THROUGH WORKING CLOSETS:
EXAMINING RHETORICAL AND NARRATIVE APPROACHES TO BUILDING LGBTQ & PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY INSIDE A CORPORATE WORKPLACE

By

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ABSTRACT

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Through Working Closets: Examining Rhetorics of LGBTQ Professional Identities Inside a Corporate Workplace is itself a story about how rhetorical practices (such as storytelling) help us negotiate and form identity(ies). I call for a new understanding of identity-building practices in the workplace. This research is a qualitative study based in interviews and site visits around one major Fortune 500 American discount-retail corporation. I introduce the concept of *Working Closets*, which my participants and I show through stories and experiences to be spaces, risks, situations, and relationships negotiated through moments of closetedness and outness. This challenges and dismantles the notion of "the closet" as a singular space one is either in or out. This work is an example of a cultural rhetorics approach interrogating professional identity building practices and the reconciling of that with personal/non-professional identity.

Ultimately, these stories are about rhetoric and power. I seek to theorize about who gets to define "professional" and when and where. How do LGBTQ professionals survive or even succeed in heteronormative or hostile workplaces? How do LGBTQ persons challenge or work around the moments when their identities are covered over or contested? My participants' data speaks to these situations and tells the stories around them. Through threads of both commonality and difference, my participants build a conversation around the contemporary LGBTQ professional and the issues confronting them. Both the American and the global workplaces are increasingly destabilized and diverse, as are notions of LGBTQ identity and the lived experiences of LGBTQ lives.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to Dr. Travis Allan Webster, my other half on this strange, emotional, draining, topsy-turvy journey. The completion of our degrees together at this point in our lives represents nothing short of a sheer will for survival and a will to live and love. Our hardships, our tears, our laughs, our rejections, and our triumphs have brought us here. I am incredibly proud of you Trav, of who you are and what you've accomplished. You've shown me that it's never as simple as I think, and that what comes out of the complexity, if you stick with it, is truly more beautiful than anything you could ever have imagined.

"I beg you... to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. and the point is, to live everything. live the questions now. perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without ever noticing it, live your way into the answer..."

Rainer Maria Rilke

"And in that moment, I swear we were infinite."

The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky

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> "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful…"
> 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 ESV

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To Mom and Dad: I also want to thank my parents, Brenda and Joseph Cox. I am absolutely humbled by the limitless and unconditional love you both show for your children and grandchildren. You have defined the very idea of human relationships that I carry with me through life and you have taught me that love truly conquers all. You would be the first to say that you are simply passing on the love and blessings that God has shown you in life and I believe you are right. I am so thankful you have never given up on each other and have never given up on our family or your children. I am thankful you have never given up on me. Without your emotional, prayerful, financial, and material support, I would not be writing these words now.

> "The righteous who walks in his integrity—blessed are his children after him!"
> Proverbs 20:7 ESV

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"If you need a friend,
don't look to a stranger,
You know in the end,
I'll always be there.
And when you're in doubt,
and when you're in danger,
Take a look all around,

and I'll be there."

"The Promise" – When in Rome

—

To Senor Juan: Next, I want to thank my former partner and one of my closest friends, John Archie Hill. We started this journey together in a Budget Truck that took us from Denver to Lansing. I would never have begun this adventure without your love and support and even after our paths diverged you has continued to be one of my greatest cheerleaders. I will forever be grateful to you Mr. Hill, MA.

"It's a fine day
People open windows
They leave their houses
Just for a short while
It's going to be a fine night tonight
It's going to be a fine day tomorrow."

"Sheltered Life/Fine Day" – Erlend Øye

—

To BFF Jason: I want to thank Jason Seth Beckerman, who I travelled the world with while I wrote this dissertation. Our friendship of over sixteen years… our pool time together. There's a little bit of Dubai Mall (and the fountain) in this dissertation… a little bit of Mumtaz Mahal on a hill overlooking Muscat… a little bit of a wharf with friends on the Mediterranean in Beirut… a bit of a steep climb to the monastery in Petra… some smiles over pastries at Brunetti's… some laughs over Burger Fuel … a bit of Mike's breakfast over Pehwa Lake in Nepal… and one of my very favorite moments… wading out into the warm, crashing Indian Ocean together by moonrise in Fujairah. LY always. We'll be celebrating Dr. Beckerman very soon!

"The moment I let go of it was the moment
I got more than I could handle
The moment I jumped off of it
Was the moment I touched down.
Thank you India
Thank you Providence
Thank you disillusionment
Thank you nothingness
Thank you clarity
Thank you thank you silence."

"Thank U" – Alanis Morissette

—

To My Chair: Thank you Dr. Trixie G. Smith for being you. Several years ago, when I decided to undertake this endeavor of a doctoral degree, I felt like I was "flying by the seat of my pants." I had no idea how I would do this thing. I guess you could say I had "imposter syndrome" in the extreme. But you, like a key that fits the right lock, came along and were the mentor, guide, and friend that I needed. I am so glad I leave MSU with you a part of my life. You have truly shown me that the queerest moments in life are often the very best.

"We'll be Friends Forever, won't we, Pooh?' asked Piglet.
Even longer,' Pooh answered."

Winnie-the-Pooh – A.A. Milne

—

My Family: To the rest of my family: my brother Joseph Cox Jr. (Joey), my sister-in-law Diana Cox, my brother-in-law Matthew Demorest, my niece Kristen Nicole Cox, my nephew Joseph Andrew Cox, and my nephew Zebadiah Jay Demorest. You are amazing each in your own ways and you'll never know how much your smiling faces and loving hugs meant to me over these grad school years.

"What can you do to promote world peace? Go home and love your family."

Mother Teresa

—

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"I'm not going to die, I'm going home like a shooting star."

Sojourner Truth

—

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"When life is broken all will mend
If where I'm walking isn't far enough
then I'll walk farther…
As tears fall, off our faces."

"As Tears Fall" – The Samples

—

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"Morning smiles
Like the face
Of a newborn child
Innocent, unknowing.
Winter's end
Promises
Of a long lost friend.
Speaks to me of comfort."

"Fear" – Sarah McLachlan

—

To Muni: Thank you Michael Underwood for the laughs, the love, and the support. Even when we left you in Denver back in the summer of 2007, you believed in me and what I would accomplished. Not a week's gone by since then that I haven't missed you terribly but it means so much to me to know we'll always be a part of each other's lives.

"And the moon never beams
Without bringing me dreams
And the sun never shines
But I see the bright eyes…"

"Annabel Lee" – Stevie Nicks

—

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"And I want to thank you
For giving me the best day of my life
And, oh, just to be with you
Is having the best day of my life."

"Thank You" – Dido

—

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"I am a magnet for all kinds of deeper wonderment
I am a wunderkind
I am a pioneer naive enough to believe this
I am a princess on the way to my throne
Destined to seek, destined to know."

"Wunderkind" – Alanis Morissette

—

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"I have been in Sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows, with a harp and sword in my hands."

Zora Neale Hurston

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"My gosh," she said, "are you a Hoosier?"
I admitted I was.
"i'm a Hoosier too," she crowed. "Nobody has to be ashamed of being a Hoosier."

"I'm not," I said. "I never knew anybody who was."

Cat's Cradle by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

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"I have learned that to be with those I like is enough"

Walt Whitman

—

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"Home
Is this my home
Been starting over
Bathe in the water."

"Home" – Engineers

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—

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—

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For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who love in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seeking a now that can breed
futures.

"A Litany for Survival" by Audre Lorde

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I know I have thanked many, many folks here, but I hope you know how much I value each and every one if you for the individual gifts and smiles you bring to my life always.

"The most important prayer in the world is just two words long: 'Thank you'."
-- Meister Eckhart

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CHAPTER ONE

(AN INTRODUCTION) A STRAIGHT LINE WON'T GET YOU THERE

"…change itself is a story, and stories are acts of change."

- Community Action and Organizational Change: Image, Narrative, Identity, *Brenton D. Faber*

"If a Martian came to earth and tried to understand what humans do from reading most literature published today, he would come away with the extraordinary impression that we mostly spend our time falling in love – and, occasionally, murdering one another. But of course, what we really do is go to work. And yet this "work" is unseen, it is literally invisible partly because it is not represented in art. If it does appear in consciousness, it does so via the business pages of newspapers. It does so as an economic phenomenon, rather than as a broader human one."

- The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, Alain de Botton*

"I tell the stories not to play on your sympathies but to suggest how stories can control our lives, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will be chained to these stories as long as I live."

- The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative, *Thomas King*

A Story: *So there I was, in the summer of 1996, sitting in a boardroom in an office high rise in Carmel, Indiana – a wealthy suburb of Indianapolis – wondering if everyone in the room disliked me for being gay. I've spent my life wondering what people thought of me. Sure, don't we all, right? But being gay, more specifically a gay male in a very masculinized culture, is its own kind of paranoia. After all, I was no longer a confident upperclassman at a large, liberal state university. I could no longer roll out of bed late and turn up for class in pajama bottoms and slide sandals. I was a professional now. And I worried about what that label meant. I would have to "act professionally" and always*

say and do the right thing. Be sure to never upset my managers or alienate coworkers. I thought it best to not mention to anyone at first that I was gay. I would "play it safe" and introduce this to one person at a time and only if absolutely sure it was safe for me professionally. My first career was, to that point, the biggest, and most high-stakes iteration of my own journey through reconciling sexuality and self-esteem thus far. Sure, I had worked service jobs from age 16 to 22 (landscape nursery employee, bookstore worker, grocery store cashier and bagger) but never, until then, had I had a "career" –a job I interviewed for in a suit, with a resume. A job that would give me my own desk and set of business cards – all the trappings of a stereotypical white-collar business career person. I had begun my professional journey. But, I was, as always, still gay. I worried that I would open my mouth and "sound gay" –I knew this reaction quite well over the years. Not everyone judged me this way openly, perhaps not even most, but many, many people did. The look in their eyes said: "you may be a big, tall male, but we can tell by your voice and affect and mannerisms that you're a gay person." These reactions ranged from amusement (the way someone reacts to a "freak" in a circus) to outright hostility. I could never be quite sure if the next time I met someone I would make an enemy just by virtue of who I was. This was hard enough on the playground or on campus growing up – it was an altogether more terrifying consideration in the workplace.

We all speak often about work and our workplaces, right? Sort of. We do seem to spend much time discussing our jobs, career trajectories, and coworkers but of course, stereotypically this takes the form of complaining (often through sarcasm or humor–think of the comic strip *Dilbert*, or the television program *The Office*) or through strategizing ("how to" manuals for job seekers, career counseling websites, etc.). But there seems to be a dearth of significant analysis of workplace culture and professional identities. Certainly examinations of culture in workplaces and workplace artifacts do exist. Ehn's *Work-oriented Design of Computer Artifacts*, Winsor's *Writing Like an Engineer*, and Zuboff's *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power*, just to name a few. Additionally fields such as Sociology have looked at workplace culture, such as Douglas Ezzy's *A Simulacrum of Workplace Community: Individualism and Engineered Culture*. But when it comes to intersections of

sexuality and the workplace, the chasm grows. Again, some studies do exist. But a search of "sexuality in the workplace" in the scholarly arena will quickly reveal many publications from the 1980's and 1990's and not much recently. Some, in addition to being nearly 30 years old deal with all-LGBTQ workplaces, for example Weston and Rofel's "Sexuality, Class, and Conflict in a Lesbian Workplace." The other works seem mostly concerned with workplace discrimination and not being fired for being LGBTQ.[1]

Given the focus of much of the literature, what does it mean that LGBTQ careers are often unseen, glossed over, dismissed, or seen as boring or rote? What about the ways that people are different and how those differences truly interact and "fit into" (or don't) their workplaces? When we do, as a culture, address difference in the workplace it is often through humor (again, think of a show like *The Office* or any of the other many sitcoms that are set in workplaces where no one ever seems to actually work) and only certain characters are allowed to be critical or poke fun at difference and minorities (and then only because it is assumed that they make fun of everyone). I mention these things to contend that workspaces are often not seriously portrayed in popular culture (when they are it is likely to be lawyers, police, medical professionals). When these white-collar workplaces are examined or taken up in popular culture there is an automatic assumption of what "professional" means. Neat, clean, wrinkle-free clothing that comes only in black, brown, grey, or navy blues. Shaved and trimmed hair and facial hair, direct speech, confident, aggressive tones and communications. A constant effort to conceal the personal and the emotional. A quick survey of

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[1] LGBTQ in this dissertation stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer." I use LGBTQ though there is much discussion and disagreement about the proper, or most inclusive, terminology to account for all facets of non-normative sexualities. I also, in this work, at times use the terms LGBTQ and queer interchangeably. You will also see the terms "LGBT," "LGBT," and "gay and lesbian" used by participants.

popular trade books in your local Barnes & Noble or on Amazon will give you a wide array of handbooks such as Rickenbacher's B*e on Your Best Business Behavior: How to Avoid Social and Professional Faux Pas* and Toogood's *The New Articulate Executive: Look, Act and Sound Like a Leader* that encourage these well-known ideas of looking and acting "professional." All of these things become "assumed professionalism." But I believe many LGBTQ professionals who do not always fit this assumed professionalism are saying "wait, back up, we aren't starting from the same places as dominant culture when we talk about what it is to be professional." In this dissertation, I interview five LGBTQ corporate professionals at a large Fortune 500 company's headquarters. I believe these five participants' stories challenge ideas of "assumed professionalism."

What do I mean when I say workplace culture? In *Workplace Cultures: Looking at Artifacts, Symbols and Practices* Keld Bødker and Jesper Strandgaard Pedersen delineate a difference between workplace culture and organizational culture:

> The distinction between the two, to us, is related to the size and proximity of the object of analysis. The point is that we use the concept of workplace cultures for a relatively small working environment, where it makes sense to talk about the workers as an entity. This implies, however, that in certain situations, when studying small organizations, the workplace culture and the organizational culture are identical. In other situations, the values and beliefs in the working environment are distinct from corporate culture, corporate ceremonies, espoused values, slogans, etc. (122)

They go on to say: "We conceptualize culture to be a system of meaning that underlies routine and behavior in everyday working life" (122).

In this dissertation, I interviewed five corporate-level employees of Spot-On Corporation—a large Fortune 500 level discount retail-corporation located in Minneapolis, Minnesota. These five employees were all self-identified as either gay men or lesbian women. They were interviewed in the

spring of 2011 in Minneapolis (at non-Spot-On locations around the city). Though I did also collect anonymous survey data from Spot-On LGBTQ employees and archival data and professional communications regarding Spot-On's relationship to LGBTQ employees and issues, there simply is not space in this dissertation to include and analyze all of these. I do hope to include and integrate these things in future publications. My participants and I work together to make these arguments:

- **Working Closets** exist as spaces that LGBTQ professionals are constantly going into and out of within the workplace.
- And, rifts and congruencies in LGBTQ identity and professional identity are mediated through storytelling practices.

Working Closets are professional spaces my participants and I theorize in which individuals choose to be "out" at varying levels (consciously and subconsciously) based on their work environments and professional identity and ambitions–how they negotiate their difference in a dominant workplace culture. To be clear from the start, I do not believe these persons and stories can really be permanently/stably defined or essentialized. In, *A Place to Stand*, her ethnographic study of rhetorical practices in a neighborhood bar (known as the Smokehouse), Julie Lindquist writes:

> Though I offer taxonomic structures as heuristics for understanding tensions in Smokehouse theory and practice, I should make it clear that I am ultimately less interested here in developing a taxonomy of semantic categories or in delivering an anatomy of the 'ways of seeing' of this community (as one might be inclined to do with a historically and geographically bounded cultural group) than in considering the social and rhetorical predicaments that make taxonomies and categories of experience impossible (or, perhaps more optimistically, unstable). (Lindquist, vii)

What my participants and I do show, as Lindquist does, is that simply finding and chronicling taxonomies and categories of experience are not possible and that instead we must come

to see stories and identities as myriad. In order to understand this "myriad-ness" though, I also show that tools and lenses such as cultural rhetorics (a term I unpack later), Spivak's "strategic essentialism," and my own concept of Working Closets (a concept I define more thoroughly in Chapter Three) are critical. Spivak's "strategic essentialism" comes from her work, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, where she counters the proposed eradication of essentialist notions within Queer theory, critical race theory and postmodernism by arguing that essentialism can and should be used strategically to gain political victory and advocate rights. Spivak feels there are times when we must be essentialist in our claims.

The work in this dissertation is important because it has implications for rhetoric studies, technical and professional communication, LGBT studies, and queer theory. This work not only recognizes but also asserts that these four areas intersect with each other. It understands that we can't look at each of these fields singularly without acknowledging and exploring the ways they interest and influence one another. As this dissertation unfolds and these interviews are presented and analyzed, you will see each of these fields touched upon in conversations.

But before we attempt to understand or make meaning from the stories, the stories must be told. Accordingly, I asked LGBTQ Spot-On corporate employees how they make meaning about their own professional and LGBTQ identities (and is this the same as, or related to, constructing professional identity/professionalizing?). I've collected interviews from several LGBTQ corporate Spot-On employees to examine what stories and narratives they rhetorically construct toward this end and to help me understand what terms, labels, and "selves" they construct publically as well as which they construct more privately and personally, and how they navigate and mediate institutions (employer, competitors, managers, departments within the company, professional organizations, etc.) and both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ Spot-On corporate coworkers, managers/bosses, and workers whom they manage.

Invoking the term "LGBTQ professional" itself is complicated because the word "professional" is its own euphemism for "middle and upper class" and often "white" and individuals' social/cultural markers (race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ableness, etc.) are complexly layered into identity in a way that the term "professional" can't always seem to accommodate. So before someone does this work—the work of talking about sexuality and professionalization—someone must also say that, in a way, this work can't fully be done, or that it is much more difficult and textured than just those two things, identities being fluid, not fixed. Not all identities are equal, they have different meanings and uses throughout time.

Interlude/A Story: *I'm writing now as I fly over Iran. I've taken a summer holiday to visit one of my best friends, Jason, who lives and works for an American university in Dubai. We've made a few "mini-trips" within my larger trips… visiting Jordan, Lebanon, and Oman already. Today, we're flying to Kathmandu, Nepal. For a boy born and raised in Indiana, every moment of it is surreal. Sure, I've been to London twice in my life and even travelled to Amsterdam and Belgium, but to leave North America or Northwestern Europe feels altogether different. I'm thinking, right now, about what it means to work on a cultural rhetorics dissertation about LGBTQ identity in the workplace as I fly over a country (Iran) whose leader denies the very existence of LGBTQ people in his nation and where "deviant" sexualities are punishable by public execution. I wonder about LGBTQ Iranians who fear for their very lives below me right now. At the same time, I'm speeding toward a non-Western nation (Nepal) whose high court just a year ago ordered its government to begin the process of legalizing same-sex marriage. I wonder about LGBTQ Nepalese who wait in hope of a life together with their loved one. A couple weeks ago, in Beirut, my American friend and I sat at dinner on a pier overlooking the Mediterranean with two gay Lebanese men we had befriended. We all talked about gay life in Lebanon and gay life in the US. These two 30-something men were not out in their lives at all and spoke of a day when they hoped they could find love and settle down, but only under the public premise of "roommates" as they would never really be able to be out in their culture. Their loyalties to their families and jobs took precedence over questions of sexuality – there was no hesitation on that point at all. "Don't you wish you could be out*

in your life?" I asked one of them. "Why should I want to share my sexuality with anyone else, it's a private issue for me" he answered. I'm skeptical. He's skeptical too. We give each other mutual perplexed looks. I keep thinking about their stories even now. Again, the question pops into my mind: how do these men's stories make meaning? How do their stories allow them to embody conflicting, disjointed experiences and identities? I know they have many stories. So many stories, all of our stories expanding outward infinitely like ripples after a rock is thrown into a still pond.

So this is one key question (a question my participants and I address in *Chapter Four*): how do we use stories both broadly and in specific instances to negotiate our dual/multiple identities? In my study at Spot-On answering this question took the form of two key things: individual stories and experiences of LGBTQ Spot-On professionals as well as their interactions with the company's LGBTQ diversity advocacy organization and the concept of Working Closets (my participants and I together theorize and build this concept of Working Closets). I believe these stories and Working Closets operate as lenses through which to evaluate and understand the complex relationship(s) between professional identity and sexuality. Next, I'd like to examine my personal stake, the theoretical lenses I use in order to understand my own relationship to the study and the participants, and also the "lay of the company"–a basic background about Spot-On in order to understand the workplace within which these five participants operate.

Personal and Rhetorical Motivations

This study privileges individual stories. It does this because, as indigenous scholar Thomas King says in The Truth About Stories: "The truth about stories is that's all we are" (2). This includes my five participants' stories, and also my own story and my own body. Beginning with my own personal story and body in space and culture I move out to listen to and explore other persons' stories. These individual stories create a rhetoric, a way of talking about being an LGBTQ professional in this particular professional space. These rhetorics are systems through which identity is built and maintained.

Sure, I have not worked for Spot-On Corporation myself and the corporate workplaces I've been employed by have had key differences from Spot-On (I have, for example, never worked for a retail corporation), but the similarities outweigh these differences I believe. I would maintain most LGBTQ employees share some key concerns and approaches to being LGBTQ in the workplace. Though materials relating to being LGBTQ in the workplace are relatively sparse (not including manuals on employment law and domestic partnership benefits workarounds), the stories that have been told seem to take two main approaches: either to rally around the hope that connecting one's sexual self and one's professional self can bring personal wholeness and satisfaction or the idea that "queerness" as LGBTQ identity will always be fractured and othered (and unprofessional) and that instead we as LGBTQ professionals/individuals must seek to deftly straddle borders and boundaries. One example of the first approach is in the *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services'* special issue "Sexual Identity on the Job: Issues and Services." In the foreword Ellen D. Wagner writes: "Self-realized employees are clearly better able to see the contributions they make to the collective enterprise." (xiii). In the preface, Alan L. Ellis and Ellen D. B. Riggle write: "The psychological benefits of a positive work experience are well documented, as are the detrimental effects of negative work environment." (xv). Ellis and Riggle reinforce what several of my participants say in their interviews: that positive reinforcement of self in the workplace is not unlike positive reinforcement in one's personal and familial life. To be approved of and wanted are to feel worth and value. It is not hard to see why the assumption that a gay accepting and gay friendly workplace mean happy employees is a popular one. But many also take a more complicated approach and view.

The second approach is that being an LGBTQ employee in a workplace may or may not ever be fully accepted or "made normal." This approach instead asserts that LGBTQ employees should work to find "survival mechanisms" and ways of straddling their disjointed worlds – realizing they may never be reconcilable. Though many queer scholars have written about the negotiating of

multiple lives and identities, it is lesbian Mestiza scholar Gloria Anzaldúa whose work has most impacted my own research. Why? It is Anzaldúa's constant attention to shifting borders and boundaries both literally and figuratively. In *Borderlands: La Frontera*, she identifies both these literal and cultural borderlands that work to keep minorities silenced or confused. She seeks to reclaim negative experiences and attempts at silencing in order to strengthen and build on new, complicated, queered identities. She writes: "Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave—la Mestiza creates a new consciousness" (102). Additionally, Mark Bundy, an Ojibwa scholar, writing about Anzaldúa's work says that queers, inhabiting these multiple/overlapping spaces and borderlands, must embrace our exotic natures. (Our) Language and texts too can all be exotic he says (143). Bundy picks up too though on the fractured and marginalized status of queer persons when he says we LGBTQ persons as exiles see other exiles everywhere and those of us who possess, because of our queer subject positions, empathetic sensory awareness are "excruciatingly alive to the world" (144). In this way, fractured queer subjects dwelling between and among multiple worlds possess unique understandings and abilities because of and through their historic repression(s). Bundy points to the ways that Anzaldúa positions language as a primal material to build bridges between cultures and between borders, and toward freedom from oppressive categories and essentialisms. It is again through discourse, texts, narrative, and language that queer subjects navigate fractured and complex lives. In this approach, being LGBTQ, while fractured and marginalized, is its own strength and its own way of survival—one we should embrace.

Personally I have found some level of reassurance and survival in both of these approaches to the workplace. I do believe that an affirming workplace is a healthy workplace, but I also believe there will always be levels of navigation, danger, and judgment. Certainly my own everyday

workplace stories bear this out. This motivated me to wonder if other LGBTQ professionals had the same experiences and stories – if they felt the same way? As I began to research and look for such stories, they seemed elusive. Most texts on being LGBTQ in the workplace seemed to take on the role of either rote legal and professional guidebooks or as "tattle tale" seedy "tell all" anonymous stories that read almost like murder mysteries or fictional short stories.

For example, Friskopp & Silverstein's 1996 work *Straight Jobs, Gay Lives: Gay and lesbian Professionals, the Harvard Business School, and the American Workplace*, contains a "Selected Reading Guide" as an appendix. This appendix includes 14 works under "Gay Professionals and Workplace Issues" and also includes 15 Masters Theses on the topic (but no PhD dissertations curiously). Additionally 30 articles or book excerpts are cited. Nine works on "Diversity in Corporations" are included. In looking at the titles of these works, many of them seem to deal with stories (e.g. "Trading Secrets: Seduction and Scandal at The Wall Street Journal" and "The Corporate Closet: The Professional Lives of Gay Men in America") but none of the works ostensibly frames the larger conversation of the role of the stories themselves in LGBTQ identity.[2]

Interlude/A Story: *I sat there in the human resources office of my longtime technical writing job in Colorado. I had worked for the company over six years at that point. I knew the company, a small computer software startup that had been founded in the late 1980's out of university research, had an LGBTQ friendly nondiscrimination statement in its equal employment opportunity clause but there seemed to be no benefits for same sex partners of employees. I had found myself in a one-year plus relationship at that point in 2004 and my partner was facing a period of unemployment. We were worried he would have to go without insurance. I waited to speak with Tammy, the friendly human resources manager. She called me into her office and we began to talk about same sex benefits. "I'm sorry," she said, "we have no same sex benefits at this point… you see, we're a small company, only 100 or so employees… and we just don't seem to have many LGBTQ employees yet. I suppose we haven't reached*

[2] A category titled "Gay Professionals in Fiction" is even included and lists nine books (469).

"critical mass." Not enough of you have asked for them over time. In fact, you're the first." I was stunned. I knew I wasn't the only LGBTQ employee at the company. In fact, I could rattle off seven others out of 100 just sitting there. Why had no one else come forward? Why hadn't the company been proactive and provided them anyway? Why still, even here in this progressive-leaning software company in liberal Boulder, Colorado, at the foot of the Rocky Mountains, did I feel like a second-class employee? I had been so proud of my company over the years as a single gay man. Now I would have to go home to my partner that night and tell him what neither of us had anticipated. He didn't count in the eyes of my employer.

What is a Cultural Rhetorics Approach?

Communities of practice, discourse communities, workplace culture, LGBTQ culture, and identity building practices are all always interwoven in the world. I draw here on cultural rhetorics within Rhetoric Studies for this project's definition of culture: "a system of practices, both physical and discursive, that help build and sustain communities" (*CR Theory Lab*, 1) and also for the definition of rhetoric as not "the traditional notion of classical Greek & Roman rhetoric we've received via Scholastic and Early Modern era scholars; instead we're referring to the act of studying systems of discourse through which meaning was, is, and will continue to be made in a given culture" (*CR Theory Lab*, 1). So then, if culture is a system that helps sustain communities, what does rhetoric (as studying systems of discourse as meaning making practices) offer the study of culture? What is the corporate culture of Spot-On? What is LGBTQ culture at Spot-On? And how can studying how LGBTQ professionals at Spot-On make meaning through discourse tell us about those cultures? That is what I hope a cultural rhetorics lens will bring to this project.

A few questions I anticipate answering however are: "why cultural rhetorics and not Professional and Technical Writing studies or workplace studies?" and "How is cultural rhetorics different from cultural studies within rhetoric or from cultural anthropology as an approach?"

Regarding Professional and Technical Writing, I would say these are not mutually exclusive lenses through which to see LGBTQ professional identities. Rather, for the purposes of this project I focus on a cultural rhetorics lens because I believe it is a viewpoint that has been missing in workplace studies. That is not to say that Professional and Technical Writing do not offer important voices to discussions of LGBTQ workplace identity, in fact, they are vital viewpoints. But the scope of this project means that these viewpoints will be added with time and as this project grows beyond a dissertation.

Cultural Studies within Rhetoric studies bring us back to J. Blake Scott, Bernadette Longo, and Katherine V. Wills in *Critical Power Tools: Technical Communication and Cultural Studies*. Scott, Longo, and Wills, here emphasize that Cultural Studies "involves critiquing and intervening in the conditions, circulation, and effects of discursive-material practices that are situated in concrete but dynamic sociohistorical formations, that participate in ideological struggles over knowledge legitimation, and that help shape identities" (5). It is important to note here the differences between this Cultural Studies within Rhetoric approach and cultural rhetorics. These are, indeed, distinct areas of study. Cultural Studies is most often associated with critical theory and Philosophy and is strongly tied to Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School in the late 20th Century. Cultural rhetorics is a field, an orientation, and a theory and methodology within Rhetoric & Writing Studies. A well-articulated and deliberate move to understand and advocate cultural rhetorics within Rhetoric & Writing Studies is a relatively recent one. As defined previously, those such as Malea Powell and the other members of her Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab at Michigan State University have recently defined cultural rhetorics as grounded in the idea that rhetoric has been and will always remain a culturally located practice. And that cultural rhetorics "theorizes how rhetoric and culture are interconnected through a focus on the processes by which language, texts, as well as other discursive

practices like performance, embodied rhetorics, and material rhetorics create meaning" (CR Theory Lab, 1).

I should be clear in saying that a cultural rhetorics approach doesn't erase workplace studies but instead illuminates them because cultural rhetorics contests the typical desexualized view of workers found within workplace studies. When I use the term "desexualized" here I do not mean to imply the idea of persons having sexual intercourse or being sexually active in the workplace or in workplace settings. Rather, I mean that bodies have a biological sex and that human beings have sexual desires and attractions and that those cannot (and should not, I believe) always be repressed or ignored in a way that pretends that a person is a non-sexual being. Though such a desexualized approach is traditional and standard, workers do not truly view themselves or tell their stories that way.

And so, methodologically, a cultural rhetorics approach to professional discourse and identity construction is the critical frame for this project. This approach was employed by my participants and I together – telling and collecting our stories, theorizing about workplace culture and LGBTQ culture and attending to the systems of making meaning of these things through our stories. Issues of sexuality and professional identity are steeped in culture and in language/discourse. While much work exists around sexuality and professional identity separately, and while much is written from various other approaches (psychological, economic, religious, etc.) there is less that is taking on the cultural context of sexuality and the workplace (especially taken together) and very little that is asking "what is the discourse around sexuality and the workplace? What are the stories from those who live the experiences?" What I'm especially interested in for my participants' and my research is how and why LGBTQ individuals and LGBTQ cultures within workplaces do and don't make meaning around sexuality and professionalism (both cultural constructs) and the assertion that they are constructing identities through rhetorical moves and storytelling.

But what does it mean then, to practice a cultural rhetorics methodology? From a premise that meaning making and stories are culturally situated, it matters then who tells the stories. Whether the stories are told about a person or group or whether those persons or groups tell their own stories. In dominant culture, my participants and I argue that minority communities and non-dominant groups have historically been written out of their own stories. In other words, the stories told about them and the definitions of them are created by and in the interest of a dominant society. In the case of LGBTQ professionals this takes the form of heteronormative desexualized professional culture. The parameters, layers, boundaries have all been decided and told by non-LGBTQ persons (or perhaps even someone who is deeply closeted and buys into the idea of a "desexualized" professional identity). Only since the 1960's and the birth of the modern gay rights movement have LGBTQ persons really begun to have any kind of voice. Even now, this is a contentious topic as the LGBTQ community continues to be fractured along lines that include race, class, gender, ability, and sexual identity. Many, if not most, would argue (and rightfully so) that the community continues to have much work to do and a ways to go to be truly represented and heard in the wider culture. So for this study, practicing a cultural rhetorics approach means allowing LGBTQ professionals to tell their own stories, to create their own theories about what it means to be LGBTQ in a workplace. It means this work is as much theirs as mine and that we theorize and construct these arguments together. And technical communication and professional writing studies, and wider workplace studies and heteronormative stories must step aside (for this project) and let these stories be told and to also ask how professionalization is culturally situated and always stems from specific languages, literacies, assumptions, and understandings. I believe these investigations of LGBTQ professional stories as cultural rhetorics can and should make a major contribution to how we talk about identity and story within Professional and Technical Writing and that is one of the functions of this study.

So, my participants tell their stories, and I collect them. But have we told enough? Have we included enough? These stories are not lacking in volume and number, there are so many. But, in theorizing about these cultural doings, these cultural rhetorics, I believe each telling offers meaning constellated among many other stories. How could one person ever collect even a representative sample of the experiences that have been lived and are being lived by LGBTQ persons in workplaces? Of course it leads to the temptation to find "a master story" or a grand narrative of professional experience – the skeleton key of LGBTQ experience, if you will. But of course no such key exists. What if these moments (these individual stories and stories within stories) are all that we have? Not because they are applicable to an entire population but because they are so diverse and they are how we survive? As Malea Powell says: "bell hooks taught me that theory (always little t, no matter who's writing) can give you language to understand pain, suffering, oppression, love, hope. Joy Harjo taught me that out of knowledge of the enemy's language comes the possibility of resistance, survival, love, hope" (personal online posting, 7/3/11). Maybe the stories of LGBTQ professionals are "the story," taken as a whole. To me, this means we must begin a dialog around these stories. Collect them, solicit them, retell them, analyze them, share them.

The Myth of Professional

Professionalism itself is a grand narrative. It's a myth. By "grand narrative" here I mean stories and meaning making practices that become accepted by a society or culture over time – becoming accepted as fact and not questioned (scholars such as Lyotard, Powell, White, and DeCerteau say this again and again: "how we choose to tell the stories matters."). Of course there is no one-way to "be professional" and develop the "perfect" or ideal professional identity. Yet ideas and sketches of ideal professionalism do exist. The thing, or things we are always aspiring to. Here I'm thinking of the administrative professional who sits down for his first day on the job and knows exactly the tone of voice he must strike when answering the phone. Or the CEO who convenes her

first executive board meeting and knows that she must not cry or show emotion lest she be seen as too "womanly" and "hysterical" and therefore hurt her professional image. Ideas of professional are all around us, even if (especially if) they are hard to define and enumerate.

Indeed, in professional culture, if you're white, if you're male, if you're heterosexual, if you're young and able-bodied and speak acceptable Standard English then you can still be "professional" and be dominant and assertive in your workplace identity. In short, you can be an asshole. Need I say more? The cultural tropes are overwhelming. How many Hollywood (and other popular culture) representations of powerful white men (think Donald Trump, think "old boys network") should I name here to convince you? The archetypes are powerful.

In *Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity*, Ella L.J. Edmondson Bell and Stella M. Nkomo present a study of black and white women within corporate America and discuss a framework that addresses the ways these women are omitted in many ways from organizational and professional life. In the study, they mention:

> Sexual orientation could well be another interlocking circle in the framework, but given that all the women who participated in this study identified themselves as heterosexual we intentionally omitted this element. Our decision does not devalue the importance of sexual identity and orientation in organizational life; we simply did not have the data to make any contributions in this area (16).

Again, the role of gender, race, and class seems often interrogated in relation to professional identity and life but sexuality is admittedly under-examined (I would also argue that it offers only one vision of heterosexuality, as if because these women all identified as heterosexual that there's no story to tell). In his 2003 essay "Becoming 100 Percent Straight," Michael A. Messner writes about childhood experiences on an all boys basketball team. He begins to realize he is gay while on the team. He writes:

> …each of us was 'doing heterosexuality'… This underscores a point made by some recent theorists that heterosexuality should not be thought of simply as sexual acts between women and men. Rather heterosexuality is a constructed identity, a performance, and an institution that is not necessarily linked to sexual acts. (Messner, 185-86)

For Messner, myself, and many other LGBTQ scholars, this is a key point – heterosexuality is the only acceptable institution and assumed identity available for humans to perform in order to advance professionally (or socially). It is about bodies and what we do with our bodies, the ways we act and perform. If you're not white, any transgression gets coded as unprofessional. If you're a woman, such assertiveness must make you a "bitch." Professionalism is, in this sense, a very embodied experience.

So the stories in this study, for those who are non-heterosexual bodies, are about slippage. By slippage I mean the difference/distance between the ideal of the perfect professional and the reality of an individual (and where they may fall short of the ideals), the reality between embodied experience and the grand narrative/ideal of professional. In *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Dylan Evans defines Lacan's concept of the "slip" as: "the unstable relationship between the signifier and signified… For Saussure, signification was a stable bond between signifier and signified, but for Lacan it is an unstable, fluid relationship" (192).[3] There is always slippage – for all bodies, not just LGBTQ bodies or female bodies or non-white bodies (I'm thinking here about the able-bodied heterosexual white male who still struggles with obesity or an awkward affect or

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3 To understand the idea of slippage here, Lacan helps me see the thing and argue the thing I want to argue. I want to emphasize that I don't invoke Lacan in order to use him as a lens throughout this entire dissertation, rather I use him here to illuminate my and my participants' argument. Lacan's idea of slippage here helps us better understand both "the closet/closets" and "professional."

shyness). Although, my participants and I would argue that for these bodies (nonwhite, non-straight, non-male bodies) the slippage is more/greater. To me, telling stories of LGBTQ professional identity is about coding the moments of slippage.

For me, it's vital to approach this with body, place, and culture in mind. In a recent interview with *Composition Forum*, Malea Powell, a leading scholar in Native Rhetorics, states that an:

> …orientation to tradition and materials and the body has set me up to understand the body, place, and culture as a triad around which Native Rhetorical Practices always circulate and constellate. In fact, I think I'm at a point where I can say that all rhetorical practices constellate around those and it's the different patterns of constellation that tell us something about individual cultures.

I believe that Powell's insights here apply to LGBTQ rhetorical practices as well. In fact, the rhetorical practices of minorities have much in common as they are threatened by beliefs and language around bodies, places, and cultures. To examine ideas about body, place, and cultures, I see rhetorics of narrative, queer theory, cultural rhetorics as key lenses. I have intentionally turned away from traditional literary narrative theory in this work because I believe that it comes from a very heterosexual white male experience, so why wouldn't both my participants and I reject that? It also carefully and rigidly defines and codes ideas of beginning, middle, and end. Instead, I emphasize the process of becoming.[4] Instead, we embrace ideas of narrative that come from marginalized spaces. It's convenient to write out certain bodies and the stories that we tell. I argue to give the body a place in that triad. In this work, my participants and I disrupt not only the narrative arc but also to utilize it as storytelling device. We don't see this set of stories and my own story as having distinct

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[4] Even traditional narrative theorist Hayden White seems to admit that these are contrived, that narratives are, ultimately, all made up/created.

beginnings and endings, but yet we do seek to tell pieces of stories within the actual chapters and dissertation itself – because I (and they) do believe stories are more compelling.

In their work *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, Dorothy Holland, William Lachiocotte Jr., Debra Skinner, & Carole Cain discuss their concept of the "figured world" which they define as:

> a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents (in the world of romance: attractive women, boyfriends, lovers, fiancés) who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or changes of state (flirting with, falling in love with, dumping, having sex with) as moved by a specific set of forces (attractiveness, love, lust). (52)

Professional worlds (and workplaces by extension) are figured worlds. Holland et al. state that these figured worlds become "embodied over time through continual participation" (53). So the figured becomes real, material, embodied. That which is culturally defined (often by the few) makes reality for the many. They are contrived imaginations that then mediate behavior. In this case Spot-On Corporation is a figured world (within the larger figured world of "the American white collar workplace"). It consists of agents (managers, CEO's, human resources personnel, secretaries, janitorial staff, etc.), acts (staff meetings, promotions, firings, hirings, and so on), and forces (pursuit of financial success, professional advancement, workplace competitiveness, team collaboration, etc.). In this post-industrial American corporate paradigm, working class identity is rejected but ideas of maleness (not just biologically but also in the sense of male ways of speaking, acting and communicating), whiteness (for example ideas of what "unkempt" hair and clothing are and aren't), and straightness (for example ideas of what kinds of spouses and families and extra-workplace socializing and private lives are appropriate) endure. The "meaningful acts" in this context go back

to the question: "what is professional?" (and only certain bodies are meaningful). If you're not a meaningful body you must at least act as if you are.[5]

> The development of social position into positional identity—into dispositions to voice opinions or to silence oneself, to enter into activities or refrain and self-censor, depending on the social situation—comes over the long term, in the course of social interaction. Relational identities are publicly performed through perceptible signs. People "tell" each other who they claim to be in society in myriad ways. (138)

One of the key ways the agents, acts, and forces are molded and created is through language. Terms and meanings are built, also sociohistorically and culturally, in communities and then comprise these same limitations on positional identity. Carol Cohn writes about a summer she spent in the mid-1980's in a workshop given by "defense intellectuals," or intellectuals who "use the concept of deterrence to explain why it is safe to have weapons of a kind and number it is not safe to use" (687). She goes on to describe that the more she herself used the language being taught to her the more she became used to the idea of nuclear war. "How can learning to speak a language have such a powerful effect?" she asks. "One answer, I believe, is that the process of learning the language is itself a part of what removes you from the reality… by the time you are through, the content of what you can talk about is monumentally different, as is the perspective from which you speak" (704-705). Cohn's assertion that language helps build reality is a recurring theme in our own field of Rhetoric & Writing Studies and in Narrative Studies. And so, as Cohn and many others remind us, *professional* is constructed, and its construction creates the reality of what professional is.

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5 I believe the concept of the "figured world" is not so different from what many other critical theorists have said over time, such as Butler, Althusser, and Bauldrillard.

Interlude/A Story: *In early October 2010 I walked down Minneapolis' Nicollet Mall on a cloudless sunny day during a bustling lunch hour. I headed toward the main headquarters complex for Spot-On Corporation. Inside the recently built skyscraper, I took a very long, tall escalator up to a mezzanine floor where I checked in with security. Lots of public art abounded, all cleverly incorporating Spot-On's logo. Once I'd registered with security and gained my security clearance badge, I was escorted back through a large, meandering area that served as part open space (think commons area of a high school or center court of a shopping mall) and part museum to the history of Spot-On. Large glass windows let in lots of natural light. Big comfy chairs and sofas sat around oversized fireplaces. Many times, I saw Spot-On's mascot, a friendly looking cat named "Spot" – once in a large clock (where a small sculpture of Spot circled the globe in a hot air balloon) and once in a huge wall-sized painting where Spot appeared in glittery multi-colored paint. One thing seems certain at Spot-On – a sense of panache, an eye toward style and unifying identity. One could just as easily be in an oversized Starbucks or the lobby of a brand new glitzy Aspen ski resort. Front and center are these things the company clearly values – a sense of design, creativity, and a forward-looking kind of urban aesthetic. In one corner, an entire display wall pays homage to diversity at Spot-On. "The strength of many, the power of one" announces the large white block letters on the bright red wall. Multiple side-by-side flat panel screens continuously show meeting dates, locations, and times for various diversity organizations within Spot-On (the working mothers' caucus, African-American employees, Latino employees, etc.) inter-spliced with short interview vignettes from diverse Spot-On employees. In etched glass around the displays appear various terms: commitment, success, diversity, culture. Culture and diversity. I contemplate those two terms in relation to this workplace as a lesbian identified woman appears on the screen to talk about her glowing experiences working for Spot On. For me, as a researcher, and former LGBTQ corporate employee, doing a site visit to this headquarters, was a viscerally embodied experience. I felt extremely proud to feel a part of a recognized community within this space. At a time when so many LGBTQ identities and bodies are at best ignored and at worst actively erased, it's quite a feeling to see your own sense of personal identity fully embraced as a strong resource within a major American retail corporation. On the other hand, it was a bit fractured and detached to see such a clean, unified, and seemingly sanitized version of what it meant to be an*

LGBTQ professional. Always smiling, always sitting upright, always impeccably groomed, always praising your employer whenever able.

Terminology

I struggled in this project trying to decide how, when, and where to define the major terms I would use. Though they may be elusive and problematic at times, terms/labels/names/taxonomies do matter. They define us as human beings (or are used to define, or try to define us), and yet we are also always struggling to get "out from under" them. What do we[6] call each other and ourselves? What do others call us? What have "we" been called across history? Pervert, queer, homophile, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual to name just a handful.[7] The question of taxonomizing rears its head across race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, and beyond.

As with any other history, [8] the history(ies) of sexual minorities as well as dominant sexual majorities must be viewed through the lens of historiography. Historiography itself must be recognized as a legitimizing discourse, the "thing" that "makes" histories—how histories are constructed and why. In this way, we must also work to understand wider narratives, structures, and

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6 In using "we" here I attempt to differentiate all persons whose sexuality deviates from the heterosexual norm within most societies and cultures. This too, however, can be problematic as spaces must be made in the community for those who are celibate/asexual and those who are heterosexual but deviate from monogamous or procreative hegemonic norms.

7 I do not intend this or any other list in my response to be exhaustive. I am not even convinced such a list is possible as these categories and identities are constantly shifting and reconfiguring themselves.

8 I believe histories must also include narratives of the present (and future) because these are connected/woven so tightly with constructed pasts. In this sense, histories to me are stories of human experience across time and space.

forms and how these have shaped and are shaping attitudes and discourses around sexualities.

Before the taxonomies of "straight" or "gay" or even "normal" or "invert" existed, there were myriad sexual practices. Animal[9] and human worlds both exhibit(ed) evidence of opposite-sex, same-sex, group-sex, inter-sex activities and beyond. Though little is recorded about same-sex activity pre-Antiquity, cultural attitudes among many non-Western peoples[10] (Asian, African, and Indigenous Americans to name but a few) reveal that modern dominant homophobic attitudes are neither universal, nor immutable. In Antiquity itself, Robert H. Allen points out in *The Classical Origins of Modern Homophobia*, male homosexuality (pederasty) occupied an almost honored place in ancient Greek culture but was then, by the end of the Roman Empire, punishable by death (3-4). Additionally evidence exists regarding female homosexuality in Antiquity in a wide range of situations and geographic locales (from Sparta to Asia Minor). But what is happening beyond sexual activities and relationships in Antiquity has even greater lasting effects for modern sexual minorities beginning with Plato's obsession with finding "Truth" and Aristotle's fixation and inscribing of taxonomies and binaries (such as in the *Nichomachean Ethics*).

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9 Homosexuality in the animal world has only recently begun to be taken on as a serious area of study. For more on this, see the 2006 volume *Homosexual Behaviour in Animals: An Evolutionary Perspective* by Volker Sommer and Paul L. Vasey (Eds.) and *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* a 2000 work by Bruce Bagemihl.

10 The scope of this dissertation has not afforded me the ability to look further into non-Western cultural attitudes and approaches to same-sex activities and orientations. Instead here, I speak from limited personal knowledge. It is important to note however that any in-depth study of such sexual histories and constructs must take non-Western narratives and histories into account.

Here, the technical and professional writer in me decided to lay out these major terms in a list format, like a glossary. I struggled with whether this would appear too tidy or boring in its "readability" but ultimately I felt it more important to ensure that these terms were defined and addressed than to risk leaving details out.

- **LGBTQ** – This, along with "lesbian and gay," is the most common acronym used in this research study. This stands for "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer." Often, other acronyms or phrases are seen such as LGBT, LGBT, LGB, LGBTQQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning). Sometimes you will even see an "A" added to stand for "ally" (as the idea of allies is very vital in the gay community). Though the LGBTQ community (and those referring to the community) use many different labels, here I simply attempt to group and differentiate all persons whose sexuality deviates from the heterosexual norm within most societies and cultures (especially Western and American). This too, however, can be problematic as spaces must be made in the community for those who are celibate/asexual and those who are heterosexual but deviate from monogamous or procreative hegemonic norms. I do not view LGBTQ or any other list as exhaustive or even adequate. In non-normative gender and sexual communities, the plethora of available terms and definitions has been referred to as "alphabet soup" – I have many times in my own life witnessed the confusion and awkward stumbling over which letters and terms to use by both heterosexual and non-heterosexual persons. In a 2009 guest blog post about US hate crimes legislation, Kate Bornstein lays out the many members of our community that she wishes were also covered under the legislation:

L for Lesbian	D for Drag Queens	G for Genderqueer
G for Gay	D for Drag Kings	T for Two Spirit
B for Bisexual	D for DragFuck Royalty	K for Kinky
T for Transgender	I for Intersex	P for Pornographers
Q for Queer	F for Feminists	P for Pansexual
Q for Questioning	F for Furries	P for Polyamory
A for Asexual	F for Femme	Q for Queer Heterosexual
A for Adult Entertainers	B for Butch	ETC for et cetera
S for Sadomasochists	M for MSM	AI for ad infinitum
S for Sex Workers	W for WSW	AI for queer Artificial Intelligence
S for Swingers		

Table 1.1: Bornstein's Hate Crimes Legislation Desired Groups (2009)

She goes on to say: "Now, if the Hate Crimes Act includes all those people, then hip-hip-hooray for our side. As a friend recently quipped on Twitter, 'One giant step for transkind.' Yes, yes. Just the way it is — even if most people disagree with my list here — the bill is a big step forward in LGBTQ etc freedom. One step at a time, right?" (Bornstein, "Thoughts About Hate Crime Legislation").

As a queer rhetorician and a gay man myself, I wonder, "Should I be using *LGBTQQAASSSDDDIFFFBMWGTKPPPQETCAIAI* here rather than *LGBTQ*?" But even with that incredibly long list, I am also not convinced a truly exhaustive list would ever be possible as these categories and identities are constantly shifting and reconfiguring themselves.

- **Working Closets** – This is my own developed concept and is treated much more in-depth in Chapter Three. But, here, in short, the term means a set of networked relations between the LGBTQ individual and all life contacts. They are complicated, layered, and unorthodox spaces wherein the individual (sometimes out of choice and sometimes by situational force) conceals or volunteers her or his sexual orientation (even partially). In this way, LGBTQ

professionals remain disjointed and fractured in their identity(ies). Though many LGBTQ professionals openly identify as out, the stories they tell show varying levels of situational closetedness. So LGBTQ individuals sometimes choose to be out, or to come out, and sometimes choose to remain closeted.

- **Queer/LGBTQ Rhetorics** – theorizes the relationship between LGBTQ culture and rhetorics (languages, texts, and other discursive practices) and meaning making. It asks what is unique and what can be learned and observed within LGBTQ meaning-making practices.
- **Queer theory** – a part of critical theory that emerged in the early '90s out of LGBT studies and feminist studies. Queer theory includes both queer readings of texts and the theorizing of "queerness." It builds both upon feminist challenges to the idea that gender is part of the essential self and upon gay/lesbian studies' close examination of the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and identities. Whereas gay/lesbian studies focuses on "natural" and "unnatural" behavior with respect to gay and lesbian behavior, queer theory expands its focus to encompass any sexual activity or identity that is non-normative and "deviant." As David Halperin writes: "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative."
- **Identity** – I use this term to mean a person's conception and expression of self through affiliation. Identity negotiation is a process by which one negotiates her or his sense of identity within cultures or groups. I focus within the cultural rhetorics ideas of culture to assemble this definition.

Scoping The Project

This dissertation reads differently than most in the genre. It attempts to model the things it claims to value: narrative, collaborative understandings and meaning making practices, and queered approaches to institutional topics and spaces. Because of that, things may not always be where you expect to read them. For example, a more detailed methodological discussion appears in Chapter 6, the final chapter. To me, and for my participants, this was the way our stories actually unfolded. First, we told them to each other, then we sought, together, to make meaning of what we'd revealed. Similarly, this dissertation seeks to first "get the stories out there" and to examine what that means in more organic ways (wherever those opportunities for meaning making appear). It also seeks to first tell the stories and have the conversations and then give attention to the kinds of lenses we used in doing so. Because of this—I, and my participants, draw from many fields and life experiences as lenses to combine into unique ways of understanding (feminist lenses, indigenous understandings of story, queered lenses, lesbian lenses, trans lenses, etc.).

Ultimately, this dissertation suggests a new understanding of identity building practices in the workplace. It is concerned with communities of practice, discourse communities, workplace culture, and the ways these are all interwoven. To do this, the study employs an approach that blends aspects of grounded-theory, qualitative interview-based work, site visits, anonymous survey responses, and archival research around a major Fortune 500 American discount-retail corporation. I have redacted the corporation as well as my participants. Though this project is primarily grounded in cultural rhetorics, I pursue a key question not yet considered in the field of professional writing: is queer identity being professionalized or is professional identity being queered? Beyond this introduction, the dissertation itself is organized into the following chapters:

The second chapter, "Bargain Bin to Cheap Chic: Workplace Culture, Sexuality, and Professional Identity" discusses theoretical lenses, and a basic Spot-On background. This includes not only company history and location/regional setting, but also descriptions of current physical

setting and corporate structure and the history of the LGBTQ organization and the company's approaches to diversity overall (based on interview data and two site visits the previous year).

Chapter Three, "Closet Space: Mapping Rhetorical Professional Terrains" examines our theory of Working Closets which are a set of networked relations between the LGBTQ individual and all life contacts. They are complicated, layered, and unorthodox spaces wherein the individual (sometimes out of choice and sometimes by situational force) conceals her or his sexual orientation—even partially). Chapter Three also introduces the first major thread, which is participants' definitions and thoughts about the closet/closets.

Chapter Four, "Threads of the Rainbow: Stories and Communities" is a chapter examining two more major threads in my participants' data and how those threads reveal Working Closets and the ways those participants navigate those closets. This chapter emphasizes participant-negotiation that is individual-centered. That is, ways that individuals "figure out" working closets and how to negotiate them on their own (in situations that force them to act alone or that they chose to confront alone).

In **Chapter Five, "Missing the Mark: Spot-On, LGBTQ Professionals' Stories, and the Jones Incident"** I examine more participant data as it relates specifically to Spot-On's dealings with LGBTQ issues and culture, with extra emphasis on Spot-On's recent "Jones Incident."

Chapter Six is titled: "We Don't Talk About That Here: Dragging the Implications Out of the Closets." This is the chapter that emphasizes reflections, methodologies, and implications. It asserts that working closets are at use by all LGBTQ persons in their professional lives and that through them, the corporate world is giving way to a wider acceptance and understanding of sexualities in the workplace. I look at not only what is learned (and not learned) in this study but also open considerable and critical new doors for future study (by myself and others).

This study is a story in its own right – one that may not have a "beginning" or an "end" per se. Rather, this story is a specific examination and narrative drawing on particular voices in particular times within a particular set of places. This story is composed of many individual stories including my own. I also journeyed to Spot-On Corporate headquarters two times – in the fall of 2010 and in the spring of 2011. I spoke with LGBTQ Spot-On corporate employees both informally and formally in five case study interviews with self-identified lesbian and gay professionals and through anonymous surveys of other LGBTQ corporate employees. I weave together my own story, their stories, and the larger story of Spot-On using a cultural rhetorics framework.

CHAPTER TWO

BARGAIN BIN TO CHEAP CHIC:

WORKPLACE CULTURE, SEXUALITY, AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

A Story: *A few weeks ago, as I travelled to Seattle, Washington for the 2012 MLA Conference, I was going in my final year of my PhD for MLA interviews for tenure-track assistant professor positions. The day I left Michigan to head to Seattle, a place I'd never been before, Washington Governor Christine Gregoire announced her support for full marriage equality in Washington and that she would shortly introduce legislation in the state legislature to legalize same sex marriage. Since then, not only has she done so, but the legislature has also passed the bill and she has signed it into law. It is set to take effect this year but opponents are already collecting signatures to force the law to a statewide ballot. As this has been unfolding, there have been many conversations in the national media and in the LGBTQ community about whether the "tide has turned" in Washington state (and is beginning to turn around the country). Popular opinion seems to be behind this idea in a way it simply wasn't ten or even five years ago. Additionally, many of the corporate giants that are either headquartered in Washington or large employers in the area have come out in force to support of the bill. Among these are Starbucks Corporation and Google. Meanwhile, later this year, both the state of Minnesota and the state of North Carolina (my future state of residence) face voter referenda to ban same-sex marriages. Spot-On has, at the time of this writing, yet to take a public position on the issue. But, in the larger picture, this moment is huge to LGBTQ people. Regardless of the debate within the community about whether same sex marriage is the best place to focus our efforts (while transgender rights, LGBTQ teen suicides, and HIV/AIDS issues are still haunting us) we can, as LGBTQ persons and allies, hold some levels of both disbelief and happiness at seeing a sort of "turning tide" where major fortune 500 companies and state governments would actually proactively put forward support and action on LGBTQ rights. It's a day that most of us even 15 years ago would not have thought possible.*

Why Study Spot-On Corporation?

One question I've often been asked is "why study this site, why Spot-On?" To me, nothing better represents a booming facet of America's economy and culture in 2012 than a big box retail corporation. Anyone who is familiar with the retail landscape in 21st Century America knows the names of America's two biggest big box retail stores: Plus-Mart and Spot-On. Plus-Mart, in fact, sits atop the list as the world's largest public corporation by revenue. In contrast, Spot-On Corporation sits near the top 25 in fortune 500 companies in the United States and has revenues about one sixth that of Plus-Mart. At a time when most Americans are torn between both a love of shopping and identity building through consumption versus a need to save money during troubling economic times, the big box store is uniquely positioned to continue growth through hardship. Spot-On has risen to the challenge of offering all of these things in one store. Spot-On has attempted to not just manufacture culture, but to manufacture a certain kind of culture – a popular culture.[11] Spot-On is an extremely pervasive corporation – 49 states nationwide. As often seems to be the case in contemporary American culture, Plus-Mart and Spot-On seem to exist in stark contrasts and as binaries to one another. If you head out on the street or stop by a coffee shop and begin quizzing folks they'll (largely) tell you that Plus-Mart represents "red state" America, it represents blue collar shoppers, those who value price over aesthetic and "hip factor." Spot-On, many will tell you, has built its success by building a relationship between affordable prices and design. It appeals to "blue state" and urban America, to those who may tend to be white collar and more educated. Demographic data and surveys have often born this out on the part of both companies. Those who have shopped at a Spot-On store before know that they are almost always very clean, organized, and

11 By popular culture I mean what is recognizable, accepted, and practiced by the majority of people in a culture at a given time.

full of colorful imagery and advertising that plays on consumer ideas of saving money while still being chic. The company seems to effectively deploy the idea that if one is shrewd and creative one can have quality and style without sacrificing price. The company then attempts to pass this set of ideals on to their customer base, as if to say "We've been able to bring you a stylish and quality product for the lowest possible price, so if you shop with us you too will be both stylish and a shrewd shopper."

One need not look further than the rise of retail and a consumer-oriented culture in the United States through the second half of the 20th Century and start of the 21st Century to see retail consumption as identity forming/building practices. These consumer practices connect back to rhetoric through stories. For example, one interviewee told me that one of the best things for him about being a Spot-On employee is being able to shop at Spot-On and wear the Spot-On logo around town, to be able to show people out and about in public settings that he identifies with Spot-On's sense of style and panache.

Interlude/A Story: *In the late '90's and early '00's, I lived out west – in Denver. The economy was still humming along and the west was growing as fast as it ever had. Living in Denver felt big and open and sunny and new. And there was Spot-On… or more specifically Mega-Spot-On – the superstore version of Spot-On. It had a full grocery store and expanded pharmacy, garden center, a coffee shop, and whatever else you could imagine. Mega-Spot-Ons were everywhere. And they became the place to stop between work and home to pick up anything from prescriptions to sushi to valentines. My friends and I, as young gay men in our 20's jokingly referred to Spot-On as "Spot-é" and "Spot-Gay" because it was well known that any stylish and self-respecting yuppie (young urban professional) and especially any gay man would only go to Spot-On for their necessary items and not Spot-On's rival Plus-Mart (or any other rival). This reputation continues to follow me and many of the other educated and/or progressive people I've known… anytime a conversation comes up about Spot-On versus Plus Mart, they immediately turn up their noses and say "ugh, no, I would never shop at Plus Mart!"*

Of course, in a broader sense, also the last ten years have become a bit of a watershed in the treatment of LGBTQ rights among Fortune 500 companies. Admittedly there's much work left to do bringing all of these companies into full support, not to mention the scores of non-Fortune 500 and small and private businesses that have made no concessions at all toward LGBTQ rights. But at this point, nearly 90 percent of Fortune 500 companies prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and over 40 percent prohibit discrimination based on gender identity and nearly 60 percent offer domestic partner benefits to LGBTQ employees. Of course, the Human Rights Campaign, a national LGBTQ rights advocacy organization, points out that: "The higher a company ranks on Fortune magazine's list of the most successful businesses, the more likely it is to provide comprehensive protections and benefits to LGBTQ employees."[12] The top two Fortune 500 employers, Mega-Ex Oil Corp. and Plus-Mart Stores Inc., have traded the No. 1 spot on the Fortune list over the last several years, each with revenues around $350 billion, but neither company provides domestic partner benefits or comprehensive non-discrimination policies.

Of course a company like Spot-On can be doing all the right things on paper in terms of LGBTQ benefits and protections and still hit rough patches. For example, a few years ago, Spot-On found itself embroiled in controversy when it was revealed that the company had made campaign contributions to pro-business candidates who also turned out to have extremely anti-LGBTQ views on social issues. This incident, which I'll call the Jones Incident after one of the senior personnel who made campaign contributions to an anti-gay state level political candidate, was a shock to LGBTQ employees and customers who had come to see Spot-On as an extremely LGBTQ-friendly corporation over the years. This incident can be seen as yet another story among the individual stories. We must ask, "How does this incident get taken up and rearticulated among LGBTQ Spot-

12 http://www.hrc.org/issues/fortune500.htm

On employees and incorporated into their stories?" I, and my participants, would assert that what matters is how careful we are with these stories, what we do with them (individually and culturally) rather than whether larger "grand narratives" exist.[13]

Make no mistake, ideas and images of culture are indeed sold (in all senses of the term) by Spot-On Corporation. A discount retailer of this magnitude has especially thrived in this time of economic downturn by convincing middle class consumers that they can have style and taste and designer goods while still watching their pocketbooks and wallets. Naturally this is a draw to LGBTQ workers (and shoppers) who identify not only with the company's (historically, though admittedly with some glaring shortcomings) gay-friendly reputation and policies but also its urban style and designer orientation. Of course, this raises an important debate and conversation within the LGBTQ community about class and diversity. Mainstream LGBTQ organizations and press have long supported and employed the stereotype that LGBTQ persons are stylish, urban, and possess disposable income. This grows out of an early LGBTQ narrative of the young gay person who leaves their oppressive small town or rural area to "make it big" in the big city and who then usually has no kids of her/his/hir own (and thus has a comfortable income and lifestyle). However, over the last couple decades the LGBTQ community has increasingly begun to seek to include and tell the stories of LGBTQ rural persons, lower class persons, persons having families, and so on. However, ideas of LGBTQ audiences as urban and well off financially persist, and retail organizations and cultural portrayals (such as at Spot-On) continue to persist and be popular. Spot-

13 In the case of the Jones Incident the media – both the mainstream American media and the LGBTQ media and blogosphere portrayed the LGBTQ reaction as bordering on outrage and frustration. Certainly much outrage and frustration was present, but the stories I collected among Spot-On employees told a much more diverse and complicated story.

On Corporation has a national/global reputation as being a company that not only values and embraces diversity but also integrates it fairly seamlessly into corporate image and product as well. Spot-On supports several diversity organizations within its corporate ranks (African-American Diversity Business Council, Latino Diversity Business Council, and an LGBT Business Diversity Council). One of the two current LGBT Business Diversity Council liaisons, Josh Jones, told me that current affiliation with the council is around 900 members (including LGBT identified employees and also allies who are supportive non-LGBTQ identified employees) out of a total headquarters workforce of about 12,000. About 100 of these 900 are "active" in the organization (regularly attending monthly meetings, volunteering for events, etc.).

Interlude/A Story: *I have strong memories of visiting the local Spot-On store when I was young. This was long before the decline of the department store and the rise of the discount retailer and big box store. Of course it didn't have the cache that it does now, no discount retailer did. It wasn't the mall, nor the grocery store, nor any main street store. In the late '70's, in our area, it was still a bit of a foreign concept. But even then, when it was still just a small Midwestern offshoot of a much larger more prominent department store company, Spot-On was recognizable to its current form. I remember lots of minimalism… stark red and white color-coding – on walls, carts, tile, signage, and fixtures. All very clean and tidy, all laid out in a way that seemed almost empty and spartan compared to the average department store at the mall across the highway. I remember wandering off, as kids often do. First around a corner, then down another aisle, then over a row or two, and next thing I was on my own. It felt like a maze. A clean, tidy, spacious, orderly maze. As the scent of popcorn from the snack bar hung heavily in the air, I thought to myself "what is this strange store that's not like any other kind of store I know?" It wasn't the five-and-dime in our small town, with its low, open bins full of merchandise. It wasn't the local main street shops (the doll shop, the trophy shop, the model train shop, etc.) with their mildewy carpet, older bespectacled shopkeepers, and pet cat sunning itself in the front window. And it certainly wasn't the "Card Cage" at the mall – with it's 80's style pastels, neon, inflatable palm trees, and stark gratings in the front display windows. It was, well… Spot-On. No one doubted that you came here to*

pick up the things you might need (paper towels, duct tape, t-shirts and underwear, a baby stroller) at a better price than you might hope to find anywhere else in town. And all with the promise of a huge parking lot, a snack bar, and the wide, tidy layout I've described. In those days, the success of big box discount stores like Spot-On seemed far from assured. The corner drug store and local grocery store were still the mainstay for running out for a few needed items. Spot-On seemed, well, tucked away. Over beyond the mall, down a side highway. In a direction most never went. But here we were, and here I was, lost in a new kind of maze. It seems now like a metaphor for American retail as a whole, and a metaphor for my own budding identity as a kid who was "different" (though I didn't yet have the vocabulary of "gay" or "sexual orientation" to guide me). I can still walk the spaces of Spot-On if I close my eyes… I can, similarly walk the discovery of my own sexuality.

On my visit to the Spot-On headquarters in October 2010, I was taken up to the mezzanine level, past the security desk and lobby, into a large complex that served as part common areas, part museum, part shopping area and food court, and part reception area. It was a large, open floor full of windows that looked out on downtown Minneapolis. It contained countless sofas and comfy chairs as well as small tables for a quick meeting or cup of coffee. The floor contained both a sit-down café as well as a full service cafeteria. A post office and a Spot-On store were also present (where one could buy anything with the Spot-On logo from office supplies to jackets and coffee mugs and children's toys). Large colorful displays also showed the history of Spot-On as well as Spot-On's predecessors, affiliates, and subsidiaries as well as colorful maps, diagrams, and information on future Spot-On store concepts and growth.

In one specific area, near the entrance to the cafeteria, a bank of monitors and sleek glass display boards touted Spot-On's record on diversity issues and involvement and offerings in various employee diversity councils and groups. There was information on Spot-On's African-American Employee Business Council, Latino/Latina Employee Business Council, Caucus for Working Mothers, and of course the LGBT Business Diversity Council. The trademarked slogan overlaying

the whole glass display read in large black letters: "The strength of many, the power of one." Also present in etched glass on clear glass around this slogan were terms such as: "commitment," "success," and "culture." The message seemed clear: we value diversity and creativity but within a carefully thought-out scheme of order, professionalism, and business-friendliness.

Interlude/A Story: *The process of reaching out and finding participants was not a difficult one in such an openly LGBTQ friendly company. However there was one bump that bears mentioning. One of the earliest contacts I had within Spot-On was someone who had served as a senior officer in the company's LGBTQ Diversity Business Council. He identified as a gay man and seemed very anxious to help and participate. He even helped get me in contact with several other willing participants. But when it came time to sit down and do the anonymous interview, he was uncomfortable with the idea of signing the consent form. Even though I assured him that his signed form would never be seen by anyone but myself and my dissertation chair (the PI or primary investigator) he did not want that association. For him, he explained, it was not a fear of being known as gay by his company, obviously, but rather he was afraid of going on record saying anything that might be seen as unflattering to his employer in light of the recent Jones Incident happenings. He was one of the only persons I spoke to who felt that perhaps I should investigate obtaining official Human Resources approval for my study. This would have of course afforded me many things – access to official company documents, the ability to use names and photographs in my dissertation work, and so on, but it also would have meant that anything I had written would have been subjected to Spot-On's official representatives for approval. This felt a bit too much like censorship to me. And while I had no intentions of intentionally setting out to say anything overtly or purposefully positive or negative about Spot-On (but rather to simply to collect open and honest stories from LGBTQ professionals working there), I didn't want to face, in any way, the specter of censoring what I saw and experienced and especially not what my participants had seen or experienced. So I made the decision to redact the company name, allow my participants to select pseudonyms, and I amicably and understandably accepted this particular person's reasons for not participating.*

Spot-On's Physical, Geographic, and Cultural Location

Spot-On's current and historical headquarters remains Minneapolis in the state of Minnesota in the Northern Midwest. Minneapolis was founded on the site of a US fort in the mid-19th Century in the old Northwest Territories. It's a river town, an old mill town. One whose economy still supports the production of foods and processing of grains. The city also took on large numbers of European immigrants (especially from northern European and Scandinavian countries) throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This has contributed to Minneapolis' reputation as a diverse and worldly city (especially by Midwestern standards). In fact, even now, Minneapolis regularly tops surveys and research in categories such as most literate, most healthy, best for singles, most supportive of the arts, best city for gays and lesbians, and so on. Minneapolis also has a reputation as art-friendly, hip, and a cultural melting pot. It's seen as a cool place.

Spot-On's headquarters complex, in fact, sits just a few blocks from the original Dibley Dry Goods Store site — which is now owned and operated by Grayson's, a national department store chain originating in New York City. The Spot-On complex includes two skyscrapers, one 14 stories and one 32 stories totaling nearly two million square feet of space. Twelve thousand employees work in the downtown headquarters (including a nearby financial services location that's a few miles away). Spot-On's divisions include financial services (overseeing such things as gift cards, Spot-On credit cards, check cards, rebates, etc), sourcing services (overseeing the purchase and acquisition of goods from around the world to be sold in Spot-On stores), commercial interiors services, branding services (overseeing the manufacture of Spot-On's own private label brands to be sold in Spot-On stores), and Spot-On.com (Spot-On's lucrative online retailing business).

The Spot-On LGBT Diversity Business Council

As mentioned, perhaps the most central component of LGBTQ culture and life at Spot-On's corporate headquarters (especially compared to its direct rivals) is the presence of a large, active, company-supported LGBTQ advocacy organization for employees. This organization is called the Spot-On LGBT Diversity Business Council. An LGBTQ human resources employee I visited with at the headquarters shared with me that the organization has over 900 members (LGBTQ persons and allies) and annually elects two co-leads (one male and one female) to lead the organization. The council sees its goals as building LGBT reputation, retention of quality LGBT personnel, engagement with the company on LGBT issues (education within the company, etc.), and business development with LGBT companies and for LGBT consumers.

As mentioned, the Diversity Business Council works closely with Spot-On Corporate on LGBTQ issues. For example, this same HR employee told me that in a recent survey conducted by the Diversity Business Council, 30 to 40% of respondents said they had heard homophobic comments while working at Spot-On. These statistics were then passed on to Corporate to help press for increased diversity training and LGBTQ-themed initiatives.

The Diversity Business Council also advocates for kinds of equality within the Spot-On diversity family. For example, Spot-On corporate has recently put extensive research and development into finding its largest Latino and African-American markets and then marketing appropriately to those groups in those cities (for example products and advertising in the South Florida market that reach out to Cuban-American populations). The LGBTQ markets however have thus far been left out by corporate so the LGBT Diversity Business Council has used its own funds to partner with an external marketing firm to identity the top 10 gay markets in the US in hopes of also convincing Spot-On to do similar targeted marketing in these cities (for example ad campaigns in say, San Francisco area stores featuring LGBTQ couples or persons and merchandise in stores

that is tailored to LGBTQ consumers – greeting cards, health and beauty items, wedding/partnership registry, selling LGBTQ themed Pride merchandise, etc.).

CHAPTER THREE

CLOSET SPACE: THEORIZING WORKING CLOSETS

There are so very many worlds, hay muchos mundos,

which we inhabit, move between, flee from, or run toward.

– "'Know Me Unbroken': Peeling Back the Silenced Rind of the Queer Mouth," Mark W. Bundy

The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this (the 20th) century

– Epistemology of the Closet, *Eve Sedgwick*

A Story: *As I prepared this study for IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval at Michigan State University, I thought carefully and had many close conversations with my dissertation chair about how to best approach confidentiality within my study. Spot-On seemed a safe enough location to research. Even with the problematic Jones Incident they still had a very large and active company sponsored and supported LGBTQ group. But, as I began to work with the IRB, my IRB caseworker worried about the safety of the employees that I was anonymously interviewing. "Could they lose their jobs in any way for outing themselves as LGBTQ persons?" he wondered. "But they are all, by their own identification, openly gay in most facets of their job and most of them participate or have participated in the LGBTQ organization at Spot-On" I answered. "But is there any way that participation in this study could come back to hurt them in any way?" he continued. "It's possible, but seems highly unlikely." And our conversation continued on in a similar way. I do not complain here as the conversation with the IRB made my study and my participants' safety and well-being all the better for having happened. But it also was an interesting moment for me as an LGBTQ identified researcher doing LGBTQ centered work and for my dissertation chair and mentor, herself an LGBTQ identified scholar. My IRB caseworker was a self-identified straight man that tried very hard to convey to me that he understood gay issues. He even went so far, the first time I met him in person in his office, as to*

use certain gay insider terminology (such as "bear" to mean a hairy and/or large gay male) to show me he understood things. It was a humorous moment, as he hadn't yet "outed" himself to me as straight. I was thinking "so is this guy gay too?" A colleague at the same time was working on his own dissertation about the use of story and rhetorical agency within the lives of gay men as it related to religious dialogue and identity. We thought surely if either of us encountered much IRB resistance or questioning it would be him as his study dealt with the delicate subject of "reparative therapy" among so-called "ex-gay" men. But in the end, it was my own study that drew the most attention and rigorous questioning. I now look back and wonder about the relationship between shame and fear and passing and being LGBTQ in the workplace and the concept of losing one's job or suffering professionally. Could it be that, ultimately, especially in this time of economic and professional uncertainty, losing one's job and harm to one's career is the one thing that even non-LGBTQ persons could identify with and fear for the most?

Previously, I have drawn upon Powell's claim that all rhetorical practices constellate around body, place, and culture. Spot-On Corporation is in the business of both place and culture. Bodies (including queer bodies) are "manufactured" within those places and cultures. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* comes into play here. Combing books, websites, and advice (from job placement agencies, for example) it's not difficult to come to the conclusion that we are encouraged, if not out rightly told to perform professionalism according to a streamlined manufactured idea of "professional." These are the dominant discourses about professionalism—be extroverted, be loud and clear (but not too loud), be clean and neat, wear neutral colors, do not have piercings or tattoos, do not sound to masculine if you are female or too feminine if you are male. In these dominant discourses, the concept of professionalism is often treated and represented as outwardly/openly heteronormative. This "common knowledge" about what it means to be professional becomes a panoptic space that always tries to police the individual to behave in ways that are "professional." Thinking here about the fact that one must act and appear professional before one can even get into the lobby of most Fortune 500 corporations. If you appear too much like a homeless person (disheveled and sloppily

dressed) and you're likely to be asked to leave outright. This panopticon-like physical arena that exists in every workspace acts to discipline all professionals—especially those that fall outside of the expected idea of "professional." One example is the well-known portrait of one's spouse (and perhaps children) on an office desk. This is a workplace performance that's acknowledged and recognized even though it's a straight performance. It's allowed, if not expected. These are ways that workplace identity can be outright heteronormative. If someone neglects to perform these ideas of relationship and nuclear family, they may set coworkers wondering and gossiping and perhaps even judging them for secrecy or nonconformity.

A key lens within which to account for bodies, places, and cultures for the LGBTQ professional as well as to challenge and interrogate dominant discourses[14] is through *Working Closets*. Working Closets is a term I coined during this study to define a set of networked relations between the LGBTQ individual and all life contacts. These Working Closets are complicated, layered, and unorthodox spaces wherein the individual (sometimes out of choice and sometimes by situational force) conceals or volunteers her or his sexual orientation (even partially). In this way, LGBTQ professionals remain disjointed and fractured in their identity(ies). Here, my participants and I argue that though many LGBTQ professionals initially identify as out, the stories they tell in fact show a varying level of situational closetedness that they may not initially name or see as such.

So, according to the idea of Working Closets, LGBTQ individuals sometimes choose to be out, or to come out, and sometimes choose to remain closeted. This seems simple enough, right? But Western culture has most often portrayed the closet as a space that an LGBTQ person is either "in" or "out of." We do though, culturally seem to be able to grasp that an individual may be out in

14 I recall here Herndl's assertion that examinations of workplace culture should work to challenge dominant discourses.

certain places and to certain people while not others (for example out to family, but not at work). But what I'm seeking to expose here goes much deeper and is much more pervasive than these common understandings.

I mean to say that LGBTQ individuals actually come out over and over again within the same relationships and contexts and at other times choose not to come out. For example, an individual may be out to her or his family members but may need to remind them from time to time that they are LGBTQ in order to counteract the avoidance or ignoring they may get from these family members. Over the years, I and many LGBTQ friends have told tales of being out to our families but then having them gloss over it after that, acting as if once it's been told it need not ever be addressed again. Of course they always ask heterosexual family members about their spouses or dating lives but then often just give silence to personal topics for LGBTQ family members (except for perceived "safe" or neutral things like school or work). Additionally, an individual may come out to a coworker or manager only to have that manager choose to ignore that they have been told. LGBTQ persons often face having to be assertive with their sexual identities over time in order to truly be out.

Conversely, at other times an LGBTQ individual may choose to purposely remain closeted. For example, if an LGBTQ issue or slur comes up in a workplace meeting or at a family reunion, LGBTQ individuals will often have to weigh in their minds the affordances and risks of inserting themselves into the conversation–sometimes choosing to remain silent for reasons that protect their own interests (job stability, family relationships, etc.). One example was shared with me anonymously by a Spot-On Corporate employee on a site visit I made last fall. He said:

> In 2008 a senior vice-president came out as a lesbian at Spot-On Corporation after 20 years at the company. Most people around the company wondered aloud why she chose to come out at that moment. The consensus was that she probably knew this was as far as she's going

to climb up the professional ladder at Spot-On and decided therefore it was time to come out.

Regarding this incident, one of my participants, Klaus,[15] said:

> Now, since she's come out – since she's been involved with the business council, she has done more than any of those other people had ever done. So, she's an amazing advocate and an amazing individual to be part of this. But, you know, I just think it speaks a lot if over 25 years she didn't feel that she could come out until then. (Klaus)

Even more complicated, individuals may at times have to negotiate being out to some people in a room or situation and not to others, sometimes even speaking in kinds of code switching[16] that protect their interests or engage in certain kinds of body language, facial expression, or affect. By affect here, I mean the term used in Psychology that refers to "the experience of feeling or emotion" or the "facial, vocal, or gestural behavior that serves as an indicator" of such feeling or emotion (APA, 26). At its heart, my participants and I see Working Closets as transcending time, space, relationality, and embodiment. By this, I mean that an LGBTQ individual will cross in and out of these closets over and over again (not just a one time "coming out" moment) and in multiple spaces (personal, professional, familial, etc.), and even across relationships (to other LGBTQ people

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15 Each of my participants chose a pseudonym for this study.

16 Code-switching is a term most often used in sociolinguistics to denote the ways that two or more speakers switch between languages or dialects that they are both fluent in. For example, the way two African-Americans might switch between Standard English (SE) and African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). Here, I mean the ways that members of the LGBTQ community may use "insider language" or terms with one another.

and to heterosexual people). That Working Closets exist in myriad moments,[17] places, and situations is the key reason they are an unexplored positionality for LGBTQ professionals, while ironically these closets are, perhaps the most pervasive and vital concept they must employ for survivance.

Certainly in defining (or trying to define) this concept of Working Closets I must acknowledge Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism." As mentioned in my introduction, in her work, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, "strategic essentialism" is presented as that which counters the proposed eradication of essentialist notions within Queer theory, critical race theory and postmodernism by asserting that essentialism can and should be used strategically for various gains and advantages (such as the political or to define community).

Interlude/A Story: *Several hours, I would guess, that's how much time we spent sitting around doodling on everything from napkins, to scrap paper, to the insides of book covers. We? Well myself of course… and my chair, Trixie; and my fantastic dissertation writing group: Trav, Daisy, and Andrea; also my former graduate writing group that included Elena and Marilee; and then there are the various friends and colleagues around the department: Les, Beth, and others. We all tried to think about how to visually represent the idea of Working Closets. It's not easy. In fact, whereas many things in academia seem to have a tendency to turn out to be less difficult than you thought they'd be, or sometimes about as difficult as you thought they'd be, this task turned out to be much harder than I'd anticipated. In fact, I still haven't figured it out. You see, as I've mentioned previously, Working Closets transcend time, and space, and relationships. They come and go, they are sometimes "kind of there" and "kind of not." They are nuanced behavior, they are learned but un-acknowledged activities and reactions. They are, often, invisible even to their*

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17 It seems worthwhile to briefly address the rhetorical concept of *kairos* here. *Kairos* is most often defined as "the opportune moment" for the rhetor. The moment at which one's message is best received by the audience and thus, most convincing. Working closets are not simply kairotic moments though; they are not just about timeliness they are about safety. In this way, simply reducing these instances to moments of being "in" or "out" is very high stakes and specific. *Kairos*, in this sense, is too abstract.

performer. We batted around a lot of ideas: a continuum (too one-dimensional and binary-oriented), a set of closet doors with accompanying scenarios (like a "choose your own adventure" book – "would you choose to be in this closet or not?") but that seemed to simplified and too insulting to all the many subtleties of a given workplace situation. Some kind of three dimensional galaxy or cloud of experiences and data and thoughts seemed maybe to be the most useful, but did I have time, in addition to writing a dissertation, to construct a "middle school science project"-style diorama? Maybe not. But I did wonder if I could have integrated a papier-mâché volcano that spewed ketchup into the mix?

Complicating the Binary of "In" or "Out"

So what is "the closet"? What does it mean to be "out of the closet"? In Western culture, we really only have this one metaphor. Of course, the phrase "skeletons in your closet" is a very old and established one in American folk language and is usually used to describe the shameful or embarrassing thing that every individual or family has to hide from the larger community. In *The Languages of Sexuality*, Jeffrey Weeks reminds us that "Out of the closets into the streets" was the rallying cry of gay liberation movements of the 1970's (26). From the earliest moments, Weeks argues that the concept of the closet is both accommodating and resistant and "simultaneously reproduces the binary divide between homosexuality and heterosexuality and contests it" (27). The choices seem clear, right? In or out? And yet, all of my participants asserted that they were not in the closet, but then most of them proceeded to tell me a story of a time when they chose not to reveal their sexual orientation in the workplace. One of the key reasons I initially chose Spot-On as a professional space to research was their reputation as an LGBTQ inclusive and supportive corporate brand—seemingly *the* workplace to be out for an LGBTQ professional. This is a common assumption that is brought up again-and-again by my participants. Yet several of my participants pointed out that this is also not entirely true. For example, Klaus says:

> (there is) …the fallacy of Spot-On being, you know, an incredibly accepting gay employer. And while I think Spot-On does a great job at marketing to its employees, I think what you find is that there's a lot of more subversive or hidden–I don't wanna say the word homophobia because I feel like that's too strong, but there is still that kind of old boys' club mentality, especially among the more senior leaders.

Spot-On itself then becomes it's own kind of institutional closet space even with its progressive reputation and efforts to the contrary. Klaus gets the complication of this when he notes that "homophobic" is too strong a term to pin on Spot-On, and yet he also sees the company as a space where non-heterosexual identity can potentially be a pitfall. Klaus is here, I believe, queering[18] the concept of "the closet"—a singular space one is either in or not in. He points out that Spot-On is both "gay-friendly" in some ways and "gay-unfriendly" in others.

Another participant, Sue who is a former co-lead of the Spot-On LGBT Diversity Business Council, considers herself very out, "even activist." She mentions that Spot-On has campaigned internally to employees on the diversity theme of "bring your whole self to work." Sue laughs at this slogan, pointing out that the company itself is then always sure to use "safe, coded language." For example, they would never say the words "sexism" or "racism" as in "we will eliminate sexism and racism in the workplace" rather choosing to ignore that such things could exist and saying things like "we promote a diverse, accepting workplace!" As she points out, Spot-On then questions why this diverse population keeps leaving for other companies or jobs.

Catherine Fox, in her *College English* article "Texts of Our Institutional Lives: From Transaction to Transformation: (En)Countering White Heteronormativity in 'Safe Spaces'" writes

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18 I draw here from queer theory the verb "queer." In this sense, queering is a disrupting, a complicating, a troubling of normative thinking or behavior, often (but not always) through an LGBTQ lens.

about the LGBTQ "Safe Space" stickers that dot doors in English departments across academia. She contends that these stickers reinforce bell hooks' "white fantasy" that whiteness is colorblind and benign and that these are truly safe spaces. Rather, she argues, such signs reify the idea of heterosexuality as necessary ally to LGBTQ persons, the only thing that can save them and protect them, thus undoing ideas of queer liberation. She says that "Sexuality, as a regime of truth, is partly constructed through a hetero/homo dichotomy, whereby heterosexuality is considered normal, natural, and inevitable and homosexuality is constructed as its binary opposite, abnormal and perverse" (501).

It's important to note here that within the social sciences and medicine there exists a considerable body of work that asserts that coming out is complex and non-linear. Though my own work is founded squarely in the humanities and rhetoric studies, it is crucial to acknowledge these conversations are already being built in other disciplines. Often these fields already note that for many coming out is a "lifelong process of information management concerning their sexual preferences and identity" (Cain 67). Many in the medical fields have seen coming out as a "complex transitional process" (Taylor) and psychologists continue to chronicle the two main approaches to LGBT identity—essentialist and social constructivist. The later of which is a growing camp that argues that definitions of LGBTQ identity and the closet are increasingly inept at truly describing the long, complicated road to acceptance of one's sexuality (Mosher).

Interlude/A Story: *In May 2011, I traveled to Bloomington, Indiana to the Kinsey Center for Sex, Gender, and Reproduction on the campus of Indiana University. If you've ever seen Bill Condon's 2004 biopic of Alfred Kinsey titled "Kinsey" you know just how difficult a time Dr. Kinsey had establishing and building his research into human sexuality in post-World War II and Cold War America. As a child growing up in Indiana in the 1970's and 1980's and as an Indiana University Bloomington undergraduate student in the 1990's I was only vaguely aware (eventually) that something called the Kinsey Institute existed at Indiana University. It was never a*

source of discussion or pride among the masses in Indiana – we were much more concerned about Bob Knight's latest antics on the IU basketball court. In fact, I would wager to say that in my memory, the Kinsey Institute was never even mentioned in any of my undergraduate classes while at IU. And yet, as I came out of the closet and became more knowledgeable about the struggles for civil rights with respect to sexuality, I began to realize the importance of Dr. Kinsey's work and IU's Kinsey Institute for Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. Now, here I was at the Center, having applied and been admitted for research that May. The first thing that struck me was how the Kinsey Center is tucked away in an old historic former dormitory building on the old part of campus. The Center itself must conform to the space of the building rather than the other way around. This type of research center, that in a city like New York, or Los Angeles, or Amsterdam, would have likely been housed in a prominent sleek metal and glass structure on any campus or city block, instead seems unassuming and almost hidden here. It shares the building with several other departments in fact. As I sat down with the Kinsey Center's library's Public Services Manager one afternoon he informed me that the Center is now run completely on private funding and donations – there is no public, state, or university funding whatsoever. Probably for the best as it has been such a lightening rod over the decades. In fact, the Center itself, the very institution's practices, posturing, and physical building seemed a "semi-closeted" space. Fully out to some audiences and veiled from others. This research and archival space, dedicated to all sexuality but especially unorthodox and non-normative sexuality, functioned not unlike an individual dealing with the same issues. Do institutions have sexuality? By this I mean, can institutions take on the collective sexualities of their individuals and their work and functions?

The Role of Performance

One key aspect of Working Closets is that they are performative spaces. Certainly non-LGBTQ activities in workplaces are performances as well. But it's important here to point out the ways that LGBTQ persons must constantly be aware of their actions in the workplace. Their performances are high stakes. A decision to pass into/through a Working Closet or to be out in the workplace can mean the difference between a successful career and the loss of a job and income.

Here, I'd like to discuss a few particular types of performance that are often crucial to LGBTQ persons: shame, fear and violence, and passing.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler builds the idea of gender performativity—the idea that gender is ultimately a performance (using signifiers) and that there is no "original gender" ("man" and "woman" as original). To her all gender is scripted, rehearsed, and performed. Additionally, she uses the concept of drag (a performance itself) to destabilize ideas of "the truth" of gender. My participants and I argue that being gay, or lesbian (or bisexual, transgender/sexual, or queer) are also always scripted, rehearsed, and performed as are the acts of concealing these identities.

One way to gauge performance around closets (within and without) is to think about what the LGBTQ individual is orienting toward. Who the individual thinks they should or should not perform for makes the difference between the entry into a closet or the remaining outside of a closet. Grounded in the field of Philosophy, Sara Ahmed, in *Queer Phenomenology*, asks: "What difference does it make 'what' we are oriented toward?" (1). Specifically, she asks how bodies "acquire orientations" toward (and away from) each other. The things that affect our orientation(s) and that we orient toward must be within what Ahmed calls our "bodily horizon" (5). Ahmed uses the metaphor of the table (as a space that traditionally awaits orientation toward it – the writing table awaits the writer for example) to show how objects take on the orientations of their associated bodies. Ahmed asks us to consider what other orientations the table may have (and the writer toward or away from the table). The table seems to be an accurate stand in for a closet because it is the thing one must orient toward or away from (or orient in respect to in some way). It is Ahmed's belief that moments of disorientation (cf. disidentifying, queering, troubling, disrupting, etc.) are key as we find ways to build queer support systems.

In *Chapter Four's* "Thread Two: Definitions of Closet," Brandi addresses this idea of performance. She shows how LGBTQ employees at Spot-On corporate are, in Ahmed's sense,

oriented toward Spot-On in their behavior. They must "act brand" in terms of how they behave at work. I ask Brandi at one point if performing Spot-On brand means acting very professional:

> **Matt:** So there is a level of professionalism about it?
>
> **Brandi:** There is a level of professionalism and actually an expectation level. So for me, I realized that "wow, this is more important than I thought it was." And I realize that we are in Minneapolis, Midwest, it is not New York or L.A., but we are also not in Alabama or the Deep South, Bible Belt.

In many respects, "acting Spot-On brand" asks the participant/employee to orient toward a type of closet (don't act too gay, or gay in "unprofessional" ways).

The Role of Shame

One of the main motivators for LGBTQ performances in the workplace is shame, a performance in its own right. In *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and The Ethics of Queer Life*, Michael Warner discusses the ways that most gay children grow up feeling queer and isolated. He states:

> No wonder so much of gay culture seems marked by a primal encounter with shame … Ironically, plenty of moralists will then point to this theme of shame in gay life as though it were proof of something pathological in gay people. It seldom occurs to anyone that the dominant culture and its family environment should be held accountable for creating the inequalities of access and recognition that produce this sense of shame in the first place. (8)

For Warner, shame begins early, in childhood. For my participants, too, the constant negotiating and evaluating of the safety of being honest or hidden in their identity begins well before their careers—with their families and their childhoods and/or adolescences. Based in this idea, it's no surprise that their professional identities are always already heavily constellated among and complicated by issues of hiding and revealing sexuality and personal self.

In *Chapter Four's* "Thread One: Use of Story as Identity Negotiator," Klaus discusses an award he receives from the LGBT Business Diversity Council. He notes a hesitancy to display this award too openly for fear of turning off new colleagues. Though he seems to not associate this act with open shame it is hard to avoid the feeling that such hiding of material "evidence" has an air of shame about it.

But some, like Eve Sedgwick, however, advocate that such shame is a necessary part of identity formation. For Sedgwick, shame is often a performative space that is "non-toxic" in the assembling of knowledge, identity, and meaning (38). She sees shame as a molding force that both disciplines us in certain identity formation moments and gives us a backdrop against which to see ourselves. Others, such as Griffith and Hebl in "The Disclosure Dilemma for Gay Men and Lesbians: 'Coming out' at Work," assume the negative effects of shame in the workplace. They studied 220 gay men and 150 lesbian women in the workplace and found that those who are able to be out at companies perceived to be more gay supportive experience higher levels of job satisfaction and lower anxiety in the workplace (1198).

In *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*, Sally Munt conversely notes that:

> Shame is an emotion that travels quickly, it has an infective contagious property that means it can travel circulate and be exchanged with intensity. Shame is peculiarly intrapsychic: it exceeds the bodily vessel of its containment. Groups that are shamed contain individuals who internalize the stigma of shame into the tapestry of their lives, each reproduce discrete, shamed subjectivities, all with their own specific pathologies. (3)

Warner traces shame to the earliest moments of an LGBTQ person's life, and for Sedgwick shame can be a good or necessary thing, while for Griffth and Hebl, and Munt it's harmful and debilitating. I and my participants see it as all of these things. How the individual uses shame appears to be operationalized based on context. At times, they may not consciously think about the shame at

work in heteronormative contexts, having grown used to it over a lifetime. Even if made aware of it, they may see it as an unavoidable part of life.

The Roles of Fear and Violence

While related to shame, I would like to talk briefly about fear and (fear of) violence as performance as well since I believe they operate distinctly from shame at times. Shame is something that is always present at a societal level even in "gay friendly" or "progressive" places regionally or professionally (for example living in San Francisco or New York or working for HBO or an AIDS hospice). But fear and the threat of violence are more overt and threatening than shame. And they are grounded in aggressive strains of homophobia. In Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal*, he speaks about ideas of disciplining and zoning bodies (such as the cleaning up of Times Square in New York City in the 1980's and 1990's) and the ways that LGBTQ bodies seeking out things like pornography must put themselves into danger (by going to dangerous parts of town for example). Jose Muñoz, in *Disidentifications*, also talks about the ways that queer bodies disidentify. By *disidentification* he means "survival strategies" that minority subjects practice in order to negotiate phobic majoritarian public spheres that punish these subjects for nonconformity to normative spaces/behaviors.

I see homophobia as grounded in the patriarchy and in misogyny. These things can never be disconnected from violence. In this understanding any non heterosexual male persons are at risk of violence. Heterosexual and bisexual women, lesbian women, gay and bisexual men, and transgender persons will all "fall short" of the ideal employee (another instance of Lacanian slippage here) and thus will be seen as susceptible to being "ruled over" or "controlled by" heterosexual male forces. This puts me in mind of a short story Klaus told me about a transgender Spot-On employee who was transitioning from male-to-female and was told by Spot-On managers that she must use the men's restroom. The only way she would be allowed to use the women's restroom would be to go

all the way to a basement women's room (in a very large skyscraper). This employee was left fearing for her job and career future if she did not obey company mandate and her body was very specifically disciplined and acted upon to behave in certain ways. Of course all of this is an interesting turn of events from non-Western cultures and even ancient cultural understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. For example, in the ancient Greco-Roman world, homosexual activities among male soldiers were seen as solidifying male bonds (Allen, 5).

The Role of Passing

Another type of performance within the LGBTQ community is "passing." The term "straight-acting" is a common in the community but is also widely seen as a space of internalized homophobia and shame. In Chapter Five's "Thread One: Use of Story as Identity Negotiator," Klaus discusses his new manager assuming Klaus's heterosexuality by talking to him about the attractiveness of the women at their common workout location. Klaus, at this point, is "passing" as heterosexual even though he hadn't set out to try to pass. He chooses, in that moment, to remain seen as heterosexual so as not to endanger his own ethos to this new manager.

Passing complicates Working Closets because it can, at times, involuntarily put someone into a presumed closet. For example, in "My Dangerous Desires: Falling in Love with Stone Butches; Passing Women and Girls (Who Are Guys) Who Catch My Eye," Amber Hollibaugh discusses how passing as a straight woman actually leaves her feeling shut out of the LGBTQ community. The implication here is that the decision about whether to pass or not is made for her based on her embodiment, affect, and so on (373). This, again, is also shown in participants' stories such as Klaus's. Passing complicates the idea of agency in Working Closets because of the ways that assumptions are often made about who is LGBTQ and who is not based on how a person dresses, talks, gestures, and so on. These are often things out of the LGBTQ person's (or straight person's) control.

And so, if Working Closets are contentious, constantly shifting spaces that LGBTQ professionals are passing in and out of in order to survive and sometimes thrive, then, I believe, the stories from LGBTQ professionals build a theorization of these closets. These theorizations also show the troubling of binaries of "in" and "out" and address the roles of performance, shame, and passing. Now, let's look at participants' stories that help us together assemble this theorization of Working Closets.

Interlude/A Story: *A recent study appearing in the* American Journal of Sociology *by Harvard University's András Tilcsik is the largest of its kind (what is known as an audit study). It looked at job discrimination in the United States against gay men. The study found that gay applicants are forty-percent less likely to be granted an interview than (presumed) heterosexual counterparts. "The results indicate that gay men encounter significant barriers in the hiring process because, at the initial point of contact, employers more readily disqualify openly gay applicants than equally qualified heterosexual applicants," Tilcsik writes. The study was conducted by sending fictitious but realistic resumes to over 1,700 entry-level, white-collar job openings. Two resumes were sent for each position (representing two different fictitious male individuals). One of the resumes for each opening showed that the applicant had been an involved part (elected office, etc.) of a gay organization during his college years. The second resume sent (the "non-gay resume") showed the applicant to have been involved in a group called "Progressive and Socialist Alliance" which Tilcsik used because employers might be likely to associate both groups with left-leaning political views (thus separating out any left-leaning penalty). His results were telling: those applicants without the gay association had an 11.5 percent chance of being called back for an interview while the gay applicants had only a 7.2 percent chance of being called. Tilcsik's research also found that employers who called in their job postings for "assertive," "decisive," or "aggressive" employees were also much less likely to call back gay candidates.*[19]

19 Tilcsik also found that gay applicants' chances of a callback varied widely based on region. Employers in the South and the Midwest US were much less likely to call back gay candidates while those in the

Thread One: Definitions of Closet(s)

For my participants (and I would assert for LGBTQ professionals the world over) one's career, one's workplace experiences, even just one day in the life, produces myriad opportunities to define or not define oneself in terms of professional identity and LGBTQ identity. In many ways, this reminds me of the old "choose your own adventure" children's books where the reader can go down several paths at specific "forks" in the road.[20] But the key thing here is not that choices are to be made and that choices are almost limitless (though this is an important observation) rather, the critical understanding here is that LGBTQ persons, and especially LGBTQ professionals become conditioned over a lifetime and career to be acutely sensitive to all decisions, implications, and outcomes of various experiences. This came out as my participants defined and told stories of the closet/closets. I asked each of my five participants throughout their interviews how they would define the term "the closet." Each of them gets at an idea of a systematic type of hiding one's real self. But there are nuanced differences too.

First, **Brandi** talks about the closet as a continuum, a percentage:

> When I think of somebody who is in the closet I think it is somebody who is not outwardly, I don't want to use the word admitting to, but outwardly acknowledging their sexual orientation. Whether it is to one person or many people. Like I think some people could be in the closet a hundred percent, others could be perhaps just in the closet at work or to their parents, or you know it could be one or many. (Brandi)

West and Northeast showed a nearly statistically insignificant difference in callbacks between gay and non-gay candidates.

20 Much is written about this idea of linearity and choice within story and narrative in hypertext theory for example. Borges and "The Garden of Forking Paths" is a good place to begin as one of the earliest examples of this "networked/non-linear" story in use.

I ask Brandi if she considers herself to be in the closet. "No," she replies quickly. We then continue:

> **Matt:** Okay, as a person who is identified as a gay woman, have you ever, and this could be in the past too, have you ever used the terms "in the closet" or "out of the closet"?
>
> **Brandi:** Sometimes, yeah. When I think of extended family, which I do not really see very often, maybe once every four years, it is somewhat obvious. Well, hopefully I do not scream lesbian. I do not have a mullet or drive a Subaru. But I think it's apparent. But, I am not going to, every time I see them say "by the way do you remember that I am gay?" My sister always says "why do you always have to be in the closet around our extended family?" Well it is not that I am in it, I am just not jumping around.

This is a telling moment. Brandi believes she is not in the closet at all, she does not see herself that way. And yet, her sister asks her "why do you always have to be in the closet around our extended family?" Brandi's reaction to this seems to speak more to the exhaustion of constantly having to remind those around her that she's gay. This gets at the ways too that heteronormative society "recloset" LGBTQ folks at times—and we don't always feel like reminding the world we are not straight. Additionally, Brandi's use of humor and acknowledgement of stereotypes and derogatory terms and concepts here is something that is fundamental in the LGBTQ community, and recurs with each of the other participants throughout these interviews.

Brandi then tells me a story from the month before, this story again complicates the idea of being fully out or fully closeted. In my interview time with Brandi, this story is definitely the richest and most detailed moment, and the point in the interview where Brandi seems the most animated.

> **Matt:** So do you feel there are expected or unexpected moments then that you find yourself stepping back into the closet or withholding information about your sexual orientation in work situations?

Brandi: Well yeah, that (Valentine's Day) is a good example. Typically I use common language (partner, she, we—that sort of a thing) freely. I am not using asexual terms by any means. I think the main reason I did not say something was because, not because of the content of the discussion but because I knew that what I would say was probably a little smart-ass and I did not want it to. I didn't want to throw him under the bus and I also didn't want to throw myself under the bus career wise by being a smart-ass in front of his leader, if that makes sense. So, it is probably less about the topic and more about the context.

Here Brandi shows an interesting sort of sympathy/empathy for this non-LGBTQ coworker. She worries about the risk for him of her "calling him out" before managers and coworkers. It's fascinating to see that Brandi understands risk in this moment better than her offending coworker, and she reacts accordingly. To me, this is an argument that LGBTQ professionals are often, out of practice, more understanding and attuned to workplace risks than their non-LGBTQ colleagues.

Matt: You made a comment earlier about angry feminism and that sort of thing. So do you feel in a way though you were saying that you were not only looking out for yourself but you were also looking out for your career and then also you were looking out for the community too—the LGBT community specifically the lesbian community. Like a certain kind of stigma that can get hung—

Brandi: Oh yeah.

Matt:—assumptions will be made.

Again, here Brandi exhibits a kind of awareness of the potential risks for herself, her coworkers, and other populations – in this case feminist women. She worries that her reaction will set her own beliefs and causes back rather than advancing them.

Brandi: There was an awkward moment; I could tell that he was blind. If somebody were to say "oh that's so gay", I would say something. Because that to me is (1) "what are you

thinking?" and (2) "why would you say something like that?" Or, if he would have said, "oh how come you are not married?", "you know there are lots of single guys." Well, I am (married) – I think it was context but you are right to a certain degree, I mean there are certain times that I would definitely say something and then there are other times where it is not a point of – it is not malicious intent, there isn't a teachable moment if that makes sense. I knew when we walked away his boss was going to say "what were you thinking?"

I remember being struck at this point by how much "mental juggling" Brandi was doing on the spot at that moment with her coworker. This is especially fascinating when set against the fact that this coworker was likely speaking from habit and not thinking carefully at all about how he questioned her.

Matt: Maybe that is the corporate setting. This particular company (Spot-On) and this particular time and place you also were able to rely on the corporate setting to back you up in a way too?

Brandi: Oh yeah, it had nothing to do with the fact that I did not feel like I should say that at work. It was just all these other variables that were working. So I feel there was the corporate backing and I was obviously totally out to everybody else that was there.

Brandi's response here reminds me that societal anti-gay stigma are still strong even in the face of corporate approval or sanctioning of LGBTQ employees within the organization. Even though she knows Spot-On is "on her side," she also understands how and why heteronormative statements are continually made by straight coworkers within the workplace.

Matt: Okay, so then do you consider yourself out in your position?

Brandi: I would say it is who I am and it makes sense. I am very social and enjoy becoming friends with people at work and – it is who I am, and I am — and when I come in to work

on Monday, the chat is "oh what did you do this weekend." Well, I do not want to have to use those gender-neutral terms about who I am spending time with and what I am doing.

Brandi reaffirms here that she considers herself out, in general, but also in her workplace. I decide here to try to ask Brandi the extent to which being able to be out was a factor in her coming to work at Spot-On.

Matt: People talk about going into careers and going into certain companies for different reasons like compensation, or they really want to live in San Diego, or they really need to be in the real estate industry or whatever, and I am wondering how important is it to you, that when you talk to family and friends extended like high school friends, college friends whatever, how important is it to say "I get paid well and I do a job that I enjoy or that I am trained for." And how important is it for you to say "I also feel respected in this space"?

Brandi: I actually came out while I was working at the last job that I was at. It was kind of tongue-in-cheek well received, if that makes sense. I think everybody acted like "oh yeah, it's fine." I worked for a mentoring organization and I was within the senior leadership group so we were doing policies and policy making, so with my immediate peer group people were great. But the organization worked with a lot of gay volunteers and families and I can't even tell you how many times I would hear, "great I have another gay volunteer, they are going to be hard to match." It was like everything was so overt and that crap would never fly at Spot-On. Their ass would be canned.

Matt: So there is a level of professionalism about it?

Brandi: There is a level of professionalism and actually an expectation level. So for me, I realized that "wow, this is more important than I thought it was." And I realize that we are in Minneapolis, Midwest, it is not New York or L.A., but we are also not in Alabama or the Deep South, Bible Belt.

Here, Spot-On's very well defined corporate culture of "acting professional" comes up. Brandi's previous work for a smaller nonprofit meant that sexual orientation was not only a nonissue but was also at times treated jokingly and lightheartedly, something that she asserts would never happen at Spot-On. This also comes up in conversations with both Trent and Sue—the idea of "acting brand" or "Spot-On brand" and behavior

Jason

My time with Jason still sticks with me, conversations about being a gay man at Spot-On really became much more complicated. Issues of race and military subculture were intertwined at every turn. In that sense, my interview with Jason was my richest conversation. When asked to define the closet, Jason responds:

> Wow. Because as an African American, the closet is kind of a loaded thing. I guess just I'll answer it for me personally. The closet is where you go when you want to do the act, but you don't want anyone to know about it. It's really about hiding your identity or taking your identity out of the equation, and compartmentalizing that behavior as a specific set of acts, and not really attaching that to who you are as a person, or who you are, or how you interact with other people, or anything like that. It's like, "That's something I do when I'm out of town on a business trip," or, "My wife is asleep and I'm online," or, "I had too many to drink at the strip bar and I go to the other bar down the street." It's one of those things.

I find Jason's answer as an African-American man to hint at African-American ideas of "the downlow" (or the "DL") for gay sexual acts while avoiding the adopting of a gay identity. Jason is such an "upstanding" African-American guy (as opposed to the societal stereotypes of black men as "trapped in poverty" or "uneducated"), he is highly educated and even comes from a military background. I don't expect him to invoke the closet as a "DL space." To me this starts to get at considerations of how strong cultural definitions of the closet are across groups according to race,

ethnicity, and class. This particular African-American concept of the closet invokes shame and also fear and violence as motivators.

Jason rejects closeted people as those who separate out acts from identity. For him, identity and sexual activity are unified. Our conversation then continues:

> **Matt:** Just for the sake of this train of questioning, do you consider yourself in the closet?
>
> **Jason:** No, because for me, I acknowledge who I am as being part and parcel a gay man. I do gay things, and not necessarily homosexual things, and there's a difference. There's a difference between the guy that – and I'll be a little crass – wants to, like, pick up someone in a park versus a guy like me that wants to play on the gay rugby team. You know?

This begins an exchange that contains a very eloquent description of gay culture from Jason. It reminds me of the many times that anti-gay and heteronormative forces and figures try to characterize LGBTQ persons and issues as being "only about sex" or sexual activity.

> **Jason:** You have to have a certain sense of identity and awareness, and seek that out.
>
> **Matt:** It sounds like you're saying that you think that a certain idea of gay culture has emerged. So, it's different than an idea of a homosexual culture, or like a closet culture even.
>
> **Jason:** Well, I think there's a difference between a sex act and acknowledging your sexuality in various forms.
>
> **Matt:** In a space of community?
>
> **Jason:** In a space of community where you can live your life, where you surround yourself with multiple or different types of people of a lot of different backgrounds in sexual and nonsexual ways.
>
> **Matt:** Right.

At this point in our conversation I'm thinking back to countless conversations I've had in my own past with family and friends, defending being a gay man as about "more than just sex." I remember

often trying to explain to my parents and others that if I were in love with a man, it wouldn't matter if he suffered a disability that kept him from even being able to have sex—that I would love and be with that man no matter what. I also think of conversations I've had trying to explain to them how my gay friends and I connect well beyond conversations about sex or sexuality. How we all as human beings tend to bond at times with those who share our experiences and backgrounds.

> **Jason:** And you engage them based on more of a societal need, and acknowledge them for being who they are and vice versa. You know, like, if I were in the closet, I would never go to a Pride Parade. I would never be on the gay rugby team. I would never go to a gay bar. I would never give money to like a HIV/AIDS organization. Whereas for me, being gay and surrounding myself with gay people, and lesbians, and transgender people is part of my life.
>
> **Matt:** Yeah, that's interesting. I think you've touched on it, too, and I think as a person who's African American there are certain kinds of erasure in both communities – like ways that white, gay male culture doesn't see African American gay men and ways that African American straight culture doesn't see.

Here we get into Jason's juggling of black identity and gay identity. We talk about the ways that the gay male community often privileges certain kinds of physical beauty (white, young, thin, blond, etc.) in ways that leave gay men of color out and how African-American culture sees homosexuality as a "white problem" and something that is invisible in the black world.

> **Jason:** Uh-huh.
>
> **Matt:** So, I'm thinking, too, about extra pressure for someone to negotiate identity when you're being overlooked.
>
> **Jason:** Or underserved, or overlooked depending on where you're at. Yeah, those are two worlds where it's very hard to meet at the middle.

Jason talks here of feeling at times like he has no real community because both the gay community and the black community don't see him as "complete." And, until the recent repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (which happened after this interview) even military culture didn't accept who he was fully. Jason seems to understand more than any of my other participants that Spot-On will let him down, will not see him as fully who he is. There's a sense of maturity about the conditions in his workplace.

Matt: You can't be African American enough for some people, and you can't be gay enough for some people.

Jason: Uh-huh, right.

Again, Jason's presence as the only participant who addresses racial issues within the context of Spot-On and being LGBTQ is key. None of the other participants discuss in quite the same detail the ways that racial and ethnic minorities (especially African-Americans) feel left out of Spot-On corporate culture. But at the same time, Jason describes the ways that African-American, LGBTQ, and Spot-On culture cannot account for his more complex identity. Even strategic essentialism cannot serve someone like him in these contexts.

Matt: You're saying, "Yeah, but I am by definition you know? I am a gay man, you know?"

Jason: So, you have to figure out a third way.

Matt: Sure, right, and well and then, what comes to mind is what you were saying about the first year you spent at Spot-On—you have to get really good at reading things that are hard to read.

Jason: And bring all that or some of that with you to work, depending on who you're working with, or when, or how, and how you're being approached, or not.

Matt: Do you even find yourself saying to people in conversation like, "I'm an out person," or, "I'm an out-of-the-closet person"?

Jason: I usually am a lot more definitive. I'll say, "I'm gay."

For Jason, as for most of my participants, being out of the closet seems to be more about what you say and how you label yourself than at what times you say it. The next part of the conversation bears this out.

Matt: Yeah, so, in the positive not in this negative space.

Jason: Yeah.

Matt: Are there times when you just think, "Well, this first meeting isn't the time or place, even though everybody in the room is chit-chatting about their wife or significant other, or what they're doing this weekend"? I think sometimes people probably make choices.

Jason: Oh, absolutely, yeah, and I've done that really because I want to get a sense of where that person is.

Matt: Right, and I think we all have.

Jason: Because I was always taught you learn more by listening than you do by talking.

Matt: And this reinforces that in a lot of ways.

Jason: Reinforces it, yeah.

Jason's comments here about being a listener and getting a sense of where a person is before speaking and acting seem to me to be one of the more overt examples of working closets in action in these interviews.

Matt: Not probably just being a gay man, but some of the other things that you've talked about, too. I mean, military culture reinforces that. I'm sure in some ways being an African American a lot of times in rooms or groups of people where you're one of the only ones, if not the only one, also encourages kinds of listening and perception.

Jason: Well yes, but at the same time I also find that I have to be confident enough to make that initial connection and to be authentic. Because, you know I'm starting to realize that if

I'm the only one in the room anyway, then I might as well own it. And because that's not going to change so long as I'm in the room. So, I might as well just bring all that to the table and casually put that out there, but not be afraid to hide who I am either.

Klaus

Klaus seems to see the closet as more of a more defined space, yet he also seems to exhibit a level of evolution on the idea of when you are or aren't closeted.

Klaus: I guess I've always thought of the closet as kinda one of those things you're either in it or you're out. I think that definition has changed over the last few months or maybe year or so. But, you know, my thought was either you kinda lead a completely secretive life or you've already – you know, you let friends know, you let family know, and then you're pretty much out of the closet. I would define myself as out because I can openly talk to my supervisor about who I am and we can – we joke about it. We – everybody on my team knows. I don't feel like I need to be careful in the pseudonyms – or not the pseudonyms – the pronouns that I choose to use, and names that I use, and things like that for the majority of my day.

We then continue:

Matt: That's really an interesting story. I'm glad that you mentioned that. So, do you feel like, as a person who identifies as an openly gay male, do you still find yourself using the term "out of the closet"—do you feel like people still talk about that, or is that just kind of, like, you're past that point, or –?

Klaus: I guess I think I'm past. I only use the closet really if it's somebody who is secretly gay or you think might be secretly gay. I would say the closet then.

Matt: I guess people use the term "out" more?

Klaus: Uh-huh, and I'm not out there telling everybody, "Hey, I'm gay," and have rainbow flags all over my desk, and stuff. Kind of like what I was telling you about this plaque that I got. I think I was a little bit more passive. If you're looking, you'll see it. If you're not, you might not, you know? You might not see it.

Klaus here gets at this recurring idea of whether or not we as LGBTQ persons must "re-out" ourselves over and over in situations where we are "presumed straight" (as long as we pass that is).

Matt: Yeah.

Klaus: If you ask me directly, like, "What did I do this weekend?" or things like that, I might say, "Well, I did something with Taylor or "I went here." I won't say that Taylor is my partner unless you ask me, or I won't bring up that I did something with Taylor unless you ask me. But I'm not going to also lie or make something up in how I answer you.

This, too, seems like a very explicit occurrence of a working closet in action.

Matt: Do you feel like that's different? What are your experiences with ostensibly heterosexual colleagues? Do you hear people say like, "Oh, well, I did something with my wife"? And do they come in and say, "I did something with John," or Rebecca, or whatever? Do you feel limited in some ways at times? It sounds like you've made a choice that for the most part you're going to say, "I did something with Taylor." You're not going to say, "I did something with my partner," or, "I did something with –" whatever your terminology is between the two of you for your relationship. Does that feel like a separate but equal thing for you or?

Klaus: No, I figure they'll ask me who Taylor is and I'll say, "He's my partner."

Matt: Right, right. That's not judgment by me of why you do that or don't do that. I'm just curious.

Klaus: No, I know what you mean. A heterosexual might just come in and say, "I did something with my wife." So, why don't I come in and say, "I did something with my partner"? It always seems weird to me. I don't know. It's always felt a little bit awkward to me to say, "partner". It never just quite rolls off the tongue to me.

This kind of awkwardness around language and terms gets at what Brandi also talked about in her Valentine's Day story and in other discussions of essentialism and naming. Several of my participants talk about the fact of inadequate and unsatisfying terminology within the LGBTQ world or that dominant discourse (both corporate and societal) use to discuss LGBTQ persons and issues.

Matt: Yeah, yeah. It seems limiting, too. Which could get into the whole bigger discussion about same-sex marriage and stuff like that, but we won't worry about that in this interview. So, since you consider yourself out, why do you choose to be out?

Klaus: I guess when I started at Spot-On – when I look back seven years ago – I never came to Spot-On thinking that I wouldn't be out or at least be honest with the immediate people that I worked with. When I came to Spot-On, and like I said, there's all that inclusiveness that they throw at you, and they have the LGBT Business Council and things like that. Plus, the reputation of the number of gay people that work at Spot-On, I never really felt that I had to sort of hush who I am.

Klaus seems to intimate here that Spot-On's reputation as an LGBTQ-friendly company were factors for him going to work there.

Matt: Right.

Klaus: But, like I said, that one example was one of those wake-up calls where it's like, "Oh, wait a minute, you know? Maybe this isn't everything that I thought it would be."

Matt: So, is it fair to say then this was something that you also thought about in a workplace?

Klaus: No.

Matt: No?

Klaus: I don't think so. I don't think it ever really came to mind; it was only the fact that there were other things that really drove my decision making, and I think it was secondary. I'm going to just put it that way.

Here though, Klaus takes issue with the idea that he had consciously thought about whether Spot-On would be an LGBTQ-friendly place to work. We don't get into how he came to live in Minneapolis (a city also with a very LGBTQ-friendly reputation) or came to look for jobs in an urban/downtown setting, but I suspect that some of these things must have been at work even subconsciously for him as a gay man.

Klaus: It was kind of a nice benefit to be able to say, "Oh, and by the way, I also don't need to worry about who I am." But I think my ability to feel more comfortable as who I am at work has definitely been a progression through my career. You know, at my first employer out of college, I never would have been out. That's progressed. My comfort level on how much I was going to hide, how much I was going to share has definitely grown over the years.

Matt: So, is it fair to say that in a way, when you got out of college and you go to start a career, there are sacrifices people have to make. Sometimes they work late hours. Sometimes they don't start at the pay they want to. Is one of those things that you put up with a certain level of being able to be out or not be out.

Klaus: Uh-huh. I think so, yeah. Because, you know, I said, "What's more important to me – my career or being myself?" If my career is the most important, I'd be willing to sacrifice.

This exchange is similar to conversations I had with Trent as well about the working closets we as LGBTQ persons must be willing to enter when we put issues of sexual identity on the "backburner" in order to advance professionally.

> **Matt:** Right, but now that you can have a little bit more a balance with those things, does it feel different to you than it did at the beginning of your career when you couldn't be out? Is it more rewarding and satisfying for you to be able to feel like the different parts of you are integrated—the part that you take home at night is similar to the part that you bring in the morning?
>
> **Klaus:** I would say so, yeah. I think it's just one thing you don't have to worry about. Like, I told you, there still is that feeling, I think there's some stuff under the surface here that I'm not really aware of and so how much of myself can I truly be at work? But yet, there's at least enough of a feeling of security that it's nice to not have to worry about it as much as I would have at some other time in my career.

It becomes interesting to me here the level to which Klaus begins to tell us, without perhaps realizing he's telling us, that he's learned the intricacies of maneuvering in and out of closets in the workplace. He has learned to manage the relationships and the risks of various situations over the years at Spot-On.

Sue

Sue seems to strongly see herself as non-closeted. Of all of my five participants it is easy to see Sue's history of activism and non-profit work and her involvement in the LGBTQ community over the years. She would rather confront people but also sees this as tiring, a waste of her energies.

> **Sue:** To me, being in the closet means that, yeah, I'm not able to say that I'm out, or I have a partner, or I'm not able to really be who I am. So, I'm, you know, faking it – not being my true self.

Matt: So, do you consider yourself to be in the closet in any way?

Sue: Well, I think that – in any parts of my life? I think that I would say that there are various places. I think that probably throughout a day, I will go in and out of the closet throughout the day, depending on where I am. I always prefer to be out. I actually would almost prefer to have a big L on the forehead.

Matt: Yeah, right.

[laughter]

Sue is the only participant that goes the complete opposite direction and seems to indicate an awareness of Working Closets from the beginning of the interview. Whereas all other participants respond to the "are you out?" questions initially with a resounding "of course not," Sue opens right up and says "Well, it's complicated."

Sue: If I'm in a place where I'm with a bunch of strangers then, I may just choose to be in the closet.

Matt: Because you have to sometimes feel it out?

Sue: Right. And whether I'm not in the mood, I don't have the energy, you know?

Matt: Uh-huh.

Sue: Is it safe or not?

At this moment, though Sue has, with a sense of easy-goingness and humor, played off her moments of closetedness as just not having the energy to be out, she adds, "is it safe or not?"

Trent

Trent exhibits an evolving thinking about the closet similar to Klaus. Trent also seems to see aging as a reason to be less zealous about coming out rather than more. For him, if you have a support network in your personal life, you don't need to "prove a point" to strangers.

Trent: I would have to say it (the idea of the closet) has evolved for me over the years. But, I would say that being in the closet is more about whether your close personal friends and family know that you are gay, transsexual, bisexual, lesbian, however you identify yourself. To me now it's more about your close personal friends knowing about you and probably less about everyone knowing which is probably what I would have said maybe ten years ago. I have maybe put some different parameters on it.

Matt: Do you consider yourself out of the closet by your own definition?

Trent: I do, yes.

Trent quickly replies that he is out of the closet. He shows a complex understanding of what the closet may be but does not consider himself in any sorts of closets at all.

Matt: Okay, so then it sounds to me like you are saying, for you the personal satisfaction or the knowledge that you are out comes around whether or not the people that you are closest to know.

Trent: Absolutely, yes.

Matt: So it seems, not as if it is less consequential to you whether or not, just a stranger knows.

Trent talks here about how he's grown and changed to a current point where he doesn't see sharing his sexual orientation openly as being as important as it once was.

Trent: Yeah, totally. I think that has definitely evolved over the years where I would say when I was younger maybe in college and "new to me" it was more important to display being gay in a certain way and ensuring that people on the street knew that I was probably gay or I was different. And maybe a little bit of the shock factor of it all. Now that I have gotten older and I think just more comfortable with myself it is less about outward appearances and what other people view me as.

I am interested here in how Trent also begins to invoke this idea of "learning the ropes" – even though he doesn't put it that way. In fact, like other participants, he's more likely to frame it as a sort of "as I've gotten older, I've gotten more comfortable with myself and therefore more comfortable in the workplace." And yet, what I am hearing from these participants is "after many years of stories and situations, I have learned to more quickly react and think on my feet, to know when to speak up and when to remain silent (closeted)."

> **Matt:** So, where does that fall for you? We are talking about the people you are closest to knowing and somebody off the street not necessarily needing to know. Where does that fall in terms of different kinds of professional and business relationships? Is that on a need-to-know basis for you?
>
> **Trent:** If I am working with someone one-on-one and they are say more of a peripheral person that I work with, versus an every day person. I think it is less important then that I get across to them vehemently that I am a gay man and you need to know that for our long meeting we are having together. If something comes up naturally in a conversation, I am not going to hide or try to change the gender of pronouns and say "oh my girlfriend."

I'm struck at this point in Trent and my conversation by how complex Trent's strategies for dealing with whether he shares he is in the closet or not are. But yet, there is also a general attitude on his part of "this is how I know how to do things and its easy now and works for me" – almost as if it's become second-hand for him. Something he doesn't even need to think about.

> **Matt:** Okay, so just like to tie things up tonight is there anything that you have talked about that you would want to talk a little more about or is there anything that you would ask or remove or add or?
>
> **Trent:** No, I was just thinking a little more about your earlier question about defining the closet because I just think that is just a really fascinating one. I guess one thing that I would

add to that is, take it for what it is worth, is that I think my definition has evolved and changed over the years as to what it has meant. But, I would say professionally and personally too, how people share their "LGBT" status or not has also changed for me. Because, I would say probably, initially in the earlier part of my career, it would be like, "well why aren't you gay at work?" It would be a thought in my head like, "oh my God, come out of the closet we all know that you are gay." So I would say that has also changed over the years for myself. "You know what? Live and let live." And if they choose to come out that's fine. I think my tolerance level even maybe for "the level of outness" has changed where I now have a lot less patience I think in my personal life, compared to my professional life. My professional life, I think it has become less of a concern, less of an interest for lack of a better term is, as whether or not they are out at work or not. It has become less of an important factor versus it has almost become more important in my personal life, as I want to surround myself with people who are comfortable with who they are and comfortable with sharing that with whom their families are. It has been really interesting to still have friends near my age group or in that surrounding age group that are still not out to their families and that is something that is just really foreign for me as I have gotten older. I just think it is an interesting paradigm shift for me thinking about how my professional views on that versus my personal views have kind of swung the pendulum.

Again, Trent attributes much of his evolved understandings as related to age but the emphasis seems more on experience to me (which he does speak to, but only as secondary to age).

Matt: So the closet for you can be a slightly different thing in the professional space than your personal space?

Trent: Yeah definitely.

Here, Trent sees closets as not only dependent on the situation, but also on where the LGBT individual is emotionally and intellectually. For him, it's a very complicated equation that is dependent on many factors. But that equation must be "worked out" quickly at the moment each individual situation of potential "outness" or "closetedness" arises.

Matt: Although it sounds like both are evolving over time?

Trent: Yeah, and I think they will continue for me. You know the cultures and groups change around you. I think that is some of it too.

Matt: I think about how we are having conversations about gay marriage now, and ten or more years ago that would have been incomprehensible.

Of course this interview took place in March of 2011 but it's fascinating to align our conversation up with President Obama's recent announcement (May 2012) of his support of marriage equality as something that has evolved over time and with conversations and experiences.

Trent: Absolutely yeah. I think that is what is interesting about working with a company like Spot-On, is that I think they like to continue to evolve and change with whatever is going on in the cultural marketplace. So again, my earlier discussion about changing fashions and being culturally relevant to specific, if it is regions of the country, or different minority groups again, Latino, African American or whatnot. I feel that the company is also trying to be nimble and evolving with what are the important things with people in the United States in general. So understanding that LGBT culture is not going away so how do we make sure we have the things in our stores that those people are going to want to see and how do we make reflective in our advertisement how people see themselves? We have had Asian people; you know we have had African American people in our advertisements so now we are starting, I feel, to evolve to the next level.

Matt: And as a non-LGBT, culture becomes more comfortable with LGBT culture than that will also dictate the level of?

Trent: Absolutely, and I think there has been blurring of lines of sexuality in general as well—gay marriage is happening and then heterosexual couples living together as common law or whatever. I think the world has just evolved and changed from one man and one woman who have to get married at twenty-two.

While participants showed a level of sympathy with the necessity of the closet in LGBTQ life, for the most part they were all quick to dismiss the concept that they themselves might be closeted in any way. In this sense, moments of hiding or concealing sexuality aren't something they see as "a big deal" – rather they see these as moments that work for them, advance or hold steady a professional or personal state. These are moments where they work to protect professional identity at the expense of personal identity.

An LGBTQ employee cannot awake in the morning knowing all the situations and conversations she or he may confront that particular day, but nonetheless she or he must be adept and agile for whatever occurs. In this same way, it's not so much that so many doorways exist, that so many closets and entries into and exits out of those closets are to be seen, but rather it's that each LGBTQ professional knows the best way that she or he can make use of these various closets and doorways in front of her or him. It is the ability to "work" the Working Closets that is so impressive and critical – that can mean the difference between success, survival, or the loss of everything.[21]

21 When I say "everything" here I do mean everything as there are instances across the last decades and centuries of LGBTQ persons suffering from outright death to physical and emotional abuse to losing their jobs and homes and being disowned by families and friends.

Making Meaning of Working Closets

Working Closets are about managing risk. For LGBTQ professionals, we are always asking "should I be 'in' now or 'out' now? Am I 'in' now, or 'out' now?" Much is at risk for LGBTQ professionals: advancement in their careers, being hired or fired, the comfort of a corporate or departmental culture, how one is treated day-to-day by coworkers or bosses, just to name a few.

These are stories about and definitions of managing these risks. The relationality and collectiveness of these definitions and stories begin to build my theory of Working Closets. True, these stories, as narrative, contradict and modify themselves. They give snapshots of moments and negotiate complex concepts with these contradictions and modifications. But closets are tenacious, they are in need of negotiation, and they are at constant odds with themselves.

One of the most useful tools for pushing at the contradictory and constantly modifying behavior of closets may lie within the Cultural Studies concept of *articulation*. J. Blake Scott summarizes articulation (as it comes to us from Cultural Studies) as:

> the ongoing process by which temporarily coherent structures … are produced out of shifting, nonessential linkages of various conditions, including identities, organizational practices, community needs, economic resources, and cultural values. (255)

The "temporarily coherent structures" in this case are participants' stories.[22] Additionally, a strong case can be made that Working Closets are themselves articulations. These articulations are negotiated in specific shifting moments. The need for these closets may exist one moment and not be needed (in nearly identical situations) later.

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22 I think there are many other temporary coherent structures here too (Spot-On communications regarding diversity and LGBTQ issues; LGBT Business Council communications, meetings, and outreach; stories from LGBTQ customers and store (non-corporate) employees of Spot-On, etc.

As I think through each of these stories and threads, I think again about these similarities and differences. I keep thinking it's not that these are big differences, it's that within the commonalities there are different ways of negotiating these stories and threads. Later, in my data analysis, I mention that my participants' stories seem to take two main approaches: to rally around the hope that connecting one's sexual self and one's professional self can bring personal wholeness and satisfaction versus the idea that LGBTQ identity will always be fractured and othered (and seen as "unprofessional") and that LGBTQ professionals/individuals must instead seek to deftly straddle borders and boundaries. In one approach, Working Closets/articulations aid in an overall goal to eradicate the need for the Working Closets in the first place. In the other approach, the Working Closets/articulations are permanent survival strategies, even desirable strategies (means available to LGBTQ persons that aren't always available to non-LGBTQ persons).

In one upcoming story, Brandi closets herself in order to liberate herself or save herself the trouble – but it's for her. In another story addressed in Chapter Four, for Trent, it's about working and not about closets. His working identity is grounded in an idea of who he is at Spot-On, and he doesn't need synchrony with LGBT identity outside of the workplace. So then, thinking about these stories, if Working Closets are plural, I believe we use them when we need them. I see them as stationed in particular sites. They offer a space for transformation to happen. Entering, or not entering the discourse in certain moments are also Working Closets. In those moments, we, as LGBTQ professionals, must literally articulate ourselves in some way that outs us or, sometimes, articulate a silence that closets us.

In *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework*, Lynn Weber writes:

> Because members of oppressed groups can withstand oppression and may even succeed while facing it, dominant group members often take that success to mean that the oppression either does not exist or is not severe. But it is not the oppression itself that

> creates the success that some people experience: it is the human will to resist oppression and overcome obstacles that make this success possible. Resistance in individual and collective forms pressures the dominant system to change and transform over time. (33)

The articulations (Working Closets) help LGBTQ professionals withstand the oppression, at times even succeed (by succeed I mean that though an LGBTQ individual may remain closeted in a certain moment or period, they achieve career success or further openness about sexuality or gender identity at a later point because they remained closeted at that moment—a sort of "live to fight another day" approach). And for some, succeeding is enough, or, rather, they see success as the only realistic short-term goal while remaining cynical about longer-term changes. But for Weber, it's vital that we see the interrelation of these things (race, class, gender, sexuality) and how they are all complicated and formed by one another and held in check by a dominant society that attempts to simplify and/or erase them over time. It's not just dealing with being LGBTQ in the workplace, it's also interrogating all dominant discourses and power structures, asking who is represented and why, or why not. This can't be done by simply "kicking open one closet door" and "being out" but instead happens over time through networks of Working Closets, through many articulations in many moments.

A recent comprehensive study by the Center for Work-Life Policy on LGBT persons in the workplace says that the roughly seven million LGBT professionals in the workplace today need "a climate that fosters inclusiveness and openness" that is "critical both to the longevity of their tenures and their ability to perform well on the job." The study, though, also notes that, "those who are not open about their sexual orientation are far more likely to feel isolated on the job and uncomfortable being themselves at work" (1). The study shows that fully 48% of LGBT employees in the workplace are not out in any way. Many are still making near-constant use of closets.

Ultimately, though, I still see a major problem with one vision of coming out, one idea of "the closet" (as evidenced in an event like "National Coming Out Day"). These ideas push for a collective or unified experience of outness and maintain that coming out is always appropriate for any LGBTQ person no matter what. But people come out whenever or however they want to come out. Or perhaps more importantly whenever and however they need (or don't need) to come out. Sometimes being "in" seems to be the liberating moment. True, being out can carry a specific rhetorical weight but that can also be a heavy weight that disrupts infrastructures, networks, and relationships. Conversely, being "in" various closets can also carry rhetorical weight.

These Working Closets actually push at the inadequacy of "the closet" or of "being out." Particular discursive spaces create sites that then offer us particular kinds of changing spaces (closets or perhaps phone booths—like the sort that Superman can run into wherever he is). These are transmission points, if you will. By being in these certain situations, we are in these discursive spaces. And we then make decisions on how we must handle these potential closets. Some closets are liberating and others seem too demeaning. Some are binding and some are freeing. In *The Truth About Stories*, Indigenous scholar Thomas King writes: "the truth about stories is that's all we are." Stories, narratives both individual and shared, "do things." That is, they bring us to, and define for us, where we are and they take us to where we are going. My participants, through their stories, their reactions, and their lived experiences are building an LGBTQ rhetoric of professional identity (or identities if you will). They are making it up as they go, and they are, as they go, offering spaces of mentorship for those who follow them.

CHAPTER FOUR

THREADS OF THE RAINBOW: STORIES AND COMMUNITIES

When working with foreign companies that do business with Spot-On, it was easier to not try and explain that I was gay. It was easier to just avoid questions around "wife and kids" and keep the conversation topical.

– anonymous Spot-On survey respondent

Identity is a river – a process.

– "To(o) Queer the Writer," Gloria Anzaldúa

In March of 2011, I traveled to the city of Minneapolis in the state of Minnesota to interview five corporate employees of Spot-On. I interviewed two women and three men, all self-identified as gay or lesbian and as open about their sexual orientation) in off-site locations around the city (from coffee shops to homes. I collected over approximately five hours of interviews (nearly 100 pages of transcripts) covering topics of closetedness, LGBTQ identity, and working at Spot-On. Here, in their stories, my participants reveal their own Working Closets. These stories[23] show their impact on their narrators, the stories ask these tellers to name the closets. I started out noticing five broad threads to examine the levels of similarity and difference across these five Spot-On corporate employees' experiences (use of story as identity negotiator, definitions of closet(s), a clear

23 When I say story here, I draw again from Thomas King in *The Truth About Stories*. In one chapter, he quotes Laguna storyteller Leslie Silko's words about stories: "They aren't just entertainment/Don't be fooled/They are all we have, you see/All we have to fight off/Illness and death. You don't have anything/If you don't have the stories" (92).

understanding of personal and professional self, making sense of Spot-On and LGBTQ issues, and aloneness versus community). At first, these threads served me well as a way of looking at my interview data. I saw them as being along a continuum, from thread one being something all five participants had in common to thread five being a topic that nearly all five participants seemed to handle differently.

But it didn't really remain that simple. *Chapter Three*, of course, is made up of participants' stories and definitions about closets/the closet and also a discussion of Working Closets as a theoretical concept. Chapter Three is fundamentally about LGBTQ professionals managing risks.

As I began to comb through the data I noticed that clear understandings of personal and professional self and ideas of aloneness versus community were actually much more intertwined than I'd realized. So instead I combined those two into a new overarching thread called "sense of self and sense of community." This thread, along with the "use of story as identity negotiator" now constitute *Chapter Four*. And to me, Chapter Four is fundamentally about LGBTQ professionals managing their relationships.

Making sense of Spot-On and LGBTQ issues has now become its own chapter, *Chapter Five*. To me this also emerged as a key topic. Each of the five participants had been so affected in one way or another by the Jones Incident, that their discussions of Spot-On's relationship to LGBTQ issues took on a kind of energy and length I wasn't anticipating.

And so, in this chapter, I will examine conversations with each of my five participants as they relate to threads two and three:

2. use of story as identity negotiator,
3. and a sense of self and a sense of community.

Along with *Chapter Three*, I believe these two threads simultaneously point to closeted moments but also disrupt those moments and assert: "there really is no (one) real closet" (of permanence).[24]

Up to this point, when thinking about Working Closets, the focus has been on the word *closets* but I wish now to shift instead to the idea of *working*. Are these Working Closets because they exist in the workplace? Are they working because they are constantly available and operative for LGBTQ professionals? Both, I believe. It would be tempting to read the following stories and say: "but your participants aren't in the closet, you're trying to closet them by emphasizing these closeted moments." But I would argue that what I'm saying is these participants are freely telling stories that both closet them (at moments) or that out them (at other moments). The stories and the storytellers are doing the maneuvering.

Thread Two: Use of Story as Identity Negotiator

The characteristic that showed itself, perhaps, most common across my five participants was the use of storytelling as a way to describe and define both LGBTQ identity as well as professional identity. In fact, the use of story seemed the first and most animated way each of the participants talked about being gay or lesbian on the job. I admit, of course, this was not only unsurprising to me but also something I looked forward to before I even arrived in Minneapolis. I myself had accumulated many stories in my years of being an LGBTQ professional. Here, I would like to offer a story or two from each of my participants.

Brandi

On a sunny and windy March day in Minneapolis, I meet Brandi at a large, spacious downtown coffee shop. Our conversation is friendly but also brief. Brandi seems happy to be

24 This echoes Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*.

meeting with me but also very to-the-point in her answers. It feels like one of those Saturdays that is too nice outside for us to be inside talking about work. I can't blame her. As she begins to talk with me, she informs me that she has been employed at Spot-On a little over two and a half years and works within the financial services division as a project manager within the IT and finance area. She leads projects and teams. She states, first off, that she has always recognized Spot-On corporate as a very inclusive culture and that everyone has seemed welcoming of her as a gay woman. She says she feels like she's been out since day one but then goes on to tell me a story from several weeks previous at Valentine's Day that involved her and a group of coworkers:

> My peer—who is male, straight, married—and I were leaving [work]. We were going to go to happy hour and then there were two other guys. One guy that was sitting here, just a great guy, we get along very well—we chitchat a lot. And his leader was also there. We walked by and I said "hey, are you going to come to happy hour?" He said "Oh no I can't go to happy hour; I have Valentine's Day duties." My peer and I were both like, "Well everybody does, but we will make it very fast. It is three-thirty for God's sake, we are ducking out early let's go." He said, "Oh, no, I have stops to make." And I responded, "Well I have stops to make too." And he goes on: "You have stops? Isn't that your husband's job?" He [then] said husband probably four times in the duration of thirty seconds… I am very out … so his boss, I could see was giving him the eye going, "Dude shut up." I had probably three or four smart-ass remarks in my hip pocket, like "my wife does not like to be called husband."

Brandi explains that she leaves the day's events choosing to say nothing to the coworker. But she continues:

> The next day I came back into work and I immediately knew I was going to go up to him and say: "Hey, just so you know, my husband is actually my wife, small misunderstanding. I am not taking offense to it." But we both saw each other in the morning and he said: "God I

> feel like such an idiot and I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry." And I think at the end of it, we both said he is lucky it was me and not somebody else. He said "I should not assume." and I said "I have never heard somebody saying husband so many times in such a short period of time…"

Brandi then said in a very "gay person-to-gay person" aside kind of way that she could have "gone down that "what gives feminism a bad name path"' but did not. We nod in agreement knowing that sometimes as gay and lesbian persons we worry about representing all LGBTQ people if we do or say something that a non-LGBTQ person sees as damaging or not upstanding. She finishes saying:

> There are certain times that I would definitely say something and then there are other times where there is not malicious intent, there isn't a teachable moment if that makes sense. I knew when we walked away his boss was going to say (to him later): "what were you thinking?"

Here Brandi's criteria for remaining closeted in the moment seem to center around ideas of how her behavior will reflect back on the larger community and whether or not there is a "teachable moment" for the non-LGBTQ person or people involved. Here Brandi is not talking about "teachable" in the classroom sense but rather as a "real world" moment where she could, or could not, show another person something.

Jason

Jason and I meet one evening at a friend's apartment after he finishes work. Jason identifies as an African-American gay male and has worked for Spot-On for three-and-a-half years (the whole time at the corporate headquarters). He has worked in three positions in the technology sector of the company and seems more cautious than Brandi about being out in the workplace.

> You just really have to be very judicious at Spot-On around whom you choose to be out to; not because they would actively do something to harm you because they know better than to do that, but because subconsciously it would just not resonate with them.

I think it's key here that Jason picks up on societal and internalized homophobia among people who don't consciously discriminate against non-heterosexual people. He goes on to complicate this noting that often colleagues see only his race and can't then comprehend conversations around sexuality. It's important to note that Jason was my only interviewee of color. Out of five interviewees, two were female, three were male and four were white. In Jason's interview, questions of diversity and acceptance always showed issues of sexuality and race to be inextricably woven together. For Jason (by his own admission) it was impossible for him to talk about one without the other. I felt it would have been fascinating to continue to interview LGBTQ persons of color who worked for Spot-On, though the scope of this study did not allow it. Interestingly, the proportion of non-white persons interviewed (20%) is higher than the actual percentage of non-white persons working for Spot-On corporate.

> Everyone [at Spot-On] sort of sees things one-dimensionally because it's easier to label or to just put someone up as, "Oh, that's Jason. He's the smart, black guy." I was on this diversity committee and one of the things we were really trying to promote was an inclusive culture. Part of that was telling diversity stories – our own, personal stories around diversity to various senior leaders in our organization. I always used the story about how people would just assume that I'm diverse only because I'm African American. And they would just be so shocked to find out that I'm also gay. It's like they just assumed that, "Oh, you're diverse enough" or "Black and gay? How does that work?" You know?

Jason then mentions yet another story during his time at Spot-On:

> I was on the LGBT business council. That was one of the first things I did to calibrate myself to Spot-On in a very sort of couched way because it's a softer sell to say, "I'm on the LGBT business council," than it is to say, "I'm a gay man." And then, the connections are made without you actually having to say them. So, we were having, about a year ago, a lot of conversations in the business council and training sessions around transgender identity, and it was just really interesting stuff learning just from a educational perspective. I went back and I talked to my manager about it because she asked: "what did you do over lunch?" and I said: "well, I was at the LGBT business council. They had a brown bag around transgender identity and some of the initiatives that Spot-On is undertaking around being transgender." And she was just looking at me and asked point blank, "What is transgender?" And, you know, how, when you get into a situation you realize how wide the chasm truly is, and how sometimes, you really have to meet someone where they're at."

At this point in the interview, Jason and I both marvel over this story, pointing out that no one ever says (in a workplace): "What is a stepchild?" or "What is alimony?" These are the languages and stories of heteronormative society. Jason continues:

> When she asked me that–she was really trying to educate herself and come at me from an authentic, well-meaning place. But it was like: "Wow, she doesn't know what transgender is, but she's really asking, she's trying to teach herself. So, I shouldn't judge her for that, but how am I going to answer?" And I'm thinking all of this while I'm trying to figure out how to answer her question. And so, you know, I described as best I could this entire context, and she was like, "Oh, okay. So, you're saying that we have transgender employees here at Spot-On?" I'm like, "Yeah, we do here in IT, I know of a couple." And she was like, "Oh, I didn't have any understanding of that."

Jason goes on to say that he knows this was a learning experience for his manager who later told him that she was "counting on him" as an LGBTQ employee to educate her and keep her up-to-date on issues and concerns in the company for LGBTQ persons. Jason and I only touch on it briefly, but Jason states that he feels here he is acting as a sort of "ambassador" to non-LGBTQ persons on behalf of transgender persons. As a gay African-American male with a military background, Jason himself does not identify as transgender in any way. LGBTQ persons often find themselves in this position—having to answer for, defend, or explain parts of our diverse community with which we may not closely identify. "I take for granted as part of my social identity and the construct – that language isn't necessarily out there." Jason says. We both take a minute to think about this. We must keep re-educating and re-explaining our lives and stories over-and-over again.

Klaus

Klaus is a very friendly and energetic kind of guy. We meet one evening after work at his house and he seems happy to share freely. He identifies as a 40-year old Caucasian gay male. He has worked at Spot-On a little over seven years—all within the Spot-On headquarters between merchandizing the Internet division and within human resources. He opens up, telling me a story about an uncomfortable moment for him recently:

> I had gotten a new director for the division I was in at Spot-On. He wanted to go out to lunch. We were standing there waiting for a table at the restaurant and we were talking about how we both work out at the same gym. He started making comments about how there are no hot women to look at there. That right away set me off a little bit. Like, "Oh, God, how do I fit into this?" Because I've never felt that I was closeted at work, but then with the fact that he was making comments about hot women to me made me feel like I needed to fit into some sort of boys' club. And I didn't really feel comfortable playing that game or even trying to pretend because I had never really kept it hidden before anyway. So, I don't think I would

have fooled him, but I didn't really know how to respond. But the fact that he felt comfortable, you know, having that conversation, which I guess people could construe that differently, but my impression was like, "Oh, so this is the world that he's used to being able to talk about this stuff without really understanding what implications that might have to the person that he's talking to." So, to me, that made me feel very uncomfortable. And then, I felt like because I couldn't fit to his mold that I could potentially therefore be thought of differently than other people who did.

Klaus chooses to remain silent. There's too much at stake for him. He offers another story:

I received a plaque from the LGBT Business Council thanking me for the accomplishments in 2009. It was framed – had pictures. Well, in my cube, I was ashamed to say I didn't want to display it because I was like, "Well, you know, I should be proud of the work I've done and who I am. And I shouldn't have to feel like I need to hide who I am at work." But yet, I still consciously decided where I was going to put it on my desk so that it wouldn't be readily visible to people. Because as I'm having get-to-know-you's with people, or people are coming wanting to learn more about a project I'm working on, I didn't want them to necessarily see that right away and then – without knowing anything about them, have that some way influence their judgment over me.

Matt: So, was that an unexpected moment when you felt like you were kind of put back into a closet momentarily?

Klaus: Uh-huh, yeah.

Klaus seems to advocate for a kind of "in-between" outness, partially closeted and partially out—and he always errs on the side of safety, of not offending the wrong audience.

Sue

Sue and I met at her house one weeknight after work. Sue, her partner, and their two children, live in a large, beautifully maintained old home in St. Mark's (a large city that borders Minneapolis). She and her partner are warm and welcoming to me and we exchange hellos and introductions before her partner takes their children out for a bit so that Sue and I can talk quietly. Sue identifies as a lesbian woman. She is a Caucasian woman who works for Spot-On as an IT manager. I ask her about experiences around being gay at Spot-On and she jumps in:

> There are times when, you know, you're in a conference room. You're in a meeting, and people are shooting the shit, and they're talking about their wife. They did this over this weekend, da, da, da, da. And at that point, I–depending on who's in the room, may choose to talk about my personal life, or I may not. So, it's not just like I can say, "Oh, yeah. Me and my partner, we went to da, da, da, da, da." So, there are definitely times when I will choose to not share that just because, again, I'm not in the mood for whatever reason. I don't know if I was thinking, "Oh, I'm going to – you know, I'm gonna get fired," or anything like that, but I think it was more about what I would have to think about, "How are these people gonna react when I say this?" And so, it was – I just knew it was gonna take energy for me to do that.

I then ask Sue if she thinks it's fair to say that this is one of those moments that she had mentioned previously in the interview where she just didn't "wanna put your activist pants on." "Right, yes, yes, yes, yes!" she answers unequivocally.

Trent

Trent and I meet one evening at his condo in South Minneapolis. We settle in and talk over a soft drink about his time at Spot-On. He identifies as a gay man and tells me he is in his mid-thirties and has worked for Spot-On Corporate for eleven years and has had about six different

positions primarily in merchandising roles. Trent mentions two stories about making decisions regarding being in or out of the closet.

> Last summer I was starting in a new area at Spot-On and moving into a new position, and I was having a conversation with my new boss and talking about a friend coming to visit and really didn't want to take the time or the energy to really share about me being gay and my friend being gay even though it was relevant to why we had become friends and how we had been friends for so long, but it was just easier to pass through that at that moment.

For Trent, even though it's one of his best friends of many years, it's not worth it to him to risk a new boss making judgments about his personal life (even though she is showing an interest in his personal life and why he's taking the time off work). He then tells a second story around one position he was in at Spot-On that required frequent trips overseas:

> I would say probably earlier in my career, I would think, "I wonder if they know that I am gay and I am not out with a girlfriend on the weekend?" But, I have never really felt like "oh, I have to hide this." I would say the only experience was that I used to do some international travel for work and it was probably more about international customs than it necessarily was about the company I worked for. It was more about the fact that in East Asian cultures my assumption is, or what I have experienced is that people are less outwardly gay. There have definitely been times where I have been out to "business dinners" with East Asian partners that we work with as far as other client groups, and the question has come up, "do you have a wife?" It has actually just been easier and more convenient for me to say, "Nope do not have a wife. Nope do not have a girlfriend, do not have kids, I am single." Because I don't think I am necessarily lying to myself nor am I lying to them. If someone was to ask, and people have asked me in our foreign offices, "are you gay?" I definitely would answer the

question and say "yeah, absolutely. Yep, that is who I am." But, I guess I just wait for it to be more of a pointed question than at a formal dinner environment.

Trent seems confident in his sexuality, yet he also seems unhesitatingly willing to leave his sexuality out of professional conversations and situations if it may hurt him in any way or require him to put a high level of energy and skillful navigation into things. How does Trent (or any LGBTQ person) know or judge when a situation may be hurtful or too much work? This seems to play out differently for different individuals, but it does seem true that most LGBTQ persons, when confronted, will choose safety and silence. Trent and I then continue our conversation:

Matt: So in that moment you decided not to go into it with your boss because that person was the new boss?

Trent: Yeah, I would say it was primarily the fact that it was a newer relationship with her and I hadn't really established who we were and she is a bit more of a, I want to say, not "professional person" but just a little bit more of a topical surface person and kind of a "down to business" type of woman.

Matt: So you didn't want to feel like you strayed too far into personal matters if that was going to make her uncomfortable or both of you uncomfortable?

It occurs to me at this point in the conversation too that straight people also often do this at work –make key decisions about when to share personal information or not ("does my boss really want me to volunteer the names, ages, and interests of all of my children right now?") but of course there is usually much less at stake for them professionally at these moments. So in that respect, these LGBTQ participants seem much more attuned to the risks of such behavior.

Trent: Yeah, and honestly in retrospect I was thinking it wasn't necessarily about the fact that she would know whether or not I was gay, it was kind of a combination of A) she is a "keeping things very professional" and not getting personal and B) a little more of the fact

of like, I think she knew that I'm gay, but I really didn't want to open that door right then and we really did not have time.

Matt: So do you feel like you know much about her personal life now? Has that been revealed?

Trent: Yeah. I would say that I know a little bit more about her personal life but I would say comparatively speaking to some bosses that I have had at Spot-On. I think I definitely know less about her.

Matt: It sounds that was a little bit of a tactical decision. Making sure that information is shared at the appropriate time.

Trent: Yeah, I think definitely it is very much a tactical thing of being able to read that person and A) what is their background and what are their experiences and B) is it the appropriate time to share this or is it more of a business setting.

Each participant mentions a moment of closetedness, of awkward shame (even if imposed by others and not self-shame) or self-awareness that keeps them from feeling wholly accepted or present in a workplace scenario. Never does one of them use the term closet to describe these moments. In fact, as we'll see in the next section, the more "formal" idea of a closet within the LGBTQ community is often something with which they disidentify. Here, I again I use Muñoz's concept of disidentification which is centered on "survival strategies" that minority subjects practice in order to negotiate phobic majoritarian public spheres that punish these subjects for nonconformity to normative spaces/behaviors—in other words, using what's available to you to deconstruct/go against the norm (5).

Thread Three: Sense of Self and Sense of Community

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, thread three grew out of what had originally been two individual threads: "a clear understanding of personal and professional self" and

"aloneness versus community." My thinking originally had been that each of my five participants seemed to exhibit a pretty strong sense of who they were both professionally and personally (in their non-work lives). However, their ideas about what was ideal and even available to them as LGBTQ persons both at Spot-On and in their non-work lives seemed more at odds on the continuum. Once I began to again look at my dialogues with them I realized that often these conversations were very tied together. Some, for example, seemed less involved in gay culture or gay activism and life but also seemed happy with it. Others seemed to follow an idea of a "home life" (partners and children) while others did not. Again, they seemed very different in how they felt about that.

Sue

Sue and I have an in-depth conversation about the idea of continuity between work self and non-work self. She succinctly talks about her desire to be the same person in both places:

> **Matt:** Okay, I don't want to put words in your mouth. It sounds like though you consider yourself overall to be an out person in your life, including your professional life, even though we understand and agree that there are these moments where we come and go, right?
>
> **Sue:** Right, yes.
>
> **Matt:** Why for you is it important to be out?
>
> **Sue:** Because otherwise, I feel like I'm lying and to be in the closet at work, I would just be lying everywhere. It's really important for me to be truthful and honest—just kind of my own value.
>
> **Matt:** And that aligns, it sounds like you're saying, with how you see yourself in terms of what values you hold professionally, too – to be an honest and truthful person?
>
> **Sue:** Right, yes.
>
> **Matt:** It sounds connected for you.

Sue: Yeah, there's a part of this that I also wonder about my values and my politics, and they're pretty closely entwined. I think that would be an area where I sometimes get the conflicts at work because to me, to be out, there's also the political realm of that. And that I would say that actually the interesting thing right now that recently happened because of the whole Jones Incident thing is that I realized, "Oh, my God. I'm a bleeding heart liberal Democrat." And I felt like I had to be a closeted Democrat at work, but I could be an out lesbian.

Sue is the only participant to get overtly into politics in the workplace and to clearly tie Spot-On's "business friendly" corporate culture to more conservative ways of acting and behaving in the work place (though other participants certainly get at this too less directly).

Matt: Hum, interesting! Because of the ideas of business-friendly culture?

Sue: Exactly, yeah. And I almost felt like this past year I had more conflicts with that than actually being out.

Matt: I understand this as somebody who grew up in a very conservative background in a family in the Midwest, and then, was in the technology industry. I was a technical writer for a long time. But then going into academia, just further, and further, and further left. This makes sense to me. There have been times where I've felt I had to be more closeted about that.

Sue: Right, yeah. So, I think it's interesting because it's important for me to be out, but it's not important for every gay person to be out. And, you know, I think to me it's about being truthful, but it's also about wanting to make change, and that hoping that if people realize that I'm out, and I'm hopefully just seen as a normal, typical person that, you know, gay people aren't really that scary.

Matt: Uh-huh, but I think it kind of gets at thinking about balance and intertwinedness, and you've already used that word once or twice tonight. Thinking about the ways that the person that comes home at night is the same as the person who went to work that morning, you know? To have your spouse, to have your children, and to have your home as a safe place for you, but then to be comfortable in your job. So, can you speak a little bit to… I don't know what the term is for that. Would you call that an alignment? or an intertwinedness?

Sue: Uh-huh.

Matt: I guess what I'm asking is do you feel like you've achieved that or can achieve that? And clearly, that's important to you to achieve that.

Sue: I still feel like, when I go to work, I'm my work person and that's my work culture, which is different than my home culture. So, I definitely am still going back and forth between different cultures. The other thing is, is that I often think about, "What if Spot-On was all gay people and how would I be in there? Would I be any different?" And I would be different. I would feel totally different. So, I think there's something about when you walk into a room full of gay people, you know right away you don't have to explain yourself at all. Even though, at work, I'm out, I'm at work still. We're all professionals; they know I'm gay, but there still will be times when I have to explain myself, you know?

Brandi

Brandi, like the other participants, seems resistant to talk about incongruencies in her professional and personal lives as a split but she does also describe, in the details, many moments of Working Closets. Here we discuss the idea of whether you can in fact be that same person at work and at home:

Matt: So to what degree do you think about your identity as a lesbian woman in your personal and private life? How does that then translate into like feeling like a whole person back at home? Would you say that there is reciprocity there, in terms of a rewarding job and when you come home to your wife?

Brandi: Yeah, I would say that it definitely, that is a good word, reciprocity because I think you could maintain your whole being both at work and at home. So, you do not have to turn one part on or off depending on where you are at if that makes sense.

Matt: Okay so there is not a split?

Brandi: No.

Matt: I am curious to know about your process of growing up and when you came out and how that was for you. I mean does that feel like a big change from what you once had to deal with at a younger time in your life?

Brandi: Yeah, so I didn't come out until I was in my twenties. My family has always been supportive. I have always had great friends but I guess it just took me a little bit longer. I think I feel that at work I have been much more successful when I have been able to totally be myself.

Matt: So do you think of times previous to your late twenties, when you had jobs, there was that kind of unhappiness or that feeling of bound or hands tied that you feel, maybe not in your job performance but certainly affected whether you were happy or content in your early relationships.

Brandi: Oh yeah.

Jason

In addition to issues of being gay and African-American, Jason also talks candidly and in detail about his military experiences (past and present) and how those affect his views on being out at work and in his own life:

> **Jason:** ...when I left the military in late 2006/early 2007 – I was really looking for a corporate job where I could be out because really at that point in my life, I really wanted to try to figure out what it would be like to bring your whole self to work. And out of all the places that I had offers for, I went with the one that I thought gave me the best opportunity to work through that process and that was Spot-On. And it was namely because of its progressive reputation. What happened though—which was interesting—when I got to Spot-On I felt like I really had to navigate the Spot-On culture. I think Spot-On is very accepting just in general, but there's a difference between accepting and inclusive. It took me a while to realize that it was okay for me to be whoever I was at the time, but that in order for me to be, I guess, included in the Spot-On culture, I would still have to gauge where, and how, and what my interactions would be as far as being out or not.
>
> **Matt:** I think probably anybody has that in a new job, but then I feel like maybe it's compounded, you know, when you're thinking about it (as an LGBT person).
>
> **Jason:** And especially when you're coming from a place where the previous opportunities were so stark black and white, and then going into Spot-On thinking that anything would be better than what you came from. Then, still realizing that you have to find that curve within Spot-On, which obviously, isn't as bad as Don't Ask Don't Tell. But there are still some not-so-subtle ramifications of your actions and knowing where that boundary is. So, that first year or so, it was just very interesting. I found myself boomeranging.

Matt: I'm assuming that in that first year you're thinking about coworkers and you're thinking about the structure of things, right? So who you're reporting to, and who they're reporting to, and then, the people that are alongside you. Do you feel like that took the form of just trying to feel out how their reactions would be?

Jason: Yes, everyday work environment, and comments, or things that were said or not said. Everything was, or is, either not talked about at all, or it's very subtle, very nuanced. And I didn't realize how conservative people's attitudes were until I started disclosing information. Then, you just really have to be very judicious at Spot-On who you choose to be out to; not because they would actively do something to harm you because they know better than to do that, but because subconsciously it would just not resonate with them.

Matt: Yeah. What do you think about—I'm curious—being a person who is African American… how do you negotiate the difference between that line with visible and invisible minority because people often talk about sexual orientation as an invisible minority, which I don't fully agree with anyway. I think that there are plenty of people who are LGBT who can't be invisible.

Matt: Well, and then there are things that come into play with being ex-military.

Jason: And in trying to manage that external relationship and that external engagement, and deal with my own internal struggles, it just took a lot of work. And I felt like in a lot of ways, I was coming out all over again.

Matt: Right. I've felt that way, too. Is that coming out is a recursive thing. You're back and forth, and you're always coming out. It's exhausting in its own way, right?

Jason: Right.

Here the idea of exhaustion, a certain level of not being able to handle the incredible amount of effort it takes at times to be out and to maintain LGBTQ identity and presence comes up again. This happens across several of the participants.

Matt: One of the things you said a few minutes ago at the beginning was that one of the things that appealed to you about coming to Spot-On was that it was a much more inclusive space, potentially, than where you had been, or at least you were hopeful.

Jason: Well, that's what I perceived it to be, and a lot of that really was – because once I got there, I realized that a lot of that was perception. It wasn't really proven other than there were other out people that worked there. And most of those people who were out, and comfortable, and ran in larger groups did not work in IT. So, it's just like, whoa, okay. So, if I was in marketing, or merchandizing, or HR, you know, it would be a lot easier for me to build peer networks, and relationships, and everything else. You know, because the leaders over in those spaces get it because they either know someone in their own peer group that's gay or they have someone that reports to them that's gay. Being in IT, there are other gay people; it's just that it's a minuscule amount.

Matt: It does, though, put me in mind of military culture and the ways that assumptions get made. Like, you know, if you're a hairdresser versus if you're a solider. So, it makes me think about, like, the Balkanization within companies, right? Like, you've said, being in IT certainly means a different thing.

Jason: Right.

Matt: So, well, keeping that in mind it was certainly a factor it sounds like in choosing this job.

Jason: Yes.

Matt: So, when you think about talking to your friends or your family – I don't know your levels of outness with those people, but the people that you're close to – did you find yourself expressing that at the time that you took the job or have you since?

Jason: Yeah, I have. And I mean, I have a really close group of friends who are also ex-military gay friends, part of my core group. We all got out of the military for various reasons and navigating that whole post-military gay man experience was part-and-parcel of our discussions because we all went about it in our own way, and we all had our own different landing spots. You know, one of them ended up being a consultant, the other ended up going into federal government, and I ended up going corporate. We still do stay in very close contact even though we're geographically spread out. And when we were going through that transition, we were all very much "How are we going to act in a—as gay men—now that we're out of the military?"

Matt: I'm sure you've had some interesting conversations, too, given what's been going on just over the last year with Don't Ask Don't Tell.

Jason: Yeah, oh, yeah.

Matt: I can't imagine what that's like—I think about just talking to my niece, who's 18, about people being out in my high school. So, I can't imagine looking back and saying, "What would it have been like for me had I been–?"

Jason: Oh, well, I mean, that's a whole – I mean, we could have a whole, entire, other conversation. I mean, because I was at the Air Force Academy before and during Don't Ask Don't Tell. I mean, and I'm still a reservist in the Air Force. I'm not on active duty, obviously, but yeah.

Matt: So, there's a very, like, specific culture there.

Jason: Yeah.

Klaus

Klaus and I talk quite a bit about the LGBT Business Council at Spot-On and about Spot-On's idea of bringing "your whole self" to work. Humor and honesty again become important parts of the conversation between us as two gay men. It feels like a "rap session" where we are both ranting a bit about how gay culture isn't often taken seriously. This seems to come up against Spot-On's conservative idea of its corporate culture.

Matt: So, I've heard a couple of people say in these interviews this slogan of, "Bring your whole self to work."

Klaus: Oh, that's a Spot-On motto, yeah.

Matt: Yeah, and what's the reality of that for you? I'm not asking you to speak on behalf of other LGBT people in the company, but what do you do with that? I mean, A) Is that true for you? And B) If it is or isn't, how do you handle that?

Klaus: I'm kind of laughing and it's funny because I'm just thinking if you really think about that, "Bring your whole self to work," I mean what does that really mean?

Matt: Do you show up in ass-less chaps?

[laughter]

Klaus: Exactly, I mean, do they understand what that means? To me, it's more like "you bring your whole self to work within limitations" is really what they're saying. You know?

Matt: Right.

Klaus: I don't think anybody really wants you to bring your whole self to work.

Matt: Well, because doesn't the term "professional" automatically carry with it its own baggage and it's own understanding of things, right?

Klaus: Uh-huh.

Matt: Disrupting that for anybody, not just LGBT culture or identity, but thinking about other kinds of diversity. I'm just curious about that phrase because it seems like really if people took them literally, it would undo a lot of the rest of the culture that they're trying to promote.

Klaus: Well, to me, I start thinking about bringing my whole self to work and I think about even when I'm working and when I used to be on the Business Council and I'd work with some people on the Business Council. We would joke about, you know, lesbian stereotypes. We would joke about gay stereotypes. We would – you know, people would make comments about cute boys, or, you know, cute girls, and to me, at least from my experience in the gay community, that's kind of standard repertoire, you know?

Matt: Yeah. Humor, and irreverence, and a little bit bawdiness.

Klaus: Being able to have those types of comments and conversations with anybody at work would be more bringing my whole self to work. But I know I could never do that with my straight coworkers – or the majority of them. So, I don't believe I could really bring my whole self to work.

Matt: Well, it gets back to the different kinds of diversity across Spot-On. So, let's say we can talk about the ways that Latino or Hispanic employees from their cultural heritage value the close-knitness of family, right? Or even African Americans, right?

Klaus: Uh-huh.

Matt: So, there are things that I think we cherish as a part of LGBT culture; they just are sometimes maybe seen or labeled in different ways by non-LGBT culture.

Klaus: Uh-huh.

Matt: And so like you said, we don't really get to actually bring those in, but yet, they're still there among LGBT people.

Klaus: Well, you know, Fridays are business casual days at Spot-On. You can wear jeans and stuff. Their other acceptable type of clothing is ethnic garb. So, what you'll see sometimes are people from India wearing a sari or something like that. Every now and then, you'll see something that's even a little bit more beyond what you would expect. One time I saw some guy wearing a kilt. So you know, ethnic garb. So they say ethnic garb is okay. Well, then, does that mean I can wear ass-less chaps because that could be part of LGBT ethnic garb? And I think I joked with my boss about that once and she's like, "You would never do that!"

Matt: Or like the Dykes on Bikes person coming in, in full Harley gear or whatever, right?

Klaus: Uh-huh.

Matt: So – or could we do drag, right?

Humor again is an important part of a conversation between myself and the participants.

Klaus: Uh-huh, and I think that is sort of the interesting thing where I think there's been some challenge to the LGBT inclusiveness at Spot-On (or probably at any corporation)—is that there isn't a well-defined, or socially-accepted culture, or ethnicity whereas the Hispanics do have, for example. You know, they'll have Hispanic Food Day or something. Well, for LGBT, do we do a high-fashion day or…

Matt: Or are we going to educate people about, like, safer sex practices? Or even just enjoyable sex practices, right?

Klaus: Yeah! I mean there's so much of our culture that's still for a lot of people taboo or uncomfortable. The one other thing I wanted to throw in—and I think it does relate to bring your whole self to work—but when Taylor and I used to work in two different buildings we carpooled to work together. So, there were times where we would walk into the lobby of the building where you have all of these people coming and going.

Matt: And there's a kiss-you-goodbye moment, right?

Klaus: So, a few times we gave each other a kiss goodbye and I just decided, "I just can't do this. It's just too uncomfortable. I don't know who is walking by. Are they going to be like, 'Oh, ick,' or 'Yuck'?" And then, will I ever have some sort of encounter with that person in my workspace where they have some sort of influence over what happens to me? The funny thing is that, though we always like to talk about how this stuff doesn't come into play… how the workplaces is objective, but so much of the decisions that are made are subjective and it's not spoken verbally, but it's thought and that goes into the decision process on whether they'll support you or not. And I was just thinking, "I don't want to risk my career over this."

Matt: How do you feel that then, in turn, played back in your relationship? Was that something that Taylor was okay with? Do you think that there are other (LGBT) couples where that's an issue too?

Klaus: We never really talked about it and I've always wondered if he's been a little bit upset about it, but, you know, he's never said… I kind of look at it as a two-way street, too. He's never really tried to initiate it any more either, so…

Matt: I am just curious about whether or not there are all these moment for us as LGBT people where we're okay with things, meaning we'll live. We'll be okay. But are we really okay over the long term? Is there going to be a moment when we're 85 or whatever and we say, "Gosh, I sacrificed this thing for my career"? And in certain moments, I think, we're still being asked to make decisions.

Klaus: Uh-huh.

Matt: And that's a really good story that you just told. I mean, that's a moment where you had to make a decision, you know, between the two, you know, the personal and the professional, right?

Sue

Sue talks about juggling the identities of not only lesbian and corporate professional but also as mother and spouse:

> I think being a lesbian and my career—I purposely picked the organization where I want to work so that I can be out. So, it definitely is a huge factor for me. So, there are a couple of things. One is I need to be out and I need to be at a workplace where there are benefits provided for my family. So, that's one thing. I just need to be out, and I think it's changed a lot, particularly with my kids. I just have always felt I've wanted to be out in the workplace. So, from the beginning, going to work at Spot-On, I mean, I chose working there specifically because I knew it was a okay place for me to be out (Sue).

Trent

The conversation between Trent and I is interesting because it again touches so clearly on his evolution into a person who doesn't really need to see his professional and personal identity as completely unified. Of course, as a single professional, Trent's ideas about being out seem, at times, more tied to a "party boy" mentality of the past. I do get the sense though that Trent still knows how to have fun and has many LGBTQ friends and an open social life, but he also seems much more deft at handling how to move in and out of that life and how that life relates to his career.

> **Matt:** How do you see your identity in your private and personal life and how do you see your identity when you go to work in the morning?
>
> **Trent:** Sure, that is a great question. I feel like it has been one of those evolutions that as years have gone by, I have become more comfortable just in my skin. So, I think my professional career as well as my own just personal life of being comfortable with the person that you are. I don't know if there is that major of a difference anymore between who the person that I am outside of work versus who the person I am at work. Outside of work, I

think especially in my early twenties, was more of party, I am going to go out and be crazy and do all these crazy "gay things" and then I have to go to work and be all buttoned up. I am going to be totally professional, I am going to have my suit on, and I am going to be like very stoic and whatnot. But, as the years have gone by I have had friends that who have said to me, "you are pretty much the same person at work as that you are at home."

Matt: So thank God there was no Facebook for you in your twenties right to worry about?

Trent: Exactly and Lord only knows…

[laughter]

My discussion with Trent here too is the only one with my five participants that touches overtly on digital identity and spaces. The complexity that social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have introduced are especially relevant and becoming more so in light of several recent articles about employers asking employees to log into their social networking sites at work and show the content to managers.

Matt: Watching out for those pictures right?

Trent: Exactly, and I think that is actually a really great point. I am friends on Facebook with many work people that I interact with at work.

Matt: So it sounds like you are saying in a way that it is something that is kind of lived into and grown into anyway.

Trent: I would say definitely. I think it has been interesting because I had a friend that used to work at Spot-On that is African American and gay and I would always joke saying, "well you know he had another layer to try to figure out because he also was African American." That was not something "that he could hide" or chooses to share at certain times. People knew when they went to a face-to-face meeting with him oh, Josh is African American. But components of my life that make me "diverse and different from other people" are things

that I can choose to share or choose to not share. Like how I am talking with this person and I am talking to that person, I am talking to a peer, or I am talking to a sub-ordinate, I am talking to a superior. How do you alter those different things? We call it "Spot-On-ese"—knowing your audience. How do you adjust that as needed? It is very, very true and I think in the business professional career that I have, but I also then have that layer of being; you know LGBT identified. What is the right audience, what is the right place, what is the right amount of information? How do I know this person? To what extent do I know this person? Do I sense it is a safe sharing time? Is it the right moment in time or not?

Matt: Things that they are not teaching straight guys in the MBA program.

Trent: Exactly, absolutely. So, I think it has made me feel like I am more nimble sometimes.

Matt: Yeah right. What I would expect too probably there have been moments where you are attuned or picking up on things that maybe the typical person may not. You know like, "oh we need to not handle this person in the same way we maybe handle everyone else."

Trent: I think that is probably a really fair observation. I feel like I do have a tendency to really want to listen to people and hear their point of view. You are going to have two different approaches or at least my personal viewpoint is that you should have two different approaches and when you are having those conversations with those people you know and being directive, versus a directive and assertive, versus being more open and listening and more like sharing of experiences. So yeah, I think it has helped me to be able to have that broader skill set of changing your tune, as you need to with things and changing what your approach is on things as well.

Closet Stories and Closet Rifts

In addition to *Chapter Three's* closet definitions, these two threads: the use of story and a sense of self and community become important foundations as well in building a theory of Working

Closets. My participants all show a need to frame experiences of being in and out at work in storytelling practices. Additionally, each participant seeks to describe and understand a clear sense of self as an LGBTQ person but also an ability to connect with the larger Spot-On LGBTQ community. Each of these threads shows the same kind of contestedness that the participants' definitions of the closet show in the previous chapter. But that's kind of a "duh" moment, yes? We can all see that these participants have highly complex ways of dealing with and talking about sexuality in both personal and professional spaces (and the interspaces between the two), so what? But the "so what" is how they continually do this with little self-awareness that they really do it. They continue to manage both the risks of being in or out at work and the relationships they have in the workplace (and how they are in and out in relation to those). They do this in such highly skilled ways over years and years of practice through nearly infinite situations. Each participant resists, albeit subtly at times, any kind of admission of intentional closetedness. As I move into Chapter Five's discussion of these participants' complicated relationship to Spot-On's handling of LGBTQ issues and employees, this subtle resistance becomes even more obvious as we see the participants express frustration and anger but also a kind of hopeful loyalty with Spot-On.

CHAPTER FIVE

MISSING THE MARK: SPOT-ON, LGBTQ PROFESSIONALS' STORIES, AND THE JONES INCIDENT

An alternative view, now beginning to attract more and more proponents, is that events are not the external raw materials out of which narratives are constructed, but rather the reverse: Events are abstractions from narrative. It is the structures of signification in narrative that give coherence to events in our understanding, that enable us to construct in the interdependent process of narration and interpretation a coherent set of interrelationships that we call an 'event.'

– Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative, *Richard Bauman*

Seems odd to never ask: 'what is at stake for me?

– Julie Lindquist

Spot-On's relationship to LGBTQ issues, especially recently has clearly affected each of my five participants deeply. And yet, as with the other threads and topics of this study, the participants feel extremely conflicted and ambiguous about these issues.

The Jones Incident occurred nearly four years ago. It is so named after a senior Spot-On executive who authorized contributions through a political action committee (PAC) to an anti-gay state level political candidate. This was a shock to Spot-On LGBTQ employees and customers who had come to see Spot-On as an extremely LGBTQ-friendly corporation over the years. Both the mainstream American media and the LGBTQ media and blogosphere portrayed the LGBTQ reaction as bordering on outrage and frustration. Certainly much outrage and frustration was present, but the stories I collected among Spot-On employees told a much more diverse and complicated story.

And a study I had originally designed without the anticipation of the Jones Incident was suddenly very much clouded by this event. This was an unexpected moment in some ways. I hadn't prepared overtly for the Jones Incident to come up so often or to such a high level. I had avoided the Jones Incident outright because I wasn't sure of the level to which LGBTQ employees might want to avoid it. I thought: "perhaps they'll fear talking about such a negative incident at their place of employment." But in each case, the participants themselves brought it up without my prompting. But of course this chapter is about much more than just the Jones Incident. It's about how these particular participants view Spot-On culture as it relates to LGBTQ issues and to them as LGBTQ employees. You can see, in the exchanges a real open struggle at times to balance what does and doesn't matter to them—which things that Spot-On has or hasn't done can be tolerated and what leaves them wishing for better things.

So, in this chapter, I've decided to, for the most part, let the interview exchanges speak for themselves. Our discussions felt honest and raw and because so much of the back-and-forth felt evenly-balanced I think that it's best presented with minimal analysis here.

Diversity and Flattening as a Lens

A few days ago, while the draft of this dissertation was with my chair for her comments and feedback, I had an epiphany moment through a conversation on both Facebook and Twitter with my friend and colleague Michael Faris who is finishing up his PhD this semester too at Penn State University. While overhearing a conversation in a coffee shop, Michael posted in frustration about the ways that ostensibly liberal people often advocate for ideas of diversity that "flatten" the field. He posted:

> After overhearing an undergraduate at Starbucks explain how "Rent" is successful because it makes homosexuals, drugs, and HIV "human" and "relatable" to audiences, and my cringing

over the "flattening" of difference to mean "sameness," I'm reminded of Jonathan Alexander's important blog post from a few years ago.

At this moment, before I even read the excerpt of Alexander's work that Faris invoked, I knew what he was about to quote… I had read that piece years ago as well and had forgotten what a rich discussion Alexander gives. I realized that I, and my participants had been already talking about Alexander's idea of flattening in our discussions of Spot-On's advocacy of "acting brand" and in participants' stories of feeling like "second class diversity citizens at the diversity table" of Spot-On.

And Alexander's words from that 2008, CCCC blog post? He writes:

> As such, a significant part of my concern with relying on narration of difference has to do with what I call the "flattening effect," or the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) erasures of difference that occur when narrating stories of the "other." Such a "flattening effect" arises out of the unexamined assumption that "understanding" and then "tolerance" or even "respect" are predicated on "identity." By "identity," I mean not just the acknowledgement that other identities exist, but that those identities are, in essence, somehow identical to your own. Whether you're black, gay, Latino, disabled, or whatnot, you are still fundamentally human, concerned with similar core issues and very likely sharing core values, if not specific beliefs. Attaining "respect," then, means that many of us have our differences essentially elided by an overriding narrative of shared humanity. (CCCC)

This is the lens I want to invoke in this chapter. Michael and my conversation and his reminder to me of Alexander's words rang true. A narrative of shared humanity is much easier for Spot-On, one that doesn't have to openly deal with "icky ideas" like sexual practices and queer ways of speaking, being, and acting. Similarly, the Jones Incident reveals that Spot-On, as a capitalist entity is primarily concerned with profit margins and as such found itself contributing to business-friendly candidates who also happened to have socially conservative agendas. This was another

example of flattening as the assumption that all Spot-On employees would appreciate a business friendly culture first and foremost regardless of social and human diversity issues became a controversy and public relations disaster.

Making Sense of Spot-On and LGBTQ Issues

When asked about the relationship of Spot-On to both LGBTQ employees and issues, Brandi mentions the Jones Incident right away:

> **Matt:** Yeah, could you tell me because I am not this familiar with it maybe as you are. So was it that people on the board or the executive board made those donations individually or did Spot-On make that?
>
> **Brandi:** That is a good question. It actually came out of Spot-On's fund, but I think – I do not believe that there was due diligence done. I do not believe that – but there may have been one or two people who provided it, knew what it was going for, but did not take into consideration the ripple effect. I think if all of those entities who had vested interests in the organization knew, there would have probably been a, "what are you thinking?". If they looked at it through a lens of, from an economic corporate perspective. So yeah I think it was a tough time. I am glad that – I think it shows a lot of the corporation, that they actually encourage us as team members to voice our opinions and say –
>
> **Matt:** So you thought they owned the situation.
>
> **Brandi:** Oh, they totally owned it. Yeah, and I think they have taken great strides and are taking a step back and are really being conscious of what they are going to be doing in the future.
>
> **Matt:** That is a good perspective to get from you, because I do not feel like many people that I know who are LGBT who are shoppers and consumers out in other states. There was sort of an attempt to really –

Brandi: Yeah, so if you look in California like riots, not riots but you know picketing and it is kind of like wait a minute. They screwed up. It was not from a malicious intent. I always looks at is malice involved. Is the person doing this to hurt somebody or were they were just kind of stupid and did not think about the impact. I think many times people do not wear all of those lenses because they do not have to. You know.

Matt: I was reading the other day about Lady GaGa too. It was on my blog roll– [25]

Brandi: Oh, yeah, yeah, so Lady GaGa is now doing an exclusive (with Spot-On) and she had apparently had met with (Spot-On) executive leaders and I do not know the details by any means but pushed them (on the Jones Incident). I would say that just the fact that they fund many resources – and when you look at Pride here - it is Spot-On all over the place and it is extremely sponsored. Other elements are always sponsored and diversity council is sponsored.

Matt: Have you actually told many other people about these experiences? About working for a company that you feel is really open. I mean is this something you tell friends and family and –

Brandi: Yeah, I think when people ask why did you go there. I use to work in a nonprofit sector, so jumping into corporate America was totally different and so a lot of people ask "well what were you thinking? Why would you go to corporate?" Well, obviously there is a better paycheck, so that is one driver. But then this stuff matters too so there are a couple of things such as giving back to the community. Their (Spot-On's) inclusion, their support of the community, all of that is key.

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25 The incident between Spot-On and Lady Gaga had just happened in the days previous to the interview with Brandi.

Matt: How would you describe Spot-On? You know the corporate headquarters specifically, not thinking about the stores.

Brandi: Stores and distribution centers are totally different.[26] Honestly, I feel like it is very safe and supportive. My experiences have been. I feel like it is a very inclusive culture that enables you to bring your whole self to work so yeah, there are tons of benefits. I mean there are still a couple of inequities in benefits but they are being worked on.

Matt: Do you feel like those are Spot-On decisions or are they sometimes state, federal law decisions?

Brandi: Oh state and federal law decisions. You know being charged tax for partner benefits. Those kind of state, federal law decisions. Now there are some corporations who will offset that tax by increasing your compensation but that does not always happen.

Here again, Brandi shifts the responsibility off of Spot-On and onto state and federal law.

Matt: Okay, what about in terms of how diversity is treated overall. And, in terms of where feel comfortable that diversity fits overall. Do you feel it is pretty equitable?

Brandi: Oh, it is absolutely equitable.

Matt: Okay, do you feel like the LBGT is at the table just like anybody else?

Brandi: Absolutely, just like anybody else.

For Brandi, Spot-On's concept of bringing "your whole self" to work and the culture it creates is sufficiently inclusive and reasonable. This seems similar to Trent, who also seems content to keep

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26 Brandi's mentioning of retail store level and warehouse level Spot-On employees continues to nag at me in this study. Though I did not have the time or resources to interview or research those spaces, I think it's a potential key to expanding this study post-dissertation to gain a better understanding of all of the pieces that make up Spot-On's relationship to LGBTQ issues and identities (along with LGBTQ consumers/customers).

her professional and personal lives somewhat separate, but very different from Sue, Jason, and Klaus who seem more overtly discontent at moments where they wish to reconcile the two and encounter resistance.

Jason

Asked about Spot-On as a place for LGBTQ persons to work and how Spot-On handles LGBTQ issues, Jason responds:

> I think Spot-On is very accepting in general, but there's a difference though between accepting and inclusive. It took me a while to realize that it was okay for me to be whoever I was at the time, but that in order for me to be, I guess, included in the Spot-On culture, I would still have to gauge where, and how, and what my interactions would be as far as being out or not.

He seems cautiously optimistic. For him, Spot-On is much better than most companies, but not a place you can ever let your guard down fully.

> That whole Jones Incident thing. You know, they put so many LGBT team members in very awkward position. I mean, it's not only just the damage that happened to the brand because of the perception that Spot-On was way more – much more gay friendly, much more liberal, but there was also the just very difficult situation they put team members in that are LGBT or not – even if they're not – but to have to defend the company and why they work at the company. You know, and how can you work at a place that supports these types of politicians and things like that? Then, you have to sorta separate your personal feeling from your professional sorta response. And even when you're in conversations with people at work, and specifically about this topic, having to make sure that – you are not being able to truly be honest about the impact this has had on you because of the perception that you could be seen as not, like, a company man.

Discussions about Spot-On's track record around LGBTQ issues, while mostly positive, were still the most heavily contested and complex discussions. The frustration or confusion around Spot-On's behavior (especially around the Jones Incident) was almost palpable in the interview space. These LGBTQ employees were visibly let down but also not ready to give up yet on Spot-On as an employer. Several participants though noted that the Jones Incident had in-fact given opportunity for even more visible dialog between LGBTQ Spot-On employees and Spot-On corporate leaders. There was an uneasiness that it had happened but a determination to make sure it never happened again.

Matt: So then, how would you describe Spot-On corporate headquarters culture in and around downtown Minneapolis as a workplace for LGBT employees from your point of view personally?

Jason: I would say it depends on where you work. It's a sliding scale of comfort, and outness, and relative acceptance, and even promotion and aspiration, and you can grow your career, and everything else. But if you're down in that other space, it can be really lonely and I wouldn't say career-limiting but I would say you find yourself in a place not necessarily as easy a road to progress as other people.

Matt: Right. So, thinking about yourself as an African American gay male, to what degree do you see your ability to really fuse who you see yourself as in your personal and private life and do you get to bring your whole self to work? Or are you still working on that?

Jason: Oh, wow. I would say that if it's, like, two trains on a track, and one is my personal life, one is my professional life, I would say starting at the same time, which is after the military, I would say my private/personal life is still going a lot faster than the one at work.

Matt: You were hinting at this or saying this at the beginning of the interview, there's a difference between what the company puts out publicly, and what the company tries to provide for, and the reality, even in 2011, of what other people bring to work, right?

Jason: Yes, and in the space that I work in, I feel like I have to be more judicious than most about being out. You know, would that be different if I was working in a different part of Spot-On? I'm pretty sure it would be.

Matt: Uh-huh, okay.

Jason: But I'm doing a lot better than I was in my last career, but those trains aren't running at the same speed yet.

Matt: So do you think that that's a product of the times that we live in, or do you think that Spot-On could be doing more?

Jason: Well, I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that all the role models that I've seen in my particular area of Spot-On don't engage in or demonstrate their outness in a public way. Because we have a couple of senior leaders who are LGBT in my IT space, but they're not really engaged in the Business Council, or any kind of outward, external, pro-gay activities; although, if you're with them one-on-one, or even in a small group setting, they'll definitely talk and be comfortable being in that gay space.

Matt: Right.

Jason: So, I think that really sends a subconscious signal that can be interpreted as, "it's okay to be this way, but you have to kind of downplay it in order to succeed." I mean, I can come up with a lot of different examples of people who are senior leaders at Spot-On that are doing really great things, but either they don't make the time or they don't make the public connection of being out.

But it just seems very interesting that you don't really have a whole lot of role models to look up to in that space for a company that labels itself and is touted for being as progressive as it is. And I mean, for African Americans, it is even worse. So, that, I think more than anything else, surprised me once I got here.

The lens of flattening seems especially strong here too, where not only LGBTQ employees but especially African-American employees do not feel truly valued for their own individual cultural and personal contributions but instead are only welcomed in with a sense of generic "valuing of diversity" that cannot hope to fulfill them or even keep them with Spot-On.

Matt: Do you think –touching back on what we were talking about with different senses of identity markers and different communities—it leaves African American employees at a company like Spot-On – and especially in a state like Minnesota, which is a really homogeneous place culturally. You know, it's a very white state. Do you feel like it's just, like, every person for themselves? Like, African American employees are left trying to look as professional as possible.

Jason: I think it's even worse than that. I think that the problem as to why Spot-On has such a difficulty retaining diverse talent is because of that. Because all of the professional African American talent is either coming from out East or down South, and coming to Minnesota, and having to assimilate into that culture at Spot-On. It becomes so frustrating and there's just so many unwritten rules that a lot of African Americans end up quitting. Because you have to navigate so many different mine fields. Everything is so nuanced. You're being graded on things that you don't even realize you're being graded on, in addition to – for someone like me – the whole gay aspect; you get frustrated.

Matt: I don't want to put words in your mouth, which is why I'm going to ask you if the way that I'm hearing it makes sense to you. It sounds to me like you're saying that corporate

culture – or at least Spot-On corporate culture –asks you, "If you want to be professional, or as professional as possible, be less African American." Or, "If you want to be as professional as possible, be less LGBT." Or, "Downplay these things," right?

Jason: I'll put it to you this way: being in the military for ten years in an environment where you couldn't be gay at all, lest you wanted to end your career gave me a lot of the survival skills, and the communication skills, and the nuance – the ways to sort of cloak and dagger parts of your identity, which have served me well in navigating the culture at Spot-On. I know how to adjust the volume on my gayness, for lack of a better term.

Matt: Right. Thinking through what we've talked about here, is there anything that you want to add, or you feel like you want removed or not talked about?

Jason: No, I would just say that –and maybe this is me just being a little jaded at this point, you know, being 36 years old—I don't think there's any nirvana place were you can just show up and be 100 percent gay all the time, or 100 percent African American all the time—whatever that means—and just be able to have all these doors open for you, and just navigate your way to wherever you want to be in your career. I would say I was pretty surprised after I was at Spot-On for a while at how little the emphasis on diversity and inclusion there really is in the day-to-day relationships between people, and above, and reporting directorates. You know, there's a really great and active recruiting presence that gives you this very strong message around diversity and inclusion, and there's a big disconnect between that recruiting message and how that recruiting message is practiced day-to-day. It's not just for LGBT.

Matt: Right.

Jason: It's just for diversity in general. I think that education aspect is woefully underserved at Spot-On because either people are afraid to go there, or they're afraid to talk about it, or they don't see the value of it.

Matt: So, it feels like a surface treatment?

Jason: Uh-huh, but at the same time, I think that that disconnect is common regardless of the corporation. So, the only thing that I can do to do my part to change that is by doing the best that I can at my comfort level to be myself and not really worry about how that's going to impact my ability to grow or not grow in the organization.

Klaus

Klaus's relationship to Spot-On feels like one of the most tempestuous of my five participants. He seems resigned in many instances that Spot-On is imperfect and hypocritical in its dealings with LGBTQ diversity and employee relations. But Klaus also is very involved, especially as a human resources employee and LGBT Business Diversity Council member.

Klaus: I think that it's not as perfect as some people might be lead to believe due to all the marketing.

Matt: Were there specific moments when you were kind of bopping along thinking things were good in your first few years and then something happened and you were just like, "Oh, this isn't as accepting of a place or culture as I thought" or –?

Klaus then references the lunch with the manager with the gym conversation (first told in Thread Two of *Chapter Four*).

Matt: Well, and that was a supervisor you said, right?

Klaus: Yes.

Matt: So, I mean, there's a lot at stake there for you at that moment.

Klaus: Yeah, yeah.

Matt: If you privilege one thing, you'll lose something else.

Klaus: Yes.

Matt: So, is that that story or that kind of story, something you feel like over the years you've heard yourself telling other people, whether it was new LGBT employees in the company?

Klaus: Yes, I've told people that story before, but I think the thing which might be interesting, is that I use that as an example of one of the few times I did feel like a direct sort of uncomfortableness due to being LGBT.

Matt: Yeah, but that's interesting though because then you said a minute ago that there was kind of "fallacy"? I'm trying to think of what word you used of Spot-On being, like, a really, incredibly accepting company.

Klaus: Uh-huh.

Matt: Or maybe you phrased it a different way. I don't want to take words out of your mouth. So, how do you reconcile that because what you just said was, "Well, really, that's been the exception and not the rule"? But then, you kind of hinted that you think maybe, like, it's not quite as accepting as it likes to think it is or as people want it. So, where is the – do you know what I mean?

Klaus: Uh-huh, I mean, I don't know the exact number right now off the top of my head, but it was a very high percent –I don't know, 30 or 40 percent, of people at Spot-On felt in the last year they've heard homophobic comments. And when you say that some people at Spot-On, they're dumbfounded that that could even be the case. They say, "Well, we're just such an accepting and diverse culture, and I say, "Well, you know, here's an example of…" What surprises me is the magnitude of how much is out there.

Matt: Right.

Klaus: And so – and then when you think about the other things that are happening or have happened like the Jones Incident, and just the rumors, and the things that you hear, kind of like the undercurrent of comments, the resistance to LGBT merchandizing and market, or just the lack of focus, to me, sends a message that we are viewed differently even though in all the literature and all of the marketing you would think that we appear just as diverse as African American, or Asian, or Hispanics.

Matt: You talked about that information a minute ago, about that percentage and that research. Is that information that comes out from being involved in the LGBT Business Council, or is that stuff that comes up also from working in Human Resources, or some of both?

Klaus: No, this really comes being in the Business Council. I would not say that there's anything unique to me being in HR, or there isn't any information that I've been privy to in relation to LGBT employees or diverse employees by being in HR.

Matt: Okay, so, the arm of the company that promotes diversity and is interested in or invested in this kind of awareness is not something that lives in HR then?

Klaus: It does. It's a component. I can't remember the exact name, but it's sort of like the diversity team. It's a group of, you know, I don't know maybe a handful of people who focus on promoting diversity within Spot-On and creating an inclusive culture. They also manage all of the business councils. So, all of the business councils are under their umbrella. They also manage a lot of the surveys that Spot-On decides to participate in when it comes to diversity in the workplace – you know, getting on, like, DiversityInc's Top 100 or that type of stuff.

Matt: Do you feel like what that kind of a team does is to help, just by virtue of existing and by placating the different councils? I'm just wondering to what extent that team makes their

presence known to other divisions at HR or other parts of the company that are not council-related. So, in other words, how often does that team get called in for its input or support in places where it might not be initially obvious?

Klaus: Uh-huh.

Matt: So, I'm wondering if, like, there are places and spaces where that kind of a diversity team could, or would, or should ideally be more involved to remind people of issues. Like, you were talking about merchandizing, for example. I mean, is that a fair way to characterize that team as maybe mostly being around to oversee the councils and let the people who are the minorities know that there's something there for them? Do you feel like they push the envelope ever, that diversity team? Do they ever say, "Hey, don't forget we're over here"? Hey Spot-On, please think more about these minority or diversity issues than you do right now"?

Klaus: You know, maybe I'm jaded, but I think to push the envelope is not really a term that Spot-On is…

Matt: it's a foreign concept?

Again here, flattening as a lens is relevant. Spot-On discourages types of difference that it can't really control or that threaten to disrupt the overall corporate culture in the organization. Pushing the envelope would threaten to offend others or cause discomfort among employees or customers, therefore difference should be portrayed and talked about only in safe ways.

Klaus: Yeah. You know, we're never the leader in anything; we're always a fast follower and that's also if it's not risqué. I would say, no. They're not pushing the envelope because that's just not something that anybody really does at Spot-On. I do know though that they have had moments or times where they've tried to bring multicultural marketing and

merchandizing into conversations with the business councils, to utilize the business councils to provide more input into, "How do we market, engage, these diverse guests?"

Matt: With different degrees of success or –?

Klaus: Yeah, well, I would say there's a lot of focus and a lot of energy behind African Americans and Hispanics. There's a little bit of energy behind Asians and there's no energy behind LGBT (markets and customers). They (Spot-On) would come to the meetings, hear what we have to say, walk away, and then, that would be it. Or they would come into a presentation of, "Here's what we're going to do in any given year for multicultural marketing." And it would be, "Here's what we're doing in the Hispanic space. Here's what we're doing in the Asian space. Here's what we're doing in the African American space." There was really nothing about the LGBT.

Matt: And that was it.

Klaus: Uh-huh. I mean, I had gone to meetings where they actually wanted representatives from all the different business councils to come and the multicultural merchandizing group was going to give a presentation and they wanted to get our feedback. Well, you know, there would be a couple of us from the LGBT business council sitting in there and at the end, we thought, "Why did we even waste our time?" because they didn't want any input from the LGBT, but they wanted the African American, Asian, and the Hispanic. But that diversity team has played a role in at least initiating some of those conversations and getting some of that dialogue going.

Matt: Right. Well, let's come back around to your story then from a minute ago with the supervisor. Maybe I just didn't hear you, but what did you end up doing in that moment? Did you just kind of laugh it off?

Klaus: – I laughed it off. I kind of said, "Oh, yeah, you know, you're right" Like, "Let's move onto the next comment or topic."

Matt: Given your involvement with the LGBT Business Council over the years, can you think of one more example of a place where you feel like the Council ran up against an unexpected moment?

Klaus: You may have heard this from everybody, but the first thing comes to mind is just that whole Jones Incident thing. You know, they put so many LGBT team members in very awkward positions. I mean, it's not only just the damage that happened to the brand because of the perception that Spot-On was much more gay friendly, much more liberal, but there was also the very difficult situation they put team members in that are LGBT to have to defend the company and why they work at the company. You know, being asked, "How can you work at a place that supports these types of politicians?" Then, you have to separate your personal feeling from your professional response. And even when you're in conversations with people at work, and specifically about this topic, having to make sure that you are not being truly honest about the impact this has had on you because of the perception that you could be seen as not a "company man."

Matt: Right. So, that definitely puts you in a spot where, like you said, you're a little divided again because there's the personal response and then there's the response that you would have officially as someone that still works there.

Klaus: Uh-huh. I don't know if you've heard of it. You may hear this from somebody that you interview subsequently, but I had to mention that Jones Incident thing and I don't know how much this will ultimately play into your thesis (sic) around being in and out, and how you transition through the workplace. But I talked about just the situation that it put people in. The other interesting thing about this though, as a group, the LGBT Business Council

has really grabbed a hold of this as an opportunity to get more than what we've ever had before and to drive more awareness into the organization. So, thinking about transgender benefits. We don't have transgender benefits today. That could be for a number of reasons. They claim it's the expense, but when you go in and you look at the details, it's such a small percent of people that when you look at all the pregnancies that occur at Spot-On, we spend way more money on the pregnancies than we do on anybody who would be transgender. This is my opinion, but using this Jones Incident gaffe as an opportunity to drive more awareness to get the company to take more ownership of the fact that today, while they preach a lot of inclusiveness, they still in many ways look at LGBT team members as second-class diverse people. That may not be intentional. That may be more out of the fact of just not understanding.

Matt: Right.

Klaus: But this is a good opportunity to drive that understanding.

Matt: I think it's going to be a really interesting time because it feels like progress is happening, albeit slowly. But when you think about things like same-sex marriage, and Don't Ask Don't Tell, and even just civil unions in other places and the level to which other companies—Fortune 500 companies—have looked at benefits, and spousal rights, and stuff.

Klaus: Well I loved your statement about how we look at it now versus in the future. We might be okay not giving our loved one a kiss goodbye at the lobby, you know, because it's all right, but is good-enough enough? But you think about 30 years ago, 40 years ago, people would have been fired for just even anybody knowing that they were LGBT. It is a journey, definitely. And, I know I keep harping on the Jones Incident thing, but I'm just thinking if anything, that's another step in that struggle.

Matt: It sounds like what you're saying in a way is that it's almost a two steps backward, potentially three steps forward, kind of thing.

Klaus: Yes. And the other thing I wanted to add, too, Matt, is how comfortable you can be being out really depends I think also on where you are within the corporation. If we take, for example,

the way they situate these business councils. They set them up with an executive sponsor who is usually one of the senior leaders in the organization. So, each business council has an executive sponsor who kind of helps champion that diverse group. Well, in the past, for the LGBT Business Council, we had had a gay male who was our champion, but pretty much nonexistent—disengaged, really. Then, we had a very straight male from the South who had transferred, but had grown up through Spot-On. I had been told by someone that was in a meeting with him, that he actually said, "You know, I have gay friends and you guys are very creative." Again, sort of stereotyping, which was just amazing for somebody who's supposed to be championing our cause.

Matt: Yeah.

Sue

Sue, like Klaus, seems very skeptical about Spot-On when it comes to LGBTQ issues and employees. She has worked hard, for many years, on the Business Council on behalf of LGBTQ issues and personnel. I feel a tinge of exhaustion, or resigned tiredness from her. While hardly advanced in years, her attitude almost feels like "I've given a lot of effort to this, lots more still needs to change, the next generation of LGBTQ employees may have to take up where I've left off." I ask her about Spot-On corporate headquarters as a workplace for LGBT people:

I would say that Spot-On is definitely up there as one of the better places to be out. It's a safe place to be out. Now, it's definitely not perfect, definitely has its flaws, but I would say

that. If somebody were gay or lesbian and wanted to know, "Hey, can I go work at Spot-On? Is it okay to be out?" I would say, "Yes, absolutely." Now, that's not to say that there aren't flaws, but I think there are number of layers where I would say that it is safe. So, I mean, I will start with policy, you know, in that it is in their policy about not discriminating sexual orientation.

Matt: It's there, it's present?

Sue: Yes, yes. So, the policies are there. The benefits, it's within the benefits, domestic partners. So, there's a lot of experience with Spot-On within HR about domestic partners and all the issues that come with that. So, to me, that says a lot about the experience about working with different kinds of families. And then, I would say even within the values. The top five values of Spot-On, one of them is to create an inclusive culture. So, that's another. The other thing is that they actually have a whole department of diversity and within that even, they have business councils. So, they actually are investing money and resources into those and again, to promote diversity and folks that aren't represented, you know?

Matt: And it sounds like from what I've been able to gather that, for example, the LGBT Business Council sounds like a fairly larger, active organization.

Sue: Yes, yes.

Matt: How would you characterize that?

Sue: It is very large and very active and it always has been known as being very active. I know that when I first started, I got involved right away with the Business Council just because I knew I wanted to meet other people. They've just always been able to attract people that are really enthusiastic and want to put time into the business council events.

Matt: Okay. So, then, you know, you've given a lot of positives, and I think that a lot of people who are familiar with the company would not be surprised to hear those positives. If

you were to talk about what are some of the flaws you mentioned or ways that you wish that they would hit the mark a little higher, are there examples of things like that over the years? I mean, keeping in mind that it sounds like you believe that, you know, these are overwhelmingly positive things that are going on at the company.

Here Sue show's this attitude of "much as been done, but much is left to do."

Sue: Right, yeah. I mean, I think there are still people that are, you know, clueless. And I think that there is still is a huge population that even though that they know "this is the right thing to do," I think deep down, they don't. Dealing with the LGBT population is still totally new to them. I definitely think that are probably folks even within upper management that probably their values totally conflict with Spot-On values. And that's when I think that, you know, there are like, the whole donation (Jones Incident)…

Matt: Oh, right. That's where that came into play.

Sue: – I mean, that to me that's just that some people that are just clueless, you know?

Matt: So there still are these individuals, sometimes high up who will do and say regrettable things and it's just a matter of trying to educate, and be present, and be at the table.

Sue: Uh-huh, right, yes.

Matt: Uh-huh. So, I'm wondering out loud here. So, does professional culture usually de facto mean straight culture?

Sue: Right, yeah. No, I think that's a good point.

Matt: Yeah, because I wonder if there are ways or are we pioneers in that sense? I mean, are there ways for LGBT people to be professional LGBT people or is that still in process? Are we fighting for that?

Sue: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah! I mean, I don't know if you've heard the people who talk about "the Spot-On brand."

Sue's bringing up of the "Spot-On brand" conversation here gets at this idea of flattening in diversity. By creating a professional "branded" way of acting and being (and dressing and speaking), LGBTQ persons must ensure their culture is in no way out of line or offensive. It becomes just one more in a laundry list of warm and fuzzy diversity categories to be treated with quick acceptance that is brushed aside in favor of the dominant workplace culture.

Matt: Uh-huh.

Sue: But, they'll say if a person is going to work here or not, "Well, they're not really brand." In some ways, the problem with that brand is that I think it keeps us from getting very diverse, but I mean, in some ways, that brand is the young, beautiful, middle class, educated, probably straight…

Matt: It's interesting that you asked that though. I haven't really talked about this with anybody else. The brand though seems to mean different things at different times because it seems to mean a certain within the culture. Like, if you're going to come work there, you need to support the brand…

Sue: Yes, uh-huh, yes.

Matt: And be a certain kind of person, and value certain kinds of things that the company values.

Sue: Yes.

Matt: So, for example, strong business practices and that's implicitly Republican, right?

Sue: Right, yes, uh-huh.

Matt: Working at 8:00 in the morning. The things that the company values, you need to also value. Which seems to skew a little conservative in a way.

Sue: Yes, uh-huh.

Matt: But then, when I think about, like, going out on the street around the country, and talking to people about the Spot-On brand versus the Plus-Mart brand, or the M-Mart brand, or the department store brand, right, it seems to be that Spot-On is definitely pushing fashion forward, designer, cheap chic.

Sue: Right, yes.

Matt: Sort of forward urban culture, little bit edgy, but yet, at the same time I can count on needing to go in and buy paper towels, and tampons, and pick up a prescription.

Sue: The majority of our clients are female mothers between the ages of 20 and 40, middle class, white, you know?

Matt: There are all these things that are there, but they're not really talked about. But there are a lot of assumptions that get made that never get talked about, I think. And also, I think, where does that leave bi and trans people in that equation?

Sue: Right.

Matt: I'm thinking about the different kinds of diversity within Spot-On and what are the different outreach and recruitment strategies that Spot-On makes toward, say, African Americans, or Latinos workers, and working mothers, and single parents, you know? Sometimes the LGBT culture, you know this from the news reports in the Pride Parade, it seems like it gets portrayed as a little seedy or not appropriate for children. Like, that has to be frustrating for somebody who's a parent, too.

Sue: Yeah.

Matt: So are there moments on the Business Council or around the company where you felt like the LGBT community had the ear of Spot-On, but maybe not quite as much as say, the African American community?

Sue: Oh, yeah. To get Spot-On to give money to Pride, it was years, and years, and years of work.

Matt: They were worried about associations or?

Sue: Yes, yep. And I mean, I think that there's the four business councils and I think that LGBT has always definitely felt like we're like the stepchild, you know? And now, I think we've done a lot of work and have gotten up there more, but I mean, there can be nationwide campaigns, and actually, every diversity council only gets a month, you know? So, I think June is LGBT month or whatever, you know?

Matt: Right.

Sue: February is African American month. Great, there are nationwide campaigns across Spot-On for African American month, which is great. But nothing like that for LGBT. Why don't we get the same?

Matt: So, there is this, "Bring your whole self to work" slogan, but then sometimes the talk is there, but the walk or the actions are not quite there yet.

Sue: Yeah, yeah. I think the interesting thing is, is that I think on the street, Minneapolis Spot-On is known as a LGBT-friendly company. And that it's a good place to work if you're gay. I don't know about that for the African American community. I don't think that it's got the reputation that, "Yeah, it's a good place to work if you're African American." So, somehow, whether it's the location where Spot-On is, or probably a number of factors. But I mean, it's changed a lot, when I first started, there were a lot of struggles about being able to be seen nationwide as an LGBT-friendly company. That was work.

Matt: I know that you said you were in San Francisco before you moved.

Sue: Uh-huh, yeah. The first company I worked at there were three people and this was in San Francisco. We had to work from my home. My boss had to come to my house and I was in this one-bedroom apartment with this other woman, but that was in San Francisco so…

Matt: Yeah.

Sue: Then when I moved here and worked at a non-profit foundation. Again, it wasn't the first day, but I think within the first couple of weeks I was talking to my boss saying, "I need benefits for my partner."

Matt: How would you tie this back to when you see yourself as an activist and when you don't? Are moments where you just don't want to put your activist pants on?

Sue: Right, yes, yes, yes, yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly.

Matt: Because that's certainly for me, as an LGBT person myself, when you said that, that resonated with me. Like, there just are those moments…

Sue: Yes, I'm tired, yeah.

Matt: This being gay in a straight culture.

Sue: Yeah.

Trent

Trent's feelings about Spot-On's track record with LGBTQ issues seems to take on a feeling of blunt realism. He is happy with the things Spot-On has done to recognize and accommodate LGBTQ concerns but he also seems to realize that profit margins and customer satisfaction take a front seat to social change at times.

Matt: Tell me a little bit about how you would describe Spot-On, and in this sense Spot-On being the Spot-On Corporate headquarters in and around downtown Minneapolis, as a workplace for LGBT employees.

Trent: I would say that it is definitely a very open place and it is a place where I have never felt threatened or never felt concerned that I have to hide my identity or that I have to share things in a different manner because I am going to be persecuted. Or, I am not going to necessarily make it up the ladder any further or you know be able to progress on to my career and not get that project that I want to work on.

Matt: What are examples of that?

Trent: Well, there are many LGBT people that work at Spot-On. So that was an initial thing to me was, "oh well then it must be okay to be gay here because there are many gay people here." And they were hired and have successful careers. They are outwardly not hiding their sexuality. Secondary is the creation of the LGBT Business Council when Spot-On created business councils several years ago. That obviously showed that they valued this group of people and wanted to make sure they understood the needs of those employees and what they desire and value and might value differently than "a normal heterosexual" man or woman might value. I think too, the volunteer opportunities that they put out there and just even the communication that they put out to all the team members like when it's National LGBT month and what that means and sponsoring parts of the LGBT Pride parade and sponsoring booths at the Gay Pride Festival and allowing me to volunteer off site for LGBT organizations or donate money through Spot-On to LGBT organizations.

Matt: Have you done some of those things?

Trent: I have, yes over the years. I have volunteered for the Minnesota AIDS Project, where they do Meals on Wheels type of things, with people living with HIV. I am gone for three hours over a lunch a couple times a month. There is no, "oh you should not be leaving the building." But, they also value volunteering in general. Something that is instilled in the corporation.

Matt: Does that feel like a connection for you between your personal life and your professional end to be able to have those kinds of opportunities offered to you?

Trent: Yeah, I think so.

Matt: What do you feel like when you think about other LGBT employees that you know, that are co-workers across different departments, or within your department? Do you find that most of the things that are being said about Spot-On as a place to work are feeling like positive things, some neutral things, some grumbling, and mumbling things?

Trent: I would say for my own personal experience, the greater majority are positive. I definitely have a few friends that feel like the corporation could be doing different, maybe putting their political money in a different pot or things like that. But, I would say most LGBT team members seem to be at least more pleased than they could be if they worked at another corporation. I think most people feel that we have more options. We have more opportunities too than they might have in another business.

Matt: Yeah and maybe even nationally in terms of whoever Spot-On's main competitors are and wondering.

Trent: Yeah like comparison to Plus-Mart. I know that there are definitely those stories that are told amongst the LGBT community a Spot-On of "gosh, I would never want to go work for Plus-Mart because they make you basically carry your wife and kids into church on Sunday morning just to make sure you are in the pew."

Matt: Do you know people who are LGBT employees there?

Trent: I actually know someone at Spot-On that knows someone that is on the LGBT board at Plus-Mart and has just conveyed that it is a very, very different place. That it is a much more conservative place. People are not as outwardly expressive of what their sexuality may be or how to express themselves.

Matt: As a merchandiser specifically, the only one that I have talked in merchandising in the interviews that I am doing, I wonder if you could speak a little bit to how the company tries to integrate the idea of merchandise with the idea of selling a brand or culture.

Trent: That is a very important component and it has become even more and more of an important component over the years to be able to have brand differentiation between like say a Plus-Mart and to understand exactly who our customer is and you know what she is looking for. I think we are very focused on segmentation as we refer to it. It is understanding the different segments of the community marketplace that we make up—Hispanic market, African American market, Urban setting versus maybe a more suburban rural setting—and being able to tailor the product assortment to those specific groups. We are starting to do more LGBT type of marketing components and really starting to understand that that segment of the audience is an important one as well—that it's kind of tied to urban markets. So I think it is an important component too, that we want to be seen, the corporation wants to be seen as a leader because we have always been seen as "a fashion leader" at the mass merchant level.

Matt: So, I am wondering what other kinds of positions you had at different companies previous to your time at Spot-On?

Trent: Actually, everything post college has been at a Spot-On so anything else that I would have had is that I had a summer internship with Sears in college so another retailer and then I worked for the university that I went to school at in some positions there.

Putting Up or Growing Into?

Bauman, a traditional narrative theorist who admits that traditional narrative approaches may be insufficient after all, tells us that events may indeed be abstractions from narratives. If this is the

case, collecting and understanding the narratives is critical. This will also help us, through the stories, understand what events and realities are being constructed.

As I interviewed my participants I kept thinking about Bauman's words, could these realities really be constructed from our narratives? As they talked about Spot-On, especially in relation to the Jones Incident, I kept thinking that they would express a constant sort of fear about losing their jobs or being silenced by Spot-On or corporate culture (and of course there was some discussion of that). It made me think of Foucault's panopticon. Isn't the workplace after all one of utter surveillance? But as my participants shared about Spot-On I also thought back to deCerteau's idea of the "reverse panopticon" in the "Walking in the City" chapter of his work *Practice of Everyday Life*. As he describes the act of walking through the city (and indeed our lives' actions as a whole) he says this is "a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is the acoustic acting-out of language)" (98). In this way deCerteau calls walking "a space of enunciation" (98). The embodied ways that my participants and all professionals live their lives are an enunciation of identities. This "reverse panopticon" (seeing spaces and places as always haunted by memories and spirits) gives character to places and lives and also gives pain and pleasure across time and in that same way constructs realities (108). My participants, I believe, do indeed begin to build the realities of their relationships with Spot-On in the context of their sexual orientations. And, as Bauman says, I think this is an interdependent process that attempts to understand a "set of interrelationships." And the relationships my participants seem to be building and narrating are contested and fragilely balanced. These five participants continue to tell me that while they are not always happy with Spot-On, they still feel the change is mostly positive, and that they are being listened to, even if it falls short at times, and that they want to keep traveling the road (of a Spot-On career).

CHAPTER SIX

THE METHODOLOGIES THAT DARE NOT SPEAK THEIR NAMES: ASSEMBLING A QUEER APPROACH

The truth about stories is that that's all we are. … Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous. … [O]nce a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories you are told. … Take [this] story, for instance. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget about it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now.

– *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King

Identity is very much a fictive construction: you compose it of what's out there, what the culture gives you, and what you resist in the culture... So you keep creating your identity this way. Then I took all of this knowledge a step further, to reality. I realized that if I can compose this text, and if I can compose my identity, then I can also compose reality out there.

– 1998 interview with Gloria Anzaldúa, by Andrea Lunsford

The Study

I have a moment where I want to tell you about how I did this study as a more narrative story… but I also want to lay it out… like a list (knowing full well that lists also tell stories)… the tech writer in me wants to give you an outline, a neat compact overview of the study. But the other part of me, the cultural rhetorician wants this to unfold as a narrative. So I will probably, as I usually do, give you some of both.

When I went to scope out what this dissertation would look like and how I would do this study and write up the study, I asked myself things like "how many people should I interview? How long should these interviews be? To what extent should my own voice be involved in the stories and interviews?" I also wondered, "What kind of access will Spot-On grant me to come into its headquarters and talk to its employees?" As I had these discussions with my committee members and with my contacts at Spot-On, the study began to take on its own flavor that I could not have anticipated or foreseen at the start, it became:

- an interview-based study
- a close rhetorical analysis that understands rhetoric as based in stories
- about queering grand narratives (those of workplace studies, queer theory, and LGBT studies)
- about including feminist methodologies (collaboration, self-situating, the importance of transparency and voice, and of embodiment)
- about professionalization studies/identity studies (drawing across disciplines)
- about intentionally turning away from traditional literary narrative theory which I believe comes from a very heterosexual white male experience (a dominant discursive space/tradition).

These things all fed into the idea of negotiating identity through stories, forming into both a professional and an LGBTQ person through a "process of becoming." This process recalls Lave & Wenger's legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) and its idea of moving from "newbie to old-timer" through mentorship and experiences and also recalls Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) with its emphasis on apprenticeship. Does the corporate culture at Spot-On allow and encourage LGBTQ Spot-On employees to become both "professional" professionals and

"professional" LGBTQ persons (at home and at work)? My participants seem to be getting at this idea through their stories and discussions.

When I think back on the process of this study—writing a prospectus, brainstorming the form, negotiating with Spot-On contacts, discussing with my committee and mentors, collecting data, analyzing data, writing this dissertation—I think about not just what I did, but also how I did it. The reality is that I did it rather haphazardly I think. And I think too this is probably how one probably should do this sort of thing. In "Dreams and Play: Historical Method and Methodology" Robert J. Connors asserts that there are no new methods he says, just old ones that we must "wield with more control and more self-awareness" (35). Our motives in writing our histories remain, he says, to define ourselves in a particular place and time. We come to our research question knowing the things or populations we want to look into but not always knowing the conclusions or ideas we'll be drawn to. We must play in the data and research. Finishing this dissertation puts me in mind of Connors: "even as the index cards mount up, even as the legal pad fills with hastily scrawled connections and insights, the shape of the final thesis-and-support often cannot be seen until the organizing and actual composing begin" (28).

So is this study grounded theory then? No, as my methodological approach was never to see everything as data (since the time and scope of my work here didn't allow for that) nor did it avoid collecting interview data as an artificial environment—rather I had to work with in geographic and time constraints between Michigan and Minnesota. But at the same time, I did operate as Connors mentions from the idea that I may not indeed know my "conclusions" until I had collected the stories.

Similarly, it was a deliberate move on my part to fuse the implications of this study with the methodological discussion of the study here in the final pages. If this project is about queer stories, about how LGBTQ people take their stories and make their own "rhetorical assemblages," their

own cobbled together ways that work for them, then this study is also a cobbled together way forward in our understanding of how LGBTQ professionals survive and succeed in their worlds. The stories combine to make the meaning they are a snapshot of how a particular set of LGBTQ persons navigate their organizational and workplace cultures at a specific moment in time and culture. If the methodologies are the theories we use and the ways we operationalize those theories, then we could not know them here until we could, upon collecting the stories and the conversations, step back and look at the picture as an assembled thing, as a constellation and a collage.[27] So, methodologically, my main lenses were:

- **Data Driven Theorizing**—Though not grounded theory by definition (as I did collect interview data and was not able to ascribe to the grounded theory mantra of "all is data" because of the time and geographic constraints on my data collection) my study is strongly influenced by grounded theory in approach. I say this because I did not formulate a quantitative style hypothesis going into the study. I did not have preconceived ideas about what I would and would not find. Certainly I had thought about the idea of Working Closets before based on my own LGBTQ corporate experiences but I had no way of knowing for certain whether my participants would bear this out as well or what other major research threads they would help me find. To this end, it was important for me to sit with my data for some time after collection to really begin to try to understand what my participants' contributions and stories were telling us.

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[27] I avoid using the term "whole" here because I don't believe it would be a whole. Queer theory, postmodernism, and cultural rhetorics all tell us that definitions and histories and understandings are always contested, shifting, and culturally situated.

- **Feminist Research Methods**— Traditional research methods have promoted a sort of "value-free" and "neutral" approach to research no matter who is the researched or the researcher. Works such as Katherine Kelleher Sohn's "Whistlin' and Crowin' Women of Appalachia: Literacy Practices Since College" and Ellen Cushman's *The Struggle and the Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner City Community* were influential to my approach. Sohn approaches her research as an Appalachian woman studying other Appalachian women and their educational journey and Cushman approaches her work as an outsider moving within a community to do long-term ethnographic research. Cushman seems to find methodological success by making a conscious effort to confront and be honest about her positionality as an outsider—a European American educated woman. Another piece, Marlene Kim's "Poor Women Survey Poor Women: Feminist Perspectives in Survey Research" was also a very strong lens for a feminist approach to positionality as a part of the group being studied. As a LGBTQ scholar studying LGBTQ community(ies), I found particularly useful and influential Kim's scoping out of five guiding feminist principles for research: bringing feminist perspectives into research, using research to induce social change, using "conscious subjectivity" instead of value-free objectivity, bringing the researcher into the research, and reducing the distance between researcher and research subjects (102/03). These themes of wanting to reject the "value free" objectivity of traditional research and situate oneself within or in relation to the study came up again and again – such as Beverly J. Moss in *Ethnography and Composition*: "I realized that much of the research I had read seemed to have no real connection to me and where I came from, that a large gap existed between the people I knew and the people being described in that research" (153). I had from the start of this project worried I would not be able to be honest about

how and where I fit in methodologically but feminist researchers such as these helped to ground me.

- **Queer Theory and Queering**—In "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X" Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner talk about queer theory as something that cannot be defined. Queer is not just (or necessarily) LGBT they say but must be made available to different populations at different times. Queer theory and practice exists in multiple localities and we must resist the temptation to make one or a handful of theorists (think Butler, Sedgwick, Foucault, etc.) into metonyms for queer theory. Articulating sexual practices (and identities) is a labor that has paralleled making these same practices and categories and identities ambiguous. Unlike many fields (sociology, psychology, and anthropology, etc.) that have thrived by offering expertise to the state, queer theory resist systematizing and settling. In this way, they say, queer theory teaches us about any given thing (x) is actually not political but about personal survival. Queer commentary and queering (the purposeful act of resisting normative behaviors and ideologies) has produced vital and generative analyses of: "cultures of reception; the relations of the explicit and implicit, or the acknowledges and the disavowed; the use and abuse of biography for life; the costs of closure and the pleasure of unruly subplots; vernacular idioms and private knowledge; voicing strategies; gossip; elision and euphemism; jokes; identification and other readerly relations to texts and discourse" and through critical voice (349). Berlant and Warner's work, from the start, helped me to set a tone informed by queer theory: resist systematizing. Even as I put together the major threads and concepts of this study, I was cognizant of how we must resist essentializing LGBTQ stories into compact, tidy categories.

As I went to write the dissertation, especially the data analysis itself, I found myself drawn scholars such as Lather and Smithies whose work tells many stories about and relating to women

dealing with HIV/AIDS in their lives. They see their work as being about both service and learning and as not only "giving voice" to others' stories but to also helping act as "filters" for those stories. Interestingly, the authors never name their book's format/style. I would describe it as a meta-narrative and a split notebook. Chapters are variously broken up with transcriptions of interviews, advocacy group materials, letters and email correspondence, and commentary by the authors. The authors describe their format as both backward and forward looking and as weaving together and embedding "method, the politics of interpretation, data, [and] analysis" (xvi). They admit that the work's format does challenge ideas of "easy reading." In fact, they write: "While this book is not so much planned confusion as it might at first appear, it is, at some level about what we see as a breakdown of clear interpretation and confidence of the ability/warrant to tell such stories in uncomplicated, non-messy ways" (xvi). I was drawn to this style because Lather and Smithies truly want to avoid the outdated and modernist view of researchers as disembodied and "objective knowers." In fact, they write: "We are very much in the book, but we have tried to put it together in such a way that our stories are situated among many voices, accumulating layerings of meanings as the book proceeds." (xv-xvi). I also wanted to be "very much in" my dissertation and in my study. I didn't want to hide or even hold back my own positionality as a gay professional. I also wanted to be able to include as much of my participants' stories and agency in this dissertation as I could while still contributing analysis and additional meaning where I could. To me though this meant admitting that it would be messy and that it would mean I couldn't do everything in this one dissertation in this one time and place. This will be where I go from here.

From Here

For nine plus years I worked at a software company in Boulder, Colorado as a technical writer. Our 11,000-page documentation set was in need of constant updating and keeping. One thing that sticks out to me, almost by habit, is that every chapter in every manual had an ending

section called "From Here." Almost instinctively now, I find myself typing those words as I go to tie things to a close (for now).

So where do we (and I) go from here? Theorizing about my participants' stories across threads and major concepts is just a start. As I mentioned earlier, the relationality and collectiveness of these stories have begun here to build my participants' and my theory of Working Closets. Yes, the stories contradict and modify themselves and they are articulations (in Blake Scott's use of the term—"temporarily coherent structures"). These stories give us snapshots of moments and negotiate complex concepts with these contradictions and modifications. But, again, closets are tenacious, they are in need of negotiation, and they are at constant odds with themselves.

Ultimately, though, I (and my participants) still see a major problem with one vision of coming out, one idea of "the closet" (as evidenced in an event like "National Coming Out Day"). These ideas push for a collective or unified experience of outness and maintain that coming out is always appropriate for any LGBTQ person no matter what. But people come out whenever or however they want to come out. Or perhaps more importantly whenever and however they need (or don't need) to come out. Sometimes being "in" seems to be the liberating moment. True, being out can carry a specific rhetorical weight but that can also be a heavy weight that disrupts infrastructures, networks, and relationships. Conversely, being "in" various closets can also carry rhetorical weight.

These Working Closets actually push at the inadequacy of "the closet" or of "being out." Particular discursive spaces create sites that then offer us particular kinds of changing spaces (closets or perhaps phone booths—like the sort that Superman can run into wherever he is). These are transmission points, if you will. By being in these certain situations, we are in these discursive spaces. And we then make decisions on how we must handle these potential closets. Some closets are liberating and others seem too demeaning. Some are binding and some are freeing. As Thomas King writes: "the truth about stories is that's all we are." Stories, narratives both individual and shared,

"do things." That is, they bring us to, and define for us, where we are and they take us to where we are going. My participants, through their stories, their reactions, and their lived experiences are building an LGBTQ rhetoric of professional identity (or identities if you will). They are making it up as they go, and they are, as they go, offering spaces of mentorship for those who follow them.

What Can Queer Offer to Professional?

So what make the queer stories useful to us? What do LGBTQ professionals offer that we need to hear? Specifically these white collar, Spot-On employees in the world of retail culture? Jablonski reminds us: "New-economy career workers tend to be more cynical about their employers, more loyal to their profession than their employers, and in many cases more invested in their own personal lives" (17). My participants' stories seem to be about reconciling worlds (and corporations) that are both evolving and unchanging. They are cynical, yes, but they are hopeful as well, and not timid about making change (though, as Sue would remind us, they also get tired at times).

In "The Trouble with Harry Thaw" Umphrey reminds us that to be queer is to make the given strange, and to celebrate since to celebrate is to be identified and to be identified is to be stabilized, to lose the nimble stance of critique (28). And yet how can we critique if we can't "stop" something long enough to identify it and "judge" it. How do we make meaning of it? Don't we have to destabilize **and** stabilize/identify? Will being LGBTQ always be, in some way, unprofessional? And should we want being LGBTQ to always be unprofessional? Should we fight to keep it always unprofessional? These are the questions that remain, and that we must still face and discuss.

Interlude/A Story: *Sue and I had finished our interview, and we sat chatting while I waited on a friend to come pick me up. "Do you have any other questions for me?" I asked her. She said to me pointedly: "Tell me what you hope to find, what does this research come out of an interest in?" I tried as best as I could to answer her, and as I answered her, in this casual minute on a couch in her home, I realized I was summarizing my work more succinctly and honestly than I had before. "Really," I began, "I'm interested in just staying within one company to get an idea for*

how corporate culture trickles down and how people receive that – but from a theoretical and academic point of view. I'm going to be looking through a couple of lenses. One is narrative; so, how people cache in their minds certain experiences of being in a conference room or whatever. So, narrative and identity is one thing, and then, queer theory – and looking at queer theory, and looking at the idea of queer as post-modern. Disruptive of the normative stuff." Sue nods her head in agreement and understanding. I continue: "and I think a lot of different aspects of critical theory do this. It happens in feminism. It happens in post-structuralism. But in queer theory, you know, specifically through an LGBT lens, you know? So, what I'm interested in is if professional – if the word professional, and therefore the concept of professional – because the naming is really how the thing gets made, right? If, from that point of view – if professional is very white, and very male, and very heteronormative, right? Then, what does it mean for LGBT people even slowly and over a long time to be brought into the professional circle? Do we queer professional or do queers get professionalized?" Sue continues to nod and agree. "Maybe we begin to disrupt and disassemble the idea of professional, but in other ways, we're being asked to be more white, more male, more professional. This happens for racial minorities, too," I continue, "you know, you can be black, but don't act – don't act black," whatever that means. Act as white as possible and don't cry at work. Don't act like a woman. So, there are all these ways that I think the word professional tries to get made normative." Sue asks: "Where did this type of research inspiration come from?" I answer her: "Well, if you go out to bookstores and look at what people have done – not just in academic research, but even just trade books, there's not a lot out there for people to think about in terms of being LGBT and starting a career. There's a lot in terms of employment law and how to get spousal benefits and such. You can take a book off the shelf that helps give you advice. But I don't think people have really done a very good job collecting people's experiences, and stories, and just talking through what people have gone through. I wonder, for a young, gay woman, or trans person who's 22 and finishing college, thinking, "What can I expect?" Maybe the answer for them isn't a clean, nice, neat answer of, 'Do this, this, and this, and you'll be fine.' Even if the answer is, 'It's complicated and here are people's stories,' that's better than what's out there, which is not a lot?" Sue and I agree, and I tell her: "I think that my work can then be built on by other people across time and places, and I hope that other people are

thinking about this, too. I think in a lot of ways that the workplace is, like, the last frontier for this because we're beginning to see people dealing with LGBT issues in religious spaces and issues. You know like, the religious right and challenging them on their ideas, and also home life, family, friends, and even different kinds of relationships—such as polyamorous relationships. But I feel the workplace is like one of the last things that nobody really knows how or wants to touch it. I think part of that is just that professional is already such a loaded term and there's so much consensus on what professional should look like and should be. People seem to just unquestioningly think, "Well, if I want to have a career, I just have to act professional." And to me, that becomes a coded thing for a lot of –isms, right? It's misogynistic. It's racist. It's homophobic. And we just have to fall in line with it if we want a career. If you want a paycheck, you'll do this." Sue and I sit there for a minute in silence. We both know this feeling and this conversation. These are not new thoughts to us.

And Working Closets? Are they then just ways that LGBTQ professionals practice Spivak's "strategic essentialism"? Though strategic essentialism was originally defined as a tool for understanding how non-dominant bodies may deal with essentialist practices while still attempting not to be controlled or defined by these practices, Spivak has since repudiated its use somewhat, not because she doesn't find it useful but because she has felt that it was often misused with little attention to the idea of the "strategy" that must come with it. She seems concerned that the phrase simply gives many an excuse to continue to protect and propagate essentialism as a tool. In this sense, it is important when thinking about both strategic essentialism and Working Closets to think about both the strategy and the idea of "working." One thing she notes though in her concern about the use of the term is that it arose in the United States' political climate of the mantra: ""the personal is political" (35). I do also see the personal as political, but when it comes to Working Closets I also understand Spivak's warning about strategic essentialism. We must continue to encourage our LGBTQ community to push beyond what it means to be a "gay professional." What is at risk is the very idea that the professional would cloud the LGBTQ rather than the reverse.

Implications for Our Field

So what are the implications for **rhetoric studies**? To me they are that:

- **Historiographies matter:** not just histories, but who tells these histories, whose points-of-view are privileged? And why? My participants tell me that they are trying to tell their own histories (in places like the Spot-On LGBT Business Diversity Council).
- **Rhetoric is about power and access to conversations:** are LGBTQ professionals gaining access to conversations about their own bodies and issues in their workplaces? What are the strategies they employee to do this? My participants continue to push for increased access to rhetorical practices at Spot-On.
- **Queering grand narratives is vital:** LGBTQ Spot-On employees continue to argue that sexuality issues are not "just about sex" and that our culture is a valuable one that must be included in the workplace.
- **We must move from Rhetoric to rhetorics:** The idea of Rhetoric privileges one point-of-view, one heir to the tradition (of the Greco-Romans, of Aristotle and other "real" rhetoricians) when effective rhetorical practices of survival exist across traditions and groups. My participants remind us again-and-again that meaning making practices exist in multiplicity and often in less-than-visible places and ways.

What are the implications for **technical and professional communication**?

- **We must de-center binaries:** Binaries such as professional vs. unprofessional or insider vs. outsider, and well-qualified vs. unqualified are the norm in the workplace. They are often invisible shields to grant and deny access based on other factors. My participants spoke often of feeling the need to conform to ideas of "acting professional" and how to balance that with "being or acting" queer.

- **Learning that identities matter:** Rather than the binarized idea of "professional" that comes up again and again in this study, I believe we can learn to encourage students in technical and professional communication to take seriously certain self-assessment moments (such as professional portfolio assessments) where we often ask them to be aware of who they are professionally but then also avoid conversations about the personal. We often ask and encourage them to "be unique" but then warn them that too much uniqueness is dangerous. My participants' stories over time offer a kind of guide to those who come after them, seeking to figure out how best to "bring their whole selves" to professional situations.
- **Thinking about the personal versus the professional versus the private:** One thing my participants often talked about was the idea that they could share personal parts of their lives without wandering into terrain that would violate their feelings of privacy. These are generative conversations for the technical and professional communication classroom as well where students often resist conversations about the personal because they conflate it with sharing the private. We must help our students think through how the personal adds value to the professional and where that leaves us as we keep the private to ourselves.
- **Social praxis, a humanistic rationale, and cultural rhetorics are key lenses for the professional and technical communication field and classroom:** Building on the works of Thomas P. Miller, Carolyn Miller, and Malea Powell, we must continue to have conversations about how workplace practice and culture are also human culture and constellated within human activity and meaning making practices. We can never truly separate out the professional and the personal nor should we try to. My participants in this study reminded us again-and-again that seeing oneself as honest across those parts of one's life was key to a feeling of completeness and growth.

Implications for Queer Theory and LGBT Studies

There are also important implications for queer theory and also for LGBT studies in this dissertation work. I believe these are:

- **Collecting LGBTQ stories and chronicling organizational cultures with a queer lens:** In "After Stonewall" John D'Emilio argues for LGBTQ community historians to undertake further archiving and studying of our organizations and politics. He argues that we need to further study how LGBTQ persons have worked across types of organizations. While perhaps not initially thinking of myself as a community historian, there is an archival and historiographic quality to this work—one I intend to build upon as I take this project forward. As LGBTQ researchers and activists we often get caught up primarily in making chance and affecting equality wherever we can. Matters of history, historiography, and archive are secondary if noticed at all. But a healthy preservation and celebration of our culture is dependent on this sense of past. This study is just a small move toward that, but an important one.
- **Disturbing LGBTQ identities and rhetorics:** In "Introduction: The 'Q' Word" Noreen Giffney asserts that queer theory cannot be assimilated into a single discourse and that queerness cannot really define an identity but can only disturb one (2). Queer is something always in oppositional relation to normativity. Though Giffney's belief that queer is not and cannot be an identity category is in opposition to many in the queer community, she does "queer identity." For her (and for me), identity cannot be stable or fixed, but is still something a person may "have" at any given moment (even if it is always changing and shifting). Giffney's approach to queer theory is effective when laid down as a discursive tool too. Texts, discourse, and rhetorical situations are also things that cannot be stable or fixed but may "have meaning" at specific moments and in specific situations. Working Closets

themselves are always disturbed and disturbing. A key contribution of this work is a continued push for queer studies to always resist definition and solidification, to always find its greatest meaning in moments of shift, tumult, and movement.

- **The continued push to queer of professionalism:** This move to continue to disturb LGBTQ identities and LGBTQ rhetorics must next be laid over ideas of professionalism and professional situations. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* Lee Edelman joins a growing chorus in queer theory (along with Leo Bersani and others) to argue for queer non-futurity. He contends that the Child is an ever present in society and has "come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust" (11). For Edelman, the Child is then "impregnating heterosexuality, as it were, with the future of signification by conferring upon it the cultural burden of signifying futurity—(and) figures our identification with an always about-to-be-realized identity" (13). Because of the Child, we must "imagine each moment as pregnant with the Child of our Imaginary identifications" (14). This for Edelman is the fetishized fixation of heteronormativity on "the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism." To be queer then is to "undo" the future… it is not about being but is about embodying the remainder of the Lacanian Real. So to be queer in this sense is to be without a future… it is to eliminate futurity. Though Edelman's work here is purposefully shocking and radical, he offers us through the lens of this study an interesting way to see Spot-On. How is retail culture and capitalist corporate infrastructure also "impregnating heterosexuality" and ideas of reproductivity into both mainstream and LGBTQ culture? In this way, how is LGBTQ and queer being professionalized instead of the reverse? While our community continues to fight against flattening and the move to "whitewash" our identities and make them "cleaner" and less offensive (and desexualized), we also must work and live within this same culture.

I wonder at times if it is too late to really overcome this "compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism." In this time of growing acceptance of LGBTQ persons and culture into mainstream political, social, and popular cultures, have we already lost the ability to speak and show openly what it really means to be queer? One thing seems certain, as with many of our cultural ancestors before us (in the Indigenous community, African-American community, and Latino communities just to name a few) we will have to continue to fight hard to queer ideas about who we are. We will have to continue to tell our own stories—no matter how boring, bawdy, raunchy, or offensive they are. Only in this way will we, as Brenton D. Faber reminds us, truly affect change:

…change itself is a story, and stories are acts of change.

An "Ending"/A Story: *I don't think most people take queer stories seriously. And as a result, I don't think dominant culture takes queer stories seriously (or ever really has). Oh of course this is beginning to show cracks with the incredible advancement of LGBTQ rights and issues in Western culture, but there's so much more to do. Overwhelmingly so. The Thomas King quote that begins this chapter has been at the heart of my understanding of rhetoric and rhetorical histories since I first took Dr. Malea Powell's "Histories and Theories of Rhetoric" course in the fall of 2008 here at Michigan State. King's indigenous approach and understanding of rhetoric as meaning making practice (and Powell's belief in that same approach) has made a strong, deep, and permanent impression. Recently, as I travelled to a campus visit on the academic job market in advance of my graduation this May, I finished up a long day of a campus visit. I spent over eight hours straight interviewing with a dozen people for an assistant professor position in technical communication. I believed the committee was impressed with my 12 plus years of technical writing experience and my Master of Science degree in technical communication from Utah State. In short, I figured I was qualified. Of course most of my doctoral work had been dedicated to cultural rhetorics and specifically LGBTQ and queer rhetorics but that was why I had come to MSU. Most institutions that invited me for campus visits seemed to*

have no negative reactions to my LGBTQ oriented work, or even saw it as an asset. I had feared otherwise after my chair, Dr. Trixie Smith had told me stories about her own committee asking her to remove the words "gay" and "lesbian" from her dissertation's title at the time she had gone on the academic job market. It seemed, to me, the field had changed for the better. But, on this cold, windy, sunny November day, at the tail end of an exhausting day of talking to these faculty exclusively about technical communication, pedagogy, and rhetoric, I was asked by the search committee chair, at the very moment of saying goodbye: "So you do realize this is a technical communication position, right?" I was insulted and crestfallen. By the way, I didn't get the job, I didn't even get a call telling me I didn't get the job, I got a vague rejection letter from the dean months after my visit. Am I saying I didn't get a job because someone was anti-gay? No, what I'm saying though is that people are still uncomfortable with our stories, and with our work. Some people just can't get past the queer stories… the gay stories can't connect back for them to any other narratives. The gay stories don't count as real stories. I keep wondering how can my own work help to make it possible to see LGBTQ stories as a facet of professional communication as a disciplinary field? Now, at a time when LGBTQ rights and issues are slowly, but surely coming to be seen as human issues and human rights, I wonder if Thomas King's words will someday ring true for those like that search chair: "But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now."

Interlude/Addendum: *It's May of 2012—a month I'm not sure I'd ever thought I'd see come after this long, emotional doctoral trek. I have now defended my dissertation and graduated in a ceremony full of pomp and circumstance. All that's left is a few revisions and some proofreading before I file this work and begin to give further thought over the summer to what kind of publication or publications it might become. I've learned a lot during this process… that my research itself is a Working Closet as I manage the relationships I've formed and manage the risks (for myself, for my participants, for all LGBTQ professionals). A few days ago, on the heels of North Carolina (my future home state) voting in large numbers to ban gay marriage by constitutional amendment, President Obama came out in support of marriage equality. It was a roller coaster moment for most of the gay community, from being so disheartened to being buoyed by the President's remarks. The President came out of his own Working Closet, a tricky space managed by pollsters and politicians and personal faith and conversations with his family. There's been much criticism of how long it's taken him to endorse marriage equality, but deep down it seems most LGBTQ individuals must understand at heart the long and often complicated process it takes for one to come out. Many LGBTQ friends and activists I know continue to contend that marriage equality itself is a "homonormative" approach to take to LGBTQ advancement—that in fighting for these marriage rights we are simply trying to become more like the heteronormative world we fight to escape. Some would maintain the same about LGBTQ efforts to be accepted into and assimilate into corporate/capitalist culture. I believe these arguments have merit and need to be heard. Our community has, from the start, been founded on ideas of radical difference and the right to break from societal conformance. But, for the lives of millions of LGBTQ professionals here and now, partnership rights matter, as do the rights to be hired, to not fear being fired, to be who they are in the workplace as well as who they are in their own homes. The conversation(s) continue… but the important thing is that we can, more-and-more, have them openly and without fear.*

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