression of non-male, non-heteronormative, and non-gender confirming bodies; feminine bodies in all variations are portrayed as inferior. Therein lies the logic of degrading men with femininity when masculinity is performed inappropriately (Levernz 1994; Kimmel 1994; Rotundo 1993). One rationale of female inferiority is the assignment of women to socially ascribed tasks and responsibilities that are not

highly valued, economically rewarded, or acknowledged. These socially constructed responsibilities are supported, validated, and mandated by systems of patriarchy (male centeredness) and ideologies of hegemonic masculinity (ideal manhood) (Connell 1992; Johnson 1997).

Hegemonic masculinity in conjunction with white privilege enforces prescribed heterogender roles (Connell 1992; Ingraham 2008). White, gender-normative bodies are neutralized and used as the norm, creating standards and boundaries for all bodies and behaviors. White privilege and normativity, which in today's political and economic state of affairs, presents itself as color-blindness and white-washing, includes the branding of two-parent nuclear family model, encouraged by the institution of heterosexuality, education, and media. With support from almost all social institutions, this heteronormative model thrives through the recognition, acknowledgement, and normalization of heterosexual marriage; individuals with other experiences (single parenthood, cohabitation, LGBTQ families) are isolated or silenced. Privileged positions continue to maintain their inherent institutional associations through cultural gatekeeping of the production of language and knowledge— in turn normalizing specific roles, discourses, and ideologies.

Heterosexuality, like most institutions, constructs rules and structured arrangements, hetero-gendering how and in which ways individuals participate in what practices (Goffman 1977; Ingraham 2002; Lorber 1994). Together, hetero-gendered, patriarchal practices and norms are established, maintaining socially constructed bodies of hegemonic masculinity and normative femininity. Those individuals whose bodies or presentations are recognized as other or outsider—such as women, individuals of color, non-heteronormative, queer bodies or feminine-masculine bodies—represent difference as deviance while also pronouncing the norm (Collins

1990; Ingraham 2008; Lorber 1994; Lorde 1984; Rich 1980). Such bodies are rendered invisible and discounted by patriarchy and other related social systems.

In sum, gender status and presentation matter, shaping life chances and outcomes in a myriad of ways; it is a visible action present on the body and a social institution that organizes and ranks individuals' lives and experiences (Lorber 1994). Gender also intersects every single action, interaction, outcome, rationale, and justification in our lives (Lorber 1994; West and Zimmerman 1980). According to famous symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman, it is not the social consequences of innate sex and gender difference that must be explained, "but the way in which the institutional workings of society ensured that this accounting would seem sound" (1977:302). As a structure and process, gender creates distinguishable social statuses and assignments with stratified rights and responsibilities (Lorber 1994). Gender has multiple, intersectional functions. In order to better understand how gender stratifies identities we must look into a society that unequally assigns gender categories; a patriarchy that focuses on male-centeredness, male-identified practices, male-dominant institutions, and the subordination of femininity (Johnson 1997).

Conclusion

Using an intersectional analysis highlights how race, class, and gender are constructed in cumulative simultaneous relationships (Collins 1990; 1993; King 1988). Applying equally significant elements to the race, class, and gender triad, such as capital or social location, highlights how macro systems of patriarchy, racism, capitalism, and heteronormativity shape everyday micro exchanges. In this way, coming out narratives are reflections of not just a sexual identity but a story that demonstrates in what ways an individual is privileged and oppressed simultaneously by race, class, gender, capital, and place. As such, dialogic encounters embody

interactions of race and gender presentations, dependent on specific locations and capital advantages. As a non-heterosexual identity is revealed or disclosed, whether verbally, through a body presentation, or by physical placement, all interacting elements shape in which way the story is told and received.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis, an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology, explains actions through stories, demonstrating that stories are produced and validated in everyday life. Narrative analysis, sociologically speaking, “narrative sociology” (Callero 2003; Maines 1993), refers to autobiographical accounts that are shaped by cultural, social, and political frames. Sociology of narrative charts the role and significance of narrative as a type of social act (Ewick and Silbey 1995; Maines 1993).

Narrative analysis, the medium to investigate stories, reveals detailed features, characters, memories, and events of these stories. Narratives specifically “elaborate accountings designed to deal with the troubles created by departures from legitimacy, which suggests a greater use of narratives during times of dynamic social change or in settings of social diversity” (Callero 2003; Hart and Fegley 1997:128). Narratives also describe events from the past, imposing structure, plot, and setting to describe and reference events. Narratives reveal events in a temporal order, which creates a casual process (Bridger and Maines 1996). Thus, narratives are socially significant because they are a component of social interactions and daily activities, justifying past behaviors and identities, while motivating future actions and self-meaning (Blumer 1969; Gubrium and Holstein 1999). In this way, narrative analysis is applicable and useful to coming out experiences or the retelling of a disclosure episode because of the involvement of chronology, identity, and self-meaning.

The narrative is a product of social language used to navigate the socialization and interaction process (Nelson 1997). Storytelling, less structured (Callero 2003; Maines 1993) than the narrative, is conversation involving social factors of situation and audience (Callero

2003; Riessman 2008). Social actors, components of both narratives and stories, produce, represent, share, and contextualize personal and intimate knowledge (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Both narratives and stories are an exchange of detailed events and accounts of a personal experience consisting of chronology, actors, and a plot. Narratives and stories are received, disclosed, and shared—thus creating an empirical arena (Blumer 1969; Gubrium and Holstein 1999).

Like other forms of qualitative work such as grounded theory and ethnography, narrative analysis is not about proving a point or argument. Narrative analysis differs from other qualitative methodologies by focusing on how an individual retells their lived experiences using their own sense of reality and language. Narrative sharing reveals an understanding of self, others, and situations, all critical to action and interactions (Blumer 1969; Gubrium and Holstein 1999). A narrative analysis researcher, or narrative analyst, is interested in how a participant recalls events, links or relates activities, and shares those accounts with someone else (Somers 1992). Narrative analysis is thus most concerned with how an individual's story is being told, who is involved in the story, and in which way the story is being revealed.

Narratives and stories matter and contribute to sociological knowledge because of their dynamic qualities, including the sharing of cultural ideologies and hegemonic assumptions (Blumer 1969; Ewick and Silbey 1995). Narratives are cultural productions reflecting specific social times; narratives are a performance (Ewick and Silbey 1995). Furthermore, sharing narratives is especially significant because it reveals influential social relationships, particularly reflecting power and resistance. Narrative analysis is a mutual enterprise; power does not just exist in the hands of the researcher, but is shared. Thus, the narrative relationship of researcher and participant challenges traditional power structures, demonstrating that power enters

interactions at various locations with multiple meanings (Foucault 1978). Power is also visible by way of the body, sharing information, and interactions; the self is a direct result of power (Carello 2003; Foucault 1978). Power takes on myriad meanings, as will the self in the sharing of stories.

Narrative analysis exists on five levels: individual, interpersonal, institutional, cultural, and social (Riessman 2008; Somers 1992). The narrative stretches across these levels. Individuals possess a story, which is shared interpersonally. Institutionally, stories use social institutions to shape our identities, such as education, employment, and the government. Cultural and social constructs produce our identities, and we are the actors in our stories. Moving through these levels, the stories contain past events and actors, has an order or structure, and endures some kind of struggle. Narrative analysis involves connecting events, making sense of individual interactions that produce social relations, and associations that create themes, patterns, and consequences (Riessman 2008).

Who is a Narrative Analyst?

The narrative analyst also becomes a storyteller by actively participating in the creation of the narrative. As the narrative analyst, it is necessary to focus on the story's point; how and why is something told? The narrative analyst is responsible for framing assumptions from the stories and interpreting the narrative. Due to the fact that the audience or readers are not present when the story is being collected, the researcher, as the storyteller, is ethically responsible to capture and retell what really happened. The researcher locates the individual within a process and sequential movement of relationships and life episodes, deciphering how their experiences shape their sense of being at that particular time and place (Somers 1992).

The researcher's questions and interests, also known as the researcher's narrative, drive the research project. With an intersectional approach and queer theory background, the stories being gathered have no "real" beginning; they exist in conversation within the researcher's narrative. In order to empathetically include participants' stories in the narrative, a "good" storyteller must listen closely, employing the Weberian touch of understanding or "Verstehen" (Weber 1930). Effective social science research involves getting inside the subjective viewpoint of the actors to see their world and to understand their motivation (Blumer 1969). Multiple stories exist; there is no one grand story. While collecting stories, the researcher must engage in self-awareness, understand one's own social position in order to identify and be sensitive to a participant's social location. Allowing the participant to steer the conversation illuminates and highlights social theory, particularly as the storyteller becomes involved and intimate with the experiences being told and shared (Riessman 2008). The researcher is responsible for preserving, not fracturing, the story in order to respect how a respondent gives meaning to lived experiences and identities. Upon completion of a story, the researcher needs to contextualize the particulars of the narrative, framing the assumptions from the stories, and interpreting the narrative.

History of Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis has linguistics, literature, and folklore roots, as evidenced by its focus on words, communication, language, and the telling of one's own story through a sequence of events (Maines 1996). Narrative analysis, including capturing and sharing stories about the social world, has been a part of social science work since the 1850s (Gubrium and Holstein 1999). For instance, Henry Mayhew ([1861–1862] 1968) and his colleagues were interested in learning about London's "humbler classes" through their own words and experiences (Gubrium and Holstein 1999). Listening to lower class individuals and hearing their stories could provide

insight about their own lives, labor, and hardships. However, Mayhew continually had to justify his research; many thought those in lower classes could not provide useful or knowledgeable information (Gubrium and Holstein 1999). Research at the time was predominantly collected from the upper classes, providing an elite and narrow perspective, which was then used to explain multiple experiences across class lines. Yet, Mayhew believed his study offered perspective from the disadvantaged and unexposed, demonstrating that class positions were unique, and offering different life chances—a necessary and missing component to social science research at the time.

Chicago School and Symbolic Interactionist Sociologist Robert E. Park (1864–1944) was interested in exploring the power of language and communication and the social bonds it called into existence. Park (1915) initially chronicled communication and importance of narrative in urban spaces in order to better understand community formation and the creation of social spaces. As an observer and narrator, Park realized words were the building blocks of social and cultural units (Wald 2002). “Communication is a process by which we transmit an experience from an individual to another but it is also a process by which these same individuals get a common experience” (Park 1921:14). Park (1923) puts his theory into action, collecting race relations information, consisting of “narratives of personal experiences and autobiographical materials and life histories” in order to uncover racial fiction (159–160). Another classic work, “The City” (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1925), relied on informants’ stories to construct accounts of urban situations and experiences (Ewick and Silbey 1995). Park emphasized that narratives are methods to studying social life.

In yet another example of early narrative analysis, sociologist William Foote Whyte (1943) set out to understand the untold stories of the Boston Italian immigrants, which he came

to call “Corneville,” in *Street Corner Society* (Gubrium and Holstein 1999). Whyte became clued into a social world not yet explored, shared, and explained in the inhabitant’s own culture. Whyte demonstrated the utter importance of individual experiences and interpretations of social reality offering insight into the ways social positioning shapes the grander patterns and nuances in the *Street Corner Society*. In the end, he offered an analysis of personal relationships shaped by interactions of culture, language, class, and race, which helped to change qualitative sociology, emphasizing the importance of collecting stories in original voices and locations.

Gathering stories has been a component to sociology methodology, yet it has been overshadowed by other forms of data gathering that focus on cause and effect (Franzoni 1998). In the 1960s, narrative analysis drew attention because, like many social science methodologies and theories of the time, social and political change was underway. Like all methodological and theoretical relationships, the narrative shift was theoretically driven as well as socially, politically, and culturally influenced. The transformation was most influenced by critiques of positivism, post-modernism, and post-structuralism from civil rights, feminism, and gay and lesbian liberation identity movements. Changes in technology, such as advancements in recording technologies also made a difference. These technological changes made narrative research a possibility by making detailed studies of everyday speech possible (Reissman 2008). New recording techniques allowed naturally occurring speech to be captured, transcribed, and analyzed.

At the same time, sociolinguists William Labov and Joshua Waletzky had a major impact on the narrative field ([1967] 1996) claiming in their famous paper:

Such fundamental structures are to be found in oral versions of personal experiences: not the products of expert story tellers that have been retold many times...By examining the actual narratives of large numbers of unsophisticated speakers, it will be possible to relate the formal properties to their functions. By studying the development of narrative

technique from children to adults, and the range of narrative techniques from lower class to middle-class speakers, it is possible to isolate elements of the narrative. (P. 74–75)

Labov and Waletzky's (1972) paper explored the structure of words, organization of events, and reliability of the story. Labov argues through a post-structuralist lens that the timetable of events is essential to the validity of the story; it helps explain the social forces impacting the narrative. Influenced by Levi-Strauss (1966), a poststructuralist theorist driven by the chronology of history, Labov focused on the importance of chronology and history of a told story and on how elements of the story are sequenced and put together:

What makes history possible is that a sub-set of events is found, for a given period... There is no history without dates... Dates may not be the whole history, nor what is most interesting about it, but they are *sine qua non*, for history's entire originality and distinctive nature lie in apprehending the relation between before and after. (Levi-Strauss 1962:257–258; Labov and Waletzky 1966:210-211)

Beginnings and endings are numerous, happening at multiple times throughout and within social interactions and therefore shaping all experiences. Levi-Strauss accounted for these events, chronologically, and its influence on social arrangements. Labov acknowledged the importance of time, focusing on the order of events as it relates to a story. Labov (1972) along with other narrative scholars, Reissman (1993) and West and Zimmerman (1980), addressed the importance of silence, interactions, and gestures in a narrative or the “doing vs. saying.” That is, he focused on what else was taking place in the narratives. Labov was most interested in summarizing the chronology of past experiences and examining how the individual interacts with the chronology events. The non-verbal components, such as the body as a narrative, including gestures, movements, and clothing, were just as important as verbal components (1972; Ozyildirim 2009). Narratives produce evaluative statements exposing insightful social functions while privileging human agency (Reissman 2008). Franzosi (1998:527) eloquently states, “a view of social reality fundamentally based on narrative data

shifts sociologists concerns away from variables to actors...models to networks...causality to narrative sequences.” This view highlights C.W. Mills’s (1959) intersection of history and biography while maintaining human agency.

Sociological Application of Narrative Analysis

Sociology, for all its different theories and methodologies, is generally concerned with representing various social realities. Sociology studies the construction of social institutions, social patterns, power structures, norms, social interactions, and inequalities (Maines 1993). Sociology also attempts to explain different forces that shape an individual’s social location and life chances, but social activities and exchanges, important components of sociological analysis, are *accomplished* and could not exist without narratives (GeMaines 1993). Narrative analysis, often ignored by sociology, can contribute to sociological inquiry by looking at social reality through the process of a story, a sequence of actions with particular social actors, certain social places, at designated social times (Abbott 1992).

Stories that represent our own personal experiences, also known as firsthand stories, are used in daily life in order to establish and maintain social relations (Ozyildirim 2009). Firsthand stories explain who we are; they do not just appear out of thin air. They are composed contextually with assistance of institutional norms. In this way, stories are also symbols, with numerous meanings, maintaining power based on their shared social meaning. Thus, as a story unfolds through a dialogic performance (Goffman 1959), discloser and disclosee, or interviewer and interviewee, compose impressions and project definitions of self in order to make claims and negotiate interactions that coincide with the story.

People use stories to build identities, create who they are, and become a part of the world by creating meaning and using symbols to communicate what the world is all about. Identity

motivates the self and also uses social action and agency to validate shared social meaning about the self in a role or group (Somers 1992). Identity, multiple and ranked, producing a hierarchy of identities, for each different position and role in society, must be established before role expectations can be defined and performances presented (Maines 1993:91). In this way, coming out narratives pronounce a non-heteronormative position while simultaneously claiming heterosexuality as normative. Moreover, due various values placed on race, class, and gender, coming out narratives hold diverse meanings and social positions. As such, differences are accomplished through interactions and reactions with others (Burke and Reitzes 1981).

Stratified identities become practiced and accomplished through the act of sharing a story; the self does not exist on its own but in relation to others (Goffman 1959; Reissman 2008; Somers 1992). In this way, narratives create identity on micro and macro levels of social life. In fact, narratives create social ontologies; it is through narrativity we come to know and understand the social world and constitute our social identities (Somers 1992:606). Thus, stories are cultural, social, and group productions, constructed when people come together to share personal troubles and things that matter in life (Denzin and Lincoln 1998).

The dialogic performance exchanged in and through storytelling is sociologically powerful because it reveals significant multiple levels of analysis regarding culture, structure, roles, interactions, and power (Denzin 1990; Maines 1993). Denzin (1990:2) articulates, using C. Wright Mills (1959), that it is utterly important to recognize that sociology as a discipline is constantly producing narratives, consciously or not, in attempt to “capture biography, lived history, and experience.” Denzin (1990:2) further states that “texts are narrative fictional productions, based on stories people tell us...all we have are experiences and stories about these experiences.”. Stories must be a vital component of sociological analysis because the social

comes alive in stories through the intersection of history, biography, and society (Denzin 1990; Mills 1959).

Other qualitative work, such as grounded theory or ethnography, are useful to sociological inquiry, making various theoretical and empirical contributions; however, narrative analysis has the ability to present an individual's account of a social experience without detaching the individual from their story. Stories can reflect deep-rooted inequalities, subtle social advantages, or changing worlds as constructed in unfolding narratives (Gubrium and Holstein 1999). Maines (1993) adds that narratives are collective acts, pertaining to political and cultural representations of lived experiences. Narratives justify behavior, often forestalling structural or agency driven change, particularly during challenging or threatening times (Ewick and Silbey 1995).

As social facts, coming out narratives are evidence of hegemonic structure (Smith 1998). Narratives and stories are placed within normative structures of race, gender and class, expressing and illustrating privileged frameworks, revealing dimensions oppression (Ewick and Silbey 1995:212). Yet, sociologists have not been interested and have even been skeptical of the structure present in narratives. In fact, narratives have been viewed as the epistemological "other" in contrast to casual explanation (Somers 1992:614). Franzosi adds (1998:548), when "analyzing 'respondents stories,' sociologists cut up individual stories and recombine the pieces into new stories, with the coherence and context of each original narrative lost and forgotten. Upon the new stories, sociologists then impose the coherence of the 'scientific' ethnographic text in context of sociologist literature." Thus, sociologists are narrators in the sense that they retell stories (Maines 1993). It must be recognized that narratives *are* social matter, preserved by investigators and researchers who respect and empathize respondents' ways of constructing

meaning and how that meaning is accomplished and practiced (Franzosi 1998; Riessman 2008). Storytelling is used to share personal information, and within that disclosure, relationships and structures are realized and validated. Sharing a story is a social transaction and each story is socially produced, conditioned, and experienced (Smith 1998). This social transaction involves interested and invested parties. In sum, the narrative has social significance; stories represent a host of stratified exchanges that motivate agency while also embodying institutional discrimination, justifying identities and actions, establishing social connections, and revealing existing hegemony in our lives.

Narrative Analysis and Coming Out Stories

While working on my dissertation research, I have become aware that my voice, experiences, and understanding of sociology should be embedded in my project. As a feminist, queer, and intersectional theorist, I did not want to ignore my social bias; I believed my position would help me understand the unraveling social theory in my participants' experiences. I had initially assumed a modified grounded theory approach, unaware that I would find my participants sharing their stories and not necessarily answering my questions. Yet, after a handful of interviews, I realized that participants were sharing stories or coming out narratives—not fragmented pieces of their lives or isolated events. Many of the participants began to weave their social position(s) into their stories, telling multiple stories with numerous beginnings.

I used the following the research question to my narrative collection, “How do positions of identity, such as gender and race, shape the multiple dimensions of gay men and women when expressing coming out experiences? I adjusted my interview questions from asking participants to explain to seeking how interpretations of experiences are made. My questions addressed topics such as: who are you; how do you racially identify; how do you define your gender and

sex; where did you grow up; how would you describe your home and family; did you grow up in a religious and/or spiritual environment; what do you practice, if at all, now; when did you first recognize feelings/thoughts/desires for someone of the same sex or gender or even feel different than other folks of your own gender; what did it feel like; describe your gender from childhood and adolescence.

After we discussed these topics, I would ask the participants to take me on their sexual identity journey, to lead me down their path of same-sex feelings and coming out. Throughout this story I would ask questions and become a part of their dialogue. Many times participants asked me about my experiences, possibly looking for a common or shared experience. The open-ended conversation elicited a narrative, where I as the researcher, relinquished control of the interview to the respondent, who then defined topics and chose the talking points to include (Ewick and Silby 2003). I came to the realization that I was listening to “stories,” and I was determined to keep the stories whole, with no fragmenting.

Narrative analysis, according to Riessman (2008:24), “necessitates following participants down their trails.” It entails listening to an interviewee describe in their own words their experiences and understanding of the world around them. Allowing the interviewee to direct the conversation can take unexpected turns (Ewick and Silbey 2003; Foucault 1978; Gramsci [1971] 1999). Narrative analysis promotes “power sharing” between researcher and participant encouraging the participant to share more (Riessman 2008:24). As participants share stories and feel in control of their own stories, storytelling begins to take on several different meanings, particularly in relation to coming out of the closet.

Coming out of the closet to another person is a form of self-disclosure, where self-disclosure is defined as communication of personal information to another person. Prior to

coming out, it is assumed one has been concealing a truth, thus coming out is considered an “authentic” act. It is through coming out that gay and lesbian individuals actually become “gay” (Meeks 2006) because coming out involves claiming a gay and lesbian identity. Coming out has developed as a social, cultural, and sexual rite of passage for people with same same-sex desires (Herdt 1992; Meeks 2006).

As previously mentioned, coming out, disclosing, or sharing information regarding sexual identities is considered to play a large role in developing a sexual identity other than heterosexual. Challenging heterosexuality is accomplished on various levels, due to other social factors such as race, class, and gender. Coming out consists of declaring a sexual position other than that of a heterogender in a heteronormative society (Ingraham 2008; Meeks 2006; Rich 1980). Therefore, telling, sharing, narrating, or coming out to someone challenges existing power structures present in organized institutions, such as heterosexuality (Ewick and Silbey 1995; 2003; Foucault 1978; Goffman 1963; Gramsci [1971] 1999).

There are multiple experiences and reactions to coming out as intersected with not only race, class, and gender, but also religion, location, and cohort. Some individuals come out and are not aware of the social institutions or hegemonic frameworks they continue to support or replicate—a phenomenon known as “new homophobia” (Ewick and Silbey 1995; Kahn 2009). Narratives are linked to the social organizations (heterosexuality, GLBQ identities, family, race, class, gender) of which they are a part—meaning we can be shackled by the narrative framework because of the oppression it reveals (Ewick and Silbey 1995). Simultaneously for some and independently for other individuals, coming out is a form of rebellion or resistance against silence, the maintenance of a heteronormative society, and a heterosexual identity (Meeks 2006; Seidman 2002; Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson 1983). Resistance, often understood as “being

less powerful in a relationship of power” (Ewick and Selby 2003: 1336), can also be used for protection, particularly for the powerless or marginalized. Goffman (1963:319) argues resistance is an essential constituent of the self because “it is against something that the self can emerge.”

The coming out story, whether consciously or not, involves resistance (Goffman 1963) by deconstructing institutionalized power. Due to the fact that coming out, narrating sexual identity, and communicating “otherness” is an evolving process and motivates different actions contingent upon intersections of race, class, and gender, identity is always in motion, resisting versions of the norm. Goffman (1963) stresses the importance of the relationship between resistance, power, and structure; resistance is used to maintain and deconstruct the organization of power. Narratives of resistance, such as coming out stories, demonstrate embedded structural inequalities and manipulation of social structures in the common sense of everyday life (Ewick and Silby 2003:1336). Therefore, even if only for a moment, resistance expresses more “probable relational outcomes, signaling the exploitation of structure to disturb ongoing expectations, and as such it is premised upon the apprehension of power, injustice, and structural opportunity” (Ewick and Silbey 2003:1331; Goffman 1963).

Influenced by the relationship between symbolic interactionism and post-modern theoretical frameworks, many narrative analysts recognize multiple social meanings, motivation, and power. Resistance, for example (Ewick and Silbey 2003; Goffman 1963; Gramsci [1971] 1999), exists on multiple levels producing multiple stories; not all stories are the same. Individuals experience resistance differently; “some actors are advantaged by having greater access to schemas and resources” (Ewick and Silbey 2003:1331; Smith 1998). Stories demonstrate the inner workings of social institutions, portraying how marginalized individuals navigate, negotiate, and resist power, thus revealing socially unearned advantages and

disadvantages (Ewick and Silbey 2003; Goffman 1963). Individuals that identify as gay, lesbian, and queer not only vary in how they share experiences and express coming out stories, but also differ in gender presentation, race, class, and nationality. Variations in gay, lesbian, and queer identities are exercised through gendered symbols and practices as well as race-based statuses and privileges, often becoming habitual in social structures (Ewick and Silby 2003). Inequalities that benefit some and disadvantage others become an external pattern of social life. Therefore, narrative analysis as a methodology exposes multiple layers of inequalities, even among the marginalized, illustrating the seduction and destruction of power, normalization, and privilege. Narratives are governed by social norms, and rules are used to constitute appropriate, successful, and representative narratives (Ewick and Silbey 1995). Stories taken together and grouped by themes become a source of sociocultural knowledge, painting pictures of not only resistance, but also of new forms of inequality. Many narratives revealed the complex picture of intersectional oppressive relationships amongst heteronormativity, patriarchy, racism, and capitalism. Therefore, narratives are sociologically necessary because they capture multiple interacting conditions and structures (Smith 1998).

Sample Description

The participants in this dissertation research do not represent larger society. That is not the goal of qualitative methodology or narrative analysis. At the same time, the participants are not a homogenous sample. I interviewed a total of 60 participants; 50 participants currently reside in the Southeast and the other 10 participants either live in New York City or Miami, Florida. The individuals in this sample range from 18–60 years of age. 30 of the individuals identified as gay men and 28 of the participants identified as lesbians. One individual identified as genderqueer and one individual identified as bi-sexual. 44 of 60 participants identified as

white, with over 65 percent of the participants identifying with some form of Christianity. Race, location, and religion influence one's access to social resources including environments that house gay and lesbian bars, clubs, bookstores, coffee shops, and safe spaces. Furthermore, cohort effects cultural definitions and meanings attached social positions. I found myself bombarded with interested participants wanted to share their stories. I would have desired a more diverse sample, based on race and location. But I was thrilled with the interest in the project.

How to Conduct Narrative Analysis

The researcher collects the narrative—a narrative transaction (Ewick and Silbey 1995)—gathering a story with connecting parts, plots, characters, and a sequence of events. The researcher is most concerned with *what* is being shared, *how* information is being transferred, *why* is this story being told, and *when* events took place. What, how, why, and when are the social organization of narratives. Hence, the researcher attempts to accomplish many goals and practices as the narrative analyst, most importantly listening to a storyteller while simultaneously becoming a storyteller.

Upon the collection of stories, transcription is necessary as well as the reading and listening to stories. When listening to stories, a researcher must ask why a narrative was developed in that way. The narrative analyst must look at *what* stories are being told, *how*, and *why*—analyzing the appearance of the story and locating underlying trajectories. How an individual organizes and chronicles their story lends insight into wider social groupings or cultural settings that an individual belongs to (Coffey and Atkinson 1996:68). Gubrium and Holstein (1999) refer to shifting between the *how* and *what* as analytic bracketing. Analytic bracketing takes place throughout the entire project, meaning the researcher is constantly looking

at the *how* and *what*. Different *hows* and *whats* of the story will emerge throughout analysis; “it is a strategy for shifting analytic perspectives in order to capture complex empirical terrain” (Gubrium and Holstein 1999:29). It also allows various key operating components or themes to exist at the same time; the components are mutually constitutive, operating with and through each other (Gubrium and Holstein 1999).

Labov and Waletzky (1972) stress that when analyzing stories it is necessary to look for order, duration, and frequency; the way a story is told is essential to the analysis. Put another way, the narrative must contain past events and actors, events must be ordered, and, lastly, events and actors must be related to one another, social institutions, and opposition or struggle (Ewick 2003; Ozyildirim 2009). When looking at narratives, the researcher must locate the actors, function, or events of the story and sequence of the events. Analyzing the functions and sequences of events allows structure to emerge (Coffey and Atkinson 1996).

Labov (1972) insists that stories have formal structural properties in relation to their social functions. These structural properties have recurrent patterns that can be identified and used to interpret each segment of the narrative (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). Riessman (2008) adds that beyond looking at structure, it is important to focus on how the story is organized, what events are included and how points are being established. Analyzing stories involves listening to stories several times; producing familiarity with the narratives, social theory, concepts, and identifying themes will then emerge.

Labov (1972; Ozildirim 2009:1211) recommends a six-step narrative analysis approach when collecting and analyzing narrative data: abstract; orientation; complicating action; evaluation; result of resolution; and coda. The *abstract (a)* is a summary of the entire story and consists of a few stanzas in the introduction of narratives; it involves asking what the story was

about. *Orientation (o)* provides information about time, place, characters, activity, and the situation that will follow; it looks at who, what, when, and where. *Complicating actions (ca)* are narrative clauses that inform the audience about what happens next—this is obligatory because it contains a climax, high point, or struggle. Complicating action is concerned with what happened next. The *result or resolution (r)* informs the readers about how the complicating action was resolved or attempted to be resolved; the researcher is looking for what finally happened. *Evaluation (e)*, a very important component to narrative analysis, creates the emotional connections and explains why the story is worth sharing. During evaluation of the story, the researcher is asking why this part of the story is so significant. Finally, *coda (c)* clauses and statements are listed toward the end of the narrative, indicating that the narrative is over. During coda, a summary can be provided, allowing the past to be bridged with the present.

The analysis process allows the researcher to think about the stories as data, generating sociological matter. The researcher is to look for the functions of the story as well as cultural and social categories. For example, how is resistance a structural property? How does coming out to family challenge heteronormativity? How do childhood gender arrangements impact coming out practices? And how do the participants' biographies and demographics contextualize the story, offering comparisons with others events?

Personal narratives, in their purest form, shape identity and selfhood by providing a complex and compelling life story. A narrative approach with a coming out lens, provides access to individual level frameworks that underlie a sense of self and thus the detailed accounts of social reality, often justifying statements of resistance and normativity (Ewick and Silby 2003; Giddens 1984; Goffman 1963; Hoey 2005). Here lies the sociological significance of storytelling—empirical explanation for resistance and normativity to explain social action and

social life (Ewick and Silby 2003; Riessman 2008). Narratives demonstrate how oppression and privilege function through the intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, location, and religion. Stories then elicit the sources, limits, and advantages of agency present and thriving in social structures. Thus, it is through narratives, that social structures reveal how social systems function; heteronormativity relies on patriarchy, which is supported by racism and capitalism. Stories, passed on through participating members, create a social and cultural heritage or organizational culture demonstrating the multiple levels of interacting systems. One can ask, then, what has shaped and continues to shape coming out stories?

Limitations and Realities of Narrative Analysis

As previously mentioned, narratives are social matter, playing key and essential roles in the construction of self and understanding of others. Narratives are only as powerful as we allow them to be. Using stories for research involves understanding that stories have no beginning or ending, no starting point or basic story. Rather, there are an unlimited number of other stories that exist in relation or response to it (Smith 1998). Therefore, the researcher is constantly asking where the line between the present and future of the story exists. Moreover, each narrative has multiple stories in reaction or response, as consequence or reward, all which are multiple. This is particularly true when studying coming out stories, which evolve with each new recipient and are continually based on location and embodiment.

Narrative analysis makes it difficult to draw conclusions across cases. This may be particularly difficult for sociologists whom often desire generalizability and therefore may end up with unresolved issues with reliability and validity. Maines (1993) reminds researchers that reliability and validity are social constructs, just like stories; all three are consequences of human interaction. Narratives must not be generalized; each story is significant, yet we are challenged

to find emerging themes. Therefore, we as researchers must be cautious to not silence or single out particular voices or stories because of how they relate or do not relate to the researcher's personal story or the larger project (Gubrium and Holstein 1999). Narratives also put forth truth claims, for example "my experience is real, authentic, true, genuine," and these statements are impossible to test (Ewick and Silbey 1995). Lastly, due to the hegemonic framework that stories are created within, narratives have the ability to reproduce and replicate the taken for granted; assumption as social inequality is a limitation (Ewick and Silbey 1995; Gramsci 1971).

Journal Example

As stated by Stets and Burke (2003):

Humans have the ability to reflect back upon themselves, taking themselves as objects. They are able to regard and evaluate themselves, to take account of themselves...to be self-aware or achieve consciousness with respect to their own existence. They formulate and reflect, and this ongoing. This process of selfhood is reflexivity. (P. 132)

I have been reflecting on the participants' narratives as well as my reaction to each individual story. Furthermore, I have a narrative as well; it is my story that has brought participants and readers to the project. My narrative is shaping the sociology developing in my dissertation project. "Thus, the scholarly representation and analysis can be itself an act of narration—*sociology as narration*" (Ewick and Silbey 1995:204). In order to remain self-aware, reflexive, and cognizant of my biases and reactions to the participants' stories, it is important I have a space to record my thoughts. After each interview I have kept a journal of field notes and memos, including key aspects of informal discussions, descriptions of the informants, observations, impressions, and emerging ideas and thoughts (Ridge 2004). The journal has been a safe place to record my experiences after each interview. Participants share extremely personal information—sometimes heart-wrenching stories—and I need a private place to digest this

information. The journal has provided a space for me as the researcher and storyteller to share my experiences listening and interacting with participants.

The project is also interested in identity and gender presentation as well as social interactions. It is important that I journal about these concepts in order to better understand my reaction and interaction with participants as well my experience through this process. There is minimal literature on researcher journaling. Participants of research projects, such as patients in hospitals, have been asked to keep journals or diaries and it has been found to be effective (Mechanic 1989). The journal has become a method of its own as I record different aspects of my experience, interactions with the participants, relationship with the data, and other relevant issues to the study. Below is an example of a journal entry from December 2009.

In preparation for my second interview, I was conscious of my presentation and wanted to be viewed as an insider as well as professional. I wore brown boots, brown pants, a green striped oxford with a navy sweater, and a brown corduroy jacket. My hair was down and I put a little bit of makeup on.

I met Tim at his place of employment, a corporate environment. I was greeted by a friendly staff, offered a beverage, and waited for Tim in the conference room. Tim and I had briefly met at an HRC event—I was given his card and contacted him that way. He eagerly replied to participate but we have no other connections. He greeted me in black corduroy pants, a grey and navy zip sweater, and puma sneakers. He had what seemed to be silver or white gold/platinum band on the ring finger and a band on the forth finger on his right hand (black rubber and silver). He had short, well kempt hair, with salt and pepper coloring, no facial hair, visible tattoos or piercings.

Tim told me upon our initial greeting that he is in charge around here and no one will be disrupting us during our interview. We sat down, Tim at the head of the conference table, legs spread apart, leaning back in his chair, and I asked him to identify himself. In contrast, I sat with my legs crossed through the majority of the interview.

I asked Tim to consider his gender, race, age, and sexuality—what he considers to be important demographics. He replied with 45-years-old and he did not answer the race question. Through assumption, I believe he is white and to him it is something not worth mentioning or talking about, employing white privilege. He immediately began talking about his sexuality and coming out or recognition of same sex feelings. He recalled having same-sex feelings as a young boy, his discussion of these feelings coincided with his relationship with his twin brother and his twin identity. His twin identity was a

prominent theme throughout the interview as well his relationships. His twin brother was constantly described as the immoral and deviant twin. His twin brother also identifies as gay and has been diagnosed with HIV. Tim feels that he is the good son and good or normal gay.

Tim argued through much of the interview that being gay does not have to be hard or difficult. That one needs to make good, educated choices. All individuals have the ability to be “good” and productive citizens. Tim believes that all individuals need to work and make money, contribute to society and be resourceful. These ideas contribute to how he thinks about sex and partnerships. Meaning, monogamy and safe sex are essential ingredients to a healthy gay life. If not, one will end up in the position of his twin brother—sick, poor, and lonely.

Reflecting on this interview, I found Tim to be self-righteous. He described his identity and experiences with a sense of gay entitlement, based on class, work/labor, age, body, gender, and lack of illness. He was not cognizant of how his race or upward mobility positioned him in society. Male, white, and class privilege seemed to be common themes. In fact, Tim shared with me there is little reason to not be out, living an open gay life. He seems to embrace the post-gay and post-closet rhetoric.

When analyzing narratives I have the opportunity to look back at my journal entries and recall my reactions to the participants, including body movements as well as time and space. The journal complements the narrative by adding more nuanced themes to the story, including my perception and reaction to the story. After contextualizing and theorizing a participant’s story it is important to share my impressions and reactions. The journal captures components of the participant and researcher relationship and demonstrates how my social location and social capital has influenced my collection of stories. I had a strong reaction to Tim; it is necessary to document this reaction for it *will* influence how I analyze his story and its placement in the larger project. Thus, including as much information about the stories as possible provides the most expansive picture of the *hows* and *whats*.

Narrative Example

Below is an excerpt from a narrative followed by an analysis. Here, the participant, a white woman in her forties, from a small, conservative, southern, Christian town, shares how she managed and negotiated her same-sex feelings in high school.

I: Did you harbor feelings for individuals of the same-sex in middle school, high school?

R: Oh I tried to fight it especially in high school...at the time I thought it went away...but talking about it now I realize that it was always there...I was friends with all the guys and I can remember all the girls bein' jealous of that and they would make comments, like are you sleeping with them? As if I couldn't have a friendship with the guys. I guess the girls were looking for boyfriends. But I always hung out with the guys, we would go, oh what do you call it, I can't remember...dirt...there with the trucks and the mud and...muddin'...southern country thing (laugh)...mud trucking, that's it! They would invite me, all the guys always invited...cuz I was like their, you know, buddy...I hung out with them and the girls were just really jealous of that...and I kinda liked it, you know...I played on it considering they always gave me such a hard time. When I figured out I liked women or came to terms with it, I still hung out with the guys but I never felt safe telling any of them that I wanted to sleep with their girlfriends.

I: Did you share your feelings with anyone, family or friends?

R: No in fact I tried to avoid people, especially the girls. I can remember bein' in locker rooms and stuff with girls and makin' it a point not to look or start any sort of conversation, maybe I wanted to, but I was so nervous of people figuring me out. Later on after high school I met my first girlfriend and I came out to my mom and grandmother and that was an absolute disaster.

The above narrative demonstrates pieces of the *abstract*. Although we are not starting at the beginning of the conversation, the participant reveals her southern culture and practices. We also know she struggled with same-sex feelings as an adolescent and during the actual interview process she is negotiating feelings towards her memories and experiences; inevitably her process impacts how she shares her narrative. The participant has several layers of *complicating actions*. She shared how she managed and negotiated her gendered relationships in school and how these experiences caused tension but also highlighted her feelings and desires. She appreciated her relationship with the boys at school but at times she still felt isolated and lonely. The participant revealed various moments of *resolution* throughout her narrative. At one point the participant

explained to me that she was raised in a racist and patriarchal environment; she was exposed to bigotry constantly as a child. Coming out and dating across racial lines brought her peace and resolution; it afforded her experiences in communities that were marginalized in her life. In fact, her first same-sex relationship was interracial; she expressed an inner peace and calmness from this partnership. She came out to her mother and grandmother, through this partnership, an *evaluative* part of the story, and receives conflict and backlash from her family. In effect, her sexuality is shared and understood through the relationship with the specific girlfriend. Her grandmother responds, “get out of her here you colored folk loving dyke...don’t you ever come back.” A difficult she exclaimed, but she felt relief for not hiding her identity from her family anymore.

The process of going through her narrative involves coding the story with various narrative analysis themes as well as recognizing how biography and demographics contextualize the story. Multiple complicating actions, resolutions, and evaluations exist, thus making narrative analysis the ideal method for this project. Upon completion of each interview, I came home and completed a journal entry. My entry would address how I reached the participant, how I responded to their story, particularly addressing their demographics and biography, and my comments about their *resolution*, if one has been achieved. After listening to this participant, I returned home and completed my journal entry:

I moved into my neighborhood about two-and-a-half years ago. The neighborhood village has a gift/flower store, owned by the participant. The participant and many of her friends that frequent the shop have been very kind to my partner and I. I had noticed awhile back, the rainbow flag hanging in front of the store. As a symbol of gay, lesbian, and queer acceptance, I popped into the store the other day to browse and possibly pick up a few odds and ends. As I was checking out, I asked the participant if she would be interested in participating in the study. She eagerly agreed.

We met in another local neighborhood, at a coffee shop and talked for about an hour and a half. The participant is 48 years old, white, owns her own gift shop, partnered,

identifies as female, short blond hair, glasses, and gives off a butch-androgynous presentation. The participant grew up in Ft. Pierce, Florida in a Southern Conservative home, but not religious environment. She shared with me that it was acceptable to use the “n” word. Both her parents were hard workers, her father worked for thirty years at the nearby plant. Her mother waitressed and then worked at a nearby auto shop, but always around the hours of the kids schooling. Mother always cooked breakfast, cleaned house, and took care of her father. The participant has two brothers and she noticed gender differences in terms of how they were raised and what they were allowed to do as children. She always felt just as capable and never wanted to be held back due to her gender.

Her first revelation of same-sex feelings came to her in a dream. She shared the dream with her brother, who shamed her. She held her feelings in for some time, but never banished her feelings. In high school she realized she was a lesbian and has had several tumultuous relationships, although currently in a healthy, positive one. She has peace with her sexuality, her work, her home, and her family.

This particular entry reminds me during analysis that I had previously met the participant and was familiar with her work, living arrangements, and peer group. The participant and I live in the same neighborhood and she has met my partner; we had established rapport and trust prior to the interview. Having insider status to her neighborhood and place of work impacts how I understand her story. She also has information regarding me possibly impacting what and how she reveals information. The journal is reminder of this dynamic, while also allowing me to be reflexive about my feelings and reactions towards her story. The journal is a space to recall the nuances to our relationship. It also allows me to reflect on how race and gender relations in her home impacted her coming out. Journaling provides a critical space for reactions to the participant’s narrative, encouraging the researcher to be reflexive with each individual story. In conclusion, my experience matters and impacts the narrative analysis and writing process but it must be accounted for in way where it does not take away from or distract the participant’s story.

Conclusion

Narratives are socially organized phenomena, containing characters, plots, and temporal ordering which can be systematically described. The researcher, who is also the storyteller and

narrative analyst, is responsible for the story structure by locating central themes, sequencing life events, and organizing the time span (Maines 1993). Narratives are powerful social tools that transmit our identities and social positions to others. They are social products that represent cultural norms and beliefs and transmit normativity, hegemony, power, oppression, and resistance. In the following chapters, narrative analysis and intersectional theory are used to uncover how the post-closet discourse fosters normativity, revealing stories of privilege and exclusion. To begin, I offer an intersectional analysis, specifically focusing on the relationship(s) of race, class, and gender in today's post- closet discourse. Intersectionality provides the multifaceted and complicated relationships of privilege and oppression functioning outside and within gay and lesbian communities.

CHAPTER 4: COMING OUT AND TODAY'S CLOSET

I begin the analysis of my participants' coming out narratives with an examination of what the closet and coming out has meant to them. I collected these narratives—or autobiographical accounts—of coming out experiences in order to better understand how individuals make meaning of their non-heteronormative sexual identity. Most gay and lesbian researchers argue that coming out is essential in becoming “gay” (Meeks 2006), because coming out involves claiming a gay and lesbian identity in an oppressive heteronormative society. Disclosing one’s coming out narrative is critical to positive self-awareness and understanding. In fact, many gays and lesbians find coming out to families, friends, and co-workers to be extremely important and valuable, but struggle with reactions and repercussions, often due to interactions of race, gender, religion, class, and geography.

Coming out research documents that gay and lesbian individuals are most concerned with family reactions and repercussions (Herdt 1996; Savin-Williams 2005; Seidman 2002; 2004; Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999). Family is often the most intimate social institution in an individual’s life, as well as a site for change and resistance (hooks 1989). Family introduces an individual into society. Family is the institution often held responsible for establishing and teaching gender roles, religious practices, and race relations. Families are socially instructed to provide shelter, education, hygiene, nutrition, and financial support. Family is thought of as central to individual’s social well being. Familial relationships and interactions create and exhibit power structures by constructing an individual’s social position as well as access to opportunities. We learn through our families what it means to be in a subordinate and/or dominant role.

Revealing and sharing non-heterosexual experiences and identities to family remains a significant and difficult process for many individuals who fear rejection and invisibility. Often times how an individual tells family members impacts if and how an individual discloses to others, including co-workers and friends. Seidman (2002) argues that families have become more accommodating in the post-closet age, but with the rule of tolerance, not acceptance (2002). Upon disclosure to families, many gays and lesbians are silenced and the gay and lesbian identity is left outside of family life. Due to the fact that coming out is not an isolated event but rather an on-going narrative dependent on social context, time, and location, silencing is also continual.

Neil, Rachel, and Cole

Meet Neil, a 37-year-old white male, born in a rural town in North Carolina and currently residing in Atlanta. Neil works in the medical field and identifies himself as a spiritual Christian. He explained to me that he came from a religious and conventional home. His father is a minister, and both his parents are missionaries. Neil's narrative literally and figuratively defines the closet as a prominent fixture in his life; it has been used and remains a form of protection and shield in various social settings.

The closet was, and to be honest still is a significant construct in my life. Even before I was at a point where I was aware of the fact that I was closeted, like when I wasn't out to myself and I didn't identify with myself as gay or even having feelings for men, I think the strength of my natural desire to come across as normal, like Joe Blow heterosexual, probably testifies to the fact that I was trying to keep myself in the closet. I did not want anyone to know and the closet protected me... Now there are some spaces where I am not closeted and some spaces where I am. Professionally I kind of, it's one of those things that I guess, depending on the situation, I'll talk about it or not. I don't hide it, but I think where the closet is most a reality for me is when I'm back with my family, even though I came out to them, the coming out experience was a really negative experience for myself, but also for my family and I think that I've probably really done myself and them a really big disservice, but I think out of a desire to like preserve the peace and not cause this fracture, even though I know it's not right, I'm pretty closeted when I go home we just don't talk about it.

Neil expressed that the closet has played a vital role in his life. Due to the fact that coming out is comprised of ongoing isolated incidents—the closet can be a persistent factor in an individual’s life. In its various functions, the closet can be used as a safety measure to hide from public and private discrimination, prejudice, and violence. The closet has always been used as a form of protection, sheltering a minority position from a dominant or oppressive force. Neil has and continues to use the closet in order to protect himself from oppressive instances at work or with his family.

Rachel’s narrative complements Neil’s experience. Rachel is a white lesbian that also works in the healthcare profession and comes from a southern, conservative, Christian home. Rachel is 38 years old and is most concerned about being out at work and the impact her lesbian identity will have on her career.

I consider myself fortunate that I’m in healthcare. The healthcare field tends to be very liberal...we provide health care without judgment. At the same time, work is not the place to be out. I think I could lose my job and even be ostracized. Other gay people should understand this—this is not my choice. My lesbian identity is not my first topic of conversation with anyone, especially at work. I wanted to come into the job and establish myself for the professional that I am...and then as I got to know everyone, personally, if they learn that about me, hopefully it won’t matter. If anyone asks me if I am gay or have a partner, I promised myself that I would not lie. I will be honest in my response. Does this mean I am closeted? I don’t think so. I am just protecting myself.

Rachel expressed her concern that if her co-workers—or even patients—come to find out that she is a lesbian, her abilities as a professional will be challenged. She keeps her lesbian identity private, to an extent, in order to protect other components of her identity, such as her working self. She does not believe that she lives in the closet. In fact, she articulated that other gays and lesbians would understand her point and find themselves in a similar position. She is protecting one component of her identity against another aspect of her marginalized self.

Even with sexual discrimination on the line, coming out of the closet, as a process and experience, is argued as important to gaining comfort with one's non-heterosexual identity. Coming out and claiming a gay and lesbian identity symbolizes the achievement of a dynamic social position (Moorhead 2003). For most gay and lesbian individuals, coming out of the closet remains central to developing a positive and comfortable sexual identity along with relationships and friendships (Hubbard and DeWelde 2003).

Cole, a white, 59-year-old liberal, Christian pastor and GLBTQ activist grew up on the West Coast and currently resides in the Southeast. He came out to his parents in his early twenties. Cole felt that coming out was necessary in order to maintain close ties with his parents; he did not want to keep such an important part of his identity silent and hidden from his family.

Don't get me wrong, I was afraid, my parents were practicing Christians, but they were liberal, and we were a close family. So it felt reasonable to come out...I came out to my parents because I wanted to maintain that closeness that I had with them, and I knew that if I didn't, that we would grow apart. So I wrote a letter, and I put it in the context of our faith. You know, coming out is part of my faith experience...I came to my sexuality through my faith and I figured they would struggle in the same ways I did. But I found peace and I knew they would too.

Coming out and claiming a non-heterosexual identity is one of the most profound ways to establish a gay sense of self, establish relationships, disrupt the persistence of heterosexuality, and challenge heteronormativity, yet it also serves to uphold the homo/heterosexual definition. Cole felt the importance of coming out, the necessity of sharing his non-heterosexual identity with his parents, in order to maintain their close ties. Deep inside, possibly due to his personal sexual and faith relationship, he believed his parents would be accepting and supportive. Cole further explained his parents' reactions.

My father was very calm but my mother, wow she was hysterical (laugh)...and she was crying and upset. I talked to them and I encouraged them to write down their feelings. My mother was blaming herself, she was blaming God; my mother told me she felt as if she was drowning. My father said he was concerned about my mother's well being.

Needless to say I was very worried about them. But I encouraged journaling and therapy and with time to they came to a place of peace. Eventually they became involved in PFLAG and coming out not only changed my life for the better but I think it positively impacted theirs too.

Initially, Cole's parents struggled with his coming out, especially his mother. However, Cole anticipated they would be would be comfortable with his sexual identity and with time they came to be. Cole believed coming out was essential to his well-being and the well-being of his parents. As a white male and member of the dominant faith, Cole had other social advantages, along with a close relationship with his parents. Cole felt secure exposing his sexual identity to his family, possibly contributing to his positive experience. As in the cases of Neil, Rachel, and Cole, coming out is a difficult process and experience; it is ongoing and potentially life altering. Many factors contribute to coming out narratives, including other components of identity, such as gender, race, class, location, and religion. Coming out remains a topic of much contention in sexuality and sociology scholarship.

Michelle, Erin, and Jamie

Michelle was born in Havana, Cuba and moved to Miami Beach when she was six years old. She still resides in Miami, and when I was down in Florida visiting family we decided to meet for coffee at a mutual friend's house. She is now 45 years old and describes herself as a Hispanic, spiritual Christian. She currently holds a management position at a printing company. She shared with me how complicated it can be to identify as gay or lesbian in the Cuban community and explained to me that she spent much of her adolescent and adult life debating if she should come out to her parents.

I always told myself if my mom ever asked...you see I have never been with a man, I never even brought a man home. I've never talked about getting married... My mom has always seen me around women. My partners would come to my house, you know, under the disguise of "my friend." I would label my partners that I would live with, as my "roommates." My mom must have known? Don't you think? We just did not talk about

it. I was so fearful as to how she would react. And then one day, mom and I were talking and I was telling her about one of my “roommates” and how she moved out and I was going to be short on rent. And I realized I just did not want to lie anymore. So I told my mom that the “roommate” and I were more than just friends. My mom broke down into hysterics. But you know, it was one of those very spiritual moments for me because I felt very peaceful, you know, like the thought of telling my mother, for years, would terrify me...the thought was just overwhelming...no, I can’t go there...but at that moment, it was very peaceful, like a huge burden had been lifted. I looked at her and said, “Mom, are you really surprised?” She said, “no...I’m not.” Of course, she’s crying hysterically. And then she said to me, “I just always had hope.” I’m like, hope for what? I’ve never even talked about getting married and so then she got upset and really changed towards me, even stopped talking to me for a while. But I really stood my ground with her and I thought things might have shifted. But after all that, I have to say not much has changed. Neither she nor my father will talk to me about it. We just don’t talk about it...it’s just understood. They are nice to who ever I bring home but they don’t want any details. They won’t even recognize the fact that we had this big conversation.

After Michelle shared this particular coming out narrative, we spent some time discussing why coming out in the Cuban community is challenging, possibly influencing her mother’s response.

I think the Cuban community is so focused on family and church, and really struggles with gay people, I mean struggles a lot. Family is supposed to look a specific way. And if you don’t look normal people forget about you or talk about you. But it is better today than years ago. When I was growing up I heard so much negativity, always heard maricon [Fag in Spanish] still do, but I do think there is still struggle, and Cubans, not gay- Cubans, but Cubans, are struggling because it’s a very traditional thinking culture. We grow up, especially the girls, full of hypocritical double standards, be a virgin, take care of the home and husband, and the man is always in charge, it is just a mess (laugh) to be a woman. My brother could do no wrong and could do whatever he wanted. I always thought that was so unfair, but that is the traditional thinking. The girl, technically, especially when I was raised, stayed home, under the care of her parents, until married and was under the care of a husband. I never wanted that and the fact that I’ve never followed that, has to be hard on my family. It is like I disgraced my family. I think that is a difficult concept for Cubans to understand. I think to have a gay daughter is bad, but to have a gay son is even worse...Coming out to parents even though I want them to not care, like it just does not matter, must have just killed them.

For Michelle, sharing her sexuality with her mother was important and something she had been intending to do. She reached a breaking point and decided to nonchalantly come out using her former roommate, but Michelle’s disclosure caused tension and complicated her mother-

daughter relationship. Michelle indicated her concern with marriage—heteronormative pressures breached her coming out narrative—which can be indicative of gender, racial, social, and cultural pressures (Ingraham 2008). Women are socially conditioned from a young age to think of marriage and family, as connected to heterosexuality, as central to identity (Ingraham 2008; Lorber 1994; Rich 1980; Wittig 1982). Consequently, the internalized homophobia most gay and lesbian individuals develop, force many to stay in the closet. When Michelle described the sense of peace and spiritual awakening she experienced, a breakthrough in her own sexual prejudice was realized.

Michelle was oppressed by the silence of her mother and family. Heterosexuality and marriage remained privileged and celebrated. Common in other social institutions, such as the military and religious establishments, Michelle is recognized, but her sexual identity is made invisible or ignored. She articulated that they are tolerant, but not without struggle and compromise. Her narrative demonstrates that even without a heterosexual identity, one still resides within a heterosexual framework, experiencing resistance from heterosexual social structures, like the family, religion, race, and gender.

Individuals that identify as gay and lesbian are often aware of the benefits of the disclosing as well of repercussions. Due to the awareness of gay and lesbian identities, news and media attention, and scholarship articulating a shift in coming out, many gay and lesbian individuals feel pressure to come out and be open. Yet, coming out to family, friends, and co-workers is a complicated task. Erin explains to me that her mother and sister ignored her story and were most concerned with her ability to participate in heteronormative practices.

Erin and I met at Starbucks on a Sunday morning. She is a 26-year-old African American from Sumter, South Carolina. She attended the University of South Carolina for

college and now lives in Atlanta. She has been working in hospital management for several years and feels connected to her chosen Atlanta family. She shared with me that being raised Southern Baptist in a traditional and conventional home made coming out of the closet to her family very difficult.

I remember from a young age, like middle school or high school, noticing pretty women and I would fight it off because being around my family who are Baptist and very strict and very religious, I just knew that I could not be gay. I mean come on, where I lived there were no gay people. If there were nobody knew about them. And my Mom would use words like dyke to put women down, saying things like, "that dyke right there" or if there was a flamey man in church, she always called him a fag, just negative and derogatory. Everything was so closed-minded, especially my mom. So when I realized I liked girls I had to find a way to shake it off. I tried dating guys but that did not work. I prayed every night to stop liking girls but nothing worked so I came to realization that I was gay and nothing was going to change that. It seemed clear to me that I needed to come clean to my family. So one time when I was home, after college, like four years ago, I came out to mom and older sister. And my mom looked at me like I had revealed the worst thing in the world and she just stopped talking to me, completely. Not only did my mom stop talking to me but she and my sister acted like they did not hear what I said and would not talk to me about it. My mom just cut off communication, for several months. I went back to school and we just did not talk, I was pretty devastated at the time. Christmas rolled around and I decided to go home, I figured she would be forced to talk to me. She was distant and cold and told me with her arms crossed that she was worried about marriage and kids. I told her I could still have both; she looked at me skeptically- like I had lost my mind. I told her if I'm physically able, you know if it's physically possible for me to have kids, I will have kids. I kept telling her that nothing had changed. I can still have kids. Now, we are at this point where she just does not want to discuss it. It's like she knows but she won't talk about. I should get her a t- shirt, "I know my daughter is gay, but let's not talk about it", you know like "don't ask, don't tell." Maybe she is worried about grand kids and how she will look at church.

Similar to Michelle, Erin received a reaction from her mother that did not necessarily exhibit acceptance or rejection, but silenced her narrative. Michelle and Erin found their mothers' privileging heterosexuality and a host of heteronormative practices by not recognizing how both women practice romance, sex, and love. Reacting to Erin's recognition of attraction to women, her mother was also defaming socially inappropriate gender roles with gay bashing. Upon Erin revealing to her mother that she was a lesbian, Erin's mother addressed her concerns

about children, reinforcing a heterogender motherhood identity (Ingraham 2008). Like Michelle's mother, Erin's mother did not want to discuss her daughter's sexuality in any detail. Erin's sexuality was excluded and silenced. Heterosexuality remains the powerful, privileged, and dominant sexuality dictating the inner workings of both families, maintaining traditional gender roles and minimizing contact and exposure with Michelle's and Erin's narratives of coming out.

Both women also commented on how race, religion, location, culture and gender impacted their social positioning and coming out. Michelle described Cuban oppression similarly to Erin's religious subordination. Both women face challenges with their home communities, struggling with how their identities will impact their families' reputations. Both mothers are extremely concerned with marriage and reproduction. Gender roles become reconstructed. Identity is complicated; a shift in one marker, such as sexuality, impacts all aspects of identity, including gender, race, and class.

Jamie, a college athlete struggled in a similar context as Michelle and Erin. Born to working-class parents in the Washington, D.C. area, Jamie moved to the Southeast on an athletic scholarship. She is 20 years old, African American, and the oldest of four siblings. According to the post-closet and post-gay rhetoric, Jamie should have minimal difficulty expressing her same-sex identity; society, to an extent has mainstreamed homosexuality. However, Jamie shared with me how difficult her coming out process has been with her parents.

Growing up, my mom, my mom...me and my mom, we weren't always close we got close when I moved away to college, but before that, it was really tough. Anytime I got in trouble or she was mad at me for some reason, she would react or yell at me and call me gay or a dyke, and all these negative, bad names. I would just cry and cry and cry. Now I know I dress more masculine and that bothered her but it was so hurtful. I guess deep down I thought I was fooling her in some ways, but how could I tell her, how am I supposed to come out if she's going to call me those things, you know? She's not making...she's already upset and coming at it in a bad way...how could I, you know, how

could I tell her? It was tough, really, really tough. She still, to this day, when she gets mad, she calls me all these bad names. So it's really tough growing up to always have to hear that...and, I don't know...it's just...it made me not want to be like that, you know be gay. But, I just couldn't help it...I couldn't just change and be someone that I am not.

Jamie was moved to tears when describing her relationship with her mother.

Understanding her desire for women has been difficult because of the cloud of disapproval inflicted by her mother. Since Jamie can remember, her mother has used “gay” in a negative form to attack or discourage behavior: “my Mom, since I could remember, she would always, if I was to get in trouble, she was always calling me gay or a dyke, and all these, you know, bad names.” Jamie notes her mother’s comments and at the same time recognizes her mother’s frustration and fear of her masculine presentation. The masculine presentation exposed by Jamie is read as a non-heteronormative identity; Jamie is not afforded the opportunity to separate her gender and sexuality. Jamie attempts to combat her feelings toward women, but cannot hide the fact that she is attracted to them. The oppression and discrimination she experiences from her mother haunts Jamie even though her sexual desire is to be with women.

Coming out to family was a difficult and emotional process for Michelle, Erin, and Jamie. All three participants were concerned with parental approval and acceptance and found themselves in defensive positions, challenged by the persistence of heteronormativity as it intersects with race, religion, location, and gender. The opportunity to share a lesbian identity was often silenced, ignored, or defamed. In light of post-closet and post-gay discourse, narrating coming out experiences and accounting for acknowledgement of gay and lesbian identities remains a challenge for many.

It is clear that coming out to family—a social institution that is socially constructed to embody heteronormativity through mother and father roles, insistence of procreation, and numerous rituals to instill the gender binary system—would be incredibly challenging for the

coming out process. There are several interpretations and definitions of family, however, one of the main reasons revealing to family is so significant is because of the heteronormative structure assumed in the Judeo-Christian family structure. When an individual comes out, the heteronormative family becomes queered; the Judeo-Christian family structure is challenged and disrupted. At the same time, it has been argued that sharing a sexual identity other than heterosexual with family is central to the development of a positive gay and lesbian identity (Savin-Williams 1998; 2001; 2005; Savin-Williams and Ream 2003).

Steve: One More Narrative

Steve, a licensed psychologist who primarily counsels individuals that struggle with sexual identity issues heard about my project through other participants. I contacted Steve, thinking that his perspective would be unique, and asked if he would be willing to participate. Knowing that his position on coming out would be impacted by his work, he abruptly inquired, “why do another study on coming out; hasn’t this been done already?” Cognizant of the fact that I did not want to reveal too much about the project, I responded, “Yes, there are several studies on coming out, but I am hoping my work will demonstrate the nuances on *how* people come out, *where*, and *why*. I am trying to better understand how various components of our identities impact our stories.” I explained further that my hope is for participants to share or reflect on how coming out has shaped their lives.

Skeptical yet interested, Steve sat down and told me that he was a 62-year-old gay man. He was raised white and perceived as white, but his biological parents were Chinese and white. As a baby, he was adopted by white family. Unaware of his biracial identity until he was an adult, he remained unsure and confused by his racial identity. At times he identifies as biracial, but he is most often read as white. In this way, he feels fractured and unsure of how to identify

himself (Rust 1995). Steve shared with me that at the age of 16 he lost both his brother and mother unexpectedly. Upon their death, he went to live with an older sister and her family in another state. Steve described this life-changing and traumatic experience.

I think I have many more issues around adoption and loss, more than any gay issues. Family issues continue to surface for me, where the gay issues feel rather resolved. I think for some time now I have been very comfortable with being gay and very quick to let people know that I'm gay. When I was 16, I experienced a tremendous amount of loss. I had a younger brother who died and my mother died a few months later. At 16 years old, I went from Washington to Florida and experienced this incredible class shift. I was part of a blue-collar family but I moved in with an older sister from my mother's previous marriage; she was 14 years older than me. She was a young mother with three children. I moved to Florida into her family, with two years left of high school and began college in Florida and I have not left the southeast since then.

For Steve, his adoption and family loss are much more traumatic than recognizing and coming out as gay. Gay has been explained in opposition and threatening to the traditional family. Since gay identities have been thought to embody immoral and unhealthy definitions, it has not been closely connected to concepts of family, nurture, care, and support. Even though the association of gay and family is changing, it is clear that for Steve, his intersectional experiences with loss, place, and class have played a tremendous role in shaping his family identity.

Steve constructs family through trauma and hardship. Family is thought of as secondary and unstable. Due to the amount grief and change in his life, events which are perceived as difficult, such as coming out, lose meaning because his family life has shifted and the concept of home and financial security has been altered. In this way, Steve's understanding of gay and coming out are not connected to the thought of loss, disappointment, or internalized homophobia; he has already been removed from the familiar, living honestly is the only way. In this way, coming out is a social construct, adaptable to all identities and situations.

Steve quickly brushed over his remaining two years of high school and initial adjustment to Florida, his new family, and home life. He dove into an account of his early college years, painting me vivid images of partying, studying, and endless sexual encounters. Not long after completing his undergraduate degree, he moved to Atlanta.

I came here because a lot of my friends from college were in graduate school up here, so I had a community of friends. In fact I lived with them for the first year and a half. And that's when I came out and had the support of all of my liberally educated friends. Several of them were in PhD liberal arts programs and at the same time gay rights was really kind of, you know, getting a lot of attention and there was even, I think, an article or cover story on "Newsweek" or "Time" about the gay rights movement. The article stated that it was hip to have a gay friend. Some of my roommates would go to gay bars with me, go out dancing with me, so that part was really not very difficult, especially living in Atlanta.

Steve's move to Atlanta after college provided the opportunity to live in a large metropolitan city, where support and access to gay activities, including bars and clubs, were readily available. Steve found comfort and encouragement with his college friends; in many ways his friends became his family. In addition, Steve's new place fostered liberal thinking; university and college life were abundant, assisting in acceptance and understanding of sexual diversity. Steve's narrative depicted his move to Atlanta, including his coming out experience, in a positive context. He added,

I have to say being gay in Atlanta was not a difficult process for me. But when holidays rolled around and I needed to go home, well let me be clear, when I speak of home in this particular context I am referring to my older sister and now her adult kids, young adult kids.

Steve made it very clear that home had various meanings. Home shifted context dependent on the intersections of where he was and whom he was with.

When I moved to Atlanta I had not come out to my sister or the kids. Upon my return for this particular Christmas I didn't want to hide but I was not exactly sure if this was right time to share such personal information. Well, my sister's middle child had some gay friends in town that worked in Atlanta. I happened to be a smoker then and I had a pack of matches from some gay bar. My niece, I guess we can call her that and her friends

noticed them. Recognizing the matches she says, "Uncle Steve, I know the name of this bar..." and that was kind of how I came out to my family, and again, because my parents were dead, it's very different coming out to a sister and kind of you know, a secondary family, rather than your more nuclear family. There was never any concern there until more recently, (chuckle) now that my sister's gotten older and more religious, she thinks I'm gonna go to hell, but she loves me and we have a lot of fun together. We are the last two remaining members of our family, so there's a real special connection. There was also a time in my life when I had a partner for 23 years and he was a real part of my family as I was a part of his family, there was no way to be secretive about that!

Making an incredibly insightful point in his narrative, Steve noted that coming out to his sister did not seem stress-inducing nor did it seem to carry the same the weight as coming out to his parents. Steve referred to his sister and her children as his secondary family as he emphasized, "because my parents were dead, it's very different coming out to a sister, your secondary family, rather than kind of your more nuclear family. So, you know, there was never any concern." In contrast to other narratives throughout this project, Steve had a drastically different experience with divergent family pressure, if any at all. In fact, we never hear concern or fear in his narrative regarding coming out to his sister or other family members. Of course, other interacting factors contribute to his stress-free experience: Steve is male, educated, perceived as white, and he comes out as an adult surrounded by supportive liberal friends in an urban environment. Hence, he has minimal if no family backlash.

Somewhat aware of his intersectional position, Steve shared how working in mental health has impacted his understanding of coming out and sexual diversity.

I'm seeing a couple of people right now who are coming out of marriages, you know, age 50 and older and as they talk about it, they really feel pressure from their family and their communities to stay married and carry on this traditional life or else they bring shame to their family. I think because of not having a real strong family, losing my mom and dad when I was very young, and being adopted, and feeling kind of on my own, I haven't felt these kinds of pressures. It never, I never considered being anything other than being gay. I would, you know, omit some information to some people, but I never struggled with "I need to get married," you know, I just was myself.

Steve compared examples from work to his everyday understanding of his identity. He described coming out as different, with minimal family pressure; he did not face parental pressure. In this way, coming out and being gay was stress-free. Steve also did not feel the need to marry. Marriage is often connected to coming out, framing disclosure as an act of resistance to heterosexuality. Post-closet scholars have argued that coming out is an act against heterosexuality, while also normalizing heterosexuality (Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999). Normative coming out is framed in such a way that an individual has been hiding in a closet, shielding homosexuality from heterosexuality, and in order to be free and live authentically, coming out is necessary. In this way, the coming out narrative denounces the institution of heterosexuality, as well as connected social institutions, including the heterogender practice of marriage.

Parents and families are often ridden with frustration and sadness because their gay children cannot participate in marriage, a social accomplishment that solidifies gender roles and arrangements. It is often assumed that coming out as non-heterosexual disrupts marital expectations, family dreams, and social expectations. Therefore, many gay and lesbian individuals fear oppression from their families. Steve is unique. He does not have to face the pressure of family. Additionally, he was born Chinese and white but is identified as white, privileged with unearned racial advantages. He is male and masculine, educated, and living in a city. At the same time, he is a therapist for individuals that live in the closet and still has some elements of a closet identity, omitting information here and there. Even with an abundance of normativity, non-heterosexuality matters. Steve, an ideal candidate for a post-closet status, calls on the closet every now and then.

For some, the idea of not coming out or disclosing one's identity is realistic. Queer sexualities are realistic, possible, and sensible. For others, coming out is normal. Whether the place, race, or body, require it, disclosure can be an act of normativity—especially when other intersectional components are hiding within binaries or straddling across interacting binaries. Identity is complicated.

All the narratives discussed in this chapter depict complications and negotiations associated with coming out. Individuals that identify as gay and lesbian continue to struggle on multiple levels with sharing same-sex feelings in what has been argued as a post-gay and post-closet space. In a society dictated by heteronormative, patriarchal, capitalistic, and racist practices, it matters how, when, where, and why one discloses a non-heteronormative identity. The intersections of sexuality, race, class, gender, location, and religion are significant.

The following chapters focus on the interplay of narrative analysis and intersectional frameworks to discuss coming out experiences. Narrative analysis highlights the ability to capture how, what, when, why, and where an individual comes out. Participants express how they make meaning and construct reality regarding their coming out experience, shedding light on hegemonic frameworks and normativity. In this way, narrative analysis provides the researcher with stories of oppression, privilege, allowing the researcher to explore intersectional dimensions of race, class and gender.

CHAPTER 5: STORIES OF PRIVILEGE AND EXCLUSION

Ben: Introduction

Ben, a 40-year-old white, gay man, has been working in the Atlanta public school system for over 15 years. He has been in a monogamous relationship for five years and lives with his partner in a subdivision outside of the city. As an educator, he prides himself on being a good listener, compassionate, and empathetic. He explained to me that until he came out of the closet and met other out, gay men, he was unaware that men could openly express emotion and affection.

Ben was born and raised in a heterosexual, two-parent home in the suburbs of Atlanta. Ben shared with me that as a teenager and college student he struggled with his feelings for men; he was worried about disappointing his domineering and conservative father. He believes that as a result of his upbringing, he turned to drugs and alcohol in order to escape his fears and concerns regarding coming out to family and friends. In our conversation, he recalled memories from his church, home, and high school football practice where scornful and negative expressions were exclaimed about gays. Homosexuality was referred to as a sin and immoral.

Upon our meeting, Ben was 12 years sober; he had found comfort and peace in his non-heteronormative identity. He described himself as out of closet with family, friends, and co-workers; he could not think of a place in his life where he was not out of the closet. Ben shared with me that his sobriety helped him realize that participating in the gay community is important; he remains actively involved in yearly fundraising events for local non-profit HIV/AIDS organizations. As a sober individual, he surprisingly enjoys going out to the popular clubs and bars; he and his partner like to dance and meet people.

I asked Ben to share with me if there were any other activities he participated in beyond the club and bar scene.

I go to clubs and bars and I always go to Pride. Pride is one of my favorite events. But did you know what I found out this past year? [What?] I work with a couple of African-American lesbians and I wasn't even aware until very recently, but did you know that there is a Black Gay Pride? It is totally separate from Pride. My initial thought was why would we need two Prides? After talking to my colleagues at work I came to realize that the gay community is probably not doing a good job of including everyone. My friends from work pointed out to me that the majority of gay people are White, and so is Pride. They told me that Pride does not do a good job considering everyone's needs. The Pride events are focused around White people—the shows, forums, music, events—they all cater to White people. After they told me this and I realized they were kind of right. Because there seems to be, even when I was out to the bars, you know, White bars and Black bars. I never even realized this until my friends from work pointed this out. Now we talk about this stuff openly but I never realized until they told me that being Black and gay is different than being white and gay.

As a white researcher, cognizant of white privilege, I became acutely aware early on in the interview, that Ben was not aware of his normative position. He was unaware of his traditional masculine presentation, including his height and muscular persona. When I asked Ben to racially identify himself, he quoted “Caucasian” and then asked me “why does race matter, isn't this a study about sexuality?” Unaware of how the intersections of white and masculine presentations stratify identities and lead to discrimination and racial exclusivity in gay and lesbian communities, Ben benefits from white and male privilege. Consistent with race and sexuality scholarship, many white gays and lesbians are unaware of how race functions in the gay community, perpetuating marginalization and stratification (Alimahomed 2010; Han 2007, 2009).

Historically, “white” has been assumed as the normative racial identity associated with gay and lesbian sexualities. Similar to larger society, many white gay men and lesbians are unaware of gay men and lesbians of color and their varied experiences, including the presence of segregated events (Johnson and Henderson 2005). Once Ben made a personal connection and

formed a relationship with a few lesbians of color from work, a representation of “otherness”, his awareness became heightened, but through the transfer of knowledge from a position of marginalization (Lorde 1970; 1980). Ben began to realize that race mattered in all spaces, including marginalized communities such as gay and lesbian events. Ben’s interacting, normative position of white and male, shaped his understanding of gay sexuality. In this way, intersectional positions of identity demonstrate how knowledge is produced and how we come “to know what we know.”

Claire: Class, Capital, Privilege, and Race

Claire is a 35-year-old white lesbian residing in the suburbs of Atlanta. Similar to Ben, she was raised in a heterosexual, two-parent household and is currently in a same-sex monogamous relationship. She was raised as a non-denominational Christian and attended Church service weekly. She performed well in high school, both academically and athletically, graduating from a small southeastern liberal arts and sciences college on the honor roll and as a starter on the women’s basketball team. She explained to me that participating in sports and belonging to an athletic team had always mattered to her. Claire shared with me that many of her coaches and fellow team members were openly gay—leading to exposure, friendships, and mentorships with gay women.

After college, Claire came out to her parents with minimal backlash or resistance; coming out was a painless experience. Claire expressed that she lives a rather privileged life; she works in a corporate environment, identifies as middle-to-upper class, and has two young children. She articulated that her typical everyday experiences reflect common aches and pains like traffic and childcare, but being a sexual minority has not been a detriment. She feels that she lives a normal, American life regardless of being lesbian. I asked her to expand and she replied,

If I had to put myself in straight people's shoes, or anybody's shoes for that matter, I would have to think that people feel more comfortable being around someone that resembles them, you know someone that looks normal. I think many people are hesitant to admit it, but people are more comfortable around me as a gay woman because I look like everyone else. I mean if you want to be different, like transgendered, or over top effeminate, or butch, I would hope you get the same reactions that I do, but I don't think society works that way. I just have to say that I have not run into many problems and I feel that I have been completely accepted, in fact, sometimes I feel that I have been overly accepted. Before we had kids, when I went out to bars and clubs more frequently, I used to get hit on by butch and feminine women. So clearly something about me was or is attractive to gay women. And at the same time I am well received by straight people. I work in a pretty conservative company and I live in the burbs and I have not had anything bad happen; in fact I have had positive experiences. And I think so much of that has to do with how I look. I am not too butch or too feminine so I don't threaten or bother anyone, I am just normal and kind of look like everyone else.

I asked Claire if she could explain to me what makes her normal? "I don't really think about those things, like being normal. Who talks about that? I just know that I am because, well, you know when you are not; society let's you know." I replied, "I understand, normal can be very difficult to describe. Can you try describing this idea of looking like everyone else?"

She explained:

Well I am kind of a part of the status quo, aside from being gay. I am like the average American and I just look like everyone else; I wear a black suit to work, drive an SUV, live in the burbs, and have kids. Don't get me wrong; I know this is not the case for everyone. I am very lucky; I had an easy time with my parents and I also went to college. I have a good job and make good money. But I work really hard. You just have to put your best foot forward. I believe it is very important to get a good education and work hard. That way you can establish yourself; how can society reject you if you are living proof of the American Dream? But, I also knew I had to get out my small town; I would not go anywhere staying there. Getting out of the small town I was raised in exposed me to so much—you know different people and places; I got to travel and see different cultures. In fact, once I left...I just don't really don't socialize with a whole lot of those types of folks anymore. I want to be around people that have seen the world and become exposed; people that have worked in diverse places and had diverse experiences; people that are aware and open minded.

We learn in the beginning of Claire's narrative that she believes her identity personifies normalcy. She explained that her lesbian identity is non-threatening to gay and straight people. In fact, she articulated a positive and painless lesbian existence thus far. She alluded to the fact

that her normative presentation, educational, and professional success, has spared her from discrimination and homophobia. Claire's narrative demonstrates that multiples versions of normativity exist, but maintaining elements of "normal" or assimilation matter (Jagose 1996; Sullivan 2003). In order to better understand how privilege shapes sexuality narratives, interacting capital into the race, class, and gender matrix (Collins 1989; 1990; 2004; 2008) is necessary; it highlights standards of cultural knowledge often accessed by way of capital.

Claire mentioned that she is positively received from gay and straight alike. In many ways she has assimilated into heterosexual culture by not only presenting a neutral presentation but by also living beyond the closet. Her capital, including networks, access to resources, travel, housing, educational background, language, and cultural knowledge, standardized her narrative. She also commented on how her work ethic and her connection to the American Dream was essential to her everyday arrangements and interactions; participating in tradition has balanced out her "sinful acts" (McQueeny 2010).

On some level, Claire was cognizant of how her class and capital privileged her identity, yet she remained unaware that she had opportunity in ways others did not. Claire asserted, "I don't really think about those things, like being white. It never comes up," alluding to the idea that white is optional (Waters 1990) and that race exists in isolation, separate from class, gender, and capital. McIntosh (1988) argues that not needing to think about how race impacts daily activities or not having to define and defend one's race constitutes a privileged position. Normative racial positioning as it connects to class and capital, afforded Claire opportunities to live beyond of the closet (Seidman 2002). In this way, Claire represents one of the most common and visible positions, an assimilated gay identity, that has been developing in gay and

lesbian communities since the beginning of community organizing (1950s) and in mainstream media (Alhimahoed 2010; Moore 2006; Rimmerman 2002; Seidman 2002; Wilchins 2004).

Both Ben's and Claire's narratives effectively illustrate the interconnectedness of capital, race, sexuality, class, and gender. Possessing capital, similarly to white and male privilege, promotes an advantageous cultural experience and narrative. We see this articulated in Ben's experiences regarding Pride and Claire's disregard for interconnectivity but recognition of normativity. Capital is needed to account for these assumptions. Since class and capital are not mutually exclusive and explain different aspects of an individual's social status, the intersection of capital, race, gender, and class provide a more complete picture of social-economic movement, including social and cultural strategizing, negotiating, and networking. Tukufu Zuberi and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2008) explain in their work "White Logic, White Methods" that we must understand all dynamics of privilege and systems of stratification, if not our studies of oppression and privilege are incomplete. Therefore, locating moments of normativity through an intersectional lens highlights where and how neutrality and privilege rest in discourse and practice.

As capital gains acknowledgement in the context of gay and lesbian coming out narratives, stories that embody privileged positions of race, gender, and class, will align with the post-gay and post-closet discourse. At the same time, intersectional analysis illustrates a myriad of gay experiences across a spectrum of discrimination and prejudice. For example, in both Ben and Claire's narrative, recognizing the intersections of capital, class, gender, and race, highlights how normativity remains relevant, even in the context of a marginal disclosure. In fact, both Ben and Claire referenced relationships of "tolerable" forms of representation. However, intersectional analysis of race, capital, class, and gender reveals that not all coming out stories

provide access to and experience with gay and lesbian normativity; including monogamy and family.

It has become more common and accepted to see gay or lesbian couples create family. For a multitude of reasons, including love, commitment, and identity politics, creating a gay, lesbian, or queer family has joined mainstream family discourse. In fact, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the largest and most visible gay and lesbian-lobbying group in the country, has continually challenged state and federal governments for family rights and recognition. Access to health care and more fluid descriptions of family have been central to the HRC platform. Family-themed politics, representative of the broader gay and lesbian communities, construct a specific image and discourse.

It is no accident that expanding, extending rights, and politicizing gay and lesbian identities and communities in and for mainstream America involved the idea of “family.” Family has been central to gay and lesbian acceptance for many reasons including commonality between gay and straight identities. Furthermore, family support and the ability to create family demonstrates that “being” and “doing” gay is no different than “being” and “doing” straight, a post-gay and post-closet theme. If both sexualities, homosexual and heterosexual, are able to receive love and encouragement from family members, provide love for family, and nurture family, then defaming gays and labeling them as deviant and denying a legal identity becomes more and more difficult.

For Claire, being gay does not raise issues of stress, trauma, or sadness; her lesbian experiences have been positive and painless. She has not had difficulty coming out, which she explained occurs often because she is not read as gay. However, Claire noted that when she became pregnant, her sexuality became even more apparent. She constantly corrected people,

stating, “My partner and I are due in the fall.” Claire explained how she and her partner created a family.

My job definitely affords me, from a material perspective or experience things that are important to us as lesbians, like fertility and being able to go through things like that...we were able to afford and pretty much do what we want to do from that capacity. I don't know if I'm unique or not, but I just don't tie it together, really, with my sexuality, it's just what I want. If I was a straight couple and I wanted to go get fertility treatment and if I didn't make the money that I make, I'd be in the same situation if I was makin', you know, half what I made and it's still a stretch, and it's still a stretch for us to afford some of the stuff that we afford. But, yes, we feel privileged and lucky. We're privileged that we can afford to have one income in the household and afford fertility.

Here, Claire recognizes that she is in a fortunate position, not many people could afford her fertility method and household structure. However, she does not recognize the interconnectedness of her privilege; why and how has social mobility, affording such specific fertility methods. How does her race inform her capital? How has her capital impacted her class and ability to reproduce as a lesbian? Claire believes her method of fertility is normal for lesbians, articulating a hegemonic narrative from her socially advantageous capital position. The intersectional-capital relationship reveals how and in which ways hegemonic structuring takes place in mainstream *and* marginalized spaces. It is critical that intersectional scholarship, particularly if intersectionality desires to challenge privileged rhetoric, locate how normalization is produced and maintained, in all spaces and places.

Claire continues to be a part of this project because she identifies as a lesbian, a sexual minority. The first time Claire recognized self-marginalization was through her parenting role, as a lesbian mother. However, her description of this socially inferior status was revealed through her daughter's identity, her child's body; Claire herself remained attached to hegemony.

I can understand that from a concerned parent's point of view—it's just like I don't want, I mean nobody wants their child to have to struggle! I look at my daughter now and I, and I, you know, I worry...I know she has a great home life, I know she loves having two Moms, but it'll kill me the day she goes to school and has to come back and tell me that

somebody said, “you have two Mommies” like you’re, you’re not normal, and that’s not why you’re not Christian...or you know, whatever things are that people are gonna say. I mean no parent wants to have a child go through that. But I guess that’s reality and we will deal with it.

Claire expressed concern that when her child reveals she has two lesbian mothers, she will be ostracized, made fun of, or possibly excluded from normativity. Claire sneaked in that her daughter is not a Christian and the reason for not identifying as the dominant religion has nothing to do with sexuality or family. Claire wanted to be clear about that, considering she understands how dominant thinking works. Claire argued that all parents worry—no parent wants extraneous challenges for their child—yet her concern is rooted in social acceptance and privilege, a challenge she has not faced. We take away from Claire that her normative positioning, including her white privilege, gender-neutral presentation, and social and cultural capital, provide her with a conflict-free lesbian identity. Her sexual identity is perceived as normal and maintained as such because of the intersection of privileged markers, creating a conflict free, post-closet identity.

Marsha and Rhonda: Marginalization and Oppression

Racial minorities, whose lives are strongly influenced by ancestry, even if an individual desires not to be, are constantly negotiating the intersections of race, class, capital, discrimination, and oppression. Waters (1990) reminds us that the relationships of race and ethnicity impact marital practices, labor market opportunities, social networking, residence, and chances for success (McIntosh 1988; Shapiro 2004). Shapiro (2004) drew a detailed analysis in his groundbreaking work on race and wealth inequality, that racial differences impact the ability to acquire *and* maintain wealth. Our political and judicial enterprises have established economic systems based on historical practices of racial and gender hierarchies, making it more difficult for non-white families to generate family wealth and purchase homes in wealthy school districts,

which results in unequal race, class, and capital groups. As a result, white bodies privileged by capital are often exposed to a variety of opportunities that are under less scrutiny, resulting in numerous possibilities for advancement (McIntosh 1988; Shapiro 2004). In this way, how an individual discloses information and shares knowledge is reflective of social positioning.

Narrative analysis has allowed me to demonstrate the multidimensionality of intersectionality. Through narrative analysis, intersectionality reveals that identities are stratified on a spectrum, a multidimensional axis of oppressed and privileged experiences. Marsha, a 30-year-old African American lesbian articulates a drastically different experience than both Claire and Ben. An African American lesbian from the West Coast that recently finished graduate school, Marsha was born one of three sisters. She initially moved to the Southeast in order to attend college and has remained in the Southeast to continue to graduate school and start a career. Marsha explained to me the complexities associated with belonging to a racial minority, with academic success in the context of sharing a non-heteronormative identity.

Race, unfortunately, it's always in the back of my mind... it's almost like a paranoia, but it's something that you have to at least consider and being gay doesn't help that either because in the African-American community, Black people sometimes just...they really do have difficulties with homosexuality, the community itself is threatened. There's no flexibility within the culture, like men, men are a certain way, women are a certain way, the household should be a certain way and anything that kind of deviates from that, even though there are tons of deviations from them in the community, it's not looked on positively it's not looked upon as favorably...it's taboo. And it's hard to really get people to listen or understand you, even the educated, because they can be so dogmatic in whatever their beliefs are, so it makes it a lot more difficult, especially when you're coming out and trying to explain your sexuality to, even, my parents, who are both educated, liberal, and live on the West Coast; you would think those factors would work favorably and we still don't talk about my sexuality very much. They know I'm gay but we never talk about it. Other people, other Black people, take it so much harder, because they feel a certain way about it and that's it. They don't think of men and women in terms of sexuality and gender...there's no spectrum. Being gay or lesbian is just not looked upon favorably especially if you are Black or brown and living in the South.

Marsha articulated that the Black community she is familiar with and has been exposed too is unwilling to embrace sexuality beyond heterosexuality and heterogenders (Ingraham 2002; 2008). Marsha commented on the role of gender regulating specific responsibilities in the Black community. In conjunction with race, gender is used to police practices and behaviors, demonizing individuals that step out of line, most commonly through familial and religious discourse. The role of family and religion have been foundational institutions in the Black community prior to slavery and maintained its importance during slavery and abolition (Collins 1989; 1990; 2004; 2008). Both social structures are empowering and limiting by providing scripts for gendered identities, safety, and shelter. Religious traditions and cultural practices have structured Black lives and families, whether recognized by the mainstream or not, to build community, encourage learning, and generate leadership. When sexualities such as gay and lesbian challenge established and unified gender roles, as dictated by family and religion, Marsha believes the Black community feels threatened and unbalanced. The gender and racial power dynamic creates a theme of marginalization within marginalization. Discriminating on multiple levels creates binaries within binaries making it difficult to highlight difference as a source of unification (Lorde 1970; Moraga 1983). Instead, a lesbian or non-heteronormative identity within a racial minority group is viewed as deviant and wrong (Lorde 1970).

Not long after meeting with Marsha, Rhonda and I spent time together. Rhonda and I volunteer at the same community outreach organization. We were volunteering on the same afternoon and we instantly struck up a conversation. I asked for a coffee date and before we even sat down I learned that Marsha was 50 years old and had been raised by her grandparents in New Jersey. In terms of work, she has been driving trucks for 25 years and currently identifies as a Black, feminist, butch lesbian. Throughout our time together, Marsha sang and spoke in

prose, quoted material from her favorite writers, went outside and smoked a few cigarettes, and asked if we could walk around outside and talk. At one point, she invited me into her car, in order to listen to a bootleg version of a song by Tracy Chapman that she believed described a specific time in her life. Her story was riveting and provided detailed information regarding the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and capital. She explained in the passage below the challenges she faced and negotiations she has made with her sexuality, gender, race, and capital.

You know, it's like I tell people I wear blue jeans and tee shirts and if you want to think I'm gay cuz I got on blue jeans, because you can't really, I mean how can you tell? I can't really like sit down and talk about it like some fuckin' good ole boys... I just can't do that shit. Especially you know when you start talkin' like, out there, what they call it, in God's country—out there in Montana. When I am driving out there, they won't look at me or talk to me. Oh, it's a man's world. A white man's world! I mean, it's a man's world, yes, still very much so in 2010, you know it is. I mean you gotta be a man out there, a white man; you gotta be ready to have your legs up, you know...

For Rhonda, the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and capital create a barrier against her Black, female, and non-heteronormative body. Rhonda initially indicated how her gender presentation might lead others to question her sexual identity and assume a lesbian identity; gender is a narrative of the body. As she continued, Rhonda exposed the complexity of the “good ole boy” network associated with truck driving and how difficult it is to sit down and share her life experiences associated with gender and sexual identity. The good ole boy network is a condition of capital, supported by racism and patriarchy; it represents manipulative social forces generating salient representations of social inequality and oppression (Collins 1989; 1990; 2004; 2008). The good ole boy network often refers to male, white, southern, middle-class, and Christian, also known as the mythical norm according to Lorde (1970). Lorde claims that the mythical norm “that is not me” is white, thin, young, heterosexual, and male: “It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the

primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference” (Lorde 1970:155). Rhonda does not feel safe sharing who she is; race, gender, and assumed sexuality force Rhonda to be protective, shielded from the norms of society and silenced, particularly in her industry. She is aware of intersecting oppressions; Rhonda is positioned as “other” to the mythical norm. Coming out could multiply the oppression Rhonda already recognizes in her heterosexual, male, white environment.

We learn from both Marsha and Rhonda what Pat Hill (1989; 1990) began articulating over 20 years ago: a Black female identity is rooted in racial, economic, and gender domination. Even though both individuals have varied experiences, they both seem to constantly negotiate race, gender, and sexuality through dimensions of capital. Marsha noted that she comes from a more accepting environment, the West Coast, and she also comments that both her parents are educated, yet she maintains negotiations and marginalization due to intersections of race, family, and location. Rhonda articulated concerns of sexism, racism, and heterosexism—all methods of discrimination that are maintained through systems of capital, preventing her from being free and open with all aspects of her identity, whether concealable or visible. Contrary to Ben and Claire, both Marsha and Rhonda are constantly negotiating and managing the reality of their intersecting identities. Marsha’s and Rhonda’s stories are not unique; in fact, it is common among gay men, lesbians, and queers of color (Alimahomed 2010; Han 2008) to feel tangled among various communities, marginalized in and among culturally identified spaces, and to constantly manage and negotiate identity. However, not all stories can be classified into racial a binary of white or Black experiences.

Arvind and Ian: Multiple Intersections of Invisibility

Arvind and I met at a local ice cream shop on a sunny Sunday afternoon. Although we were connected through a mutual friend, I noted in my dissertation journal her initial hesitancy when it came to sharing her story. Cognizant of her uncertainty, we began chatting over chocolate ice cream with strawberries and sprinkles. Arvind told me she immigrated to the United States when she was nine years old. Born in Bombay, India to a homemaker mother and an entrepreneurial father, her parents and two sisters moved to the United States in the late 1970s in hopes of better educational opportunities. She grew up in the suburbs outside of Washington D.C. and attended Virginia Tech where she earned a Master's degree in material engineering. She currently lives in the southeast and is self-employed.

She explained to me that as a child, she felt “different,” constantly negotiating the gender expectations from her racial and ethnic community as well the mainstream white community evident in her school and neighborhood. Fighting against the “othered” label placed upon her brown skin, she shared the challenges and tribulations she faced coming out as well as finding an accepting gay and lesbian space.

I felt isolated and thought that it is was because of the cultural stuff. I saw a lot of American people coming out but I did not see my own kind coming out. I thought I was the only South Asian person going through this; I was also very suicidal. I actually tried to commit suicide at one point and then decided I couldn't. I was not able to and then I had to figure this out and live my life and be brave. I felt, how do you describe it, fractured, you know always piecing myself together. Always hiding some part of myself in order to let another aspect be present. I felt like I could not be open and free, I felt that there was no way to integrate all the different parts of my identity—and if I did, it was going to leave me very isolated and it did in a lot of ways.

Arvind explained that integrating race, culture, and sexuality has been a difficult task, causing depression and at times constructing thoughts of suicide. She constantly felt disconnected from herself and others. Rarely did she find others in her racial or sexual

community that she connected with; she felt alone and ostracized. O'Brien (2008) notes that many U.S. Asian, Latin, and Indian men and women feel marginalized by their "racial middle" identity. Arvind added:

It was just really hard to integrate my race, sexuality, and even gender. The South Asian queer group that I joined was a lifesaver, but the membership mainly consisted of men. Being a member of this group helped me come out to people. When I came out to my mom I don't necessarily recall feeling like my identity was conflicted. I do remember my mother telling others in our community and they were surprisingly supportive. As I reflect, I did not feel that I had as much conflict with the South Asian community as the other way around. I think that I had more conflict being South Asian in the queer community. I felt, I still feel very invisible. It is interesting, one of the reasons I moved to Atlanta was because of the number of people of color here but most of them are African American so it still leaves me in an isolated state because I am neither black nor white. I am brown. [I: There is a very defined racial binary here.] It is very strict binary here so it leaves me very invisible in a lot of ways. I can go to white clubs and get ignored and go to black clubs and get ignored. I can go to either club and get asked strange questions. I have been asked to belly dance—you know strange things like that. I have been asked many times, "I want to know what it would be like to kiss you?" I don't know what they are talking about, me being Indian or queer. It is very strange navigating all that.

Significantly, Arvind calls attention to the intersection of racialized and sexualized non-black and non-white identities, which occurs in mainstream *and* marginalized communities.

Arvind's experience is not new; Han (2007; 2008) revealed stories from Asian gay men that reported exclusion and marginalization from both white men and Black men in the gay community due to their inferior racial identities or stratification of non-white identities.

Similarly, Alimahomed (2010) reported on queer Latina's and Asian/Pacific Islander women experiencing marginalization in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement and communities due to their subordinated identities.

Arvind noted that the South Asian queer community she joined was helpful, but it was predominantly a group of men, which connects to previous stories and scholarship regarding the presence of patriarchy and male prevalence in gay and queer spaces. Arvind mentioned that joining the Queer Asian group fostered community with other individuals that were both Indian

and queer, but the lack of female membership impacted her gender connections and interactions. Thus, Arvind's narrative expresses multiple, interlocking, connected forms of oppression, racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, self-loathing, and isolation. Despite Arvind stories of challenges and hardships, she did share her experiences with radical marginality (Unger 2000), finding activism, peace, and empowerment in one's oppression.

I originally got involved in queer politics through the marriage campaign in 2004. I felt like there were a lot of people that wanted something different and there was nobody to actually making it happen so I decided that it would be me; I created a group of queer progressives in 2004. A lot of my politicizing happened from being involved with the South Asian queer community, which is really not very political, but it is a progressive South Asian organization that does a lot of work on domestic violence. For example, we started offering living spaces for men and women that needed safe living spaces and we also held discussions series on myths of the model minority. Those experiences empowered me to get involved in the marriage campaign. My involvement helped me recognize all the things that were happening both because of my experience growing up and just who I was as a queer-South Asian. I became exposed to various forms of discrimination and realized how much race mattered. I worked on a progressive-intersectional campaign for marriage; I refused to feel isolated anymore.

In Arvind's case, ethnicity matters, drastically impacting her verbal narrative and the narrative of her body. Arvind negotiates designated gay spaces and non-gay spaces resulting in her interconnected, multi-layered body difference. Black, Latin, Asian, and Indian Americans, such as Arvind, with no option to hide or conceal ethnic or racial identities, are forced to constantly negotiate and manage social ascribed prejudices, even in spaces of marginalization.

Discrimination and oppression can foster empowerment and activism, also known as radical marginality (Unger 2000). Radical marginality upholds and highlights the positive aspects of marginality, but it requires self-reflection and awareness. When Dubois (1903), one of the first radical marginal scholars, identified double consciousness, he implied recognizing one's challenges as obstacles and opportunities. Similarly, radical marginality scholars claim that a marginal identity leads to a simultaneously objective and subjective experience (Collins

1989; Dubois 1922; Hall and Fine 2005; hooks 1992; Unger 2000). Radical marginality scholars challenge the marginality of their identity, such as the sexual, racial, and gendered components, by locating ownership and empowerment in a subordinate status. Thus, one engages in an understanding of dominant and subordinate positions, known as “reflection from the margin,” that becomes bridged with activism and empowerment (Collins 1990; Hall and Fine 2005). According to Unger (2000), engaging in positive, radical marginality often leads to vulnerability yet creates a profound sense of self by understanding one’s very own social stigma.

Ian is a friend of Arvind’s whom she had originally met through a South Asian queer community fundraiser. Both Arvind and Ian have been actively involved in queer politics and I was looking forward to hearing about Ian’s experiences. Ian shared with me, similarly to Arvind, experiences of marginalization, invisibility, and activism.

My family is Chinese and Puerto Rican, and it is a very conservative household where there’s a lot of emphasis on the sons. While I might not be the first-born son, I was still valued by the family. They felt I had a lot of potential, but they felt that all that potential was cut out by the fact that I came out as gay. My mother, unfortunately, does not acknowledge the fact that I did come out to her, and all that stuff ever happened.

Ian pointed out that his male gender or masculinity loses its’ privileged status and value when his sexuality is revealed as gay or non-heteronormative. In order for Ian to present the socially appropriate Chinese-Puerto Rican masculinity he must also be heterosexual. Ian’s experience represents the socially constructed association between gender, sex, and sexuality as well as the intersection of patriarchy and heterosexuality. Ian’s narrative reveals that once one component of his status, such as his sexuality, is interpreted as invalid, incorrect, or less masculine, dominance is removed and replaced with subordination.

Espiritu (1999; 2010) demonstrated that historically, socially, and politically, Asian men have been treated unfairly due to the patriarchy’s relationship with racism, resulting racial

patriarchy. Due to racism, men of color do not benefit from patriarchy in the same ways as white men; hegemonic masculinity functions as the ideal masculine standard with an idealized white, male, heterosexual body. Hence, Ian's masculinity is already challenged, intersecting a racial and ethnic minority identity. With the addition of another inferior status, homosexuality, Ian's masculinity is challenged and called into question. He added:

I definitely feel that being Chinese makes it harder to be gay. Being gay doesn't really bring up an image of Asian people. When I first started researching and learning about being gay, anything I found was all about, you know, whites, the upper middle-class, and gay men. They were the only ones havin' fun, they were the only ones enjoying themselves, the only ones being happy and having sex. There is already such a limited amount of gay and lesbian centered media or books or movies or TV shows, and that representation is skewed towards what the mainstream audience might consider what is "mainstream gay." You know gays have subcultures too. So many of the images out there are limited and unrealistic. There are more images of gay people available now, but minimal coverage on gay Indians, gay Asians and that totally sucks because we exist. I remember, a few years ago, there was nothing on Asians, and I went out deliberately trying to look for anything that pertained to me, specifically, and I actually did manage to find a small community of on-line, gay Asian people that were around my age and it was a great bonding experience because we knew that all of us were gay and Asian and we had common experiences. We all knew or had experienced similar rejection from our families. You know once you came out as gay you could never have a relationship with your family...like our partners could never have a relationship with our family the same way that you know, a heterosexual couple would have in their family or maybe even some white, rich gays, and we knew that... at one point in our lives, we had to block off our family from our private lives and that was an enforcement thing.

My journal reminds me that Ian had a difficult time looking at me when sharing his story.

We did meet in a coffee shop and there were distractions, but I can't help but wonder how his coming out and navigation of multiple communities has impacted his one-on-one interactions.

Ian reiterated themes of marginalization and stratification due to intersections of gender, race, class, ethnicity, capital, and sexuality. Ian described the challenges he faced finding community and representation. His story specifically highlights the role of racial patriarchy (Espiritu 1999; Johnson 1997) in gay communities. Men benefit differently from patriarchy, depending on race, class, capital, sexuality and ethnicity, and thus experience gender differently (Espiritu 1999;

2010). Ian expressed that visible gay communities did not exhibit a body such as his own. However, he was fortunate to have access to the internet, and the where-with-all to search and find an on-line community in which he connected to other individuals in a common position. As such, he learned that his experience was not uncommon; straddling various worlds with little support from family was “normal.”

Jim: Moving forward with Intersectionality

In this chapter, I have used an intersectional lens to demonstrate ways in which coming out narratives harbor experiences of oppression, exclusion, invisibility, and privilege. In such a way, post-gay and post-closet discourse is present in stories of racial, gender, and class normativity. Yet, with an intersectional framework and multiplicative collaboration of capital, the function of stratification in certain gay and lesbian stories is revealed.

To conclude and transition into the next chapter, I end with Jim’s story, a 63-year-old queer Jewish man from the South. In Jim’s story we see the significance of the intersectionality with race, class, gender, capital, location, and religion. Jim shared with me that throughout his life he has been read as white *and* a racial other because of his Jewish identity. When he first moved to Atlanta in the 1960s, his Jewish identity meant he did not have a white identity or any other racial identity for that matter. Being Jewish meant exclusion and discrimination, especially in the South.

In the western world, Judaism is understood in relation to Christianity. In the South, also known as the Bible Belt, if one is not white *and* Christian, one is understood and defined as a religious other. As a minority, Jews have been categorized racially and religiously, but are often read as white. As a stigmatized minority, Jewish stereotypes are derived in historically, socially, and politically driven contested terrains. Expressions such as “to Jew one down,” “JAP,” and

“kyke” poke fun at capital-focused matters including education, economics, family, and the body. Jim expressed, that he was often called a “kyke fag” and asked to enter restaurants and bars through “colored only” doors. His experiences fostered radical marginality, including active participation and leadership in the civil rights movement, feminist organizing, and gay politics. He also focused his career on helping others by attending college and graduate school to earn a degree in psychology.

Jim explained how his identity hindered his social movement as well as benefited his social position. Jim felt ownership of his Jewish self but was aware of how it forced him to straddle and negotiate all interactions. His race, sexuality, gender, location, and religion were constantly intertwined, tangled, and intersecting, forcing him to negotiate his identity in almost all social situations. His racial awareness spurred his initial community involvement and he continues to fight issues of racism and white privilege in mainstream society and the gay community. In doing so, he has spent the majority of his adult life participating in community outreach work with gay youth, AIDS, and immigration. During our meeting, Jim commented on issues of race and class in the gay community.

From early on, I always noticed how race and class, particularly race impacted who could get into the gay bars, it was mainly white guys. Black people and even myself sometimes, we were kept out. And even today, say on Sunday nights at the local parks, there's a Black gay gathering and the cops have always been trying to bust it up, spurred on by the neighborhood association. The park is a crucial space because Black, Asian, or even Hispanic men need the park or places that are not necessarily designated as white or have a price tag, for gatherings. You know, there was a time when all we had was the park! Men of color don't necessarily have specific bars or clubs like the white men, so getting together and socializing happens at parks or other public places. And honestly these gatherings are so crucial to community building. And I see resistance to these gatherings all the time. I along with others have held rally's resisting the police and we write letters but nothing has changed it, at least not yet.

I learned from Jim what many progressive queer and race scholars have been arguing—that the white identity is privileged and normalized (Alimahomed 2010; Bonilla-Silva 1997;

2001; 2010; Feagin 2000; 2010; Han 2007; 2008; McIntosh 1998). Being white is noted as the most privileged and comfortable race—it is the race that has the most options and choices, from beauty products to residential opportunities and visibility in the media. When it comes to sexuality, white privilege is no different. White experiences, stories, desires, styles, practices, behaviors, and relationships are used to shape sexual discourse and regulation.

Jim's narrative highlights intersecting components of privilege, opportunity, and oppression. Jim's experiences reflect hegemonic cultural narratives of a specific place and location. Hence, he illustrates that white, middle-class gay men have historically constructed bars and clubs as the most visible meetings points for gay men (D'Emilio 1983). Often in urban environments, such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Atlanta, San Francisco, and Austin, entrance into bars and clubs cost money and potentially involves risk. Urban environments are known to attract art, music, theatre, colleges, universities, and travel—equating urban space with diversity and open-mindedness. Gay and lesbian research demonstrates that open-minded people tend to be tolerant and accepting of gay and lesbian identities (Brewer 2003; Herek 2000; Seidman 2002). It is no surprise, then, that gay and lesbian communities have found homes in urban environments; however, participation in urban space and place involves more than average economic practices; capital, race, gender, and class are also involved.

Economic arrangements, outcomes, and opportunities are socially derived, gaining value from of patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity, and capitalism. Money, the currency of capitalism, has been most associated with masculinity. As such, earning, collecting, and acquiring money has been constructed as a sport— a competitive game with winners and losers. White men are socially ascribed inherent masculine knowledge and capabilities necessary for the attainment of money. A component of this white masculine knowledge, or hegemonic

masculinity, assumed useful in the game of money is what McIntosh (1988) refers to as the knapsack of privileges, access, inside news, visibility, and opportunity. In addition to masculine knowledge, white men are afforded the ability to have a public presentation. A man is supposed to be able to move through the public easily, earn money, and present aggression and stoicism with grace and stature; participating in a masculine public presentation and earning money supports patriarchal sensibility (Johnson 1997). The above masculine “skills” can remain intact with a gay identity if gender and racial normativity is present. However, not all men have access to masculinity and patriarchy in the same way and as such benefit from masculinity or patriarchal power and benefits. Racial patriarchy (Espiritu 1999; 2010) demonstrates how non-white bodies are scrutinized for divergent work and family practices, often challenging the normalized, or white, standard of separating family (female) and work (male) (Collins 1990; 2004; King 1988).

Intersectionality exposes how structures and systems impact not only race, class, gender, and capital, but place as well. This is not to take away from the love, community, and political activism that develop in a place through the creative chaotic collision of privilege and oppression (Chauncey 1994; D’Emilio 1983; 2002; Levin and Blitzer 2006; Nardi 2000; Rimmerman 2002; Savin-Williams 2005; Seidman 2002). In fact, without these accounts, mainstream gay and lesbian visibility would be different, maybe minimal. However, this project is focused on challenging how stories are produced and collected. Intersectional work challenges where data come from; if designated bars and clubs are most accessible and recognizable to a specific race, class, and capital because of access to specific locations, and these establishments are being used to construct mainstream stories—such as gay history, discourse, politics, and narratives—whose stories are we missing? *Why* and *how* did this happen?

Given that marginalization within marginalization happens, it is necessary to understand how and why in order to make change and uncover multiple experiences. In this next chapter, I add to my intersectional analysis by locating how place, along with race, class, gender, and capital, shapes coming out experiences.

CHAPTER 6: INTERSECTIONS OF RACE, SEXUALITY, AND PLACE

Courtney: Mississippi and Coming Out in the South

Atlanta, a southern city with a reputation for revolutionary social and political movements, fine cuisine, and exceptional art and music, embodies diversity and growth. A place with interactive opportunity and a constructive cultural and social world comprised of various physical and natural settings, Atlanta attracts many men and women from universities and colleges in the southeastern region of the United States. Courtney, 27-year-old southeastern college graduate has been living in Atlanta for four years. Born to wealthy parents, she was raised in Jackson, Mississippi. Living in an upper class, suburban, Republican, Christian, environment, Courtney attended K-12 private school in which parental involvement was common and high rates of college acceptance were the norm.

Courtney's parents, both owners of a commercial real estate firm, provided her with several capital opportunities. Beginning at a young age, Courtney experienced international travel while also attending one of the most prestigious private schools in the state. Courtney was at ease sharing her social-capital experiences, yet when I asked Courtney to describe the racial composition of her neighborhood and school, she defensively replied, "I don't remember seeing Black students in high school." In fact, when I asked Courtney to describe her own demographics, she responded to the racial identification question with, "my race, you mean what am I? Um, I guess I am white? I never really think much about it."

Courtney went on to state that her hometown of Jackson was "very white, Christian, and straight." As I proceeded with questions regarding sexuality, romance, and coming out of the closet experiences, the tone of Courtney's voice began to exude hesitancy; fear and tension took over her southern dialect. Courtney shared that disclosing her lesbian identity predominantly

involved her mother and friends. In fact, she never thought much about coming out to her father. Courtney described her parents as having a “solid” marriage, but she recalled spending the bulk of her time with her mother and still does so to this day. She explained that her father always worked, and her mother, although partial owner of the family business, was always at home.

It seemed obvious to me that discussing sexuality and coming out experiences were difficult for Courtney. I noted in my journal that her casual demeanor shifted to a presentation of sadness and anxiety when the topic of conversation turned to her sexuality. With tears rolling down her cheeks, Courtney reluctantly explained that coming out of the closet to her family, particularly her mother was difficult, challenging, and guilt provoking. She did not want to disappoint her parents, but more significantly, she was unaware of how to proceed and live openly as a gay person in Jackson. Both Courtney and her mother were concerned about the reactions from other families in Jackson; they thought it would be a struggle to find other families that had gay children and were open about it.

When I told my mom, I was very apologetic. She said I had nothing to be sorry for. But I felt like I disappointed her. She had very sad eyes when I told her. When I think about it, I can't escape her sad eyes. But I have to say she was proactive and took an educated approach. She read as much as she could get her hands on and I think the reading helped explain things I was not comfortable talking about. You see, when you grow up in the South, you learn not to talk much about sex, especially being gay. I definitely think, in fact I know, that growing up in the south is directly related to my conflicts with being gay. At least for me growing up in Mississippi made things very difficult. I am sure there are other gays from Mississippi, but where are they, where did they go? I had never been exposed to anyone gay. I think I knew one friend of a friend in college who was gay, but other than that, I did not know anyone. I think the guy who cut my Dad's hair, but other than that, I never knew anyone or came in contact with anyone that was gay, or at least open about it. It was just a very religious and traditional environment and for most of the people I grew up and spent time with, being gay was looked down upon.

Courtney described her coming out process through the intersection of place, culture, gender, race, and class. As intersectional theorists note, using fully interactive, engaged, co-constructed, and arranged pieces of identity create complex, sometimes contradicting

experiences (Choo and Marx-Feree 2010). Courtney's story is situated in an environment that breeds traditional, patriarchal, white heterogender roles, where heterosexuality is enforced through the silence of homosexuality, particularly through institutional establishments such as the Church, education, and family.

As Courtney continued on, she shared with me that in high school and college she recognized feelings of attraction for women. She never shared these same-sex feelings with friends or loved ones; she feared her desires would not be welcomed in Jackson, or her southern college town. She was expected to meet a "nice, wealthy, white man," marry, and return to Jackson where she could raise a family. She further explained that she was brought up under the assumption that she would emulate her parents' gender-role model. Courtney's parents worked together in the family business, yet her upper class; patriarchal environment imposed strict prescriptions of masculinity and femininity. Courtney's memories painted an image of 1950s gender roles, with the mother as nurturing, available, and connected to the home, and the father as stoic, unemotional, and associated with the public dimensions of social life. In this way, Courtney's southern culture emphasizes "gender as difference" where men and women are polarized.

Such strict gender prescriptions are supported by institutional religious doctrine and white heterosexuality (Glaser 1994; Ingraham 2008; Lorber 1994). Consistent with white, upper-class gender roles and southern heterosexual presentations of marriage and family, children are viewed as essential to southern identities (Martin, Wilson, and Dillman 1991; Reed 1972). Despite Courtney's economic, capital, and racial advantages, sharing a coming out narrative in this context can pose challenges. Hence, Courtney's experience demonstrates an intersection of opportunity, contradiction, and restriction, which is characteristic of the South.

Toward the end of our time together, the majority of Courtney's story was transmitted through tears, confusion, and frustrations. She expressed a deep level of vulnerability, reminding me that she felt unaware of other sexual identity realities and possibilities; Jackson was limiting and confining for gay people—suicidal even. Moving to Atlanta has increased her gay knowledge; there are a plethora of gay resources and activities, but upon each return to Jackson she feels disconnected and lost. Intersectional theorists comment on how the multiplicative processes of interacting dynamics, such as race, class, gender, culture and place, shape every interaction, rationale, and outcome. As such, Courtney's coming out narrative demonstrates the complex interaction of socially advantageous possibilities (white and class privilege) in light of polarizing institutions.

Kris: New York City and Intersections of Race and Place

Kris, a 26-year-old actor that currently resides in New York City, was born and raised in Detroit. Kris and I share mutual friends and decided to get together for coffee when I recently visited New York City. Kris and I have spent time together before, in fact, the past few times I have visited New York, I have also had the pleasure of seeing Kris perform in on- and off-Broadway productions. On some level I was familiar with his interest in the performing arts and the theater; therefore, knowing a bit about Kris fostered a level of intimacy between him as the participant and me as the researcher. As such, when Kris and I met, he began the conversation without me having to ask questions.

Kris began by telling me about an incident earlier that morning regarding his race. He was auditioning for a show and the casting director was concerned that his skin was not light enough for the role. He argued that his skin tone should not matter for the role, but if he was qualified for the role, makeup could lighten his “darker” skin. Kris followed up that experience

by sharing with me that being Black in Detroit is very different than being Black—Black and gay to boot—in New York City. New York City, according to Kris, is liberal and progressive, a place where he feels comfortable in his skin and “constantly evolving” presentation; however, he contended that regardless of where you live, race matters.

In Detroit you are either Black or white; nothing else exists. Being light is beneficial, but no one cares what you are. New York is another story; if you tell someone you are Black they want to know what kind, everyone is something specific, where in Detroit you are just white or Black.

New York City is famous for the intersections of social, natural, and built environments; it is a city of monumental architectural design, gorgeous natural landscapes, and a myriad of social experiences. In contrast to Courtney’s narrative, depicting southern restrictions, Kris told me that moving to New York City was “a dream come true.” For Kris, the city embodied performance and theatrical opportunities as well as a life outside of the closet. Beyond the city, as one of the most progressive states in the United States, New York is the only state that has legislatively recognized gay marriage, yet it remains judicially contested.

This institutional accomplishment extends New York City’s early acknowledgement and acceptance of homosexual practices and identities. Gay historian George Chauncey (1994) described New York City in the early 1900s as a world of complex, ever-changing gay male activity with remarkable visibility. In moving to New York City, Kris moved into a world of openness and acceptance, but at the same time, he was also aware that his racial identity was going to shift.

Once I got settled in New York, I realized that I never had a Black experience in Detroit. I mean people knew I was Black, I checked Black on applications but my parents are from Jamaica and Trinidad; they’re immigrants, so it’s different. They are also first generation, and they came to the U.S. under a different set of experiences than other Black people. My parents did not have direct connections to the civil rights movement. So for them racism has different meanings. It is there, just different. Listen to me, all Black and brown people are fucking kicked around, but if you’re an immigrant it’s

different. As I think about, we did not come from Africa, we were not slaves here, and I don't even remember my parents talking to me about civil rights. They moved here so we could get a better education, have a better life than what was available in Jamaica and Trinidad. As a result, I think I have always felt a bit disconnected from American Black culture, and in Detroit it was all about skin color and being light, so if I called myself Jamaican, the kids at school would tell me to go fuck myself. But here in New York it is different. People want to know where you're from and which neighborhood you live in. Shit Jamaicans have parades, neighborhoods, and restaurants here in New York!

Kris explained that binary driven racial identities, such as those in Detroit, pronounce white as dominant and Black as other. As a dichotomy, Black receives meaning through its relationship to white. White identities, often defined as separate but equal to Black, drastically stratify property values, neighborhood schools, home loans, and the ability to generate family wealth (Shapiro 2004). Although Kris is aware of the Black/White binary, when his place shifts (Detroit to New York City), he recognizes the intersectionality of race and place, shifting meanings of his identity in relation to class, ethnicity and sexuality. He added,

I feel completely and totally comfortable being gay in New York. I am even at the point where I feel comfortable when I go home to Detroit, but I am reminded as to how different the two places are. I think being exposed to both places has given me a really good perspective on the whole gay thing.

I asked Kris to elaborate on “the whole gay thing,” to which he responded,

In Detroit, for me, it was always about safety. You know you had to watch where you were going. Especially, well I mean come on, I am not the butchest one out there, so that matters too, but it did not stop me from being me, but I have to be honest, it always scared me, at least a little bit. Here in New York it is not necessarily always about that, gay is normal, especially in the arts. So when I feel like wearing makeup and heels I am applauded not chased. Here, I can also be openly involved in gay politics so it is just complicated in a different way. I am at the place where we [gays] need to deal with not separating and segregating ourselves. We don't need to be separate from everyone anymore. We don't need different clubs and different this and different that. I think we need to start integrating our lives into the mainstream. That's how people get over being so scared of it and us. We need regular America to know that you and I put our pants on like everyone else. As soon as being gay is not made into a big deal all the craziness will calm down.

Illustrating the intersection of place and culture, Kris drew a clear distinction between gay safety in Detroit and in New York. Both New York and Detroit are urban places, defined by natural and built space, but they embody incredibly distinct industrial practices, race culture, and social norms. As Kris pointed out that his conceptualization of gay in New York is distinct from gay in Detroit, he exposed the intersectional institutions such as gender, race, and place that contribute to various meanings of gay. With New York City embodying a space of expansive freedom, he is able to focus on equality, acceptance, and visibility in both mainstream and gay communities. In this way, Kris believes that once knowledge and information regarding gay life is made accessible, what has been assumed as difference will be accepted as common practice.

For Kris, creating the “mundanity of gay” begins with recognizing discrimination in both hetero and non-hetero spaces. Kris described experiences of discrimination from heterosexual institutions and interactions, such as being called a fag, hearing homosexual slurs at school, and being reprimanded by his parents for feminine behavior. At the same time, he also addressed marginalization from within the gay community. He shared with me that he dates men of all racial backgrounds and when dating white men he receives backlash from men of color. Critiqued by some Black men for his dating choices or “turning” on his race, I asked Kris to provide some detail on his experiences with Black gay communities in New York.

I argue the most with other Black gay men. First of all, I can name almost every experience I have had where I have entered a bar or club on the arm of a white man and Black men stare me up down with looks from hell. I have even been pulled aside at these so called “clubs and told I that I am committing an injustice. I cannot wrap my head around what injustice I am committing? Is this why Black gay men are not involved in gay civil rights? It just does not make sense to me. I keep meeting men that have zero interest in the fight. I keep hearing, ‘that’s not my fight.’ I think to myself, because Black people in America have already had a civil rights, they think they can sit this one out?

Kris articulated his frustrations over a variety of political and cultural issues that are specific to his intersections of race, sexuality, gender, and place. As a Black gay man dating men of various racial and ethnic presentations, he is transcending traditional dating scripts, gender norms, and racial standards. Although it is common in New York City—a city whose residents represent nations from all over the world—for social interactions to involve and celebrate difference, the intersection of Black homosexuality and interracial dating challenges fundamental components of American social norms. Kris’s actions are being interpreted as a narrative of deviance. His unapologetic discontent for Black sexual politics demonstrates that race and sexuality matter equally, unlike the traditional storyline of secret sex and down-low brotherhood (King 2004).

Kris also expressed frustration over class disparities in the New York City “gay scene.” He described a situation where he and several of his friends, who are also gay and in the theatre, decided to go out one night after work. They hit up a new bar over on the Upper West Side, which had been recommended to Kris by a fellow co-worker, also a man of color that is active in the theatre. Walking in, the crowd seemed “way too posh” as Kris described it, “and the drinks were crazy expensive.” Kris then told me that most of the men in the bar seemed to be middle-aged white men: “These men had money to spare...and of course there were plenty of twinks to be found, too.” I questioned, “Twinks? What do you mean?” He explained, “Skinny, pretty boys, like me but younger. They were all over the place, you know, hanging on the silver daddies, willing to suck dick or bend over for a chance at the good life.”

Kris shares a story that coincides with the work George Chauncey author of *Gay New York* (1994). A brilliant and diverse New York City has been home to same-sex practices for decades, however, history indicates that gay communities, including bars and clubs, have been

constructed as white, male, and middle-class (Appleby 2001; Barrett and Pollack 2005; Valocchi 1999). Gay history, as described in this project and as it relates to many of the participants embodies elements of patriarchy, racism, and capitalism; individuals that benefit from such unequal systems are granted access and social advantage, particularly if what makes an individual privileged is visible on the body. Therefore, with the intersections of white privilege, male privilege, and individualism or capital, many white, middle-class, gay men have been living publicly in urban spaces with access to diverse neighborhoods and environments.

Today, gay culture and political activities continue to embody an exclusive, hegemonic gay identity where gay men and lesbians are typically depicted as economically stable, professional, in stable monogamous relationships, often with children, rightfully fighting for legal rights and citizenship (Barrett and Pollack 2005). Such a political identity represents a life outside the closet—a post-closet presentation. However, according to Barrett and Pollack (2005) and other sexuality and class scholars (Appleby 2001; Valocchi 1999), only a middle-class identity affords the privilege of an openly gay identity:

A class bias raises the question of how ability or the desire of individuals to express their sexual orientation would be shaped by the resources associated with the class...variance in class experiences creates differential access to social, psychological, and economic resources that facilitate the ability to express one's sexual orientation. (P. 438)

In this sense, living beyond the closet is not available to all, most likely those individuals that have access to secure economic practices and stable safe gay spaces. In this way, normalizing one's sexual identity involves an expression of middle-class politics and safe space living (Barrett and Pollack 2005; Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999).

Thus far in this chapter I have employed intersectional analysis, with applicable points of race, culture, place, and gender, in order to demonstrate how one understands and discloses sexual narratives. Depending on the points of intersection, some challenge the post-closet

discourse; others are left standing in the doorframe. In both Courtney's and Kris's narratives we were exposed to the various inconsistencies of the post-closet discourse; place, race, and class shape one's ability to disclose a coming out narrative. As white, middle-class, urban identities remain the most visible gay identities, specific, advantaged sexual identity narratives are normalized, ignoring differential experiences. I continue to demonstrate how place, such as Jackson, Mississippi and New York City, although divergent in politics and the celebration of diversity, are necessary to intersectional analysis, impacting which coming out stories are marked as normative. In this next section, I spend more time focusing on cultural practices of the South, a region with a monolithic cultural narrative that represents specific racial, gender, and class practices.

Meg, Alaine, and Ken: Welcome to the Bible Belt

Narrative analysis, a storytelling methodology, is designed in such a way that researchers listen to participants recreate stories from memories. Stories reflect experiences and meaning making, often times revealing social patterns and themes. Narrative analysis does not seek to make generalizations or blanket statements about the population or the sample being used; sample size does matter, but the goal of a narrative analysis project is to understand how an individual recalls and shares an experience. For this particular portion of the chapter, participants are explaining how place, such as the South, has shaped religion, race, and coming out of the closet.

In order to better understand how the South has influenced coming out experiences, with intent, I collected the majority of my data, 83 percent, from participants that reside in the South: 60 percent of these participants identify as Christian; 42 percent of these participants claimed a Christian and white identity; 18 percent of these participants that identified as non-white

represented a 24 percent contrast between white and non-white southern, Christian identities. All narratives collected in the South came from Atlanta, a large metropolis city with visible gay communities and diverse, but racially and economically segregated populations.¹ As a qualitative project, no generalizations or assumptions are being made about the sample, but collecting the majority of narratives from one specific place can highlight trends and patterns on the structural levels. The southern narratives used in this project explore and uncover how southern place interacts with one's identity, shaping how we narrate the memories and experiences of our lives.

Thus, a significant proportion of my sample identifies with a southern location, a Christian identity, and embodies a white racial presentation, also known as place-specific identity (Corcoran 2002; Gieryn 2000; Gustafson 2001; Stedman 2003)². These intersecting identifiers—southern location, Christian faith, and white racial identity—are all culturally significant factors because of the social normativity they represent. Within the context of the South, both Christianity and whiteness signify privileged ideologies and bodies. The association between the South and Christianity is referred to as the Bible Belt, where fundamental southern Christianity is more than attending Sunday service; it is supported, reinforced, and validated through various social institutions, including the media, school, news, music, and everyday exchanges (Barton 2010). As a result, southern Christian dogma, infamous for heterosexist and homophobic rhetoric, articulates that homosexuals are perverted, diseased, and immoral individuals that will not be allowed into heaven (Barton 2010).

¹ I recognize that collecting from a singular location is limiting. It affects the sample by creating

² These figures are representative of an effort to recruit a diverse racial and religious sample.

Meg, a 31-year-old white, self-identified genderqueer individual shared with me that she grew up in the Atlanta suburbs of Stone Mountain, Georgia. As a child, she attended a Presbyterian church and recalls consistently attending Sunday service with her mother and sister. Meg professed her childhood and adolescent love for her religion and God. In our conversation regarding religion, Meg also shared that although her sex most closely resembled a girl, during elementary school she noticed that her interests and body presentation resembled boys. She did not necessarily struggle with this assumed contradiction, but she often heard snickering from kids at school and was constantly asked by her mother to wear dresses as opposed to shorts and tee shirts. Meg often attended Christian camp in the summer and church related retreats during the school year. She explained that during one of the retreats, she had a 45-minute “quiet time” with God:

I remember standing on this tree stump, I was just standing there, meditating, connecting to God, and all the sudden I found myself coming out to God, saying God, I am gay. You made me. You tell me what to do with it. It was just like that. I think that was the first time that I came out. God was the most important figure in my life, he should be the first to know.

As a researcher, it is necessary and critical to one’s work to recognize social bias and hold oneself accountable for cultural judgments. As a Jewish woman from South Florida, I can be confused and bewildered by Christianity; I stand as an outsider to the dominant religion, particularly in the Bible Belt, and listening to Meg’s coming out experience with God was a strong reminder. I respectfully took in her story as I did all the participants’ narratives, but noted in my journal that southern Christianity and interactions with God were highly significant to many of the southern coming out narratives.

Meg’s emphasis on her relationship with God, including the fact that God is an important figure in her life, and as such should be the first to hear her coming out narrative, demonstrated

what a significant role Christianity could potentially play in one's life. Meg's negotiation with God and Christianity, which is specific to the South, reminded me that place has an identity and ideology specific to its inhabitants (Agnew 1987; Barton 2010; Bell and Valentine 1995; Gieryn 2000; Hays 1998; Altman 1993; McCarthy 2000; McQueeney 2009; Relph 1976; Tuan 1977). Meg further described how she managed her southern Christianity and evolving genderqueer identity.

I knew that my religion said that it wasn't ok...I mean everyone knew that, you know, Christianity doesn't mix with gay and nobody was out at my school. Because when you grow up in the South and go to church regularly it is almost as if it does not have to be spoken, you just know that being gay is wrong. All you see is family after family and they all look the same; there are never any gay people or gay families around. I mean, there were some gay teachers in my high school, but they weren't out, but we all knew they were gay, and everyone talked shit about them. Like our P.E. coach who was awesome, but you weren't really supposed to be too close to Coach K, because she was gay...you know, she had like a braided rat tail down to here, I mean, c'mon...dead giveaway.

I began this chapter with Courtney's story. Born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi, like Meg she too articulated that locating other gay men and women was incredibly difficult. Both Courtney and Meg yearned for gay and lesbian representation as they worked through non-heterosexual feelings, yet anti-homosexual sentiment and heterogender practices remained normalized and infused into their everyday arrangements. Meg explained that her school environment in the suburbs of Stone Mountain did not offer positive images of gay and lesbian individuals nor did it provide possibilities to seek out realities beyond southern-Christian heterosexuality. Meg continued to explain that individuals who transgressed heterogender presentations, such as Coach K, were often ostracized and pushed to the margins. In alliance with Meg's southern-Christian upbringing she attended a conservative, Christian college in North Carolina.

It was a small Presbyterian college. It was totally racially segregated and very wealthy. As I look back, I cannot believe I was ok with going there. Anyway, so when I was away

at school I was totally managing my faith and sexuality and learning all these meanings about being white and rich. I was overwhelmed at times and I became very connected to my faith and felt the need to constantly prove my love for God. I was always concerned about being Christian enough. At the same time, my feelings about girls kept coming up and I would just push them down. I knew it was wrong, especially being at this college; I heard it was wrong all the time. Yet, I was able to maintain my more tomboy presentation, I mean that's who I have always been; I was not going to be someone I was not. But everything got more complicated when I met Kelly, my first girlfriend and love.

Meg attempted, in fact she tried incredibly hard, to present and embody what has been constructed and perceived as “the southern Christian.” She attended a southern Christian college, studied Christianity, and worked to prove her love to God. In college, she lived and worked in a space created out of a Christian framework, where religion served as the gatekeeper to her scholarship, conversations, and practices. However, no matter how much Christianity she practiced and engaged in, she continued to recognize, fight, and manage what mainstream Christians recognized as sinful feelings: homosexuality. At the same time, Meg became aware of how her religious identity was intersecting with her race and class, forcing her role in the privileged and oppressed areas of society to become more visible and tangible. Her time in college, a new location in a common place, changed Meg’s approach to her intersectional lens, forcing her to confront her same-sex feelings. Meg explained to me that she spent most of college fighting with herself, subconsciously and internally arguing over who she was, her relationship with God, and how to express herself. As she recalled these memories and shared them with me, she was astonished with what she went through, attempting to maintain multiple conflicting identities.

I spent most of college negotiating and managing my faith with what came to be my genderqueer identity. I realized that I never felt at home in either a girl or boy body; I was just me. I knew that I was always attracted to women. I could not deny that. I slept with women the entire time I was in college, so for me it was about piecing all of this together. Could I love women in a variant body and be close with God? There was not a day I did not think about it. I knew I had to get a grip on what was going on; I could not just wallow in these thoughts. One thing I did for myself in hopes to help sort it all out

was get involved in an organization that was not faith related. I joined an outdoors group. We would hike and camp, you know do all sorts of outdoors activities. It was something totally separate from the Church. It gave me a chance to be outside in the fresh air; I was able to reconnect with nature. We would spend three-four days at time on camping trips; I have always appreciated how beautiful we have it here in the South. The North Carolina mountains are gorgeous. I have to say joining that group saved my life, I met some of the kindest people, no one judged me, and of course I met some cute girls. I was very happy camping, hiking; I would reach some level of peace when I would participate or hang out with the group. I finally came to the realization that the God I knew would love me regardless and not tell me that my body was wrong or bad. When I moved back to Georgia after college, I came to Atlanta for work. Everyone told me it would be best place in the south for me to be. I got involved in a variety of different activities; some were queer-focused, but not all. I met an African woman in my drumming group and she was very spiritual. She introduced me to a whole new way of thinking about religion and belief. And since then I have come to reject God, or at least the God I grew up with; there is no way only Christians go to heaven. Religion and faith have never been the same.

Meg, like many gay men and women, traveled on a journey of deception and self-realization. For Meg, living in a southern place that embodies a Christian rhetoric of heterogender families and patriarchal practices posed complex challenges. Meg explained that she was constantly managing her love for faith, her genderqueer presentation, love for women, and social acknowledgment without marginalization. She came to the realization that she could no longer live in a space of confusion and must deal head-on with her confused and tangled feelings. Working with an accepting group of individuals amidst a landscape of peace and beauty provided Meg with the empowerment to maintain her relationship with God, regardless of her identity and genderqueer presentation. Moving to a city, such as Atlanta, which could provide various spiritual and queer opportunities was made possible through her personal place-based exploration.

No southern place is the same, whether visiting Tallahassee, Florida or Louisville, Kentucky. Places in the South vary and so do the experiences, yet the South in general maintains a common intersectional sentiment of new racism (Collins 2004), patriarchy, and

heterosexuality. Alaine and I live in the same neighborhood in Atlanta. We often cross paths when walking our dogs, and one afternoon I stopped and began a conversation. I learned that she was born and raised in Fort Pierce, Florida and worked as manager for a large Atlanta-based corporation for over 15 years. She currently owns and manages her own business and lives with her partner. We agreed to coffee and an interview, during which I learned how Alaine's southern experience was deeply shaped by racism, White privilege, gender, and religion.

I am from the South. Oh yeah, very southern parents raised me! I hate saying this about them, but they were very prejudiced. I didn't realize how prejudiced they were, well let me say this, they used the "N-word" in their everyday vocabulary. I thought it was normal, so I did too—until my grandmother told us to stop using it. She was more much educated than my parents. I think my father was the black sheep of the family, or maybe my grandmother was, I don't know. But anyway, my parents used it all the time, "N-word" this and "N-word" that, my parents didn't care and neither did their friends. To this day, my mother still uses it.

Alaine explained that the language her environment embodied was racist and discriminatory. Her parents degraded Black people on a regular basis, enforcing white as normal and Black as other. Alaine's grandmother was a figure of rebellion, asking her not to use the term, but there seems to be some disregard for her omission of the word. As a child, Alaine was surrounded by prejudiced thoughts, sentiments of inequality, and subordination. As Alaine recalled her experiences and shared the remainder of her narrative, oppressive themes resurfaced.

Schools were integrated where we lived, they would ship certain kids across town, the Black side of town to the white side of town for school. And certain neighborhoods, white neighborhoods, would go to the Black schools. We got chosen to go to the Black schools, and it was before Martin, well my little brother was still a baby. So it was me and my older brother that got shipped to the Black school. And on the first day of school my lunch money was stolen out of my purse and my brother, Kip, well he was heavy, he was kinda fat, well no, he was really heavy, dad always picked on him, and anyways, two big guys, two Black boys got him in the bathroom and made him pull down his pants because they wanted to see, well you know all our "stuff" was different colors. When we came home that day from school and told my parents what happened they immediately pulled us out and put us in a private school. So from third and fourth grade, I went to a Baptist school and all the kids there were white. I heard the "N-word" a lot there too, all the kids on the playground, you know at recess, would use it.

Alaine's southern childhood exhibits institutional interactions of parental everyday use of racist language, as well as neighborhood and school validation of discriminatory practices. Although such language as the "N-word," has gone through various stages and changes, its history of describing Black bodies, as chattel remains embedded in cultural and social politics. The "N-word" defines the Black body as dark, evil, and inferior by placing the white body, in a superior position. Using the "N-word" in common speech normalizes the Black body as immoral and unequal (Moraga 1983). Alaine's memories of her parents using the "N-word" casually and often, reflects the normalcy of the Black body in a subordinate position. Notably, Alaine's 1970s school memories reflect race relations of the time; moving white and non-white bodies through the process of integration. During the 1970s the United States was adjusting to racial, sexual, and educational transformations. The southern racist beliefs her parents embodied intersected with the educational transformation Alaine and her brother experienced. As a result, they were both pulled from public school and placed in a private Baptist school. This transition confirms what many southern studies sociologists have been demonstrating since the 1940s: the strongest social institutions in the South are the family and church (Himes 1991; Odum 1947), which both teach and enforce traditional "separate but equal" southern values. The maintenance of white supremacy, patriarchal dominance, and conventional Christianity requires strong support and membership in both institutions. In addition, both institutions are supported by specific political measures which become normalized and neutralized to the point where white, male, heterosexual, Christian privilege is embedded in all southern interactions (Glaser 1994; Reed 1972).

Ken, a white, Christian man currently residing in Atlanta has become a visible face of the Atlanta democratic movement as well as Atlanta gay activism. Prior to his current political

work, he shared with me how growing up in the North Georgia mountains was challenging and fear-provoking at times. He explained that he was instilled with “fire and brimstone” rhetoric as child and stated, “If I was caught being gay, I was going to hell!” I asked Ken to tell me more.

I could not fathom the idea of not spending eternity with my family. I always struggled with that. But, I think, recognizing that sexually I was attracted to men was something that really happened when I was about 10. And by the time I was like 14 or 15, I knew I was gay. I think I first told myself out loud that I was gay when I was maybe 16 or so. Saying it out loud made it real, like God could hear me. I thought to myself this is between God, and me and no one else needs to know right now. Telling God, or at least I thought, it meant I could ask him to change me; you know pray the gay away. I would go to bed each night and pray that God would change me. I would tell him that I knew this was sin and to take it away from me. I basically would cry myself to sleep every night for about 10 years. It was a total religious thing. I was so scared that I would be banned from Christianity if God did not change me. And I did not know how to escape it. In fact I was surrounded by it. It has always been a big struggle for me and that concern that they, my family and community would look down on me or think less of me in everything that I do and did, I guess that really frightened me. I always try very hard to make sure that people, well they don't have to like me, but I want them to respect me. Especially when things of a moral substance are questioned, where people might question my character, integrity, or choices; that is what concerns me. I still remain concerned with that. I don't want to lose respect or trust.

Ken has been hurt by religion; it has made him doubt his abilities to love himself and others. His struggle with his sexuality is at the expense of his family not loving or accepting him. His religious beliefs do not coincide with how he expresses his love for another human being. Ken articulated an internal frustration over the contradicting intersection of faith and sexuality. Similar to Meg's struggle with negotiations of faith and sexuality, Ken's main concern seems to be with perception; how does his conflict with religion impact his public persona?

In a patriarchal society and within a patriarchal religion, a man is supposed to exude respect and authority; power is essential to masculinity. Ken mentioned that he struggles with his moral actions being questioned. In many ways he expressed that he fears his masculinity being challenged. In the context of Ken's concern, gender theorist Michael Kimmel (1994)

states that Ken is dealing with what is at the root of American masculinity: fear. Masculine fear embodies worry of not being good enough, man enough, or powerful enough, regardless of sexuality, race, and class.

Through awareness and reflexivity, Ken felt determined to make peace with the intersections of his sexuality, faith, and masculinity. He knew that the process would be an ongoing evolution, but standing still and doing nothing would bury him deeper in confusion and frustration. He explained to me that he began to reach a point where discriminatory language and hurtful practices, even if they were in the word of God, pushed him to the point of opening his mouth and saying something.

I was raised Methodist until I was 12 and then my mother switched us into the southern Baptist church in town. My mom still attends that church and it was there where it all started. I walked out of church a number of times, because it was a conservative church and the pastor felt compelled to talk about sexuality and abortion from the pulpit. Eventually, I was old enough, maybe 17 or 18, and I told my Mom I'm not going back to that church again. I also walked out of a funeral one time for a democratic state representative who was a member of that church and they turned the service into an abortion rally. Basically, I got up and walked out.

Ken felt the burn, the fire, and the anger of oppression. Not completely out in all settings, Ken was cognizant and angry regarding what prejudiced rhetoric is being spoken at religious and state-related events. With his identity challenged, he decided to start standing up for what he believes.

I think I've always been an empathetic person. I grew up in the mountains, in a county where there were no visible people of color, and everyone was white. There were no openly gay people and I have always been the one that someone would tell a racial joke too. For some reason, I would step in and say, "that's wrong." I always had that defender of people aspect to myself. I can't explain it, but why pick on the little guy? So in some ways, being gay has become this empowering experience. I would create a safe space for people that got picked on, I was big, tall and stocky, and so no one would bother me. I had this identity of someone who would defend people who were a minority, so coming to terms with the fact that I happened to be one of those groups, a gay minority, it all came full circle. It was time to defend myself and other gay people.

Ken, like Alaine, grew up in an environment where race mattered. With visible white and male privilege, Ken felt obliged to stand up for the underdog and fight social inequality. He expressed an awareness of privilege, in light of his southern, small-town background. As an adult, Ken was encouraged to move to Atlanta, shift his place and alter his intersectional perspective. Atlanta was and continues to be one of the most politically active cities in the southeast, with an expanding gay population. As a tall, masculine white man, living in an urban environment, Ken had numerous opportunities to express and experience his gay masculinity. Ken threw himself into political, social, and community organizations. He continues to remain actively involved in gay politics, particularly the gay marriage campaign and 2012 election.

Conclusion: Intersections Matter

As the saying goes, “location, location, location.” Location harbors prescribed ideologies of power, knowledge, and language, shaping how an individual identifies with their environment. Location, such as the South, is a social construct, constantly adapting to political events, cultural shifts, and environmental changes. The South embodies varying presentations and landscapes, including rural, urban, suburban, yet it is portrayed as singular with a history of social injustice and discrimination. The southern region, designated by specific states, laws, and agricultural practices, is constantly changing and evolving; the South is a social construct, derived from the natural, social, and built environment. Investigating the South, particularly in light of hearing Kris’ narrative, which embodies specific elements of New York City culture, highlights how place impacts sexual identity one’s sense of self.

Place, culturally defined by those that inhabit its space, impacts how an individual understands gender roles, race relations, and class structures. Thus, southern place exists in relation to gender, race, and class. In this way, the South is multiple. As Law (2001) notes, the

South embodies places such as the Ozarks in southwest Missouri, the North Georgia mountains, and the beaches of Jacksonville, Florida. With multiple locations, environments, and communities, southern space is vast, beautiful, and unique. It is an area with various identities, but continues to be described and categorized by a specific cultural narrative of fundamental Christian, patriarchal, heterosexual tradition (Allison 1992; Law 2001).

Radical lesbian writer Dorothy Allison (1992) claimed that to some extent most southern identities are shaped by racism, Christian fundamentalism, classism, compulsory masculinity/femininity, right-wing politics, and the bitter legacy of the Civil War. The complexity of these intersecting components has created an identity—often perceived by the southern self and by others—that is fueled with racism, bigotry, and ignorance. Such themes were visible in all presented narratives. Various levels of intersecting inequalities, fueled by religious angst, tainted coming out narratives and memories demonstrating the exclusivity of the post-closet discourse. Empowerment and activism surfaced and remains visible and active in urban environments, but other components of one's identity, such as race or class, are often silenced or minimized at the expense of progress.

In the next chapter, I explore the role of embodied gender in coming out narratives. I delve deep into the intersections of feminine masculinity, privilege, and narrative to examine the ways in which feminine masculinity challenges the concept of post-closet as available to all gays and lesbians.

CHAPTER 7: FEMININE MASCULINTY

Travis: Introduction

Travis is the youngest of four siblings. He grew up in New York City, raised by white, working-class parents that embodied traditional hetero-gender roles. His father was the breadwinner with a stoic yet competitive temperament, and his mother was responsible for domestic tasks, including caring for the children and home. Travis recalls attending a neighborhood private Catholic school with his sisters and brother while also regularly participating in Sunday church services. Travis proceeded to share details with me regarding his childhood, including music and television interests, yet his already cautious demeanor began to project hesitancy and fear. Attempting to spark a discussion around sex or sexuality, I asked him, if comfortable, to share with me memories of his first childhood crush. Instead, Travis began sharing a narrative regarding gender.

When I was younger, my sisters were really big influences on me, probably for a lot of reasons, but I think the biggest one is that they protected me. I didn't get along with my brother—at all. He was mean to me and I would seek refuge with the girls. They would help me deal with him. They could pull him off me, you know get him off of punching me or throwing me around. He was very physical and not in a brotherly sort of way. I mean I think I got my first black eye from him, when I was seven. He threw me into the couch and I hit my face on the floor and it hit the board, the wooden board that was there at the bottom of the couch. Then he popped me right in the face, called me faggot and laughed.

I had imagined Travis's memories of childhood crushes to be more along the lines of sneaking around the sanctuary halls at church, so I was surprised to hear him reveal a story of violence and fear. Contrary to what I anticipated, his description of bullying, hiding, and disjointed family protection surfaced, reflecting the essence of American boyhood and masculinity (Leverenz 1990; Kimmel 1994; Pascoe 2007).

Travis explained that his childhood was filled with torment; his brother and the neighborhood boys picked on him for inappropriate displays of masculinity. Travis and I

discussed his memories of childhood gender display and the bullying that followed suit; he explained to me that his parents ignored the gender abuse in the home, school, and neighborhood. In fact, as a young boy, Travis never felt safe or protected; he was always vulnerable to his brother's violence.

Masculinity, constructed out of patriarchal knowledge and social discourse, performs as the most admired gender presentation. Although masculinity is a social construct in which “men are made, not born,” most individuals fixate on gender being static, singular, and unchangeable (Fausto-Sterling 1995:219). As such, male bodies exuding inappropriate masculinity, often labeled as femininity, are blamed for dangerous mishandlings of gender. When such inaccurate displays are recognized, such as a male body *not* presenting the expected aggressive, athletic, and competitive masculine presentation, patriarchy as a system and process has instructed society—men, of all ages, races, and backgrounds—to react negatively, aggressively, and violently (Johnson 1997).

Violence as a response to and dimension of masculinity represents historical, social, and cultural meanings while also spanning across intersections of race and class. Martin Espada (1996) accounts for this relationship with violence, arguing that he learned from his father that appropriately being a brown man meant embodying rage. Espada explains in “The Puerto Rican Dummy and the Merciful Son” that rage was taught to him as a necessary response to bigotry and violence was a cousin of rage. Espada learned that violence was problematic, that social masculine prescriptions of punishment and bullying paradoxically lead him to constant self-humiliation. Frequently worried if he was “man enough,” Espada took his rage out on other men but could never locate the masculine enemy.

As a victim of gender violence, Tommi Avicolti explained in his groundbreaking work on bullying that his personal gender abuse stemmed from his socially inappropriate display of masculinity or “sissyness” (Green 1987). Never performing masculinity up to par, Avicolti (1986) recounts that he was constantly picked on at school and abused by kids in the neighborhood:

What did being a sissy mean? It was a way of walking (from the hips rather than the shoulders); it was a way of talking (often with a lisp or in a high-pitched voice); it was a way of relating to others (gently, not wanting to fight, or hurt anyone’s feelings). It was being intelligent (“an egghead” they called it sometimes); and getting good grades. It meant not being interested in sports, not playing football in the street after school; not discussing teams and scores and playoffs. And it involved not showing fervent interest in girls, not talking about scoring with tits or “Playboy” centerfolds. Not concealing naked women in your history or porno books in your locker. (P. 24)

Travis, similar to Avicolti, did not exude, present, or engage in the socially appropriate scripted masculinity. As a result, his gender presentation was scrutinized and violently attacked. Institutions rendered with strict masculine presentations ostracized his actions. More precisely, social institutions designed to teach masculinity, such as sports, military, education, and church, branded the male gender through acts, practices, and rewards by degrading inappropriate displays with femininity or female bodies.

Travis explained that the school he and his siblings attended was also connected to their church and neighborhood; he was never allowed to escape the predatory masculinity that followed his every move. Travis did find shelter with his sisters and their friends, but at the same time those relationships helped foster his femininity. His female friends never made fun of him or picked on his atypical masculine behavior. He was always included by his female friends and asked to participate in socially normative feminine games and activities, such as shopping or playing house and dress-up. Travis explained that letting the girls dress him up was fantastic and fun but he recalled,

I was so scared of my brother and all his friends, yet my sisters and their friends made me feel so safe. It got to the point that I did not even realize all my friends were girls. I just stayed away from the boys; I was always worried they were going to beat the shit out of me.

Travis described his gendered relationships as polarizing and contradictory. Both his brother and sisters reacted in sharp contrast to his identity. Travis was constantly worried about his brother's response to his gender display, while his sisters were in support of his identity.

Travis used the safety provided by his sisters to manage the fear invoked by his brother.

Wanting Travis to tell me more about his gendered experiences, I asked him about his presentation or "doing gender" practices. I was hoping Travis would recall memories of his everyday childhood masculinity. He stated that he would wear feminine clothes in the house with his sisters; he would put on heels and makeup, walk around, and take pictures. He told me that he loved playing dress-up with the girls. Smiling and sharing these memories, he also firmly stated,

I know there is great deal of shame in being feminine and not being masculine. When I would put on my feminine attire, as much as I enjoyed playing around, I was always shaking inside. If my brother came home and found me dressed like this, he would have killed me.

In a society that admires aggressive and stoic posture on masculine bodies, toughness and strength in little boys, and athletic skills in male youth, it is clear that males of all ages that transgress traditional gender roles are viewed negatively and marginalized. Gendered-discrimination is made clear through the degradation of female-ness and femininity.

Travis conveyed that he is clearly aware that his presentation of femininity was at fault for his lack of masculinity. His narrative effectively illustrates that presenting femininity is looked down upon and valued as inferior to masculinity. In other words, as the subordinate gender, female and femininity are used to locate inferior masculinities; policing and calling out

masculinity are done through the recognition of femininity. Furthermore, when gender and sexuality are grouped together, as they so often are, the female body is thought of as the receiver of penetration from the dominant male body. Thus, for most men “the deep fear is to be humiliated, dominated, exposed, and [penetrated] as a wimp instead of a Man of Force” (Leverenz 1990:446).

Throughout my data collection process, I interviewed several men (10) who described experiences similar to Travis with a persistent theme of “feminine masculinity” that ignited gender violence. Such violence and abuse was used to regulate, scrutinize, and torture the irregular masculine presentation while also stripping away any closet for the potential non-heteronormative identity. Feminine masculinity has developed into a policing tool, often used to socially control and regulate male norms and practices, while also describing a male body with feminine play, sway, language, actions, and likes. These male participants talked about feeling most comfortable with female friends, engaging in what has been labeled as feminine activities, and steering far away from boys, especially aggressive, athletic, and competitive boys. Based on traditional social scripts of masculinity and femininity, feminine masculinity can be described and labeled as the antithesis of hegemonic masculinity. Yet, as a contradiction, feminine masculinity remains functional to gender practices because it sparks the very essence of American masculinity: fear.

David: Masculinity, Violence, and Fear

David, a 50-year-old African American man from a small town in North Carolina told me that as a child his father constantly scrutinized him for being effeminate. “I was sensitive, artistic, and intelligent; I couldn’t stand fighting or being physically extraordinary,” he said. His father believed that in order to correct his son’s non-masculine behavior, David needed to be in a

private-Baptist school and attend church regularly. However, David said that regardless of the environment, he was picked on.

The boys on the block picked on me all the time. They knew that I did not know how to fight. I also, well I didn't understand the way boys thought about things and ironically, I did have some athletic ability, but when you're a sissy, they don't know how to support that. Our culture doesn't know what to do with sissies, especially Black sissies. And there were some tough girls who also joined in on the abuse, and I call it "abuse" because nobody knows what to do with the sissified boy...we have a place for the tomboys, the girls who are a little too butch, but we really don't yet know what to do with an effeminate boy, it scares the living shit out of adults.

Masculinity is so often defined by the devaluing and avoidance of the feminine; female is used as a threatening agent (Burn 2000:3). Hence, emasculating little boys that display femininity, such as David and Travis, is common. Parents, teachers, and peers constantly regulate and grade children's behavior, rewarding those who act socially appropriate and punishing those individuals who transgress socially prescribed behaviors (McCreary 1994; Martin 1994). Individuals such as David and Travis are highlighted for challenging traditional gender presentations and expectations, at times empowering but most notably such transgressions lead to violence.

Men are taught to perform masculinity, mapped out as social arrangements, in accordance with the meanings attached to given and assumed identities, including elements of fear or fearfulness of not being "man enough" (Kimmel 1994; Leverenz 1990.). Masculinities scholar David Leverenz articulates, "our real fear is not fear of women but being ashamed or humiliated in front of other men or being dominated by stronger men" (1990:451; 1994). Kimmel also contends, "in here lies the secret of American manhood: We are afraid of other men" (1994:119). The fear, shame, and embarrassment that Kimmel and Leverenz describe—the threat of being seen as fake—is essential to masculinity; it is used to maintain dominance and subordinate relationships, especially gendered ones. Gender does not exist in isolation, though; it functions in

relation to race, class, and sexuality. Accordingly, David notes that his sissy identity is complicated by race with his statement, “Black sissies are not only marginalized by gender but also the interconnectedness of race and governing social institutions, including the church and family.”

Fear, as a practice and presentation, is a powerful tool and applicable to all gender performances. Moreover, some fear is more visible or recognizable than others, creating multiple dimensions of stratified fear. In other words, fear has different values and weights; masculinities are multiple and exist at the intersection of race and class. As such, gender presentation is often under the most surveillance when it interacts with non-normative racial and class identities, stratifying feminine masculinity and dictating unequal measures of power, control, privilege, and ability. Just as significant, gender-driven fear has been most accounted and recognized for in boys and men. As models of patriarchy, more so than girls, boys are teased and ridiculed for challenging traditional patriarchal gender displays (Herek 2000; McCreary 1994). This is not to discredit or discount the challenges girls and women face in transgressing traditional gender presentations, but closely examining descriptions of feminine masculinity allows us to better understand how multiple dimensions of gender, including presentation, challenge the post-closet discourse.

Listening to themes of feminine masculinity in coming out narratives demonstrates that disclosure or communication of a non-heteronormative identity occurs in a variety of ways. The body itself is a narrative, articulating cultural and social positional stories. Within the context of a patriarchal society that promotes capitalism and heteronormative practices, presentations of feminine masculinity on a male body often remove all normative gender, sex, and sexuality identities. In this way, the coming out process is a constant, visible presentation; a closet is

barely if at all available. The “gender as difference” ideology that is initially attached to a body at birth is disregarded along with protection from associated institutions and systems.

The body as coming out narrative has the potential to alter the purpose and function of the closet. Due to Western medicines’ initial assignment of a sex category at birth, heterogenders are pronounced as normal and natural. Categories of sex, gender, and sexuality are merged into one core identity. If an individual performs gender appropriately—the only visible category out of the three—an individual has the potential to be legally and economically privileged in several areas of social life, primarily through heterosexual marriage. However, when an individual misrepresents the only visible category, all three positions have the ability to be called into question, jeopardizing social mobility, interactions, and life chances. In this way, the body plays an intensely powerful role in coming out narratives, demonstrating that gendered stories do not just happen through verbal communication but are also present on our physical bodies, too.

With the closet minimally visible, David explained to me that he was often called or named gay, fag, and queer. Picked on for his gender behaviors and labeled as a sexual other, David was cognizant of his same-sex feelings at a young age. His gender was used for sexual disclosure.

I was aware that I had feelings for boys. I was aware that I really loved being around men who could be loving and caring to me. I was also cognizant of the fact that I entered into these emotional relationships with other boys, that would go so far and so deep it would scare the other boy. Boys would tell me that I reminded them of a girl. I did not look like a girl but I also was not overly masculine. I remember having a friendship with a guy, a little white boy, I think he was from Kansas City, Kansas and he, we were on the phone and he said to me “we can’t be friends” and I said, “why?” and he said, “because when I talk to you, I feel like I’m talking to my girlfriend.” And there was something about that that was upsetting about losing his friendship, but the fact that I made him feel like he was talking to his girlfriend did not upset me.

David indicated that he was conscious at a young age that he had strong, intimate feelings for boys. He was aware of the love men could provide for one another and felt no shame, discomfort, or unhappiness in his ability to love and other men. At the same time our gendered language has limited our ability to describe love and comfort between men. As such David's love and same-gender compassion is described as feminine. Although he does not mind the labeling, it does strip elements of his masculinity away and make him vulnerable to both gender and sexual bullying.

While listening to David's experience I was reminded of the work by Judith Halberstam who, contrary to feminine masculinity, explored "female masculinity," or female forms of masculinity (1998). In her work, she investigates the diversity of masculine expressions in non-heteronormative women, emphasizing that female masculinity is distinct from male masculinity; masculinity can be present without men.

Using historical accounts and everyday performances from drag kings, Halberstam claims that masculinity does not have to be connected to a male body; it is a presentation that can be consciously alive on all bodies, varying by place, race, class, and ethnicity. She adds that any sexed body can act or produce masculinity and femininity. However, sexed bodies are assigned different social values; even though femininity and masculinity can be present on both male and female bodies, varying cultural weights exist because of economic and political systems of power. In this way, masculine men, masculine women, feminine women, and feminine men exist on a gender hierarchy. In addition, masculinity is regarded as the most desirable presentation. Even though presenting masculinity on a non-male sexed body could come with costs, striving for the dominant presentation has its rewards too.

Thus far, western hetero-patriarchal culture has indicated that both female masculinity and feminine masculinity equate to non-normative gender identities while at the same time both bodies are used to demonstrate and pronounce normative gendered bodies and accommodating institutions and systems. Furthermore, masculinity on female bodies carries weight differently than femininity on male bodies because of interconnected systems of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and capitalism. In this way, “the body as a narrative” demonstrates a dimension of an individual’s association and relationship with hetero-patriarchy.

Locating Gendered Narratives

All narratives, stories, memories, and experiences are gendered. In this way, social history is retold through gendered intersections of class and race. Yet normative positioning is often used as the constant and consistent explanation of reality and truth. The idea of an ultimate truth has haunted the human body, including dimensions of sex and gender, since the 1920s. Beginning with embryologist John Money, traditional gender rhetoric was used to claim that the body harbored ultimate truths. The body, as understood by the institution of medicine, can provide a “real” understanding of sex in which male is universally defined by the size of one’s genitalia or phallus. It is here where “size” is socially constructed to matter to men.

John Money was determined to define male and female as physically distinct and separate categories. His research became common in psychology and medical textbooks, courses, and operating tables, where body or physical variance was learned and described as a curable abnormality (Fausto-Sterling 1995; 2000). Equally important, sex and gender were understood as difference; femininity was described as “not” masculinity. If a large enough penis was present at birth, the child was deemed male. If no penis was present or the penis was not grand enough, then a female body would do. Money and other physicians used biological

findings that were reflective of one's social and cultural surroundings to describe the body, assign tasks, roles, and presentations.

Biology became social law; natural variation was used to define normality and dichotomize men and women. Masculinity and femininity were best explained through gender otherness. In this way, masculinity and femininity came to represent extreme opposition. Maintaining such distinction between men and women was fostered through the *matrix of body-domination*, including sex, gender, and sexuality (Collins 1990). John Money argued that for an individual to be a "true" male or female, "one must produce the right hormones at puberty, acquire and express a consistent gender identity and role, and to, complete the picture, must be able to reproduce in the appropriate fashion (Fausto-Sterling 1995:220; Money and Ehrhardt 1975; Money and Tucker 1972). Although sex, gender, and sexuality are three distinct positions and separate classifications, all categories are constructed to rely on one another for social understanding. In this respect, medicine, one of the most valued social institutions in society, claimed that sex, gender, and sexuality must harmoniously align, if not, a cure is to be put into place.

Medicine and other elite social institutions have been quick to use the physical body, or the sex of an individual, as the sole author of an individual's story, while neglecting other intersecting components. This misunderstanding disregards the important point that all individuals do, wear, and perform gender narratives as a separate component of sex. For some, sex and gender align, and the two categories are presented as one, but this is not true for all. Gender is a social act influenced by cultural meanings at any given point in time; gender performance varies. Post-closet discourse, which often assumes a normative gender position, disregards multiple gender possibilities, which creates various versions and functions of the

closet. In fact, feminine masculinity often cannot use a closet due the gendered body representing a non-normative or sexually deviant body.

In order for the post-closet argument to work, an individual needs to be in the closet in order to come out; yet socially inappropriate gender presentations and narratives have the ability to remove the closet door. If an individual's gender narrative contradicts society's gender expectations and challenges the assumption that gender, sex, and sexuality are synonymous, how does an individual create a closet to come out? Can a feminine masculinity gender have a post-closet existence? For such questions, I return to my participants' narratives. Recalling Travis, he declared that during his late adolescence he found himself resistant toward his parents and most adult figures. He kept to himself and was drawn to other boys that seemed different from the mainstream. He was cognizant of his attraction to boys and men as a young teenager and did what he could to pursue his interests and keep safe. His brother consistently picked on him, calling him fag at home and school.

He infiltrated every part of my life, calling me a faggot everywhere I went. Since he was so tough and strong everybody followed suit and called me a faggot, too. It got to the point where it was so hard to deal with. I was just waiting until the day I could leave for college because I just could not take it anymore. I needed to get out and find somebody other like me.

Travis noted that his brother's fear-driven masculinity preyed on his feminine masculinity, following his every move and using the word faggot to degrade his gender presentation. Travis was constantly policed and monitored (Pascoe 2007), but eventually found a way to cope with the violence and gender bullying.

I began auditing classes at a local college and met some Queers. I finally met some guys like me with interests in the arts, music, and photography. At that point I just did not care anymore. I really had not come out to people, everyone just assumed because of my brother. I did officially come out to my parents and they thought it was a death sentence because of AIDS. I knew I just had to get away and get out and moving away was the best thing I ever did for myself. It gave me space to deal with everything that happened.

I still see a therapist and I am constantly working through stuff, especially with my art. But at least now I am on my own and I can take care of myself. I still find myself defensive and protective at times; I guess all the stuff I went through has left me on edge.

Finding a mechanism for survival was critical for Travis. He knew that support was not available at home; it was important that he found it elsewhere, such as education, therapy, and art. He still harbors pain and a sense of restlessness, but he shares a level of awareness as he recalls his gendered past.

Similar to Travis, Bill was also picked on as a young boy. Born in Long Island, New York and raised in an upper-class, Jewish neighborhood, Bill shared with me that he was picked on and bullied as early as second grade. Kids at school and in the neighborhood “poked fun at me, called me gay, fag, and queer; they often beat me up in the bathroom too. I would come home with bloody noses and black eyes. I would have to explain to my parents and brothers that they beat me up, again.” Bill claimed, partially in laughter and also in tears, that what was so difficult about these former years was that he had no idea what gay was or what it meant to be gay.

I could not understand why they were picking on me and I was too scared to ask. I was 9 years old and I had no idea what these words meant. The boys were pushing me around, yelling at me, calling me a fag, and I had no idea what was going on. I finally went to the public library and looked up the words. It was then I realized what they were saying.

Bill explained that growing up in the suburbs where traditional gender roles were normalized and expected created a barrier with such abusive language. He continued to argue that his young age most likely had something to do with it, too. After realizing that gay referred to homosexuality, he figured out that his interests in the arts, lack of aggression, and competition made him vulnerable and an easy target.

I don't think I was masculine enough, I think masculinity is exceptionally important to our culture. I think I am more masculine now, but when I was younger, I had very little

confidence and I never felt grounded. I was totally insecure, very shy, and sensitive. I had no idea how to guard or protect myself.

Bill shared with me that his childhood masculinity, interpreted and regurgitated as sexuality, was read as inappropriate and resulted in violence and torment. Bill told me that the bullying almost got the best of him.

I was so conscious of all the bullying. I always left the house worried that someone was going to attack me. My parents were worried too. It got so bad that I wanted to kill myself. I was so fed up with everything. School was awful and recess was the worst. I could not play sports and that is what the boys did. I just did not want to deal with it anymore. Luckily my parents talked some sense into me, got me into therapy, and put me in a private arts school. But as I look back on this, I know not everyone has these options. My mom is a doctor; my parents could afford this stuff.

Contrary to Travis, Bill's parents—both college-educated and with full-time jobs—became involved in his gender abuse. Noting that Bill also had interests in the arts, they decided to send him to a private performing arts school. Gender non-conformity was encouraged and Bill was greeted with sexual and gender diversity. Bill did come to the realization that he was gay and came out to his mom during his sophomore year of high school; he received an open and loving embrace.

I first told my closest girlfriend. We were in the performing art program together and she was loving and supportive. In fact she helped me get over some of my fears and encouraged me to be open with my parents. I finally told my mom but I was nervous, you know, it's this huge thing and I didn't know how she would react. I thought it would be ok, I mean she had to have some idea. She also made it clear after my suicide scare that no matter what, she loved me.

Ben described coming out to his best friend and mother as productive and empowering. Both coming out experiences provided him with confidence and involved love and support. On the other hand, he described sharing his gay identity with his father as a nerve-racking experience that “scared the shit out of me.”

My mom and dad have very different styles of parenting. I guess I was always the effeminate child and I responded best to my mom's heavy nurturing and super intense

support, care, and love. My dad was much more the disciplinarian; he is strict, firm, and very masculine. He wanted to be a strong, guiding force with us. I understand the importance of strength but I think there are a variety ways you can be strong and it took him a while to see that. Just because I am not very masculine doesn't mean I can't take care of myself. My father took my coming out as best as he could, but I remain closest to my mother.

Gender, a narrative of the body, shapes every moment of life. For individuals that do not conform or present socially scripted representations of hetero-patriarchal norms, including all associated categories—gender, sex, and sexuality—are called into question. In this way, the closet, a tool and institution developed out heteronormative discourse, becomes less available or attainable as protection from gender and sexual marginalization, torment, and abuse. Using an intersectional lens, demonstrates how bodies are stratified and ranked, even normative bodies are privileged by the post- closet discourse.

Travis, David, and Bill are just three examples where the body became the coming out narrative. Based upon non-traditional presentations of masculinity, a “feminine masculine” display was applied and used as a sexual narrative, minimizing a closet to hide in or come out. In this way, the post-closet discourse is less applicable to bodies that transcend gender normativity. Calling upon the intersection of gender, sex, and sexuality highlights the presence of privilege associated with the post-closet argument.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

Intersectionality and Coming Out

Throughout my interviews I heard many coming out stories that embodied active gender dimensions, race dynamics, place oppression, and religious persecution. The closet was active for many, and coming out was challenging and excruciating for some. At the same time, some participants described sexuality as if it were their eye color; assumed, embodied, and simple. However, for many of the participants, multiple dimensions of race, class, religion, capital, and gender impacted how non-heterosexuality was revealed; variations of support, success, heartache, despair, and torment were simultaneously present. Functioning in a variety of ways, the closet was not universal, assumed, or consistent. These variations in the closet were related to intersections of participants' demographic characteristics and social locations. Thus an intersectional perspective became the best way to approach the study of the coming out narratives.

Intersectionality highlights the construction of multidimensional relationships traditionally involving gender, race, and class. Because it is problematic to treat gender, race, and class as mutually exclusive, additive categories, studying such significant positions at their intersection highlights how normativity produces social inequality and ignores multiple, stratified experiences (Crenshaw 1989; 1995). More recently, scholars have begun to acknowledge dimensions of sexuality, nationality, and age into the intersectional scope (Collins 2004). Such classifications and experiences shape how race, class, and gender are assigned meaning and used to maintain or challenge social order.

This dissertation argues that intersectionality is a powerful tool of analysis because it can account for various interactions of race, class, and gender while also recognizing the dominant or

oppressive influence of capital, place, religion, and the body. Exploring dimensions of intersectional positions, such as race and gender, gender and sexuality, or race and place, allows us to consider how and what ways identities intersect with patterns of sexism and racism, sexism and homophobia, and racism and unearned advantages. Often times these experiences are not accounted for or listened to. Using coming out narratives and applying an intersectional lens, allows us to locate in what ways normativity silences sexist, racist, and homophobic experiences by privileging elements of normativity in the context of coming out narrative.

Chapter 4 offers a brief look into the lives of self-identified gays and lesbians that share narratives of an active closet; hiding in the closet was essential to one's identity. Participants describe the closet as an ongoing outcome of sexuality. As such, many participants shared stories of how family shaped the closet and perceptions of sexuality, gender, and the sharing of a non-heterogender status. Coming out research has documented that gay and lesbian individuals are most concerned with family reactions and repercussions (Herdt 1996; Savin-Williams 2005; Seidman 2002; 2004). As a socializing agent, family structures and relationships greatly shape formats for disclosure, especially when one considers intersections of race, class, gender, place, religion, and body. Post- closet scholarship articulates that the closet is less important or necessary due to the fact that gay and lesbian visibility has increased in multiple ways (Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999). With such recognition, less emphasis is placed on coming out and attention is directed towards visible gay and lesbian identities, practices, and roles. For some, normalization and descriptive practices are exclusionary, emphasizing the closet as functional, necessary, and adaptable.

As a dimension of socioeconomic status, capital accounts for the way intersections of race, class, and gender benefit networking opportunities, advancement in education, cultural

knowledge, and a normative position. In this way, the intersection of race, class, gender, and capital shapes the closet, the disclosure narrative, and the meaning attached to one's sexuality identity. Chapter 5 offers narratives of interacting dimensions of race, class, gender, and capital, demonstrating that privilege can be prevalent in marginalized stories. Although non-heterosexual identities are revealed in the context of heteronormativity, individuals with visibly normative gender and race presentations demonstrated access to social opportunity, presenting a coming out story of tolerance and gay or lesbian identity or assimilation. Such coming out stories of normativity coincided with gay privilege and inclusion, resulting in a hierarchy of closets and identities. But privilege cannot exist without oppression. Examining this binary, I found both socially constructed advantages and disadvantages throughout many narratives. Due to the unequal stratification of gender, race, and class, including the interactional and multidimensional accounts of capital, it became clear that oppressive, marginalized, and invisible accounts were prevalent in coming out narratives. In fact, I learned that coming out stories of normalization (Seidman 2002; Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999) represented a white (Waters 1990), middle-class, and gender normative participant. These assumed positions were accompanied by a college degree, corporate position, and home ownership with a committed partner or family. Such presentations marked gay visibility and acknowledgement of a gay identity, providing meaning to those that are out of the closet. Some of the non-white participants, such as Black working-class lesbians, highlighted experiences of discrimination and discontent within the coming out experience. By locating how and in which ways normativity functioned, I showed how an intersectional analysis with the inclusion of capital, reveals multiple versions of the closet and coming out narratives. Using narrative analysis in conjunction with intersectionality helped me to grasp the significance of normativity to our

culture; social markers understood as normal have the potential to neutralize an assumed stigmatized gay or lesbian identity.

Chapter 6 recognizes that place embodies the meanings of its inhabitants. Going into each narrative experience, I reminded myself of the location, time, and place. Considering I collected the majority of my narratives in the South, particularly Atlanta, a southern metropolis, I found that many of the participants used the intersections of place and religion to contextualize their stories. For example, Atlanta harbors a history of racism, religious and political conservatism, as well as artistic creativity. As a transient city, many of the southern identified participants lived in previous locations, most often a different southern place, prior to moving to Atlanta.

Acknowledging that the South has multiple built, natural, and social dimensions, each participant described place differently while using it to contextualize their experiences. Religion and politics were often included in such descriptions. With the Bible Belt having such an intense presence, depending on how one was raised, discussions of Christian hetero-patriarchy in the home, school, and community fostered anti-homosexual sentiments. I also spoke with participants from Miami and New York who discussed the role of religion and politics. With place having various meanings, not only did religion and politics have multiple applications, but so did gender and race. Again, applying intersectionality to coming out narratives, allowed me to account for these multidimensional interacting moments.

Focusing on stories of “feminine masculinity” I explore how the body can be used as narrative for gender and sexual transgression. The men in chapter 7 share experiences in which their gender presentation revealed a gay or queer identity, often leading to homophobic bullying. Homophobia, an outcome of “American masculinity” (Kimmel 1994) is used to construct, control, and shape how gender and the body relay narratives of sexuality. I call on

intersectionality to highlight how all three categories are used to socially control male behavior, with measures of oppression, torment, and bullying. The destructive dichotomy of sex, gender, and sexuality assumes all men are hegemonically male, assaulting feminine or non-male presentations. In this way, homophobic bullying is a response to feminine masculinity and the closet as it has originally been designed is provides minimal protection to those that challenge the traditional notions of gender.

Why this Project?

Conclusions are never easy to write, especially when one considers that this dissertation research is evolving into several larger projects. I recall at the dissertation proposal defense, hearing from my committee that one of the biggest limitations of this project was its' infinite potential. Due to the fact that I approached the project with a specific level of openness and fluidity, my 60-person qualitative data set revealed multiple intersectional stories. In order to keep track of how important it was to stay focused and not lose sight of the task at hand, I kept a journal of interests and questions I wanted to revisit upon completion of the dissertation. The journal provided me a space for reflexivity and acknowledgment of personal bias while also offering me an opportunity to keep track of new and potential research topics and questions.

As I near the end of this project, I look back at the past two years fondly. Not only do I find this project to be sociologically significant, contributing to the sociology of sexuality and gender research, it also provides insight into the roles of privilege and normativity. Just as important, this project also provided a space for many gay and lesbian individuals to process and recount their various coming out experiences. The dissertation journal informs me that 25 participants broke down and cried at one point or another during their interviews. And 35 of the

60 participants shared with me that reflecting on their sexuality in this format was therapeutic and emotionally healing.

My interview questions, which sparked most participants to tell me their sexual and gender journeys thus far, were designed to capture the nuances of coming out stories; what interactional factors influence coming out stories and why? As an individual who has dealt with the trials and tribulations of coming out and continues to define and explain a non-heteronormative sexuality on a regular basis, I worked on the project from an “outsider within” position (Collins 1986; 1990). Like most researchers that study and examine personal and intimate issues, as a source of contention in my life, coming out was difficult and emotionally challenging. I struggled with how to tell my parents, friends, and family. I put myself on an emotional roller coaster, constantly worried about what others would think of me. I moped around unsure of how to create a future as a sexual “other.” My internalized homophobia was intense and daunting.

Although I had always identified myself as a religious minority, with some experiences of religious discrimination, coming out and creating relationships and family that would not be legally recognized seemed like an impossible burden. Furthermore, my Jewish identity was a concealable stigma, not easily recognized. My visible identities were shaped within a normative framework; my gender presentation, racial and class background were somewhat privileged, dictating a rather typical existence. I perceived coming out to be one of the most difficult processes I would experience.

Fearful of destroying my parents’ hopes and dreams, I came out to my family in what I perceived to be a cowardly and clumsy way. My younger brother, the first person I told, was also gay. Due to the fact that he had already come out, I assumed telling him would be

challenging, but relatively easy. At the time, I was under the impression that gays could not be homophobic; it was a contradiction. My brother did not respond homophobically, but he was surprised and shocked at my discovery. How could the sister that was on homecoming court and president of her sorority also be a lesbian? At the same time, he expressed support and encouragement. I made him hold my secret for a very long time; I was not ready for anyone else to know that I was a lesbian and had a girlfriend.

Because my brother had already come out to my parents and received an enormous amount of love and support, I had reason to think I would also receive a positive response. However, my brother's gay identity was seen as predictable. As a feminine masculine child, comparable to the narratives in the previous chapter, he barely had a closet to hide in. His childhood gender presentation forced my parents, at a much earlier stage, to accept the fact that they did not have a heteronormative son, at least according to society's standards. Although my brother rarely discussed boys or indicated a sexual drive for men, his feminine masculinity—including his interests in theatre, art, and clothes—was attached to femininity and used as his sexual narrative. In this way, his gender performance was used as an indicator for his sexual identity.

Considering the relationship of patriarchy and the institution of heterosexuality, hegemonic masculinity is contradictory to feminine masculinity. With binary thinking as the norm, conditioned as inherent in our social minds, my parents used their son's doing gender as indicative of his sexual other status. My brother explained his coming out as anti-climatic and expected: "We were having dinner together, as usual, and I wanted to tell them I was gay while I was still living at home and in high school. I told them I was gay and they told me to pass the chicken! As if it was nothing, it was no big deal at all."

Unfortunately, I did not feel the same comfort as my brother. He had been seen as different for some time; coming out was expected of him, it was just a matter of when. For me, identifying as non-heteronormative was going to involve a serious amount of explaining. I had always had boyfriends, was active in my sorority, and had participated in heteronormative activities. I may not have been planning my wedding, wearing dresses, or searching for “Mr. Right,” but not all women did while maintaining membership in the institution of heterosexuality. In this way, my coming out was more of a shock than my brother’s declaration and harder to swallow.

Coming out was not evident by my gender display, everyday activities, friends, language, or interests. In fact, I believe that is what I might have struggled with the most. The only “gay” I was familiar with was my brother’s version of gay. I did not know many gay women, and if I did know any, they happened to be more masculine than me. The gender and sexuality dynamic caused me great confusion. I had assumed gay men were equated to femininity and gay women were associated with masculinity. Since I did not have a strict gender presentation of either masculinity or femininity, I did not understand how I could be gay. Furthermore, with an already out gay sibling, if I came out, it was going to be important for me to distinguish for my parents that a variety of gay experiences and expressions existed. I would need to explain to my parents, “Mom and Dad you have two gay children, but being gay is different for both of us. His gay is not my gay.”

I went back and forth as to whether I should tell my parents and friends. I was petrified of anyone finding out that I had a girlfriend. With my intense internalized homophobia, I hid her from almost all aspects of my life. In fact, I would sneak her into my room through a window in order to avoid all potential run-ins with roommates and friends. I denied my lesbian desires to

my roommates, friends, and more significantly, myself; I hid from everyone. I constantly harbored the feeling that being normal and having a family rested upon my shoulders; I felt pressured to represent my parents' hopes and Jewish-American dreams. I did not know how to maintain such expectations and be gay.

Almost a year after confiding in my brother, I finally came out to my mother. Keeping such personal secrets from her was difficult, frustrating, exhausting, and took a tremendous toll on our relationship. Unsure if I was a full-fledged lesbian, or so I told myself, I shared with my mom that I was bisexual. Coming out as bisexual seemed less harmful, scary, and hurtful; there was still a possibility that a man would be intimately involved in my life. Looking back, such a claim was hurtful on many levels, not only for my mother but to myself and for those individuals that identify as bisexual. I made it seem that bisexual was unstable and an unrealistic identity. I told my mother that even though I still found men attractive, I felt it was necessary to date women in order to better understand my sexuality. An open-minded individual and second wave feminist, she encouraged me to be honest with myself, explore my sexuality if I needed to, and to do what made me happy.

Deep down, I knew that I was sexually and intimately connected to women; heterosexuality was not for me. I waited several months before emailing my father the news. When I recall this experience, I cannot help but note that most research indicates that children tell their mothers before fathers. Mothers are considered more closely connected to their children's lives and more likely to respond in a soothing and caring manner (Herek 1986; 1988; 1994; 1997; 2000; Savin-Williams 1998; 2001; 2005). Although I was scared, I was fed up with hiding from my father; I wanted him to know that I was a lesbian and had a girlfriend. Half a dozen days passed before he emailed me back. Once I heard from him, it was obvious that he

would love me regardless, but at the same time I had also broken his heart. He had to say goodbye to heteronormative dreams and images that he conjured up in his mind. With unconditional love and support, my parents encouraged me to be happy, honest, and truthful. They promised me that no matter what they would love me; social norms were meant to be broken. Ten years later, my parents exceeded all of my expectations and threw me a gay wedding where I gay-married my female partner of six years.

My parents' love and encouragement was incredibly helpful during a time when I was scared and unsure of myself. Fortunately, I was greeted throughout the initial stages with unconditional support from my family. Not long after finding peace, with the help of therapy and loved ones, I found sociology. As a way of viewing society and social interaction, the "social construction of identity" helped me develop pride, self-awareness, and confidence unlike I ever had before. My enlightened awareness of social problems, social constructionism, and queer theory helped me to better understand that society, culture, economics, and politics influence identity.

Influencing Factors

As I look back and reflect on my upbringing, it seems that my brother's experiences are integral. Even though he was white and from a middle-class family, his gender acts and performance were under constant scrutiny. Although normative in some instances, his discredited gender presentation labeled him as a sexuality minority; the intersection of gender, sex, and sexuality were used against him. Growing up in the suburbs of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, we were at least 30 minutes from a city where there was access to gay bars and bookstores. Reaching a gay space was a good distance away, and for my brother in particular, safe spaces were few and far between. My brother was constantly picked on and bullied by other

kids; fifth through eighth grade were very traumatic times, filled with taunt and ridicule. Based on the literature, I knew other boys and men had similar experiences to my brother. I wanted to find some of these stories so I could better understand my brother's experience and work toward social change.

Connecting my personal coming out experiences to a specific area of sociological inquiry brought the "personal is political" to life. I read an abundance of material on coming out, specifically the work of Steven Seidman (1991; 1992; 2002; 2004). Seidman frames his work in the context that sexuality is socially constructed, culturally influenced, economically designed, and politically significant. As an influential sexuality, post-modern, and queer scholar, Seidman also argued that as a social product, the homosexual identity is constructed in relation to the heterosexual identity. Using a patriarchal, capitalist, and racist framework, heterosexuality was naturalized as moral and good while homosexuality was demonized as sick and deviant.

As the most dominant and also threatening gay identity, white, financially secure individuals living in urban spaces are often the most recognizable. Using the most visible and "normal" groups as cultural gatekeepers, information providers, or meaning makers, gay identities that represent such an image or close to it, begin to find living "normal" out of the closet lives to be accessible and realistic. Seidman commented on this prevailing notion of "living beyond the closet" (2002) as an essential element to the normalization of gay.

As a reader of Seidman, a sociologist, and gay person, I was surprised by such a normative and privileged position. It seemed to me that Seidman (2002) was arguing that to embody gay one must be out of the closet; it was necessary to the normalization and routinization of gay. Seidman contended that coming out was necessary and expected of American gay and lesbian identities. For Seidman, coming out had reached the point where it

was not very important anymore; it was assumed and therefore viewed as an accessible practice, available and inherent to all those that identified as gay and lesbian identities. Generalizing that coming out came along with being gay or lesbian infiltrated cultural and social understandings of non-heterosexual identities. It was assumed that all gays and lesbians could attain the coming out discourse—living in, walking out, and shutting the closet door was common.

My sociological lens informed me that Seidman's argument called for an individual to be in and then out of the closet, a binary experience that does not account for intersectional, queer, unidentified, multidimensional, and stratified movements. Intersectionality calls attention to these missing perspectives by addressing the normative concerns in feminist and gender scholarship. Cognizant of the fact that gender is often expressed through a white, heterosexual, middle-class framework; intersectional scholars locate how race, class, and sexuality transform gender experiences. Indeed, the findings described in this dissertation contradict the notion of a gay life "beyond the closet" available to all. The closet remains relevant to many gay and lesbian people, depending on the intersections of their social locations.

Limitations

As a qualitative dissertation, this project was limited by its lack of generalizability. A 60-person data set was adequate, but a 100-person data set is desirable. The 60-person data set was limited by region and location. I collected 50 narratives from participants that were currently living in the South. Although I collected 10 narratives from other locations, particularly New York and Miami, it would be beneficial to collect a variety of narratives from different locations in order to better understand how region impacts coming out and sexual identity.

Religious diversity would also have been beneficial to this project. Acquiring stories from individuals that live in the South affects the religious or spiritual status of the participants

within that specific location. Considering the prevalence of Christianity in the South, many stories reflected the religious culture of its inhabitants. Although I did collect stories from an individual that practices Islam, Hindu, and a few individuals that identify as Jewish, Christianity was rampant.

Similarly, more racial, class, ethnic and gender presentation diversity was desired. My criteria were simple; I asked that in order to participate, one must self-identify as gay or lesbian. I intentionally sought out gender diversity and it resulted in the collection of 30 narratives from self-identified men, 29 narratives from self-identified women, and 1 narrative from a genderqueer person. More gender variation, particularly in presentation, remains desirable. I was fortunate to have various racial and ethnic identities participate as well as varied socioeconomic statuses, but there is always room for more variation and diversity.

Engaging in dialogue with a participant, spending a few hours getting to know someone, and learning about the sexual journey was fascinating. I would have liked the opportunity to follow the participants over a period of time. Tracking coming out experiences and an evolving sexual identity would be beneficial to coming out research. The project was limited to one narrative collection.

Policy Implications

The research from this dissertation project can contribute to the study of gendered abuse. Due to the visible increase of homophobic bullying, I find it essential to explore the relationship of gender, sex, and sexuality in hopes to improve the lives of GLBTQ youth. I believe that when one looks at homophobic bullying through the intersectional lens of gender, sex, and sexuality, institutional measures of discrimination, prejudice, and violence will surface. Recognizing how and which ways bullying generates meaning will help minimize its impact.

This dissertation research can also be used to expand the work of intersectionality. It demonstrates the multiple ways intersectionality can be used and how it has the potential to reveal interlocking relationships of oppression and privilege. With an intersectional lens, sociologists can locate how normativity perpetuates social inequality in the most marginalized spaces. Furthermore, this dissertation project notes that coming out is associated with the normalization of gay (Seidman 2002; Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999). However, closets and coming out experiences vary due to the intersections of gender, race, class, capital, place, and religion. Not all closets look the same, take a common shape, or function in a similar manner, altering how one reveals a non-heterosexual identity and lives as a gay or lesbian. As such, coming out and sexuality are shaped by the intersections of gender, sex, race, class, capital, place, and religion.

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