

(DE)(ANTI)(INTRA): QUEER SELF-STORYING AS EMBODIED, COMMUNITY,
AND THEORY-BUILDING PROCESSES

By

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ABSTRACT

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This cultural rhetorics project asserts that story is theory, and surfaces self-storying as an embodied, theory-building process. I undertook phased interviews with three queer creative writers, holding space for their stories in order to witness, interact with and to learn from the ways in which queer authors discuss and approach relationships with one another through storying and composing. This desire to learn from other queer-identified community stakeholders led to the emergence of a story-theory, through which a narrative thread of failure, survival and agency emerged. I articulate a reorientation and reframing of guiding concepts of community, composition and embodiment within queer spaces as (intra)community, (de)composition, and the (anti)body. An important impetus for this project was a desire to address the future of Queer in the academy. I utilize tools and theories from queer theory and cultural rhetorics not only to build, but to show spaces in which these conceptual frames can inform future, positive shifts. I do so to provide my own insights and to offer tools to continue the work Queer in the academy and to bridge the space between academic Queer and non-academic queer. I utilize cultural rhetorics to continue the work of what I see as one of Queer's primary purposes: to subvert, to disrupt and to re-imagine the ways in which the queer community and Queer can thrive *and* effect systemic change.

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I dedicate this dissertation to my family: Parker and Lucas, always remember that you can start over at an age, at any stage in life. Thank you for inspiring me to be my best self in order to be the best mother for you both. Dan: you never let me give up. You believed I could when I couldn't. Thank you for walking this beautiful, difficult life with me at every turn.

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TRIGGER WARNING

In reading this, it must be acknowledged that what are being unpacked and examined are threads in a larger, much more tangled system of discourses and ideologies. It follows that as we work through them, things might occasionally seem contradictory; they might make sense from one angle and not another. They might push against the reader's boundaries, concepts of what is acceptable, what is right – your moral or ethical ideas. While this project doesn't require discomfort, reader discomfort is not only alright, but welcome. Discomfort is the space where who we are and how we see the world is pressed right up against an invisible wall; what lies beyond that wall are powerful ideologies, mechanisms of power, apparatus of repression, makers and controllers of the discourses that shape our conception of the world.

Should you find yourself at that discomfort, you may go in several directions. You may choose to push against it; you may want to break through it. Maybe you will choose to sit in that discomfort. It may be too much: topics covered in the interludes include referenced but never graphically described sexual assault, mental illness, self-harm, disordered eating, parental death. I feel like it is most important here to say that if these topics are triggering, self-care is the most important move if discomfort will be detrimental to your well-being. The ethical stance of care, compassion, and empathy that grounds my inquiry extends to the respondents, to myself, and to the reader.

Interlude #1: sea shapes

“I want to tell you this story without having to confess anything”
—Richard Siken

“Memory

Body, 53, 26-28;
Historical, i-326;
Lack of, 94-106.

See also Abuse,
Sexual Post-Traumatic
Stress Disorder
(PTSD); Trauma,
Physical; Trauma,
Sexual”

—Qwo-Li Driskill

I want so badly to word-shape everything that happened to me. Intangible things, dark relics in the water, lurking shadows I wait to surface, that I know must surface school below me. They need air as much as I do.

Come to the surface, I whisper. I'm ready for you, I lie. I'm strong enough, I wish.

But these things take years. Ten, twelve, fifteen years. The older I get the more I promise myself that it's time. Years have passed and like all other things, they never listen. My own trauma hoards all of the agency, and I've been the silly girl trapped in liminal space, caught and held at the surface of the water, trying to breathe.

A body of water filled with dark creatures a fingertip away, and I'm not special.

I am no one in against this large force, no one but the small sparking girl waiting for something to come up for air. Exhaustion weighs down the air and each sip I take struggles to get away. Fear pushes and pushes me from the edge. Keeps my feet from the wash of incoming tide, keeps me from the water.

I'm on a precipice. I can't breathe, and I can't sleep, but the words, the world-shaping, the edges and curves spell something into that air, carve out a space in that sleepless exhaustion. If I say them just right, if I press them against each other and outline the moments and movements and shadows just right, will they rise? I've made a shadow girl, a secret self, a shell. I push her hands into the water and whisper what might be lies into her ears.

Come to the surface. I'm ready for you. I'm strong enough.

Chapter One: Introduction

“I have been writing as long as I can remember, and sharing it with people for nearly as long...writing is basically a way of life for me at this point...” Daye¹

I welcome you to a story comprised of stories.

This is a cultural rhetorics project whose foundation is the assertion that story is theory. This project surfaces self-storying as an embodied, theory-building process. For this dissertation I undertook phased interviews with three queer creative writers—Julian Winters (Young Adult fiction), Emily Stoddard (poetry and creative non-fiction) and Daye Duncan (fanfiction/novelization); one of my goals in doing so was to actively visibilize queer bodies in context with meaning making while also considering community as a space in which theory building could occur. My primary research question at the outset of this project was, “What are the ways in which Queer authors story and compose their bodies?” I took into consideration sub-questions such as:

- Do they perceive themselves as consciously composing or being composed?
- What do they perceive the relationship between writing, storying, composition and the body to be?
- Is this done with or in resistance to the ways in which they perceive their bodies being composed, discomposed, recomposed by others?

This dissertation is framed by and built from specific aspects of cultural rhetorics and queer theory. Emerging from my positionality as a cultural rhetorics scholar, my scholarship and research philosophies emerge from constellating theories and methodologies drawn from

¹ Duncan, Daye, Personal Interview. 15 May 2021.

multiple spaces, including queer, indigenous and feminist theory. Throughout the research phase of this project—the creation of, process of, and data collected through phased interviews—I focused on the writers’ identified understanding of and relationship with composing, writing process, and how those inform the relationship between created persona and the embodied self, individually and within or in relation to various communities. Guided by a desire to address the future of Queer in the academy, I explore potential methods for bridge building between academic and non-academic queer spaces. Using data collected in these interviews, I articulate a (re)orientation and (re)framing of my guiding concepts—community, composition and embodiment—within queer spaces as (intra)community, (de)composition and (anti)body; a shift I believe offers insights and tools for Queer futures and bridge building between communities.

*

How these stories survive, how I survive, exists internally but also, now, in your hands.²

*

This project steers toward the creative, the personal, the storied. It acts to hold space for the voices and experiences of others, those who don’t have ties or stake in the small academic, theoretical world many of us travel together in. I honor acts that embody constant reorientation through which we can understand each other as humans, moment to moment, relation to relation. I approached this work and the relationships built, the theory created and shared, by understanding that we’re all, as humans, going through something, somethings, many things.

² Free write, de Sostoa-McCue 29 June 2021. Throughout this dissertation, I reference and borrow from many of my own unpublished works, including personal and research journals, correspondence, free writes and even voice memos that were written throughout the course of this dissertation process.

This story does not take place in a classroom, my participants don't have a background in high theory;³ and honestly, their investment in this project lay in other spaces.

The very core of this dissertation is story and relationship. My participants chose to enter into this project for two stated reasons: to help me, whom they count as a friend and a human they care about, and because they wanted to experience a moment of community with other writers.⁴ This is not to say that "academic" theory isn't helpful, thought provoking or insightful: after all, this form of theory informs and supports a large part of my inquiry, practice and product here. Still, there are those in the field of rhetoric and composition who discount story as theory, actively undermine a legacy of constant, tireless work on the behalf of people attempting to understand, re-route, escape or change.⁵ This dissertation bridges, honors and works with two theoretical and methodological approaches, finds the potential in shared space and the flow of ideas, words, and emotions between these two.

I work to surface self-storying as an embodied, theory-building process. Initially, I intended to focus on the ways in which specific writing processes and procedures inform the relationship between created persona and the embodied self in conjunction with the work of writing and composing. Over the course of this dissertation, directly in response and relationship with the work I did with participants, the trajectory of this focus changed. It is important to note

³ Many scholars have discussed or used ideas of high and low theory, utilizing the concept of low theory in differing ways, many specifically drawing from Stuart Hall's work. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam outlines their own definition of low theory, stating, "As long as there is an entity called *high theory*, even in casual use as shorthand for a particular tradition of critical thinking, there is an implied field of low theory," (16). Rather than define what high theory is, besides as an entity existing within a "particular tradition," I draw from this approach which sees low theory not as a binary "other" to high but as something that "constitute[s] the name for a counterhegemonic form of theorizing, the theorization of alternatives within an *undisciplined* zone of knowledge production" (18) (Emphasis mine). That is to say, my participants are not a part of academic disciplinary fields.

⁴ Group interview, 29 June 2021.

⁵ Referencing Cushman, Baca, and Garcia's recent and rather targeted critique of cultural rhetorics in a *College English* introduction, "Delinking: Toward Pluriversal Rhetorics," And Hidalgo's response, "A Response to Cushman, Baca, and Garcia's *College English* Introduction."

that while this dissertation might have taken me on a journey that was unexpected in terms of how writing and composing, as well as the impact and influence of processes and procedures (which, ultimately, was not a focal point that emerged in the interviews conducted), throughout the course of it my interest and focus on conversation and storying primary concepts of community, embodiment and composition remained foundational.

I worked with three participants—queer creative writers—by collecting data by survey, writing samples, phased interviews. Through this journey, in conjunction with a self-created coding system, I surfaced a common narrative amongst their stories—one of survival, failure and agency. Using this guiding narrative as one of many possible nodes through which this data could be storied, I articulate a reorientation and reframing of guiding concepts of community, composition and embodiment within queer spaces as (intra)community, (de)composition and the (anti)body. Of particular interest, and an important impetus for this dissertation as a whole, was a desire to address the future of Queer in the academy. I utilize tools and theories from queer theory and cultural rhetorics not only to build, but to show spaces in which these conceptual frames can inform future, positive shifts. I do so to provide my own insights offering my own potential “tools” as a scholar with a vested interest in, and belief in the importance of, continuing the work Queer in the academy.

This work is intended to bridge the space between academic Queer and non-academic queer, utilizing cultural rhetorics in order to continue the work of what I see as one of Queer’s primary purposes: to subvert, to disrupt, to re-imagine the ways in which the queer community and Queer can thrive *and* effect systemic change.⁶ In this dissertation I make a distinction

⁶ I do so while acknowledging a historical two-way relationship between academic and non-academic queer dating back to the emergence of queer in academia as a in relationship with (whether positively or in tension with) queer activist movements in the 1990’s such as ACT UP, Queer Nation, the Lesbian Avengers etc. Erin Rand does an

between what I address as capital *Q* Queer and lowercase *q* queer. The use of Queer signals to the reader that I am referring to academic or academically oriented Queer: I am treating this as a proper noun. Capital *Q* Queer functions as an umbrella that encompasses action and trajectory, agents within theoretical, scholarly, institutional bodies that work *with* queer theory, queer studies, etc. This is meant to clearly demarcate when I am utilizing the word to describe something that falls within that academic umbrella. Lowercase *q* queer, on the other hand, is meant to denote queer community, queer folk and their work, which is not explicitly tied to academic work. When I refer to *queer studies* or *queer theory* I do not capitalize them, as they are merely aspects or pieces that contribute to the body of Queer.

Genesis

“I am curious about how writing is often a practice of pinning things down, clarifying language, synchronizing ideas—and yet by doing that work, I feel freer, and the boundaries around experiences, memories or identities loosens, sometimes dissolve, sometimes re-constellate.”
—Emily⁷

This dissertation began as a bundle of self-borrowed ideas, a whole lot of seemingly unrelated questions, and a gut feeling that there was something that would be of value to the work of the academic and queer communities I am a part of. However, this project was also plagued by self-doubt. It was insecurity and instinct in a trench coat. The insidious, damaging narratives of perfection, of achievement, of a singular tangible product we could call “knowing” walks side-by-side with this project.

*

No one taught me how to write books. I just did. I read and I read and I practiced on my own and I fumbled my way through and somehow, without ever really having believed in

excellent job exploring the relationship between queer activism and emergence of queer in academia in *Reclaiming Queer: Activist and Academic Rhetorics of Resistance*.

⁷ Stoddard, Personal Interview. 18 May 2021.

myself, I became a published author. When I write, I don't think about component parts—I don't have notecards meticulously planning narrative arcs, I don't know every character motivations. Half the time, I have a vague idea what the end might be and I'll be damned if seventy percent of the time, the stories and characters don't just go ahead and do whatever they want. My relationship with words, with storying, with making, is rooted in an instinct.⁸

*

This dissertation emerges as I, and many others, continue to account for the ways in which “academic” theory, of particular interest here, queer theory, re-centers itself over and over through power structures, particularly those inextricably linked to higher education, whose lineages are overwhelmingly Eurocentric/Western. I've learned to word and story and make in a world that is very determined to press heteropatriarcal, heterosexual, colonial narratives onto and into me. I fumble my way through academic milestone after milestone by making a mess, throwing ideas around without too much clear understanding of the *why* or the *what*, much less the *how*. I spend the majority of my process berating myself and even after consistent favorable outcomes, I am never satisfied. I think back on my work and cringe at every mistake.

*

I don't just live with imposter syndrome. I get in bed with her every night and close my eyes when she rolls on top of me and think, “If I can just make it through this one last thing.”⁹

*

An important part of my practice has been a tendency toward instinct. Feel first, understand later. The abusive relationship I have with the concept of “knowing,” particularly within what I was so long trained for in academia, was built on the idea that the only way to get

⁸ Because I am a prolific reader and writer, I often wonder about the nature of citationality. About the ways in which we absorb the words, ideas, concepts, themes or even emotions of others and how those shape who we are, how we write, what we write about—countless things—that we aren't even consciously aware of. Or perhaps, we are in a tangential way. Do we cite the feeling a book of poetry evoked that then led to a productive writing session that was ultimately, by subject, unrelated? If so, here I cite Richard Siken's *Crush*, whose role in this free write was simply that it moved me, and inspired me to sit down this particular day and commit words to paper.

⁹ Free write, 10 October 2021

there—to valid, tangible product and thought—was through “proof,” with logic, by constructing an argument with a beautifully tight structure predicated on the more valuable, more insightful, more “right” work of others. Yet, that instinct and drive, the voice in me that’s experienced constant hunger and longing for knowledge, for learning and writing, being and connected—a version of knowingness I felt I must constantly discount, the one that’s innate to who I am as a human and writer and scholar—comes from a quieter, truer place. I cannot discount that instinct; I cannot continue to do the work I want to do without learning to listen to and trust the value of my process and my stories.

Four years ago I undertook a project which aimed to understand the ways in which women find avenues of resistance to hegemonic discourses about their bodies and desires.¹⁰ Although that work was focused on women’s movements and resistance to oppressive narratives through creation of subversive space, the rootstock that fed it feeds this new project as well. What I could not anticipate, nor really grasped at the time of that project, is that through that project I was, in many ways, writing myself into being. I was testing the edges of a new understanding: that my body has been shaped and pressed and forced and grown steeped in much larger forces and narratives. This testing did not mark a demarcation at which point I *arrived* in any way. Instead, it was a step over some imagined boundary, past the containers that personal labels had become, into a period of reflection and imagination, of the constant project of self-understanding and acceptance of my own nuanced sexuality. I emerged from that project contemplating the idea that I could, with words, write myself out of those containers, particularly shaped in my mind’s eye, and into new ones. More importantly, however, that work was the first

¹⁰ de Sostoa-McCue, Tania. “Rhetorics of Resistance: Reading Taboo in Fanfiction.” Michigan State University. Critical Studies in Literacy and Pedagogy, 2017.

time I gave conscious thought a growing feeling: perhaps, my body functioned as a text. My words weren't simply *about* bodies and language and hegemonic ideals. What I skirted the edge of understanding at that time—not just writing about but really feeling the shape of—was how I compose and am composed.

My changing relationship to understandings of my own use of the word *text*, what I was seeking when I began this project and how it was inherently based in western concepts of literacy and textuality, is important to this story and the trajectory it undertakes. I cannot discount my identity as a writer, and the ways in which I serve words, and the ways in which they serve me. As I chose to work with writers, I understood that some of these tenets held true in some ways for every participant, particularly from their own, personal point of view and articulation of relationship with writing and compositions. Yet, through their stories, their storying, the theory and community built, I was able to see beyond the words, perhaps even the body, and live for small moments in what one of my participants, Emily, once referred to as the “third space.”¹¹

*

I confess to imperfection. In fact, I advocate for it, as I believe that the myth of perfection, of arrival, at solid conclusions close more doors than they open.¹²

*

If I am to do the cultural rhetorics work of moving forward in good faith with the assertion that we must work to bridge scholarly Queer with real world queer, I do so in acknowledgement that this work has no end point. In fact, I believe that the constant working, reworking, gesturing and un-gesturing toward these moments will be vital for work within and

¹¹ Stoddard, Personal Interview. 18 May 2021. Emily's definition of and understanding of the third space appears throughout this dissertation. This is not connected to theoretical discussion of third spaces in this particular study. Instead, the third space theory throughout is Emily's.

¹² Free write, 10 October 2021.

outside of the community in service to queer and queer folk. We should be constantly reorienting ourselves. As such I welcome, with confessed trepidation, the ways in which this work might age positively and negatively.

Continued narratives challenging the work of cultural rhetorics—a home in which I’ve lived as a scholar from the moment I began this journey—deeply trouble my work. Not simply because I believe that existence of continued resistance to looking at rhetoric, composition, writing, community from outside of particular matrixes of power is overlooked, but because often, *attempting*, even with good intentions, fails its own project for a variety of reasons, and that failure in traditional academic context is inherently perceived as bad. Queer scholars whose work explores the rich potential held within failure offers one path toward reframing my academic work. Failure as a site rife with potential means I can open my eyes and my work to all that I come across, the good and the bad, and *make* from it. This is one reason I’ve chosen to approach this work with an openness to a variety of theoretical work, considered a potentially valuable part of the journey.

Positionality

“What is the point of presenting the human condition in a language separate from the human experience: passion, emotion, and character?”
—Lee Maracle

Moving forward in this chapter, it will be important to articulate my positionality, acknowledging my orientations in order to address my own potential biases but also the perspectives I bring to this work. I believe that who I am as a person is inextricable from my scholarly positionality; therefore, I cannot, and will not, divorce my own human experience from this dissertation. I am cis-gendered, Latinx but white passing, queer but also straight passing. These are perspectives and privileges I carry, intended or not, into all work and all relationships I

have. I am a mother, a mature student who returned to higher education after a ten-year break. I am a creative writer who has published multiple novels, who writes fiction, poetry and creative non-fiction. I am a story teller and a student who has always craved learning and the interaction and synergy of writing and learning communities. At heart, I am a creative scholar who thrives on engaging in work with others. I have always been drawn to a variety of disciplines, theoretical spaces and frames. I am a writing and rhetoric scholar whose work is framed by cultural rhetorics and queer theory, whose axiology is shaped by queer, feminist and indigenous scholarship and theory.

I came to this project with all these aspects of myself, and write it in this manner too. I braid the creative, the exploratory, the theoretical aspects of this dissertation throughout, I play with format as much as particular guidelines allow. I ask my readers to trust in me even as I experiment, even as I create as queerly as I know how within this space. I resist the idea that I've been allowed this space, this room, even as I know that practically, logistically, this is true. There is a box, and I am in it; still, from within, I shape queer worlds and queer tools and queer stories as queerly as I can. I take this space.¹³

*

Academic trauma has personally manifested through warped perspective on the idea of *knowing* and what that word implies. Knowing has always been the goal, that finish line, that thing toward which I was moving. Perhaps this is one of many nodes in which my relationship with theory, writing, queerness and community becomes complex and at times, painful. Why do I need to chase white rabbits? Why do I need others to legitimize myself? Pursuit of knowing as an end goal has led to constant, exhausting motion toward that which is ultimately unachievable.

¹³ So many aspects of my personal story are layered into this idea of claiming, reclaiming, or even having the confidence to know that I can exist on my own terms. There is a particular tension between the rules we must follow when writing a dissertation, or even the process of schooling that allow us to arrive at this moment. Conversely, without my own movement, without my own action, there wouldn't even be space for me to take. I chose to go back to school, to learn to balance motherhood, a publishing career, and academia. I fought hard for all of these things, and fight hard to feel that what I do, and how I do it, is legitimate, necessary, and mine.

One cannot achieve knowing as if it is a tangible product; knowing is not a singular being or destination.

What is offered here, both through my story and the stories shared, is a postulation of knowing as constant practice.¹⁴

*

My academic journey over the past seven years has been influenced by a myriad of external factors. As a cultural rhetorics scholar for whom story is both theory and methodology, I find it is important to share aspects of this journey, as they are inextricable with the genesis and development of this dissertation. As Cox et al., discuss in “Embodiment, Relationality, and Constellation: A Cultural Rhetorics Story of Doctoral Writing,” cultural rhetorics can provide a frame for reimagining dissertation writing, both in process and product, bringing to fruition vital aspect of cultural rhetorics.¹⁵ Story as theory is a foundational pillar of cultural rhetorics; it follows that the story of the author, particularly in a theory-building dissertation such as this one, is vital to the process *and* the product (Bratta and Powell, 2016). An openness to sharing of my story—here and with participants—brings a transparency to my work that can only enhance and encourage the community building in this work. Honesty is vital to relationality, another pillar of cultural rhetorics work (Powell et al.).¹⁶

I bring all of my embodied experiences to this project, and must acknowledge that they influenced and affected it. A myriad of circumstances such as transitioning from being a stay at home mother who hadn’t been in an academic setting in ten years, learning to parent and

¹⁴ Free write, 10 October 2021.

¹⁵ I’ve formatted this citation according to the most recent MLA standards. Doing so, however, erases the labor and visibility of other authors involved in the writing of this articles with three or more authors. Therefore I would like to attribute this to all authors: Matthew B. Cox, Elise Dixon, Katie Manthey, Maria Novotny, Rachel Robinson and Trixie G. Smith.

¹⁶ Here I cite Michigan State University’s Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab, which was authored by Malea Powell, Daisy Levy, Andrea Riley-Mukavetz, Marilee Brooks-Gillies, Maria Novotny, and Jennifer Fisch-Ferguson.

commute while adjusting to life as a graduate student, caring for an ailing parent through illness and death, recovering from (with all attendant adjustment and relearning) a brain injury, working through a global pandemic all created sedimented layers that shape who I am as a human, scholar, and writer. They also altered my relationship with knowing and unknowing, with learning and unlearning, composing and recomposing my ideas about the world and myself. As this project focuses on story—my participant’s stories and the story of the community and theory we built together—it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge the impact and influence of my own story. I have made room for my own story throughout for theoretical and practical reasons.

As a scholar-writer, my scholarly positionality is inextricably tied to the writer-self. Therefore my story appears through a series of creative non-fiction interludes as well as with the braided passages that appear throughout the chapters. These “braided” moments include quotes—either writing samples or from interview transcripts—by all participants as well as personal passages through free-writes, correspondence and research journaling. The interludes were written over the course of this project as I worked with my participants and worked through my own relationship with the research questions, participants, interviews and the process of analyzing results from this study.

As a creative scholar and researcher, I utilized my understanding and positionality in multiple academic spaces, theories, methodologies and interests while working with—creating community with—other people. My own academic and authorial histories deeply inform my approach and sense of self as a scholar. As an undergraduate, I changed my major multiple times: my ultimate goal was to become a high school teacher, and as I studied, I was unable to decide if I wanted to teach English or History. As I swung between the two, I found myself taking more and more classes, and ultimately earned a BA in each. And while I continued on to

begin the work of a MA in Curriculum and Administration as I completed my student teaching internship post undergrad, a variety of external circumstances influenced my decision not to pursue a job as a teacher. After a long period away from academia, during which time I primarily worked as a stay-at-home mother, I entered a period in which I longed to go back to school, a process that necessitated trying to parse this thorny question of *what I wanted to do with my life*.

It was during this period that I also began to write fiction and eventually, began publishing novels. For a period of time I audited classes at a local community college and then at Michigan State University. I vacillated between potential interest in different programs: sociology, anthropology, literature, history, MFA's, religious studies, Latinx studies: all held potential, but none fit. In 2014 I happened to take an introductory LGBT studies course as well as Religion and Sexuality course. And while these were hosted in different departments by very different professors, at the end of the semester, both guided me toward a potential program they thought would be a good fit for me: the department of Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures, which was developed to replace the American Thought and Language department just a year after I'd graduated with my undergraduate degrees. The WRAC department focused on and created space for precisely the sort of work I was interested in doing: it was interdisciplinary, allowed freedom to explore topics and spaces I had never imagined could be done, such as pop culture studies. It allowed for—and encouraged—my affinity for blending various forms of creative and academic work. Moving forward over the course of my academic career, I have had the pleasure of working with and around various disciplines in various modes in the pursuit of deeper knowledge, connection, and storytelling.

Execution

I'm honest, but I'm not openly honest.
—Julian¹⁷

Framing each “formal”¹⁸ chapter are a series of personal, memoir-style interludes. In the course of this project I committed to considering every piece of writing, from daily journals to notes to stories, personal correspondence and free writes, as a part of the project. I had, months before beginning the active work of this dissertation, committed to a project: attempting to write personal memoir.¹⁹ As I began to really tug on threads and understand what unfolded as I worked with the other authors, it became increasingly clear that the stories we shared, the conversations, the revelations in those moments were being reflected in action as I worked on these creative non-fiction pieces. When considering the body, community, composition, survival, agency, failure as they appeared in the writerly community the four of us created, I was actively undergoing and experiencing acts of confession that reflected these things through my own writing. The product of writing is not passive; it does not simply exist and continue in stasis. Its effects and work change as it passes hand to hand. It creates unique, often unseen, perhaps unintended relations with writer and reader.

For *this* writer, all of the work done over the course of this project was vital to the project itself. Without the unfolding and (de)composing done in these very personal interludes, much of what emerges would not have been so. Much like the “academic” work done, the interludes

¹⁷ Winters, Julian, Personal Interview. 29 June 2021.

¹⁸ Although this dissertation takes on a braided form at times, I would consider the work of each chapter more in service of traditional academic writing. While the braided form is a testament to my own desire to resist “straight” composition, there is no denying that these chapters adopt many formal field-specific conventions. Rhodes and Alexander compose (and therefor influenced my own work) resistance to “straight” conventions in much of their work, such as “Queer: An Impossible Subject for Composition,” rhetorically deploying “disruptive” composition such as the use of narrative, song lyrics, poetry, theory and argumentation.

¹⁹ I stress active, as I did undertake this project after I had proposed my dissertation and became ABD.

presented will never be passive, nor can I promise that the work that went in and that comes out of them will pass into your hands as they came into mine. Regardless, it would be a disservice and a dishonesty not to include them here.

As I rediscover or commit to how much of myself I am willing to story, how many words I am willing to hand to a reader, knowing that they will take those and compose their own story of who I am, how I am, how I will be, how I was. There are threads that will bind these stories together. They are loosely woven. Aspects of the story should be a mystery to you, the reader; after all, it is in many ways a mystery to me. These stories represent my own commitment to my own unique practice storytelling. I allowed many things to emerge without telling them to, and I resisted organizing them in particular ways even as I made deliberate compositional choices in how these are ordered and presented.

*

A reflection of self as a lie emerged in these works; whether the narrator is lying to the reader, herself, or both exists/weaves throughout. I cannot confess to a truth, and I won't present a neat story. If you want to capture a moment, or encapsulate a narrative, I cannot stop you. The process of writing and presenting these are a testament to my own relationship with failure, agency, and survival. At times, I wrote myself as existing in all three of those spaces at the same time.²⁰

*

It is important to remember that all work we do—within or outside of the academy—is pulled through and out of fallible humans. No matter the intent, I believe it is impossible to separate researcher from subject. This dissertation is built upon trust: trust participants put and continue to put in me. Trust in myself, that I might treat the subject, the people, the writing and conclusions with respect, that I allow myself to follow paths my instinct and intellect present.

²⁰ Free write, 10 October 2021.

Trust that despite the fallacy of “objective” work in the academy, you know I’ve done my best. My story, their stories, our theory and other’s theories are woven together: they create one of hundreds of possible stories. The ways in which I composed are ultimately, deeply queer.

Moving forward, Chapter Two will further articulate the ways in which cultural rhetorics, particularly indigenous theory, and queer theory have deeply influenced and helped to build my research philosophy and scholarly orientation. I provide a sketch for the ways in which both cultural rhetorics and queer theory frame this dissertation. I outline what a cultural rhetorics approach is, how one does cultural rhetorics, and how I do cultural rhetorics work. Following this, I approach queer theory: what it is, what it can do, and, again, how I use queer theory. As this is a theory building project that emerges from my positionality as a cultural rhetorics scholar who does queer work, I utilize aspects of both—which often overlap even when articulated or used differently in different academic spaces—to build a methodology that draws from cultural rhetorics and queer theory. To do so I will “define”²¹ what cultural rhetorics and queer theory are: tracing their history and development, aspects of their purposes and uses. I do this to set the stage for the centerpiece of this dissertation, which is theory and community building work with authors who write queer fiction and creative non-fiction. In this chapter I revisit my research questions and their origins before moving forward to demonstrate how they draw from the theoretical frames previously provided. This chapter concludes with an overview of the methods I utilized.

My participants, their stories, the story of how we came together and what emerged from this project are the very center of this project. It would be impossible and irresponsible not only

²¹ With the understanding that fluid/flexible theories, methodologies and frames resist concrete definition, which will be addressed as we address what cultural rhetorics and queer theory are in more depth.

to center them, but also my own story. A claim that story is theory is merely that—a claim—when we do not put these intents and words into action. As such, A Story, *our* story is presented between Chapters Two and Three. It describes individual relationships prior to and through the interview process utilizing braided vignettes, excerpts drawn from research journals, free writes, and personal correspondence. All work together to create a narrative of myself and my participants on a more vulnerable, human level. In this story I ask the reader to leave the metaphorical home of this dissertation. To step into the garden with the four of us, to take our hands and just be. What follows in Chapter Three is a story of the arc of *my* changing relationship with the intent I carried into this project and the ways in which the process of facilitating interviews and then analyzing the data deeply changed me and the trajectory of this project. This arc describes my reorientation toward the specific concepts I chose to examine: composition, embodiment and community, through the narrative of survival, failure, and agency that emerged in the process of data analysis. Without this grounding, this deep personalizing, the chapter that follows—the data analysis—becomes unmoored, ungrounded.

Following this moment, and with the four of us in mind, Chapter Four does the work of sifting through and analyzing data gathered from the phased interviews, exploring layered conversations with these writers about composition, embodiment, community—questions which drove the creation and enactment of this dissertation. Each concept is troubled by and examined through a vital, woven narrative (agency, survival, and failure)—as I ask readers to reorient themselves toward concepts I call (anti)body, (de)composition, and (intra)community.

Chapter Five then draws us toward the ultimate conclusion of the findings I toward: that a community-centered dissertation working with authors who are not in academic fields would offer insightful, transformative story-theory whose application—or even from lessons learned in

the process of witnessing—could have implications for the ways in which we work both inside and outside academic communities. This chapter circles back to one of the primary impetus of this dissertation, which was a desire to address the future of Queer, how the story-theory that unfolded in these interviews offers insights into ways we might bridge queer and Queer, and what sort of systemic changes such work and commitments might produce.

Participants

*I am boxes of 100-year-old letters from Shanghai and Argentina
Spain and South Africa
I am superstition, salt over the shoulder.
Arepa Sundays, trips to Mexican town
for the perfect queso blanco*

*I am from São Paulo and Spain
churrascaria, the remembrance
Of six-year-old fingers and feet, a wooden
floor and Xucha, pão de queijo pilfered from the table*

*I am the ink
—Tania²²*

Before I ask you to continue this journey with me, and to dive into the theories that helped shape this project, I'd like to take a moment to center the most fundamental part of my work: my participants. Although I will provide a more personal, in-depth interlude devoted to them, I feel I must introduce you, the reader, to those authors who made this possible. I do so by drawing from the data-gathering questionnaires, the interviews conducted, conversations we had and the work each writer chose to share with me and the others.

²² Excerpt from personal poem, "I am From Ink," Included in Trixie Smith's, "Collaging the Classroom, the Personal, and the Critical." *Self + Culture + Writing: Autoethnography for/as Writing Studies*, edited by Rebecca L. Jackson and Jackie Grutsch McKinney. Utah State University Press. 2021. 159-172.

Daye Duncan is a 25-year-old writer who identifies as queer, male, white and Ojibway. He lives in Ireland with his partner and his partner's family, having moved there from Canada shortly before the start of the global COVID 19 pandemic. Daye works in the food industry as a server. In the Phase One individual interview, he stated, "I have been writing as long as I can remember, and sharing it with people for nearly as long."²³ While he initially shared their writing with family, he began sharing his writing with a larger audience through the internet beginning in 2003. In 2020 Daye was offered an opportunity to write a novelization for a movie as their first paid writing project. Otherwise, the majority of the writing he has done and shared with a larger audience is fanfiction in a wide array of fandoms. Daye self-described himself as a writer stating, "My genre strengths are introspection and comedy, and my pitfalls are grand emotional scenes and action sequences."²⁴ Daye chose to share a creative non-fiction piece that he wrote years ago, which he described as the piece he always shares when asked, as it doesn't contain any names, as fanfiction might.²⁵

Julian Winters is a 40-year-old writer who identifies as gay, male and Black. He is currently a Young Adult writer who has published several novels, including *Running with Lions*, *How to be Remy Cameron* and *The Summer of Everything*, from which he provided his writing excerpt, and the recently released *Right Where I Left You*. His books focus on "LGBTQAI+ teens from diverse backgrounds and marginalizations."²⁶ In his individual interview, Julian stated that his goal and motivation when writing is "providing BIPOC teens with a mirror or window into a world where they receive the happy ending often not promised to them through other forms of

²³ Duncan, Personal Interview. 15 May 2021.

²⁴ Duncan, Personal Interview. 15 May 2021.

²⁵ Duncan, Personal Interview. 7 July 2021.

²⁶ Winters, Personal Interview. 12 May 2021.

media.” Julian began writing through fanfiction communities. For his writing sample, Julian shared the first few pages of his third novel *The Summer of Everything*.

Emily Stoddard is a 38-year-old writer who identifies as “pansexual/fluid/open.”²⁷ She identifies as white. In her biography, Emily felt that it was important to know that her “creativity, writing, sexual identity, sense of gender and even spirituality come from a nonlinear, restless (seeking/curious), and questioning...space.” In our interviews Emily addressed various creative tensions that are a part of her process and the products of her process, as well as her thought process and lived experiences. Emily is a published poet who also runs her own business, *Voice and Vessel*, which offers writing workshops. Her upcoming book of poetry, *Divination with a Human Heart Attached* will be released in February of 2023. Prior to running *Voice and Vessel*, Emily worked in philanthropy and social change. Emily is the oldest and only daughter and is in her second marriage; these relationships and tensions are important to her queer journey. Emily states that “poetry is my first love and where I’ve devoted the most attention in terms of craft.”

I just want to say thank you. Thank you so much. This has been a real gift. I really, really have been...It’s been an honor to get to meet you guys and hear about process and stuff. A lot of people don’t like talking about it. It makes them uncomfortable and they don’t know how to talk about it. So to be with you folks who actually enjoy it and have clearly reflected on it, it’s like a huge gift. Huge gift.
—Emily²⁸

Together, we invite you to a story.

²⁷ Stoddard, Personal Interview. 18 May 2021.

²⁸ Stoddard, Personal Interview. 7 July 2021.

Interlude #2: ten, twelve, fifteen secrets

“I love him too,
you know, I say to Satan dark
in the locked box. I love them but
I’m trying to say what happened to us
in the lost past. *Of course*, he says
and smiles, *of course*. Now say: *torture*.”

—Sharon Olds

You took my children. Of the long line of people who removed my agency you were the first who might have *actually* done it for my own good.

But

You took my children. *Then*, surrender was my agency, the bitter edged February wind acknowledging just how filthy with pain I’d always been. I never let myself dwell on how he found me, woke me up. Ten, twelve or fifteen pills in, he just wanted me, lovely round just-past-toddler cheeks, the call of love an always lit filament from the moment he breathed, that lovely innocence that threaded us to each other.

I don’t say the words. I dance around mental breakdown, syllables like lonely smooth pebbles, worn and comforting, lonely textured yearning I want, viscerally, to feel. Mouth full of stones, flint against my teeth, a spark quelled by my spit and lies, I never say the word. I fill my belly with swallowed words. I don’t speak this truth.

Suicide.

The hard *i*, the false comfort of the soft *e*. The mitigation of *attempt*, the trailer hitch that pulls those words together. That *i* a hard, sharp rock to swallow, glittering mica flecked, deep nausea, swallowed, ten, twelve, fifteen, endless times.

*

I don’t know if I’m afraid of honesty or being raw. Maybe it’s really that I still lie about things I tell myself I’m ready or want to be ready to honestly look at.

I was afraid then, but believed in surrender. Now, I tell others to surrender. *I* surrendered. Children ransomed, I surrendered and made myself believe I wanted it. That I was *ready* for it. It was spring and I was alone. The cold sluicing of wind chased me toward the comfort of the barn and the warm bodies of animals, the stink of their shit, their hearts beating clean and constant and trauma free. The truth might be that without agency and already broken, surrender is easy.

*

I am the most compulsive liar to myself.

You can know these facts: I forget to eat. I hate the grocery store. I am the educated, bettered, well, well-spoken woman who can say,

Disordered thinking but not disordered
Disordered but not
Disordered.

Once we made my body well, once we took away foods and organs and reasons, reasons such literal, inexorable truths, I could no longer rely on tight glutens, congenital deformity, a fucked up bile duct other doctors whisper about at conferences only to deem harmless. Sludgy gallbladder gone, body shushed again, I sickly miss the shape that illness gave me. I've never told you I reminisce about the pain, the vomit that refused itself, that deep glittering nausea felt like a lovely promise, a painful lie, a gift that was at the tip of my fingers. Who am I even speaking to or with when all I tell are lies?

I, invisible glutton eats up that dirty pride, the arrogance of my body as a secret keeper admitting I hate food. Whose ear do I whisper in? Who catches the words when I tell you that it's okay because I eat and it's not controlling me. Will you believe me if I say I don't know why or where or who, the origin story, the endgame, the myth or the pathos but, but, but--I am a compulsive liar and I won't tell you these facts. Lean in and catch the hissed edge whispers, parse the syllables for the truth. Sift and sift, pan for that nugget that you can hold over me again to make me well, line your pockets with fool's gold.

I hate food and I *want* to. I want to hold the promise of a broken body close. I want to dwell on it. I want to eat up that starving obsession. I want to hold the knowledge, the educated, bettered, well, well-spoken woman who can say,

Disordered thinking but not disordered.
Disordered but not
Disordered.

I'm hungry for it, I want to be a glutton for loathing, I want to gorge myself on it, dripping down my cheeks, gagging on it, spilt juices of some fruit, red and connotated and hurt. Compulsive lies even I eat. I'm in love with the secret self who indulges in a harm no one can see, and that—that's my glutton's agency. If I tell you I hate food I can congratulate myself. The promise of control burns so bright in my belly. Lies so smooth on my tongue, rocks the pills I show you before I swallow, ten, twelve, fifteen times. The broken woman proving she's following orders. Being well. Compliant and malleable, surrendering to your plans.

Fuck surrender. *You can't you can't you can't* take this from me. You can't see those beautiful pebbles tear through me and whisper from deep inside that vulnerable red twisting path, each symptom such a hurting stunning secret. I'll swallow them down gorgeously, whispered words sucked back in, and you'll never know what's true.

Now, I'll tell you this:

It's not that I want *that* pain. It's not calming like the others, but a reminder that my body is my secret keeper. That there's room in my belly for ten, twelve, fifteen secrets swallowed. Ten, twelve, fifteen lies I've told you, told me.

Chapter Two: Cultural Rhetorics, Queer Theory, Methods

“Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of difference strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.”

—Audre Lorde

In the previous chapter I situated myself, my writerly values, and the backdrop for this dissertation. This chapter will turn to the two frames—cultural rhetorics and queer theory—that steered this project. I begin by situating myself and my relationship with cultural rhetorics, the primary influences that shape me as a cultural rhetorics scholar and the ways in which these helped me conceptualize and carry out this project. Following this I discuss the other frame for this work, queer theory. I begin by providing a brief history of queer theory, touching on the most influential historical aspects of queer for this dissertation in order to contextualize the ways in which I drew upon past and current queer theory to shape, conduct and compose this. Finally, I address the methods I utilized. I describe how I gathered and then analyzed the data collected during the interview portion of this project.

Perhaps the “straightest”²⁹ of all chapters by appearance and organization, I do this understanding the important work of covering definitions, histories, and theories in order to present, explain and describe how and when they informed, shaped, or were utilized in the creation of this project, from initially proposed research questions through the process of writing interviews, collecting and analyzing data and the theory building done throughout.

²⁹ Much of the work in this dissertation does the work traditional academic writing. While a lot of the format and braiding are intended to resist “straight” composition, this chapter does what I might consider the most service to conventional academic writing.

Specific to this project are the conceptual frames that “build” or house this work. By “conceptual frames,” I am referring to how I put to use the theory and scholarship that guided the construction of my questions, gave me tools with which to understand what direction my interviews needed to take as I composed them, and aided me in the practices of interviewing, analyzing data and writing. While this dissertation is theory building, it does not build theory or understand theory or theoretical moves—much less make them—in a void. Without other theoretical, methodological and rhetorical underpinnings this project would not have been possible to undertake nor complete. In this chapter, I point to specific aspects of cultural rhetorics and queer theory I drew from or utilized in order to visibilize the very theoretical underpinnings that enabled me to do this theory building work.

Part One: Cultural Rhetorics

Cultural rhetorics scholarship and practice within the field of rhetoric and composition is storied, complex and at times, politicized. Cultural rhetorics emerge from a variety of spaces, disciplines, objectives and points of view. I do not seek to explore the history or politics of cultural rhetorics, nor to trouble its uses or role in rhetoric and composition studies. I do not argue that there aren’t multiple approaches to cultural rhetorics practice or methodology, nor do I argue for or against the value or importance of any. As Cobos et al., note in “Interfacing Cultural Rhetorics: A History and a Call,” understanding cultural rhetorics as the interface between culture and rhetoric allows room for “the multiple, mutually-informing, and overlapping ways,” scholars can approach, theorize or explore that interface (143).³⁰ This is vital to keep in mind if

³⁰ As before I draw attention to all authors involved: Rios, Sakey, Sano-Franchini, Hass and Cobos.

we, as scholars, want to open our hearts and scholarship to the potentials in all, even if differing, approaches. The fact that there are multiple ways to do or approach cultural rhetorics is a gift.

As a cultural rhetorics scholar, my scholarship constellates theories and methodologies from multiple perspectives—queer, indigenous and feminist theory, for example—practices that I learned from the scholars and scholarship emerging from a specific space and place. In the interest of transparency, I acknowledge that my introduction to and learning about cultural rhetorics have been deeply informed by the fact that my MA and PhD work were done in Michigan State University’s Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures department.³¹ Of course, this affected and shaped the ways in which I do and understand cultural rhetorics, including the strong influence of indigenous rhetorics and the body of work I cite from. Many of the scholars that I cite in conversation with cultural rhetorics are drawn from scholarship that does focus on and emerges from this same space; they are not representative of the entire field—or fields of cultural rhetorics. From here forward, the ways in which I describe, use and frame cultural rhetorics will be representative of *my* approach and positionality.

Indigenous Rhetorics

Indigenous rhetorics and scholarship largely inform how I understand and enact cultural rhetorics. It is important that I acknowledge and honor the influence of indigenous rhetorics on this project. Bratta and Powell’s introduction to the special 2016 *Enculturation* issue offers the following understanding of cultural rhetorics, rooted in indigenous rhetorical practice and theory: “We also build from what we see as four pillars of cultural rhetorics practice: story as theory;

³¹ I would like to take a moment here to acknowledge that Michigan State University occupies the ancestral, traditional, and contemporary Lands of the Anishinaabeg - the Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples. The University resides on land ceded in the 1819 Treaty of Saginaw. We recognize that settler and indigenous signatories understood the terms of the treaties in starkly different terms.

engagement with decoloniality and decolonial practices; constellative practices as a way to build community and understanding; and the practice of relationality or honoring our relatives in practice, which often includes acts and attitudes of reciprocity” (Bratta & Powell, 2016). These four pillars, which are inextricably woven into my own cultural rhetorics framework, shaped ways in which I conceptualized, imagined, created, executed and wrote. Although engagement with the following values vary, moving forward I will articulate the ways in which I utilized cultural rhetorics rooted in indigenous rhetoric through:

- Constellating practices and methodologies
- Story as theory
- Relationality
- Decolonial Orientation

Cultural rhetorics understands culture as always rhetorical and rhetorics as always cultural. Cultural rhetorics draw from rhetorical studies that reject stabilizing ideologies. Rather than examining or creating “stable” or concrete theories, cultural and indigenous rhetorics focus on aspects such as constellation and relationality in context with that or whom we are studying or working with. Foundational in this approach is understanding that our relationship to what we study is where meaning making and discovery take place (relationship rather than objectification). This framework provides another option to emphasize meaning as made within and among multiple contexts, histories and knowledge systems. Shawn Wilson’s assertion that “the whole of the paradigm is greater than the sum of its parts” (70), supports an understanding of a research paradigm rooted in flexibility, relationality and reflection as we work with our understanding of our epistemology, ontology, axiology and methodology as a guiding unit. It is

with this cultural rhetorics frame in mind that I move forward by grounding my practice in the four pillars described above.

Constellating

In "Our Story Begins Here: Constellating Cultural Rhetorics," the authors of MSU's Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab³² contend that research with a single point of view or system risks researcher bias or blindness in regards to the influence of our own ideologies, understanding of how knowledge is made, our own positionality within our cultural paradigms. The CRTL argue that this approach requires an orientation toward culture as constantly moving rather than static (CRTL 1.1). The research done with the specific community of this dissertation (queer authors), who also hold multiple subject positions, required me to approach this study with flexibility informed by this constant re/orientation. A constellated approach allows scholars to understand the ways in which multiple discourses influence the shaping and creating of particular discourses. "All cultural practices," the CRTL argue, "are built, shaped and dismantled based on the encounters people have with one another within and across particular systems of shared belief" (1.2).

A static study of a culture would require isolation from other forces that consistently influence, shape and alter the trajectory and fabric of said culture. This approach divorces subjects from their roles in meaning making aspects of culture. Vital to all aspects of this project is acknowledging that my participants and myself do hold multiple subject positions and that those inherently shape and alter any and all aspects of self, including interaction and understanding of community, and what composition means to them in different spaces.

³² Brooks-Gilles, Fische-Ferguson, Levy, Novotny, Powell and Riley-Mukavetz.

Story as Theory

A cultural rhetorics orientation values making—things, relationships, story—as culture creation. When we approach making and storying as culture creation and culture as always rhetorical, we then begin to see the ways in which making and storying *are* theory. My approach to the research questions that guide my work is contingent on my understanding of *story as theory*. This project worked with layers of story: the works supplied by authors, the stor(ies) that took place during individual and group interviews, and my story as the researcher as a part of this project. In *Oratory: Coming to Theory*, Lee Maracle argues that story exists in every line of theory (7). Maracle describes European scholarship as predicated upon the idea that theory and story exist separately. This binary results in the creation of a new language that ostensibly ‘proves’ theory (1). In this context and/or with this mindset “objectivity” becomes a cornerstone of research practice: but to become objective—a practice I do not believe is wise, much less actually attainable—theorists and scholars who aim for objectivity remove story from the humans and real life interactions that inform said story.

Along with Maracle, I question what the worth of research with participants would have should I try to distance myself from the story and humanity inherent in any work with others. Attempts to be objective, to separate person from story (the removal of the personal pronoun, for example), built from this practice leads to languaging that alienates many readers and participants. Thusly, the writer “retains authority over thought” (Maracle 11), creating and perpetuating troubling power imbalances between subjects, researchers, and the product of research. This project intentionally treats story as theory but also, stories shared and knowledges gained in the interview process as theory building. I believe that theory built and created with this orientation, with this methodological approach, is more accessible, ethical and powerful. It

would be impossible to completely remove a power imbalance from this project, as I was the principal researcher: couching myself through a third person, “impartial” voice would be a deception: a very real person with very real feelings and objectives undertook this study. Furthermore, my participants’ stories and knowledges are just as valuable, insightful, and powerful—if not more so—than my own. No one retains authority over the story or theory that took place: it was, and is, shared.

Relationality

In this story-centered project, I understood several values that contributed to the concept of relationality. This included trust and reciprocity between researcher and participants as most critically important to the research and outcome. Authors who participated were invited into a relationship with myself and each other as we listened to one another, witnessed each other, and ultimately, built what I consider (and call throughout the course of this dissertation) community together. Although I explore notions of community in a larger, more concrete way further in the data chapters, as I use the term here, I simply mean that we were a group of people with a similar interest (participation in this dissertation and the topics to be discussed) who came together to discuss and share stories, experiences and insights surrounding the topics within that similar interest.

Although our conversations were limited in number and length, all four of us shared a space together what came from that time shared would never, and could never, have happened under other circumstances: only *these* people, in *these* moments, built this community. Deeply influenced by Shawn Wilson’s *Research is Ceremony*, I work to value relationships with others and with the work I do as a part of my practices of relationality; as Wilson states, understanding that it is these relationships that should inform our ontology (76); “When ceremonies take place,

everyone who is participating needs to be ready to step beyond the everyday and accept a raised state of consciousness.”(69) As such, the researcher must understand research as being done *with* participants, not *about*. When one says that research is ceremony, they must examine both the ontology and epistemology that shape research paradigms, taking the time to reflect upon what it means to treat research as ceremony.

My hopes with this project included this: that if I should manage to create this joint state of consciousness (the coming together surrounding a similar purpose), the ‘ceremony’ (AKA research) would reflect community building between the four of us. Approaching research as ceremony involves laying that specific groundwork—what Wilson calls rituals—that are specifically built in order to create the space for all participants (myself included) to speak, to story, to meaning-make with each other. A research paradigm that is holistic and built upon a foundation of respect not only for the research, for the participants and researcher, but for all relations involved is imperative in my research practice.

Wilson argues that what is most “important and meaningful is fulfilling a role and obligations in the research relationship... [in] being accountable to your relations...the researcher is part of his or her research and inseparable from the subject of that research” (77). Dovetailing with Maracle’s discussion of researcher/participant dynamics, Wilson reminds us that academics who treat subjects as subjects and not as members of a community, who do research *about* rather than *with*, are taking on the role of a savior academic, a move that easily slips into a fetishizing role (67).

I have come to understand that the most important part of participant-led research is the building and honoring of relationships, understanding my participants as relations. Regardless of what I, as the researcher, might hope to find over the course of the project, relationality and

openness to other's stories—even if they do not align with my ethics—must be respected. As Riley-Mukavetz reminds us, what Wilson offered is a model for building, not deconstructing (10). Reciprocity is a vital function of relationality, a practice that informed my decision to give my participants access to all products of research and agency to ask for changes. Trust emerges from this model, as we come to understand process and product as shared theory and community building (Wilson 108).

Trust building, honoring the stories and lives of others, informed my desire to slowly transition already existing relationships with individual authors toward research-oriented conversations. During developmental phases of this project, I opted to ask authors I already knew to participate. The nature of this project necessitated limited interview time. I felt that beginning with established relationships would lay the groundwork for trust-based work moving forward. I hoped, by asking authors to do individual interviews first, I'd be able to foster two-way communication in which the authors felt like they were actively a part of a reflexive conversation and relationship with me as members of a group together, rather than as subjects separate from myself who were under study. Respecting their voices and individual stories—and sharing my own—was intended to help create a community conversation between the four of us as we met as a group.

Decolonial Orientations

Decolonialism, decoloniality and decolonial orientations are foundational aspects of cultural rhetorics practice (Bratta and Powell, 2016).³³ This dissertation is not explicitly

³³ It is important to note that *decolonialism* is not the same as *postcolonialism*, which was initially used to examine cultural products such as literature and art and is utilized by a variety of disciplines in order to examine the impact of colonialism *through* said product. One approach examines relationship *with* a product or outcome, and one studies the product *as an object* of knowledge. Decolonial methodologies and orientations—therefore my work—work *with*.

decolonial work, but as it is framed by cultural rhetorics, it is predicated on *aspects* of decolonial work.³⁴ In “Embodiment, Relationality, and Constellation: A Cultural Rhetorics Story of Doctoral Writing,” Cox et al. specifically address particular privileges they carry, specifically that of white scholars working on colonized land.³⁵ I draw attention to the ways in which they chose to address their positionality as cultural rhetoric scholars who work from a decolonial/anticolonial *positionality*. In this piece they refer to their positionality as a *decolonial orientation* in order to avoid using decolonial(ity) as a metaphor,³⁶ separating allyship and support for Indigenous work toward issues of land redress and sovereignty (Cox et al 158). I draw from their reflections of the privileges that come with particular academic/publishing work within our field and the ways in which their work can affect and “break apart colonized/r notions in our academic embodiment” (159).

In *A Rhetoric of Alliance: What American Indians Can Tell Us About Digital and Visual Rhetoric*, Angela Hass describes decolonial methodologies as “epistemological and ontological approach[es] to: 1) exploring how we have individually and collectively been affected by and complicit in the legacy of colonialism and 2) interrogating how the effects and complicities play out in our rhetoric and research practices, theories, and scholarship” (43). It is here that my decolonial orientation is the most grounded. Rooted in decolonial methodologies, we begin to

³⁴ As I address the ways in which cultural and indigenous rhetorics frame the work of this dissertation, I acknowledge that there is a large breath of work in decolonial scholarship and theory that is not explicitly addressed here. Without the work of the many scholars and theorists focusing on or building from decoloniality, this work would not be possible.

³⁵ Cox, Dixon, Manthey, Novotony, Robinson, and Smith.

³⁶ For further consideration, see Tuck and Yang’s “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” which addresses the broad uses of the term decolonization in academic fields. They state “...we want to be sure to clarify that decolonization is not a metaphor. When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks” (3).

see narratives as rhetorical and epistemological, and rhetoric as more than texts/and discourses, which also allows us to see the ways in which rhetoric shapes identities and bodies. Decolonial orientations underpin the work I do later exploring and troubling the relationships of text, textuality, literacy and embodiment, community and composition from alternative understandings.

Part Two: Queer Theory

This dissertation is, at its core, queer. It weaves in and out of the scholarly theory that has served to teach me a tremendous amount about myself, while also witnessing the person I am with one foot firmly planted in my non-academic queer life, with my queer friends, people who might not know half of what I'm talking about when I engage with Ahmed or Butler, but whose lived experience accounts for the *reason* we have and do theory in the first place.

Queer theory is by nature slippery and resistant to simple or concrete definition. What I currently call Queer is an umbrella term that covers a variety of theories, thoughts, method/ologies, frames and spaces. One of the hallmarks of queer theory is that it exists to both resist and create. Queer theory, confounds stabilization as A Theory. In "What Does Queer Theory Teach us About X," Berlant and Warner state that "Part of the point of using the word queer in the first place was the wrenching sense of re-contextualization it gave..." (345). I find it useful to think of queer theory as a constantly shifting, resistant movement that can offer us important tools and tactics for examining, resisting and existing in this world; ways to dismantle hegemonic structures of power, particularly those surrounding gender, sexuality and sex.

I've often found that queer theory appears in books on the topic is not often given a "set" definition. Instead, it's treated historically, traced as political shifts and movements over time; discussed as a series of texts or theories; presented as resistance and rebellion; discussed as a

reflection of engagement with language, acts, gender, sexuality, gesture, thought, meanings behind meanings.³⁷ Queer theory is often described in terms of what it *does* or what it *can* do. In more recent scholarship, it shows up more and more often as a potential lament over a perceived dying breed, as a decaying moment: its roots are white, privileged, inaccessible.³⁸ Queer theory shows up in graduate classrooms where it is languaged and theorized in ways that aren't necessarily accessible, interesting or relevant to many queer folk outside those academic walls. Personally, I don't think Queer in the academy is dying or losing relevance; I think Queer has always inherently been about movement, change and resiliency. *Queer* could never have existed without *queer*, and I think that a forward looking approach that embraces what each have to offer the other is one way forward.³⁹

It could be argued that aspects of Queer—the inaccessibility, its problematically Euro/White canon—are incongruent with a desire to bridge Queer and queer. Why do we need academic theory, after all? How is it serving queer folk? I find in my own story, as a baby queer who came to grad school very late and without the language to understand who I was, how I desired, why I didn't fit, that queer theory and studies deeply helped me. When Wilchins states, “I started reading postmodern theory because it captured and explained things I'd felt or suspected all my life, but which I'd never put into words” (4), their words deeply resonate with me. Change can happen both inside and outside of the academy. I don't think they have to be

³⁷ We see these things woven into a lot of modern theoretical work but also in what I would consider “primer” work such as Wilchins' *Queer Theory*, *Gender Theory*, or Jagose's *Queer Theory: An Introduction*.

³⁸ Again we see this sentiment in many Queer works: a few examples being Muñoz's work in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, *Cruising Utopia: The Politics and Performance of Queer Futurity*, *Love's Looking Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Halley, Moon, Parker and Sedgwick's *After Sex?: On Writing Since Queer Theory*.

³⁹ That is to say, that without queer folk, queer community, queer art, queer longing, there would be no capital q Queer.

mutually exclusive so much as open to conversation, to change; they will be best served by sitting together, talking and storying theory together.

Part Two of this chapter begins by touching on the history of Queer. A large-scale history is not called for here; instead, I call upon some key historical movements, concepts that emerged during these times, in order to foreground the work of three specific scholars whose work is often included in what might be described as “canon” in Queer, and whose scholarship and theory I’ve found particularly important to my own work: Sedgwick, Butler, Foucault. The seminal work of these scholars’ poststructuralist work in deconstruction and critique of discourses of power in regards to sexuality and gender are not only important to Queer, but to my own understanding of Queer as a scholar. I draw from this history, scholarship, these key concepts and scholars as I turn toward the ways in which they informed the work of this dissertation and how they provide a base from which I will do theory-building work throughout by utilizing more modern, diverse academic scholarship, alongside the story-theory that emerged from interviews with my participants.

History

In *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, Jagose explains that while queer theory is often equated with the institutional developments in the 1990’s, its lineage can be over the past 100 years. Similarly, Wilchins addresses this long history in *Queer Theory, Gender Theory*, by tracing the ways in which multiple political movements over time combined with historical contextual changes such as postmodernism and poststructuralism. These created a loosely woven narrative that culminated in academic, institutional Queer. Since a detailed history of Queer is not my focus, here I instead briefly focus on a few key moments (postmodernist and poststructuralist influences on theoretical scholarship of the 1960-1970’s), key concepts

(deconstruction, hegemonic discourses of power, binary opposition), and key theorists (Sedgwick, Butler and Foucault).

Postmodernism arose in the latter half of the twentieth century as Western cultural dominance's centrality was coming under question. During this time, scholars and theorists began the work of deconstructing metanarratives and understanding of "truths" as universal. Instead "truth," (knowledge, ideologies etc.) began to be examined as the products of discourses. An untethering from the idea of "truth" opened avenues for exploration of spaces where, ultimately, Queer's resistance would emerge. As Hutcheon argued in "Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism," "Ruptures, surfaces, contextuality, and a host of other happenings create gaps that make space for oppositional practices which no longer require intellectuals to be confined by narrow separate spheres with no meaningful connection to the world of the everyday" (518). It is in that everyday life, the everyday, that queer folk, BIPOC folk, disabled and otherwise "othered" folks' lives, stories, struggles and triumphs occur.

Poststructuralism emerged in the 1960-1970's in the work of European continental and French scholars who were beginning to call Structuralism into question.⁴⁰ Deconstruction as a practice emerged alongside poststructuralism and its practice within poststructuralist work became central in queer theory and scholarship, emerging most prominently in this context from Derrida's works. Here, deconstruction emerged as a method of critique of the relationship between text and meaning, arising from his particular approach of reading texts with an ear to what ran counter to the intended meaning or the structural unity of a particular text.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Scholars such as Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, and Althusser (and later, Butler, Haraway and Braidotti) presented different critiques of Structuralism.

⁴¹ Important (or I mention) as I want to highlight the dependence of structuralist, and then poststructuralist work on text, textuality, and links to culture making within queer roots and history as these will be troubled later in this

Postmodern and poststructural work shifted attention from belief in metanarratives and fundamental truths toward the implications of these truths and the very real effects systems of “belief,” AKA systems of power, and the role these played in the perpetuation of such truths for the purposes of repression and subjugation. It is in these spaces, in the ruptures, that resistance exists. As Belsey argues in “Toward Cultural History,” “Wherever there is a history of subjection to norms and truths, there is also a history of resistances. Power produces resistance not only as its legitimization, as the basis for an extension of control, but as its defining difference, the other which endows it with meaning, visibility, effectivity” (557).

Poststructural work included a focus on concepts of binaries and binary opposition. As an example, one term within a binary opposition (man/woman, birth/death) was/is considered dominant. Poststructuralist, queer and feminist theoretical work discuss and expose the inherent violence within these hierarchical models, as well as the depth of that violence in the perpetuation of said hierarchies. Anything outside of a binary opposition, or that might not fit into one will be repressed. Queer and feminist theorists worked to dismantle binary oppositions in context with critique of hegemonic discourses and power structures as related to sex, sexuality and gender.

Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* examines a paradigm shift that took place in the late twentieth century in which specific acts came to represent a person as a whole. This shift then influenced and altered what Sedgwick came to call the double-bind (23). Binaries do not simply exist in opposition of each other, but in tension with each other. As one half of a binary is “subordinate” to another, subordination requires subsumption by and in exclusion of the other.

dissertation, particularly as I reorient understandings of text/textuality/literacy within decolonial orientations in mind.

The prioritized half of a binary is therefore inherently unstable, as the “subordinated” half is central to and marginalized by the “valorized” half at the same time and is its condition of dominance (9). Sedgwick saw double-binds as nodes rich with potential to recognize and manipulate oppressive discursive power (10).

In exploration of discourses of power and construction of gender, feminist scholar Butler addressed compulsive heterosexuality, which is predicated on concepts of gender binary, an ontological frame toward which all language must exist in order to shore up practices of heterosexuality, and upon which cultural and political power in various societies rest.⁴² Butler argues that gender is comprised of “....repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that conceal over time to produce the appearance of substance...” (*Gender Trouble* 33). Heterosexuality functions much like what Foucault describes as the incitement to speak—the construction of heterosexuality diverts us from asking about language role in construction of binary sex categories (*The History of Sexuality vol. 1* ix). Without one, we cannot be distracted from questioning the other.

In both of these instances, Foucault’s interest in discourses of sex, the relationship between creation of those discourses and power and the ways in which resultant discourses and knowledges are disseminated are important. Foucault’s explorations of these relationships are in many ways foundational to queer theoretical work. As mentioned above, one example of this is the incitement to speak. According to Foucault, institutions with power needed to create situations in which sex must be addressed. Power, he argued, is contingent upon a need and ability to silence or control an “other.” That other *must* exist, however, and must be worth

⁴² Specific to her work, Euro/Western-centric societies.

silencing. Incitement of speech, he argued, “was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself” (23). Reorienting the concept of the incitement to speak into an incitement to enact, replicate, to repeat helps us understating how discourses of sexuality, gender, sex are “shored up.” Acts of deconstruction, of really examining discourses of power and that apparatuses that help them function, is a vital tool in both queer theory and queer rhetorical practice. It is in the disruption of these structures of power, the breaking apart of binaries, that queer resistance can take place.⁴³

Queer in Practice

Queer theory offers insights into the ways in which our lives are shaped and policed by hegemonic structures of power, and the ways in which those structures function to remake and reify themselves in a multitude of ways. Queer confounds these structures time and again. Queer doesn’t fit.⁴⁴ Not only does queer theory offer insights, but also tools and tactics for resistance and rupture.

Throughout the course of my dissertation, I saw in my own participation symptoms and effects of hegemonic discourses of power, particularly in context with sexuality, gender and race. In turn, there were many instances in which I witnessed the smaller and larger ways in which my participants enacted tactics and practices of queer resistance: not necessarily exclusive to queer identity, but in the ways they torqued approaches to selfhood, community, relationship with their bodies, and understandings of composition.

⁴³ As queer is ever changing and malleable in response to the ways in which hegemonic systems of power function to reify themselves, I hesitate to make grand statements about queer theory function and purpose without the caveat that these are not the only ways in which one can understand queer theory, do queer theory, queer work, or practice queer rhetorics.

⁴⁴ As Rhodes and Alexander state, “At many different moments, queerness appears...to trouble normalcy, legitimacy...it skews the realities we construct for ourselves” (“Queer: An Impossible Subject for Composition” 181).

One way in which Queer informed this project is through queer rhetorics. Defined by Rhodes and Alexander as a “self-conscious and critical engagement with normative discourses of sexuality in the public sphere that exposes their naturalization and torques them to create different or counter-discourses, giving voice and agency to multiple and complex sexual experiences,” I understand queer rhetorics in context with this dissertation: as a *practice*—a “critical engagement” (“Queer Rhetoric and the Pleasures of the Archive” Introduction) that aided the shaping, theorization and writing of this project. Rhodes and Alexander attend to queer rhetorical practice by calling upon Warner’s expressivist-poetic form of argumentation as one that defies culturally privileged critical-rational. “Queers,” they state, “often find that the logics of larger culture are aligned to discredit queers, disavow the legitimacy of their interests, and discombobulate their attempts to find social justice” (Logos, or Silence=Death). This dissertation builds theory from story and community from outside that critical-rational, giving the narratives of those being oppressed by a larger culture. It builds from the expressivist-poetic, the deeply personal, from an embodied relationship with art and sexuality and self-expression, from hours of queer writers showing up to story themselves.⁴⁵

Queer’s shifting nature offers many avenues for making and breaking, wrenching, and hoping within hegemonic power structures that work to police and erase queers and queer culture making. It does so through a variety of tactics and practices. My brief foray into some of Queer’s history—some foundational concepts and scholarship—exist here because they are just that: a foundation upon which a continued lineage of more diverse scholars and thinkers write and

⁴⁵ I refer here to Warner’s work on public sphere theory, in which he understands publics as poetic world making: as performative and queer. In “Publics and Counterpublics” Warner articulate the ways in which publics and counterpublics are formed and understood, examining a link in cultural privileging of “critical-rational” forms of discourse over “expressivist-poetic.”

theorize in exciting, transgressive, queer ways. This scholarship it utilized throughout further chapters in context with participant interviews. The works of many theorists mentioned in this dissertation that emerged from that initial development of Queer in academia offer tactics that demonstrate the ways in which queer resists and hopes through deployment of things such as unruly rhetorics (Rhodes and Alexander); queer phenomenology (Ahmed); practices of disidentification (Muñoz); sexual and embodied rhetorics (Warner, Rhodes and Alexander); commitment to ephemera (Rhodes and Alexander); queer world-making (Muñoz, Ahmed); re-contextualization and orientation toward time (Love, Muñoz), futurity and hope (Muñoz, Halberstam); and through a re-approaching failure as productive (Halberstam).⁴⁶

As previously described, all of my participants have been subject to hegemonic discourses of power; in context with this dissertation and the interviews (and impetus of), the ways in which their sexuality, gender, race, and neurodivergence were affected by these discourses crops up often. In their stories, however, run beautiful counter-narratives, moments of resistance, moments in which they've enacted queer resistance in everyday life. Through their words, I encountered the ways in which these discourses and their own queer world-making influence and affected their own understandings of embodiment, composition and community.

Part Three: Methods

Drawing from my scholarly positionality and perspectives as well as the two frames discussed above (i.e., cultural rhetorics and queer theory), this dissertation was born of a desire to explore concepts related to queer composition and bodies, an anchoring in my feminist

⁴⁶ Additionally, I'd like to draw attention to queer scholars and scholarship whose work does not directly appear in this dissertation but that were deeply influential to my development as a queer scholar. This list is in no way exhaustive, but includes scholars such as Gloria Anzaldua, Karma Chávez, Ann Cvetkovich, Eric Darnell Pritchard, Erin Rand, Stacey Waite, and Trixie Smith.

orientation, and a desire to participate in a community of fellow writers in order to discuss imagination, creation, composition of self in public and private spaces. In Part Three of this chapter, I discuss the research questions that guided this project and the feminist methods that informed it; I describe the data-gathering processes for each step of this project, followed by a discussion on how I analyzed the data gathered.

One of my goals for this dissertation included active visibilization of queer bodies in context of meaning making. Approaching community as spaces for theory building and making was another. I interviewed three queer-identified creative writers. My primary question for this dissertation was: **What are the ways in which Queer authors story and compose their bodies?** Subquestions that stemmed from this question included:

- Do they perceive themselves as consciously composing or being composed?
- What do they perceive the relationship between writing, storying, composition and the body to be?
- Is this done with or in resistance to the ways in which they perceive their bodies being composed, discomposed, recomposed by others?

Prior to a more in-depth explanation of the methods undertaken as I pursued these questions, I take a moment to address the ways in which my work and therefore this dissertation are deeply influenced by feminist theory, especially in regards to the methods I chose to adopt. In the creation and implementation of data gathering, my work was informed in particular by Royster and Kirsch's methodological concepts of strategic contemplation and critical imagination. In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices*, the authors advocate for finding new and unexpected ways to interact with subjects using critical imagination. As researchers, they state, "we must learn to listen while keeping an eye on what we assume, what frames or thoughts we

brought to the relationship and work” (location 245). The practice of critical imagination required me to think beyond traditional scholarship and the values that tradition are imbued with: a valuation of things such as objectivity, rigor, one that values that which is considered factually demonstrable, and instead think in unexpected, creative, open ways as I fashioned my interviews.

Research participants’ stories help build sustainable, ethical theory. And what’s more, they actively work to teach readers how to do the same. Royster and Kirch’s concept of strategic contemplation has been personally vital to the development and nurturing of my own listening practices, asking me to consistently pause and take stock of my positionality in order to ensure that I was doing the work of listening and respecting and caring for the gift my participants were offering. Strategic contemplation is about engagement in dialogue, understood in context as exchange with subjects—in my case, participants (Location 346). Engaging in strategic contemplation allowed me, the researcher, to hear more about that which mattered or influenced my participants beyond what I had hoped for or expected.

Data Gathering

For this dissertation project I interviewed three self-identified queer creative writers who consented to take part in a phased interview process. I deliberately chose to work with a smaller pool of participants because I wanted to create space for relationship and trust building. The questions I intended to ask and the themes and topics of discussion I hoped to address were of a personal nature such that it felt necessarily appropriate to keep the community I hoped to build small. Additionally, I anticipated that a smaller data set would allow me space to do a deeper, more nuanced and in-depth review and analysis of themes that would emerge.

Keeping my desire to build a small community of writers who would participate in conversation about meaning-making (in context of their own work, but hopefully over the course

of the interview with each other as well), building of trust and clearly communicating my belief in reciprocity in communication was vital. The methods chosen and undertaken draw particularly from aspects of cultural rhetorics (story as theory, treatment of research as ceremony, relationality) articulated in Part One. In “Towards a Cultural Rhetorics Methodology: Making Research Matter With Multi-Generational Women From the Little Traverse Bay Band,” Riley-Mukavetz utilizes a cultural rhetorics approach as she re-tells stories shared in talking circles in order to theorize “relationality and there-ness as rhetorical practices for doing intercultural research” (108). My choice to design this project as a space where I made myself a fellow participant sharing experiences and telling stories as a fellow queer writer was intentionally done in order to reflect values of relationality and reciprocity, approaching story shared as theory.

I personally knew each participant that I reached out to and who agreed to participate. While I was willing to work with authors I did not know, should I not have been able to secure other participants, the hope was that an existing relationship would have the benefit of an already trust-based foundation. I hypothesized that this would facilitate interviews that would yield nuanced, honest conversations. I sought queer-identified authors from publishing, learning or fanfiction writing spaces. I intentionally created a diverse list of authors to reach out to, taking into consideration a desire to have this dissertation as representative of diverse intersections such as race and ethnicity, neurodivergence, and/or (dis)ability as possible. Prior to contacting potential participants, I listed all authors and writers who might be able or willing to participate and made sure this pool could represent the voices of diverse authors. As this study had a necessarily small pool of participants, I recognized that the inclusion of a truly diverse pool of respondents would not be guaranteed. All of these considerations were at the forefront of my

mind as I designed my study and as I considered authors I felt would be a good fit for this project.

This project was designed utilizing mixed methods of data collection in three phases that I describe in further detail below. Briefly, Phase One consisted of a primary data-gathering biography and request for a three-to-five-page writing sample that participants would be willing to share with the group (Appendix A). Phase Two consisted of individual interviews carried out over Zoom (see Appendix B for the initial/guiding interview questions). Phase Three of the interview process consisted of two ninety-minute group interviews, carried out over Zoom (see Appendices C and D for the initial/guiding interview questions). Following this, I analyzed the Phase Two and Phase Three interviews to begin surfacing themes.

As this dissertation process examines and addresses the lived experiences of queer authors, particularly in context with their understandings of composing, their embodied experiences and their relationship with writing, I journaled my experiences and my process along the way. I realized that this particular practice would not only benefit the work I was doing, but ultimately, would be absolutely necessary acts of strategic contemplation. Taking into account that I was striving to build community—or hoping to be able to—with three others while asking them to invite each other and myself into their stories, their lives, the narratives that have shaped them, I knew that my story must be a part of the larger narrative of this project. This “journaling” took many forms. I have routinely kept a small daily check-in journal throughout my academic career. I knew that these small entries would provide context for what was happening in my life outside of this project, and so I chose to include this as a part of the data. Additionally, I kept a research journal dedicated specifically to this project. These entries coincide with moments specific to this process. They take place post-meeting, post-milestone, after work sessions, and

post interview. These are longer and were intentionally loose, as I wanted to try to capture more raw thought processes rather than cleaned up ones. This was a deliberate choice as I did not want to try to perform something “academic” but to really capture and embody the research process. Over the past year I have worked on creative nonfiction, memoir-style essays that were influenced by many aspects of this dissertation. Ultimately, any and all writing done during the course of this project was considered data inextricably linked to this work.

Phase One: Survey

Phase One consisted of a data-gathering written questionnaire as well as a request for a three-to-five page writing sample participants were willing to share with each other. Authors were asked to provide what name or pseudonym they wanted to use for the duration of this project. The questionnaire asked authors to provide identifying information (age, race, cultural or ethnic heritage; gender and or preferred pronouns; sexual orientation; other identifiers). Participants were advised that they were not required to answer any of these questions if they did not want to do so. Additionally, they were asked to provide a short biography. This section was worded specifically to allow authors room to breathe, intending to make the crafting of answers self-guided. Specifically, authors were instructed: “Tell me about yourself. This is a space for you to share what you feel is important for me to know about you as a person, a writer, your interests...the sky is the limit.” (Appendix A) The biographical portion of this questionnaire did not include page- or word-count limitations, which was meant to give the participants room to breathe and to provide information they felt was relevant and most important. In order to avoid predetermining findings, I asked them to share a sample of their own writing without guidelines. One of my intentions was to read these artifacts in an attempt to begin to understand how these authors compose. All three authors took different approaches as they selected their writing

samples, as is discussed further in the data chapters. These samples were also shared with the group so that they might get a sense of each other prior to asking them to meet face-to-face in Phase Three of the research process. As a self-identified queer author whose research philosophy is also rooted in relationship building and reciprocity, I also shared a piece of my own writing.

The open nature of the short biography did inform some of the questions I asked in Phases Two and Three, as well as how I approached each interview, because the authors' approaches and choices helped me understand where they were at and if I had to draw them in different directions or how to guide them. While this project was intentionally designed to allow for unpredictability and flexibility, it was vital for me to get an understanding of what they perceived I might be looking for—how they interpreted or internalized what working as an interviewee for someone's dissertation project meant. In a sense, these biographies helped me understand the performative orientation each author came to the table with.

Phase Two: Individual Interviews

Phase Two consisted of “face-to-face” individual interviews that were recorded and transcribed with participant consent. Owing to distance and restrictions due to the COVID pandemic, these interviews were conducted via Zoom. These interview files were then sent to Rev Captions and Transcriptions to be transcribed. Each interview was intended to last for sixty minutes, although two of them ran longer. The function of these interviews was to initiate conversation about writing and the writer-self, grounding the self and the writer in the body, before turning toward discussion of composition, both self and social. This was done in order to get a sense of what these words and phrases meant to the authors, which helped lay the groundwork for how I would shape the group interviews. An important focus of this interview phase was conversation about composition. In acknowledgement that the word composition

might hold different meaning for me, particularly as I designed this project around the idea of composing self through words, I asked each participant to define composition, or to offer what associations they had with the word.

In the developmental stages of this project, I initially intended to limit the questions in this phase to roughly five or six. However, prior to prospectus defense it was suggested I might want to pilot conversations, particularly about the meaning of composition, prior to finalizing my questions. I conducted pilot interviews with Michigan State faculty: Karen Moroski-Rigney and Stacia Moroski-Rigney. These interviews were invaluable in that I was able to receive feedback from people who haven't known me or my work and therefore had different perspectives. Additionally, their interviews offered drastically different perspectives and answers regarding ideas of writing, embodiment and composition. These pilot interviews allowed me to streamline the questions I planned to ask in Phase Two. Despite my knowledge that these interviews could and probably would stray from the script, I only realized post-interview that I had mentally predetermined the direction the conversation about composition and embodiment would go. Stacia's responses to questions I had drafted along this vein seemed to directly contradict the idea of embodiment and composition I had envisioned. In retrospect, this interview allowed me to see the ways in which one might approach this line of questioning and my theories from a different angle.

These pilot interviews helped me reshape the proposed interview questions I drafted for Phase Two. Additionally, once I had data from the Phase One data-gathering questionnaire, I was able to tweak the wording and direction I wanted to take. The Phase Two question script I brought to these face-to-face interviews were written with the intent to understand and lay

groundwork for conversations about writing, the writer self, and grounding the self and writer in the body before turning toward discussion of composition.

Phase Three: Group Interviews

Phase Three consisted of two ninety-minute group interviews between myself and my participants, Daye, Julian and Emily. These were recorded and transcribed with participant consent. This was the least rigidly planned phase of this research process: while I created a skeleton list of potential questions that might be asked, having learned from the pilot interviews conducted prior to Phase One, I realized that implementation of critical imagination and strategic contemplation would help to protect the interviews from inflexible lines of questioning that didn't reflect my participants' stories. Pre-determined or overdetermined questions would not enable me to create dialogue, nor actively participate in the theory and community building the four of us were meant to create *together*. Therefore, the majority of the interview questions for the first round of Phase Two were created after I had received transcribed copies of each individual interview and after I had a chance to read and reflect on the direction each interview took.

Likewise, the questions posed for the second group interview were created after I received a transcript of the first group interview. These interviews contained specific questions within a suggested conversational script. For each I knew there were topics I would like to address: embedded in language that harkened back to previous topics were key words or guideposts, for example: "Touching back on **embodiment**, which came up passionately last week, I'd like to ask..." and "Something else I saw surfacing last week had to do with concepts of **agency**..." I've emphasized the key words that signaled the direction I wanted this line conversation to take. Each of these guiding questions had potential sub-questions that acted as

conversational prompts should the participants need more scaffolding or encouragement. There were times when these were not needed at all. My commitment to understanding story as theory, and therefore the stories fostered, informed the decisions I made as to whether or not to probe further and ask sub-questions. I did not make the story, the community, or this theory alone. I facilitated, I participated, but I also listened and followed.

Data Analysis

While the primary data set used and analyzed here consists of interviews conducted solely for the purpose of this project, I approached both these interviews and the interpretation and analysis of this data as story informed and shaped by the lived experiences and pasts of the participants and myself. Interviews explored the ways in which authors story their embodied experiences and their relationships with composition. The research conducted was meant to attend to the past, present and imagined futures of all four participants (including myself as the fourth). As such, I framed my participants' stories and words as dialoguing across time—not just each participant's "time" but time as linked to both large and small socio-cultural narratives (Royster and Kirsch location 245).

With this in mind, I read and re-read interviews to both visualize and internalize the relationship between the most common themes and their relationship to each other (that is to say, moments in which one answer or passage might be flagged for overlapping themes). Although I intended to code this data in a particular way, which I will describe below, halfway through the process of coding I found that to really attend to the story and theory being created I needed to take a more flexible approach. Many stories could have emerged from this data. The flexibility with which I coded and then read these interviews resulted in the story *this* dissertation presents, the theories *this* dissertation surfaces.

I began analyzing data with a system for surfacing themes. I did this by reading and then re-reading each interview, immediately prior to the following interview, and so on. I then re-read them as an entire data set once all interviews were complete. As I read these interviews, I kept note of any time participants referenced community, composition, embodiment—as those were my main focus going into the study—as well as themes that emerged from interviews and were folded into questions in subsequent interviews: agency, failure, survival, persona, identity. I also took note of any other phrases or topics that appeared in more than one interview. These included conversation about space, mentions of the five physical senses, longing, power dynamics, neurodivergence, coming out. Several of these easily overlapped: for example, the five senses fell under the category of embodiment, and persona and identity overlapped with each other as well. This left me with ten potential “themes” to explore the data with.

At this point, I assigned each theme a color and re-read the data, highlighting any moments in interviews that corresponded with these themes. As a part of this process, I often had to code multiple themes for single passages or phrases. I tracked each theme, cross referencing overlapping phrases, words, and sentences that might belong to multiple themes. I utilized these moments as a part of a narrowing process, as often, two themes might show up again and again at the same time. In addition, I narrowed my focus by examining which “themes” appeared most often.

Through this method I narrowed my themes to six: composition, embodiment, community, agency, survival and failure. It was at this point that I intended to utilize an Excel spreadsheet to further quantify the results that were emerging from the interviews. However, I realized that what I needed to do in order to both understand the ways in which themes were overlapping and intersecting and do the kind of theory and community building work I set out to

do, was not to quantify them, but to *listen* to them. Here is when it became most crucial to employ critical imagination and strategic contemplation, to look at and to listen to and to feel these stories as theories. I therefore read them as a whole, and not a sum of their parts. I knew that multiple story-theories existed in these moments the four of us shared, were reflected in the data sets before me. Once I began to really listen across these six themes did I understand the theory I wanted to surface and story. What emerged was unexpected, at times difficult for me to grapple with, and challenging to write.

And yet...

I invite you to a story.

A Story

Casting a little line in the darkness toward you.
—Tania ⁴⁷

Emily comes first. I don't remember our first meeting. Maybe when I'm settling into my dorm single, into a new floor of other students who must know they live best alone. Perhaps that is only me, errant and willful and unknowingly, painfully introverted and controlling. I hadn't discovered the words for all the ways in which I felt wrong, or spoiled or incapable in those years. I knew I loved the solitude of my room, the safety of having my things in or out of place. Everything in that room was mine, mine to touch, to move. A space I cluttered or cleaned, where I wasn't dependent on others, where no one but me had permission or autonomy. It's my third year of college and I still struggle with friendship, with overture and people.

A confession: There is a lot I don't remember, that I know existed only in that which remains. I don't trust my memories or the echoes of emotion or even the narrative I've strung from the tangible result of those years: my degrees, my husband, my friendship with Emily.

In many ways, Emily is the reason I knew I was queer. Long before I knew it, I knew I loved her in a very special, particular way. We met during a time when my faith was an albatross and a haven. When I still felt guilt and still carried moral compasses that were damaging and stunting. Emily and I bonded over faith: we had questions but believed. We spoke of the sanctity of marriage even after a drunken night of kissing on a dare.

And then it was and wasn't that night that sewed its way deep into a secret second self I'd been trying so hard to excise. Those kisses stitched me together, made that separation impossible. It was a moment, a night, but a light turned on, cast glow bringing this other self to light. It became harder and harder to ignore—I became harder to ignore.

Dianne Wakoswki is perhaps the most responsible for the relationship Emily and I formed. Or perhaps, simply the space she created. Because in that space, we found each other as writers. I don't just mean that we were, or that we admired each other. Dianne opened a space in which we could connect in a way that I never anticipated.

Emily is in many ways my soulmate. Perhaps there is a word for the string that connects us, that has held us together for twenty years. We often tell others, and remind each other, that silence is a trusted friend. We can, and have, gone years without speaking, but always knowing we will always be bound. That at any moment, we could reach out to the other and be present in very honest and vulnerable and trusting ways. When I die, should I die before her I know I want everything, *everything*, I've ever written to go to her. Emily is the only person to know and to understand the phrase: *I feel Virginia Woolf today*.

⁴⁷ Personal correspondence, 24 February 2021.

I don't know that Emily knows this: when I had a mental breakdown, when the call for a river with pockets full of stones became nearly unbearable, she was the first to know without knowing. I read her work and that call I sent out comes to me in reverb, the slapback of emotion and desperation and seeking we both went through, and through and through as young, Catholic, queer women coming up in a world with no room for brains and bodies and hearts like ours. Now, after months of writing workshops together, I am shocked to recall that at the genesis of this project, the complexity of this ask was almost too much. Wording what we'd never worded—I know you're queer, we know I know, we know each other, but we've never said it out loud—overwhelmed me with implication.

And now, now I feel like we've built a small world for ourselves, one that came through in brilliant technicolor throughout the body of each interview Emily participated in.

*

“...I don't know if it's me, the dissertation, the 6 years of work on myself and queerness and language, or if it's all of that and the very specific space Emily and I make, but what I'm writing is so raw. Where I am really began with me telling Emily that I'm the most compulsive liar to myself. I'd had, that morning...realized something about myself for the first time. That I was holding on to a lie so hard but that it was a lie I was telling myself. Or forcing on myself?

...Now that I'm exploring it...it's like I opened one small door that felt specific to a topic—food—and am finding a post-carnival warehouse of broken and haunting parts scattered everywhere. I guess that's how it goes when you're nothing but years of trauma bundled inside 5'4 inches of thin skin....I've opened this door... and I don't want to look in right now...I just have no desire to sit here and name these broken parts—the paint chipped eyes of an old carousel horse, the broken machinery of a too-fast and unsafe spinning, spinning, spinning ride. I don't care to do it alone, I don't want to do it with anyone but Emily. But once the words are down, a part of me badly wants to share what I've peeled back and uncovered.

Only it's full of confession of lies that no one might understand. Emily said she approaches all writing sharing as fiction—after I told her I felt bad that I had made her my body's secret keeper, made her body a secret keeper for my shit. People will read anger and resentment and mental illness and hidden unwellness in this writing, which for me *isn't* any of those.

I'm writing about agency.

It's crazy how powerful that word is to me; the realization of how it has been taken from me across my life and the ways in which I have battled to have even a bit of it for myself. Maybe in a way that others would understand as harmful or hurtful but that for me, feel absolutely understandable. That make me want to offer thanks and compassion to myself. Maybe my

agency is fucked up. But it's mine. Maybe these kinds of things I've lied about to myself and everyone else are nothing more than very stubborn agency I won't let others take away."⁴⁸

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I have a confession to make and no one knows this because it feels weird and pretentious and whatever. But I've been thinking lately how much I really feel like I need to write about things in my life. Memoir seems ridiculous when you're only 39, but honestly sometimes I think I've lived about 400 years of non-stop...trauma.
—Tania ⁴⁹

And another story

A twitter DM, a request from a stranger who had read *Idlewild* ⁵⁰ and wanted advice on how to approach publication themselves. Julian approached me for the first time as a complete stranger on the internet and even in his request, an innate goodness, a beautiful light everyone who meets him sees, shones through.

We meet in Atlanta in 2016 at a conference; I hug him over the table at a book signing and later, in a crowded bar, he shares a secret: he's signed his first contract for a novel with my publisher. A year or so later, we're speaking every day. My fourth and his first manuscripts are due at almost the same time. Our edits line up. Our release dates are a month apart. We commiserate over how hard we're finding it. We joke that we'll paddle in the edit boat together. *You are not alone*, we whisper under mundane daily exchanges. *I'm right here with you* is layered under complaints about gerunds and passive voice.

Years later, we meet at an airport in Baltimore. It's not the first or even third time we meet. Each time is better than the last. Hugging Julian is coming home.

It's so early in the morning and we're both starving and have no desire to spend 100\$ on a cab ride, so we try our best to follow the directions the nice lady at the help desk at the airport gives us.

The shuttle is under construction. The bus line she told us to ride was the wrong one. We get turned around in the subway. We're spit out on a street with GPS locator that tells us over and over we've reached our hotel when clearly, we haven't.

It's been four hours and all we have are planes, trains and automobile jokes.

And when we finally get there, sweaty and exhausted and hungry, we collect our computers immediately, find a Starbucks, and write.

⁴⁸ Excerpt from research journal, 23 April 2021.

⁴⁹ Personal correspondence, 24 February 2021.

⁵⁰ My third novel, published December 2016.

Julian writes beautiful queer young adult romance. Its beauty is in the sincere heart he puts into his characters and stories. That lovely genuineness that seems so inherently Julian is in every word. He inspires me to try it out—a long silenced dream of writing my own YA novel one day—and so I begin.

Four days later, I walk into a kitchen cupboard at home and lose nine months of my life to a concussion.

Thinking of Julian brings me joy. Even when we don't speak for periods of time, I really do feel loved knowing that he's out there, writing and connecting and brightening the world by just existing. Maybe one of the small blessings, just a tiny pinprick of joy is here:

I abandoned that novel and that dream. Losing the ability to write impacted me so deeply that even when I got it back, I was so changed, and heartbroken, it's hard to imagine trying again. The months I lost, the friendships that drifted away, unmoored when I could no longer communicate—Julian was a part of that story in that he knew me, he encouraged me not to give up. He was one of the last people to really see me, the author, the writer-self, before I lost it.

Somehow, I grieve that, but Julian—Julian is that small pocket of love at the very center, and that keeps me warm. That warmth, that innate goodness felt absolutely necessary to the work of this dissertation. I never doubted that I couldn't imagine this project without Julian by my side, even when we no longer spoke every day. That instinct, I know now, was so right. Julian carried us all somewhere deep and vulnerable through his own vulnerability. Julian showed us all this wall, the wall that protects him and slowly, in the hours we all spent together, he took our hands and led us over it into the more protected parts of ourselves. Without him, without this, I doubt I ever really would have understood the way agency and survival and failure work in this beautiful cloth wrapped around this entire project.

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“It's hard to tell how effective this interview was in terms of, ‘did I get what I wanted exactly for the diss’... Julian mentioned in the beginning having a wall up when he writes for a variety of reasons which include personal reasons when he was a kid, his lived story etc. So to watch him kind of go from that, to us naturally getting to a space where he kind of let that wall down to speak to honestly and vulnerably was wonderful. I think in part because it seems like an indicator that the structure of the interview worked well there and that overall we were getting good material. But that's just...stuff. That's cold stuff.

That's not the heart of how it made me feel. The discussion of empathy and sympathy because I was so moved and I hurt for him. I'll never know what it's like to be a gay black teen growing up in Atlanta. And that informs his writing hugely, but so does the genre he writes in (YA) and the responsibility he feels there. But it's a huge and important part of who he is. Not just author Julian, but out in life around people. The ways in which, yes, he does feel the world

composing him, and the ways in which he composes himself in response to make himself less threatening on which ever level seems to be the one other people are threatened by.”⁵¹

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I feel this kind of burning desire to write these things. I've struggled with writing for a while now. Do you ever feel that spark in your chest, but also feel as though you have no idea how to work with it? It's just stuck in there.
—Tania⁵²

And yet another story, for the road:

Daye, as much as anything else, is the reason this dissertation is what it is.

I hyperfixate when I find something to love. My brain isn't necessarily wired for passing interests. Imaginary worlds I can enter become obsessions. When I'm lost, I can cast a line into the darkness of a pre-made world rich with possibility for more and more and more. This is the fan in me. This is the woman who writes hundreds of words of fanfiction at the height of an obsessive cycle.

Insomnia came for me when I was a child. As night bled into morning I would make whole worlds from books I had read to keep a haunting loneliness at bay. One am at ten years old is an empty, cold space.

From an armchair, it's clear I do this most in times of intense stress or distress.

During my concussion recovery I slid headfirst into a new fandom. My brain retrained itself to read and write through fanfiction; stories that took place in worlds already built were so much easier then. I sought community in online spaces, hid from the pervasive loneliness that isolation in my real life had brought. I could not drive. I could not teach. I was homebound and frustrated and online, it's so much easier to shed my awkward fear of talking to new people.

Daye writes hauntingly lovely fanfiction. There's a particular shape to his words, the way he structures stories. The way there's so much room to breathe in his prose, the way that room makes you fall into the characters, their emotions more and more. Daye is the kind of writer I'd like to be one day, but never will. Daye has written a story with a character suffering from amnesia. He does what so few people can do—avoids cliché, avoids trauma porn, avoids glamorizing suffering real people go through for the sake a plot dependent on characters hurting.

Daye speaks from the heart in every word and I feel each one of those so deeply as someone who is recovering from brain injury.

⁵¹ Excerpt from research journal, 13 May 2021.

⁵² Personal correspondence, 24 February 2021.

As first, we speak in tumblr messenger: it's notoriously unreliable with notifications and conversations stop and start. Often, Daye messages me from the restaurant he works in, from a supply closet. Initially, we bond over fajitas, of all things. Eventually, we share ideas for stories, we share our own life stories. Daye is much younger than me but I never really feel a difference in those ten years. Daye is one of a few people I really connected with in this new space: when entering a new fandom there's always an adjustment period as you learn its rhythms, the spaces it occupies on the internet, its unspoken rules. I am the worst at those. It takes me a long time to comprehend patterns, to see the subtext. I blunder in to conversations and overshare. I tend to assume too much, to want too much. I am hungry, hungry, hungry, and it shows.

There are many, many things I learn from Daye; many I'm not sure even Daye understands, and some I couldn't quantify. But there's a resonance, an echo of those moments, those months when we spoke constantly, when we shared a small world that revolved around fictional characters we gave multiple lives to.

I remember, once, a conversation with Daye about gender. I don't remember the words. I don't remember the context, or even any precise words. I do know that I was deep in the process of my concentration exam and that I was so, so lost.

I remember the sky blue walls of my bedroom, curled up on the couch Jenney gave me, and weak sunlight through the window above me. I never worked in my room, and I don't know that I could say why I was that day. We talked about gender and in Daye's expansive words, even in casual conversation, the breathing room for learning and shaping, a beautiful *something* unfurled. In the shower that day, replaying the conversation over and over in my mind, I understood what was in bloom: a line of thought I would chase through my exam, through dissertation prospectus, through shaping of this project.

What if, I asked myself, the body is text?

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"So I interviewed Daye on Sunday the 17th. I should have journaled but I was so exhausted by the time I was done. That was the hardest interview by far. Daye doesn't have a camera in laptop so it was voice only which is so fucking hard. Not being able to read expression is so hard. It made it difficult for me to vibe and direct the conversation in a way that felt more organic. It was also hard because...it just didn't feel that great? It felt like I was chasing something... I'll have to see when transcripts come in. I think that my own sense of insecurity definitely came into play. I wanted Daye a lot for this project because we've had great conversations about queer and embodied stuff before, but the conversation just didn't seem to work. There's a turn my questions take that's just super awkward. It was easier to play that off with Julian and Emily, for sure. I think my past history with Daye and having no idea how they

feel about me as a person...really affected the ways in which I approached some of the deeper conversations and questions.”⁵³

“I finally got transcripts and haven’t even been sure how to approach them? I decided for now just reading them to get first impression is best...The first interview I wanted to read was Daye’s—maybe because it felt the hardest and most slippery and least productive? But it’s nice, with space and time and a different eye, to see that some great stuff seems to be in there. I’ll put a positive spin on this long break to say that it’s good to come to it fresh, because it definitely felt, in particular with the Daye one, that I was pushing the interview or searching for particular things and the awkwardness really felt...disruptive? Distressing? At the time. I remember leaving that interview in a full body sweat and feeling super down about the whole thing.”⁵⁴

There are selves I have I’m not ready to reconcile, particularly as I share them with the world. I know this. This is the way I write myself but that, in a way, is a response to the ways in which I feel myself written. This is the only space I get to be honestly queer.
—Tania⁵⁵

Community and story-theory building begins.

At what point do people create community? How do we create communities? Especially, based around story?
—Tania⁵⁶

“I got up at 5:30. Wrote up an ‘outline’ (my style, thick and wordy) to guide the interview. I had therapy at 10 and we basically talked about my anxiety, what could go wrong, reframing everything. I was really worried people wouldn’t gel and it would be awkward. It was hard to reframe that mentally as, it’s not MY failure necessarily if that doesn’t happen but it will provide info for the research. Maybe what it would provide wouldn’t be what I hoped for but the whole project is meant to be open rather than strictly predictive.

Talking to Marina helped a lot, and she helped me think of a few more things to say to help frame and guide the interview, including asking them why they agreed to participate in the first place...That proved to be really important for me as a way to frame and gateway the whole thing in general, even before they answered. Their answers were awesome anyway, particularly as a lot of the conversation ended up being about desire for writing community, etc.

The interview went so well...Everyone definitely loosened up over the course of the interview. It’s a shame we had to end after an hour and a half, but I think it’s important to honor

⁵³ Excerpt from research journal, 19 May 2021.

⁵⁴ Excerpt from research journal, 14 June 2021.

⁵⁵ Excerpt from research journal, 15 May 2021.

⁵⁶ de Sostoa-McCue, Personal Interview, 29 June 2021.

the time commitment they agreed to, even though by the end we were really lose and it was going so well...

I really feel so much better. I feel like maybe things went sideways in that we kind of got into different conversations, but again, that could be my perception because of anxiety. With the individual ones I felt that way and reading them back they went really, really well as far as getting good data. This interview felt way more organic toward the end but what really makes me happiest is how much they seemed to enjoy and open up to the experience, especially getting to know and talk to other authors in different spaces, and kind of that longing they feel for this kind of interaction that they expressed to start coming to a positive fruition.”⁵⁷

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In a cohesively shaped story, a beginning, middle and end would appear. There would be an arc, and tension, perhaps. And the story of this project, these interviews, and these relationships could certainly be framed this way. There are, after all, threads I pull from the hundreds of pages of interview transcripts. Putting together a story is inevitable. However, as I begin the work of shifting this dissertation and our perspectives, I find myself wanting to embrace the idea of the anti-story. In the coming data chapter I ask the reader to make a change with me, to reorient our relationship to ideas of community, composition and embodiment, for the sake of witnessing the theory building this community did. Still, here, as I gift you with stories of the people who gifted me their time, access to their vulnerabilities, to their precious lives, I want to honor the very real truth: this is work unfinished. More importantly, these are people who are unfinished.

⁵⁷ Excerpt from research journal, 29 June 2021.

Chapter Three: The Researcher Participant

“The world is wrong. You can’t put the past behind you. It’s burned in you; it’s turned your flesh into its own cupboard. Not everything remembered is useful but it all comes from the world to be stored in you.”
—Claudia Rankine

At the heart of this dissertation, underneath proposed interview questions I built to be fluid and changeable, was my commitment to learning about composition, community and the queer body through the lives and stories of other queer people. I deliberately chose to work with queer writers for two reasons: first, a huge part of my identity is that of a writer. My orientation as a cultural rhetorics scholar underscores the importance of relationality in research. Secondly, I am committed to the understanding of story as theory. Informed by these values, I knew the best way forward was to create a community of writers; participants who, along with myself, *have* stories to tell and who *tell* stories.

In Chapter Two I explored aspects of both cultural rhetorics and queer theory that enabled me to do this work. These frameworks provided support, clarity and tools—but they also gave insight into where disconnects between academic work about people and their stories about themselves emerge. Enacting and utilizing queer theoretical and cultural rhetorics tools and perspectives offers new entryways for understanding the reorientation my work takes toward composing, embodiment and community. The work done here with participants who have no tie to academia offered newfound knowledges and insights in understanding that I believe provide space to bridge the gap between Queer and queer communities, an opportunity that I believe to be invaluable as we continue to practice cultural rhetorics approaches and do the work of Queer.

I begin this chapter by sharing a vital story: my story. In a dissertation about theory making through story, the ways in which this researched changed and how that changed my perspectives is necessary work. This lays the groundwork for how I tuned in to a particular

narrative—agency, survival, and failure—and how this narrative aided me as I arrived at the shifted perspectives that are explored in Chapter Four. I envision this chapter as middle ground, the moment before the focus shifts more deeply into participant stories that are offered, explored—before those stories become theory. I offer the phrase middle ground as an imagined space, one in which I allowed myself to try to see, try to story, tried to inhabit a place in which all of these dialogued: where the individual and group interviews “spoke” with/to me. In this chapter I pinpoint specific moments in which the work I thought or hoped I would be doing were confronted by my participants differing perspectives, *particularly* in relationship with composition, moments that required me to take a step back, listen carefully, allow myself to imagine, and shift. In what became a vital process of letting go, I was able to understand challenges I faced and changes required in my data analysis approach as productive failure. The subsequent surfacing of failure, agency, and survival as a single narrative informed my articulation and understanding of the important (re)orientations the story-theory that emerged from exploration of composition, embodiment, and community.

Letting Go

I would like to story my own struggles as an example of queer storytelling approaches. These are not only present in the way I present the complex relationship between themes and concepts which emerged in this work, but the fact that all of the writers in this project speak to, spoke of and experienced these things in complex, sometimes shadowed and often visibly circular, webbed, or constellated ways.

The process of and my engagement with this project and this data unveiled ways in which acts of letting go of predetermined expectations for how this scholarship would work and how it might *do* that work opened doors for active, compassionate listening and participation with the

community I created. Throughout the process of writing this dissertation, I had to confront many of my own internalized biases, which I discuss in further detail below. By necessity, contemplation, reorientation, and a new awareness of the ways in which the data needed to be worked with are partly what led me to shifted perspectives of composition, embodiment, and community can mean.

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I forget how much I forget. I exist so often in liminality, a space where I am between previous products, whether my own or others, and the newest version of myself and thought I'm pulling toward. Which is to say, so much of what I do here, now, with these writers and as I look harder at my own writer-self, grows from what I've done before.

Even these words aren't a novelty. There is nothing unexpected here. You, reader, are probably less than surprised: this work is ground trod often. But that liminality is a haunted, haunting, tantalizing space. There's no set beginning or end. Footsteps litter this ground, but here, I refuse to follow premade paths. If I embrace this resistance, and treat myself with kindness, the connectivity, the amorphous permission to exist and thread thoughts, perhaps we can arrive at something new.⁵⁸

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As described in Chapter Two, once I surfaced and then narrowed my data to what I called six themes (composition, embodiment, community, survival, agency, and failure) the ways in which I envisioned myself analyzing the data changed. I had planned to use an excel spreadsheet to try to quantify emergent results—how often particular themes were showing up, how often they were intersecting, what these frequencies might mean—that is, a slightly more quantitative approach. Yet, the more I immersed myself in the data, the more aware I became that what I needed to understand were the ways in which these themes intersected and overlapped, rather than how often, or which ones overlapped the most. An important turning point here was the

⁵⁸ de Sostoa-McCue, Free write, 10 October 2021.

realization that I had included community, embodiment, and composition in my list of themes when in reality, they weren't *themes*, they were the *foci*. They were what I had come into this project wanting to examine in the first place. Everything else, all of the other themes I had surfaced, existed in relationship with these concepts, and it was my job to learn how to listen, how to see, in order to really get to the story-theory my participants were sharing.

It was at this point in my data analysis that I took a new approach: I worked to *live* with the stories shared and told; I read and re-read interviews. I narrated my own thoughts as I processed what was emerging, recording stream-of-consciousness voice memos as I drove, in the shower, cleaning my home. I lived with these stories while still living my mundane, every day, non-scholarly life. As I took the time and allowed myself to (re)examine and reflect upon individual and group moments, it became clear to me that what I was "looking at" on paper was not necessarily reflective of what we, as community, were and had lived, and how those experiences were woven into the words chosen to reflect our lives and stories.

*

I begin to imagine each color coded sentence as a thread. As the daughter of a textile artist; as a girl who learned arts of crochet, of needlepoint and knitting from my grandmothers; as a girl who never saw in straight lines but always tangled knot of strings, what takes shape for me is the mental equivalent of webs of colored thread. Here, in the seat of my imagination, I am able to free myself from a literal linearity and allow myself freedom to "see." I begin to understand the intersections of themes as narratives, *vital* narratives. Mapping the colored threads that emerge from this project creates a scatter of constellated intersections, and I am at the heart of a world I've helped to create.

*

Community, composition, and embodiment still function as concepts focused on in this work. Yet much of the story my participants shared and discussed happened in rich, different, unexpected, disorienting, or even confusing ways. My analysis and experiences in the process of understanding and writing this dissertation challenged me to open my mind to the potential in

shifting, redefining, torquing what community, composition, and embodiment can mean, particularly in relationship with theory building with queer communities and the future of Queer. What emerged from these interviews and my particular process of analysis of the data collected uncovered concepts I describe in the following chapter as (de)composition, (anti)body, and (intra)community. In many ways, this work, specifically the ways in which I allowed myself to experience the conversations with participants and my immersion in the data collected are representative of a process of letting go of personal expectations for how I should “do” scholarship.

Genesis of Productive Failure

“I see the art of losing as a particularly queer art.”

—Heather Love

Over the course of my interviews, there were several moments when my participant’s answers to questions threw me for a loop and caught me off guard. At times, I struggled to steer interviews in the direction I thought I needed, struggled with pre-planned questions because the next question often hinged on a pre-supposed answer I was unaware I was depending on. I thought I came into this project with a flexible mindset and flexible interview questions because to a degree I knew this would happen. Unfortunately, what I learned was that the inflexibilities my interviews exposed had more to do with underlying cultural or hegemonic narratives underpinning what I exposed as researcher bias.

The struggles I experienced during the interviews and in my initial attempts to code and understand the data are central to the arc of how I “arrived” at the approach and interpretation of my participants’ stories and the emergence of story-theory. Not only did I have to (re)imagine and (re)approach the concepts I was examining, but the “lessons” I learned as a researcher.

Embracing failure as productive was a large part of how I managed to do this. Framing failure as hopeful or productive can be found in a lot of current queer theory and scholarship. Although different scholars use it in different ways, I find much of Halberstam's approach useful. Failure, in his words, is an art—and art that “turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art and for being.” (88) In other words, I had to take my own difficulties, “failures,” and struggles and see them as hopeful, as creative, as generative. I had to find the unexpected in the mundane at times. I had to listen to and for moments I would not have under other circumstances.

*

I took an unintended (de)compositional turn. I followed a white rabbit—the ways in which the conversation flowed from meditation on long form writing, ways in which we all deployed tactics of hiding in plain sight, how we learned to survive in literal margins, imagining or experiencing straight composing as a container, well. I had to chase them.

I think, perhaps, I did not hold the right space.

These conversations, this feeling about composition don't match what I meant to make, the building I imagined.

We arrived at agency in the most beautiful way; how as queer folk, we understand and have understood that the only way we will ever have it is to make it. This feeling, this moment—it cannot be housed in the prefab I didn't realize I'd brought along.

*

As an example of the struggles I experienced, a lovely turn of events emerged in these interviews when I found that my participants' initial association with the word composition temporarily stymied my attempts to move forward with a pre-planned line of questioning. In many ways, these conversations about composition were the genesis of my struggles to understand all of the data the way I had envisioned. Their answers varied quite a bit, all veering in directions that sometimes made it difficult for me to transition into an eventual conversation

about composition and their bodies. After all, the question that followed ones about composition and rhetorical choices in composition was: “*We’ve talked about the relationship between your body and writing. I would like to explore the relationship between body and composition. What do you think your body composes? Who or what composes you?*” (Appendix B).

Emily’s response in regards to composition focused on music and music composition: “...so I’ve actually been watching a lot of YouTube videos on music...words will come in or things that poke my curiosity. And then inevitably leads me into some sort of music theory path, which has interest for me too, because I’m someone who can’t read music” (Stoddard 18 May 2021). And while initially I wasn’t sure how to transition from this moment, Emily did pivot toward a discussion about musicality and sound, stating, “Those types of things are hugely informative to my practice. When it comes to composition and that kind of thinking, I’m almost always exclusively looking at music, or painting or dance” (Stoddard 18 May 2021). At that moment I was not sure how to turn from musicality toward embodiment and composition, but Emily’s own associations with composition and forms of art that involve the five senses was helpful later as I examined the data because embodiment could be found in the answer, even if not explicitly.

When asked to define, describe or articulate what composition is, Julian initially said he didn’t know; this revealed itself to be more an issue of trying to give an answer he thought I wanted or that might be right. With some prompting, he revealed that his mind also first went to music when thinking of composition. He stated “The world has skewed how I look at certain words....When I also hear that word, I also think about like that old school...the composition book? Like a black and white one” (Winters 12 May 2021). What was more interesting, although challenging to think around in that moment for me, was that his emotional response to

composition books as an adult was a negative one. In that moment, in that interview, such a literal answer about an object was difficult for me to navigate around, particularly such a negative one. And although I did, eventually, at the time I remember feeling grateful that we had moved away from this literal, object-oriented answer. Imagine my surprise when this object would appear again and again in our group interviews, requiring that I really interrogate the relationship these authors had in regards to the links between composition and what I describe in Chapter Four as “containers.”

Of all of my interviews, however, it was Daye’s response that most challenged me. Although his answers were about writing, his straight-forward and pragmatic approach threw me off balance:

“My first thought would be an essay, to be honest... I'm very good at essays. I can crank them out very easily because I understand the composition of them and I understand exactly what goes into the opening, ending, and middle bits. So with an essay, the composition is almost more important than what you're saying, especially if you're not in a post-grad situation” (Duncan 15 May 2021)

What ensued was a conversation about academic writing, signposting: what I might consider very “straight” forms of composition that made it difficult for me, with such a predetermined image of how these questions would flow, to recover from in order to redirect.

While each individual interview I had was exciting and enlightening, I admit I left all three at a bit of a loss; there were what felt like vital connections between composition and queerness and embodiment I’d hoped would emerge from my line of questioning that simply did not appear to. What I now describe above as a lovely and unexpected turn my interviews did not *feel* lovely at the time. They felt far disconnected from a starting place where I could direct

further interviews. Moving into the group interviews I knew that I would have to encourage conversation slightly in order to address my research questions. I did not want to force concepts or ideas on them, but I did want to dig a little deeper. And while my questions were of use, and did direct the conversation, they also left a lot of room for the authors, including myself, to explore these topics in a community space where what excited us, what interested us, had room to breathe.

Reorientation

Although I do focus quite a bit on composition as an example above, there were moments all throughout these interviews where participant answers caught me off guard in regards to embodiment and community as well. As an example, in our first group interview, I wanted to open a conversation about embodiment without leading the participants. I asked them to think back “to moments when...physicality has really influenced your writing or altered it or helped develop it” (de Sostoa-McCue 29 June 2021). Emily’s responses, which I explore in more detail in Chapter Four, veered directly to embodiment—again in a completely unexpected negative way:

“Sometimes I get really angry about people who make assumptions about how embodied writing should be or not.... It [feels] like such a violation, and especially from someone who should...know things about trauma and identity. I often find the people who violate the most for me are the ones who are doing work in trauma sensitive...spaces. Like they’re the ones who think we can begin with an assumption of the body” (Stoddard 29 June 2021).

Likewise, while there were many lovely, nuanced, moving conversations about community, there were also several moments in which their constantly changing relationship

with the concept of community made it very difficult for me to parse what it was exactly that was threading these conversations together; what it could all mean. Toward the end of our final group interview, as I was discussing the creation of queer community with them, Emily began to describe difficulties she'd had experienced working for non-profit organizations. Julian's response was a bit surprising; correlating some of her story with his own feelings about queer communities and queer writing communities, he said "I'd love to go on a whole 'nother about the people who say, 'But when I get to the table, I'm going to make the change.' And then they get the table and they're like, 'Well I'm at the table. I'm comfortable'" (Winters 7 July 2021).

Time and again, during interviews and in my processes of reading, coding and trying to make sense of them, moments and conversations would appear that I had no idea what to do with. As mentioned, literal things, such the composition notebook, became a particular object of nostalgia, leading to *lengthy* conversations about the art of composing long-form by hand. These conversations appeared and then reappeared in both group interviews. While the composition notebook (nor even their associations with composition) is not the focus of this chapter, it is an example of one of the hardest aspects of these interviews to "see" around. Its value to the authors was a clear signal that there was something of importance in these conversations I simply was not grasping. In order for me to truly understand my participants' stories, the theory in these stories, what I needed to do was (re)orient myself and my relationship with the data and this project. The shift, the reorientation, I chose to make in how I experienced the data—by listening, by seeing themes constellate, focusing on a narrative of agency, failure, and survival—ultimately revealed the ways in which this particular conversation was actually an inroad into insights into their practices, histories, and stories on a much deeper level than I was imagining.

Composition and Text, a Redux

Earlier, I alluded to underlying cultural and hegemonic discourses I did not realize were coloring my questions, nor my initial attempts to understand the data produced by my interviews. One troubling example was the fact that I approached this project buried under a particular understanding of textuality. Although it was not my intention, and despite training as a cultural rhetorics scholar, the truth is that I too had given in to the Western/European concepts of text and textuality. Much of the inquiry leading to the development of my research questions, in fact, stemmed from one of those particular moments—you know the ones, where you're trapped with your own thoughts in the shower or the car and suddenly something brilliant comes to you—over a year ago: the idea of the queer body as text. What I didn't see at that time was that in *my* thought processes, the concept and word text was inherently tied to the idea of legibility. I've previously argued for conceptualizing the body as text,⁵⁹ stating “that *reading* the body as text—making it legible—is one example of a tool queer theory offers...” (de Sostoa-McCue 21).

The emotional resonance that fed this line of thought at that time, as well as my desire to continue to expand on its potential came from a place of care for others and a very personal longing. I was, and have been, incredibly moved and inspired by the work of queer writers whose work addresses the body, story, and textuality. As an example, Allison's “Her Body, Mine, and His” deploys beautiful semi-fictional conversation and haunting memory to bring longing and grief tied to the HIV/AIDS epidemic to life. Allison's phrasing and structure do not allow the reader to escape confrontation with sedimentations imbued in acts of sex—how she

⁵⁹ For context, this statement was used in an argument regarding the ways in which queer theory has tools to offer bridging public sphere theory and rhetoric and composition. Although that focus is completely absent from this dissertation, the point stands as to the implications of my orientation toward the concept of text.

writes sex as language, as act, as political, as embodied. The ways Allison does so, however, ties story and text and embodied actions in order to be literally *read*.

What I've come to realize is that in my own personal orientation toward the implications of the word *text*, what was revealed to me was that the word text was directly tied to concepts of legibility and literacy. Reexamining and reflecting upon these changes is why my own reframing and learning process becomes complex, fruitful, painful, and hopeful. Personally discovering that the word text carries with it such heavy implications of *literacy* required personal interrogation, after which I realized that I subconsciously understood literacy as *alphabetic literacy*. The ideas captured by queer scholars writing creative non-fiction such as Califia, Hawkins, Bolus, and Machado do reflect on concepts of embodiment and story; the feelings these stories inspire come from the images, the emotions, the pain, and ecstasy shaped—and yet for the longest time *my* association with the vehicle delivering these emotions was alphabetic text. I realize that what I describe is a subtle reorientation, perhaps even philosophical. Regardless, interrogating these moments and my own biases was and cannot be ignored in the story of how my relationship and approach to this dissertation changed.

Although the thrust, intent, and instinct shaping this project weren't about alphabetic literacy, it is impossible to do scholarship whose methods and methodologies utilize indigenous methods and methodologies and not understand that the idea or use of the word *text* is often overlaid with a settler/colonial narrative of alphabetic literacy. Not only were my questions regarding composition colored by this understanding, by default my questions and approaches in regards to embodiment and community as well.

Shifting Perspectives

It is important to remember that this project is meant, in part, to offer opportunities or potential my dissertation can to for the Queer, something I ultimately synthesize in the conclusion in Chapter Five. I aim to bring the story *of* these stories and *from* these stories together to speak to the hopes I have for this project in context with the future of Queer. In Sarah Ahmed's "Orientations Matter," Ahmed approaches phenomenology queerly as that which "attend[s] to the background" (240). A queer phenomenology approaches that which appears from various orientations. Although Ahmed focuses in particular here on embodied orientations, it is her assertion that we must not only think about the effect of repeated prior actions on the direction we take, but the ways in which those accumulate or effect the ways in which we become oriented toward particular objects. Ahmed's "objects" do not simply refer to literal objects but could refer to "thought, feeling, and judgment, or the object in the sense of aims, aspirations, and objectives" (246). A queer phenomenology does not simply look at the "object" presented, but sees it from the background, from the sides, examines or aims to understand how we arrive at the object, how the object appears to us. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed explores these concepts utilizing the writing table as a metaphor. In this book, Ahmed attends, and re-attends, describes, constructs, deconstructs, imagines, and reimagines the writing table. The writing table is an object but not. It is a metaphor; it is arrival at a place; it is sedimented history that shapes the body apprehending it or approaching, it is the history that emerges as a body approaches it over and over.

This concept has been deeply influential to my development as a queer scholar, and to my scholarship. Queer demands we approach the writing table from a different perspective, understanding that there are infinite possibilities for how that table might be approached. In

working with queer theory—theory in general that evolves from or is taught as “canon”—I find that often what we, as scholars, are doing is approaching the *same* conceptual writing desk, rather than the many, many locations where story might be told. Ahmed’s work explores not only different tables but the ways in which approach and use “change” a table. This dissertation, and the small reorientations that emerged from it, represent not only reorientation toward the “table” but attempt at understanding the potential of *remaking* of tables through action, or even, with imagination and a willingness to let go, forget our attachment to notions of the “table” all together.

It was through acts of listening and letting go that my initial vision for a study on composition, embodiment, and community took an unexpected and important turn. No matter how queerly I wanted to approach these concepts, what I imagined, how I defined, how I interacted with the *idea* of them was simply a series of reorientations toward a particular table—straight composition, the queering of a “straight” table, for example. Instead, what ultimately emerged was a need to step away from what I wanted to happen. What needed to happen was not composition, but instead, (de)composition. I did not need to talk about embodiment, but understand the potential of the concept of the (anti)body. A reorientation toward concepts of community—what it can mean, what it should do, the potential building and having it can hold—instead benefited from valuing (intra)community instead.

I understand that the ways in which I choose to language the shift in concepts hold potentially negative or contradictory connotations. However, when we approach them as examples of space held, opened by the queering that happens in the complexly rich landscape of a narrative of survival, failure, and agency, I believe that reframing these concepts as the (anti)body, (de)composing, and (intra)community offers pathways—only few, far from all—that

can help shape the ways in which we do and see queer. The *anti* (against), the *de* (breaking, resisting, denying), *intra* (within, during, between layers of) hold tremendous potential to be understood as shades of failure and hope. I propose we approach them as transformative, as failed, as manifestation of potential. It is hope.

Agency, Failure, Survival: A Narrative

“Just when I was about to give up, the knowing reminded me that I knew how to fly. I thought fly, and I leapt to the ceiling of the white room. I felt safe.

Then the monster flew up.

There was nothing else I could do.

With a sudden, unexpected grace, all the fear within me escaped. There was no panic. I was a lightness I had never experienced before in my life.”
—Joy Harjo

The discovery and utilization of a narrative of survival, agency, and failure helped to shape and inform these changes in orientation to my original concepts. Once my own examination of the raw data emerged in the form it did—constellated intersections—what became clear to me was that taking a single narrative as an intersecting point that would run through each of the three primary concepts (community, composition, and embodiment) would present one of *many* potential ways to move forward with the work of this dissertation.

I resist the need to neatly package these in a single order; one which would create a tight, lovely narrative arc—failure *and* survival then *arrival at* agency perhaps. As an author of LGBTQAI+ romance, I have become increasingly familiar with genre conventions—not as a lifelong reader of romance novels of all kinds, but in a particularly internalized way that comes with the pressure and expectation that A Romance Novel must do particular things in particular ways. Although this set of conventions often opens the genre to critique and accusations about formulaicity, I personally believe—as an author who struggles to merge my kind of storytelling

with these conventions—that it takes particular skill to create compelling stories within these frameworks. The kind of story I have often been encouraged to write but very much struggle with is one in which the protagonist encounters a challenge (failure), works to get through it, to overcome it (survival) and ultimately achieves the happy ending (agency) in which they are empowered, where the story achieves resolution. As a person who struggles with linearity in all aspects of writing and learning, I have always found a set trajectory difficult to follow in and to flesh out.

The order these themes appear in when discussed as a narrative are not married in context to the moment or ideas they appear in conjunction *with*. At times in my data analysis, I focus on one word of the three as an example or to shed light on something a participant said; this does not extract the word from the narrative these three create together. It points to a thread in a woven story. I ask the reader to always keep in mind that this narrative is the meeting point for three themes that intersect so tightly, not one was ever more important than the other, and that each needed the others as a part of the story-theory in my participants' words.

Interlude #3: the chive man

“It is important to remember that the Dream House is real.”
Carmen Machado

There is a house of eighteen and we're all being crushed by something different.

There's a pool table in the basement. We walk out and the smokers take their break. Before, when I was “well,” in the humid crush of a rushing restaurant a smoke break was respite, burdening nonsmokers with other's work. And then, in insurance, each call for lapsed payments was another layer, a second skin of responsibility for other's problems. There, the break was from sliver tongued office gossip, a room of people prepared to hurt you one open door down from your cubicle.

Here, at Rose Hill, I trace the edges of freedom taken from me. Here, I don't quite know what they are taking a break from. From reality? From the variant shades of illness that plague us?

On nights I couldn't sleep, that first month, I'd play pool with Abby and Nico and Grace. Others whose names I don't remember. A slow revolving door of the sick, the ebb and flow of those caught up in the tide and those taken out to sea. Everyone was so sick, and that sickness seeped into my empathetic bones. Each day I pulled myself in tighter, curling up, a little pill bug, a small, insular being. I ached for silence.

There was a walkout basement. The freedom was haunting, threaded with fog silver ribbons of catastrophic potential. Anyone of us could walk into the woods. Could walk and keep walking. I wondered how it was that no one ran away. As a mother I knew intimately just how much could happen in the ten, twelve, fifteen-minute interval check-ins. A minute alone is enough.

Ashley woke me to tell me my Grace had run away. I don't know why. I lay on one of the uncomfortable living space couches all night. They had the dogs out, were getting ready to get helicopters. Somehow, they hadn't seen it coming. They hadn't seen the expanse of the woods, the silence, the green soaked shadows, the potential in natural isolation. A haunting temptation to insulate by pine and maple and oak. Someone had run away and they hadn't seen it coming. I hadn't seen it coming.

The story goes: seizures that weren't seizures, inexplicable brain activity, a medical mystery that truly lived somewhere in Grace's brain. There was no window in, there was nothing she could hold in her hands and hand to us, to herself, to understand. I'd never really understood why Grace was there. I knew her as a friend, someone more like me, more well, more pulled together.

The story was: Through cheesy forced game nights and mixers we earned the right to go to the grocery store and a movie. A trip to Meijer, a gift of a movie day: they let us sit side by side and watch *The Hunger Games*. We'd all passed the books around the house like candy, battered hardcover going hand to hand as we devoured the story.

Their story was: not knowing what the movie was about. We did. But that only meant we felt safe. Prepared. Grace walked out of that theater with me, herself. I watched her that night, sneaking four extra Oreos at 8:15 snack time. I laughed and pushed my thumbnail through the tough skin of an orange and wondered who had my book now. The smell of citrus stained fingers followed me into broken sleep.

Our story went: We'd read the books; we thought we were safe from the story because we were prepared.

Her story was: A little girl surrounded by flowers.

Every time I see that scene I cry, but not for Grace.

I rarely think of Grace.

Grace who was my friend, who took a smoke break and then a psychotic break and then a break for it. A girl who suddenly heard a man's voice in her head, one who told her to do things. Who followed his instructions and broke the window at the barn barehanded, who climbed to the top of the silo. Who had to be convinced to come down at four am by barely prepared support staff. Grace who forgot everything, forgot everyone, forgot who she was, for months after.

The Hunger Games went: A little girl, dead in a meadow, surrounded by flowers.

That's what Grace remembered.

And after I, I was the only person she remembered.

I rarely think of Grace. I know I should.

She followed me everywhere. She'd imprinted on me, the only person she remembered. They let her follow me. They told me to let her talk, to let her process. They let me do the work. I buried my trauma and took on hers.

The new story went: There was a man.

Grace came into my room—I don't know where Abby was—and sat on my bed and told me she'd remembered something. I wanted so badly to leave; I was so lonely for *my* Grace, for the girl I'd known. Guilty because I wanted to run when she spoke. Compressed into a ball of resentment every time she approached me. A small curled up thing, aching for silence.

There was a man. The chive man. He had a garden, lived on her street. People would send their kids there because he shared what he grew.

She sat too close to me on the bed and shared what she knew, tiny broken memories she tumbled into my hands like broken glass.

It was the movie, in the end. The miserly gift of groceries and a mostly empty theater that broke her. A story filled with the dead bodies of children. A little girl, dead in a meadow, surrounded by flowers.

There was a chive man.

My story then: Make a story of this Tania. Make a story for Grace. Tell her story because she doesn't remember who she is.

There was a chive man. He showed her pictures.

A little girl, dead in a garden, surrounded by flowers.

The bed sagged in the middle. When she sat she tumbled into my space. My skin crawled, wanting anything but her desperate and needy and secret self, knowing this story would cut right through that shell I was building, unfurling me, laying my belly bare because I was all she remembered.

There was a chive man. He showed her pictures. Pictures of dead little girls in his garden surrounded by flowers.

He told me that would be me if I didn't do-

The story I tell: it becomes a weapon. I must uncurl more, I must walk and talk and breathe with palms full. She pressed shards of glass into my hands, the bite of her memories sewing their way into my skin.

Her story was in my hands. Her story is in my hands.

I must tell the barely trained support staff who've put me in charge. I must report her broken memories. I try, in the telling, to tip my hands, to spill all that brokenness at someone's feet, in someone else's heart, in the silent woods.

But the glass is in my hands, under my skin, working its way deeper and deeper.

Her story as a sickness: I feel it like it's my own. I feel her story and know it could be, it might be, it probably is mine.

There could be a chive man.

My body knows this story, knows the shape of sharp edges cutting from the inside out even when I don't. It was in there, silent through that movie, through an endless night with the sweet haunted woods through the basement doors, through the smell of oranges curled with my fists under my pillow. It was there, dormant, ten, twelve, fifteen times, all over and through the body I curl tighter and tighter, insulating myself from the press of the outside world, the sickness of Rose Hill.

And then, a story for a future self: Am I meant to learn my chive man's name? Am I meant to know the story?

I don't know the story, I won't know the story, I want to bury it deep in the garden, covered in earth, so far down the sun won't speak to it. I want to bury it so far that it'll never bloom. So I won't be the girl in the garden.

Grace is the girl in the garden and I'm the one who must tell her story.

Grace is the girl in the garden with her chive man and he silences her with pictures.

She presses the glass into my hands and silences me with her stories.

I press each shard with wonder and care, winding that slick silver ribbon into my skin, through muscle memory and heavy, aching bones. I dig them in and bite my tongue and silence myself.

Now, a story:

Chapter Four: (de)(anti)(intra)

“At many different moments, queerness appears (or emerges or erupts) to trouble normalcy, legitimacy, signification. It doesn't fit. It skews the realities we construct for ourselves.”

—Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander

In Chapter Three I broached the idea, borrowing from Ahmed's work, of not simply reorienting toward conceptual “tables” but envisioning what might happen if we were to let go of our attachment to perception said “tables.” Here, my primary concepts—community, embodiment, and composition—are the “tables,” and when viewed through the identified narrative of survival, failure, and agency, those acts of turning away, (re)imagining, (re)making these tables offer tremendous potential for understanding ways we can bridge Queer and queer. It is difficult—in fact, still feels impossible at times—for me to comprehend what a turning away from concepts of community, composition, or embodiment might look like, how we as scholars might behave, and how we might actually “do” the work of letting go of these conceptual “tables.” I do not pretend to have achieved this in this small space. What I have done here is the beginning practice of shifting my perspective and relationship to acts of or concepts of composition, embodiment, and community. As I re-read, listened to and lived with the story-theory my participants and I shared, what I was left with was this: (re)orientation as a practice holds tremendous potential for offering tools that might help us approach the perceived gap between Queer and queer. This chapter, the emergent findings from this dissertation—shifting exploration of composition, embodiment, and community to (de)composition, (anti)body, and (intra)community feel like the first step in a particularly arduous and potentially futile but intrinsically beautiful journey into inquiry, listening, and being queer: a queer writer, and a queer scholar with a willing heart.

(de)composition

So while you were talking, I was thinking about the idea of decomposing and then composting, which is not the same thing as composing... once you're tuned into that idea of decomposing and recomposing, can you ever really be composed again? Because you're always going to be in that cycle and then...you'll never be in repose.
—Tania⁶⁰

It begins with the ways in which my participants associated composition with nouns (composition notebooks, school worksheets); from there, the way in which the notion of the literal container begins to decompose: my authors begin to question notions of what the container can or cannot do for them in regards to “queerness.” For each author, the container looks and works differently due to its relationship with agency, survival, and failure, but for each, their relationship with the container is indicative of (de)compositional orientations and practices.

For Emily, her primary relationship with long-form writing was relayed as occurring most often in writing workshop in response to writing prompts that often go into a “to look at later” pile (Stoddard 18 May 2021). For Julian, who discussed an entrance into creative writing through secretly writing fanfiction, what emerged in the conversation was an acknowledgment that long-hand writing was not for him, but that he had done it once, effectively, when presented with writer’s block while writing *How to Be Remy Cameron* (Winters 29 June 2021). Daye’s experience (which was much envied by the rest of us) of writing one of his first long pieces—a fanfiction story for the Merlin fandom—was done completely by hand in a composition notebook. (Duncan 29 June 2021).

From a straight theoretical perspective, perhaps the mundanity of who writes long form or via typing might overshadow the significance of this conversation, during which a story

⁶⁰ Personal Interview. 18 May 2021.

emerged as Daye related the ways in which he “survived” by hiding through writing: in our on-one interview, Daye discussed his ability to write at work as a server, as standing and writing in a notebook can easily be construed as professional. After all, no one would know without reading what he was or is writing and it would not appear unprofessional or odd to see a server writing in a notepad. When this conversation came up again during the group interview, Daye pivoted the conversation toward his method of hiding and protecting himself—creating a “straight” buffer in the first few pages of a notebook: “I have that in my physical notebook, as well. I have a to-do list at the beginning of my notebooks, but I can just swap to that if anyone tries to look over my shoulder” (Duncan 29 June 2021).

What Daye practices here is the creation of a buffer, a series of sophisticated and deliberate agential moves that deploy “straight” composition and forms of literal writing in order to protect or hide “queer” writing. I found that there was something particularly poignant in this conversation to what I came to see as (de)compositional choices—a shift I will explain in more detail—utilized in a specifically embodied method the other authors had already expressed interest/desire/envy regarding. While these specific queer moves aren’t exclusive to long-form writing, it was in context of Daye’s story that an alternative understanding or definition of composition as a noun began to emerge.

Emily’s ability to envision the possibility in the idea of forms of composition as “containers” emerged as she remembered an old relationship with writing on paper in school as a student.

I brought some boxes home from my parents...I was looking at [a notebook] and I was struck by how all my weirdness...I was in the margins and along every appropriate edge I had, I was doodling and doing stars and writing strange things... I just looked at it and I

was, ‘Jesus Christ. This girl is...’ It’s all there but it’s hiding right along the edges. I only did as much as could be held by the little corner of the page (Stoddard 7 July 2021).

The created “buffer” pages, the self who challenges container boundaries within particular boundaries such as the edge of a page, all demonstrate that “(de)”—breaking expected form, denying by hiding in plain sight, resisting “norms” *within* those very norms.

What emerged from this shared survival tactic—Daye’s buffered grocery list to Emily’s escape into the margins then segued into a reflection on agency. At that moment I recall thinking about my own tendency to always have “neutral” tabs open on my computer I can toggle to quickly should I need to hide what I am working on, a practice most often used at home or in a public setting where my queerness is something I prefer to hide. Simultaneously, Julian made a connection he hadn’t previously—

I’m always thinking about my character’s agency...I never think about my own...because it just really makes me think about how much, as a queer person, I let everyone else have agency over me. Except in those moments when I am alone with my notebook or my laptop and writing, everyone else kind of controls...when I get to have and who I get to be and when I get to achieve. And I never really thought about that because I had the notebook and the laptop to escape into these places where I get to control everything (Winters 7 July 2021).

“That, to me,” I stated, “was a beautiful way to say that the laptop or the keyboard or the paper is the place where I have, or create, the agency” (de Sostoa-McCue 7 July 2021). Daye pointed out that as queer people and writers, we must create agency, “because no one gives it to you” (Duncan 7 July 2021). This particular focus on agency, lack of, or desire for proved to be a particularly powerful moment: at the time, what I remember most was experiencing a visceral

pause, a silence in which we all took in the implications of the turn our conversation had taken. That moment, the breathless suspension in which we shared something that we didn't speak, can't be captured in a transcription, in a relay of speech. Instead, it relies on my memory, on their memory, for burden of proof. What struck me then, and continued to jump out at me as I read and re-read the transcripts, is the sense that not only had we shared a moment, but that moment revealed the truth in story as theory.

Before writing came along... I felt like the world told me, 'This is what your future's going to look like, and this is how you're going to exist. And this is when it's going to stop.' Honestly, before I gave myself into writing and telling the stories I want ...the world told me...I'm going to make it to 30, and then it's anyone's guess whether you make it past that kind of thing. Because every form of representation and media that was shown to me, whether from the queer side or being black, was that you are destined to be hurt and to die young.
—Julian⁶¹

Julian's experiences as a black, queer man clearly influence or affect his interactions in his everyday life, but also in spaces where "readers"⁶² feel as if they know him. Julian describes, in his interviews, a metaphorical wall he's built between himself, his emotions, and the world (Winters 12 May 2021). Although the image of a wall calls to mind something solid, something that marks boundaries, perhaps even that with which you might build a container or a buffer, what he describes as deploying is instead, by necessity, a constantly malleable force, something he is able to change at will as he navigates a desire for connection and authenticity with acts of self-protection and preservation. Of particular interest here was Julian's discovery of self behind that wall as well.

While this could be seen as "composing," internally he feels and knows this is that liminal failure/composure space. When he says discusses his interactions with communities of

⁶¹ Winters, Personal Interview. 12 May 2021.

⁶² Not just those who read his stories, but those who "read" him.

readers and writers, what we see are constant acts of gesturing. Julian's "persona" in particular is comprised of gestures he understands he is undertaking (Winters 12 May 2021). In this way, it can be argued that it's not that Julian is composing *a* self. Rather, he is aware of who he is, how he moves in the world, and his own set of survival tactics. What he's doing is (de)composing himself in order to try to survive failure, and as I explore further in the (intra)community section, not just his, but also of a community he seeks to be a part of and to create. Julian's interviews and conversations reveal—to himself, me and the group—a persona that is a shifting, reorienting, changeable set of acts.

Throughout the course of our individual and group conversations, I witness a journey Julian undertakes as he begins to let himself examine what is behind the wall. In our conversations, it was clear that it wasn't as if Julian didn't *know* he had that wall up or why—more, he was reticent to really lower that guard because it has become such a protective measure. When Julian is navigating his public persona, I see him able to take component parts of who he is, who people think he is, his own desires, and to break them down. While one could argue these acts signify (re)composition, the fact that these acts are consistently changing without ever "arriving" suggests a form of (de)composition. As he has had to work through increased visibility, increased "access" to self and persona, Julian has had to learn to be differing versions of himself as he is being read in different spaces over and over again.

While many of Julian's practices with textualizing himself—entering a "room" that will read him, he's keenly aware that there are many ways in which this reading can lead to a sort of failure. In his own past, that failure has ranged in feeling from being at danger, feelings of hopelessness, and disconnect. However, Julian is also an incredibly savvy writer, and he understands the narratives that surround him. Having achieved many of the goals he thought the

world had set for him (such as surviving to the age of thirty) Julian clearly demonstrates knowledge and understanding of the narrative our society in particular has written for a young, gay, black man. He has reached a point in his life where he has taken “failure” and through an examination of his own survival tactics (the wall), understands that the use of component parts, of choosing who to let in or how to allow himself to be read—and finding in himself a way to feel genuine even when he’s put together various parts—is indicative of agency. In fact, for Julian, the story of agency was perhaps the most moving aspect of the interviews and this story:

I think that's why...I was so gray and I was so one note, because there wasn't much to look forward to, the highs were you get to turn 18 and then you're an adult. And the next high was like you get to turn 21 and you get to legally drink...Those were the things that I was looking forward to, instead of looking forward to a relationship or looking forward to going to my first Pride...Those were just not notes that I was looking forward to hitting, because it wasn't supposed to happen. Yeah, before writing the world definitely composed who I was...(Winters 12 May 2021).

A lot of the time with where and how I'm writing, queer experience is in everything I write. And that's mostly because I live it. So it's in everything I write, but a lot of the times if I'm writing in specific places in public, I actually have like a buffer zone in my notebook, which is full of like grocery lists or something. And just that way, if somebody opens it, they aren't confronted with fiction that's queer.
—Daye⁶³

Daye’s actions work beyond (de)composing narratives others might read onto him; agency, survival, and failure as a narrative runs through Daye’s actions and story differently. Often revealed in Daye’s interviews was an awareness of what I call “reading the room.” His deliberate practices of reading the room and consciousness of being read demonstrated both a

⁶³ Duncan, Personal Interview. 15 May 2021.

shrewdness but also a commitment to self that appears in a variety of ways throughout the interview process. When Daye describes the differing ways in which he “presents” himself at work, there’s a tongue-in-cheek defiance and nod to underlying and intertwined social power structures that affect queer lives on a variety of levels. Daye’s description of their choices with wigs as a kind of day drag are indicative of this. For instance, he says “I make the joke that it is my cis-sona at work and that the person I am at work is completely cis-gender, loves to work overtime and always has a smile on their face” (Duncan 15 May 2021). Daye doesn’t need to theorize or address hegemonic or ideological structures of gender, sexuality, economy, capitalism etc. that affect or shape his life explicitly. Instead, he (de)composes through acts of defiance that appear, to those outside his own narrative, as compliance.

Daye’s insights into the interplay between language and other people’s perceptions of his body when appearing more or less masculine, and the ways in which he chooses whether or not to wear a wig, knowing how people will perceive the word partner differently based on that, especially in a self-described homophobic town dovetails with the underlying narrative of who Daye is (Duncan 15 May 2021). I don’t want to simplify Daye’s journey or life, but many times when we all spoke, Daye’s commitment to wanting people to know he’s queer, but navigating that in a way that is safe or coded is particularly interesting. Daye comports himself in a way that speaks very much to agency, and also to navigating and balancing agency (the desire to be seen and recognized) with safety (survival). He explains,

...dressing yourself up in certain ways is very much conscious...my general rule of thumb is that, yes, I want people to know I'm queer but not people who are going to take it badly...the key rings that lesbians used to wear or how they gave purple flowers to each other...we have codes for that reason. It's fun but it's nice to have a queer signal...of

course...not everyone who shaves their head is queer. But it's just another thing in a list of things that people might be able to identify about me (Duncan 15 May 2021).

Daye's day-to-day choice to wear a wig or not, along with his choice to continue shaving his head and how this act could/did reflect or affect his own feelings of queerness and gender presentation, will be further discussed further in the (anti)body section. In regards to (de)composition, this specific example exposes skills and choices in "reading the room" which is consistently reading him, and Daye's deliberate and conscious choice to fuck with those perceptions through incremental or (bigger) compositional choices. Daye explicitly (de)composes hegemonic ideologies with his choices, in writing and the ways in which he "allows" people to read him through his choices. What he's (de)composing here is the world.

There's not a leap from I'm in this box, I'm confined by it, to I'm free.
—Emily⁶⁴

Emily's pondering and exploration of the word composing went through a few turns over the course of our interviews. As a poet whose practices often focus on sound and texture rather than a dependence on finding the right word, Emily also tended to fixate on particular words, chasing ones that evoked a particular feeling or whose etymology she found interesting or wanted to explore in the future: "I'm usually more obsessed with finding the right sound of things and connotation of things than I am finding the right words itself" she explained (Stoddard 18 May 2021). As we discussed the idea of the differences between how we are composed (perceived) vs. how we compose ourselves, Emily chased a white rabbit as well, stating that "You can't integrate a thing or help a thing become fluid and free until you first name the parts, decompose the parts that no longer serve and then work with what arrives out of that..."

⁶⁴ Stoddard, Personal Interview, 18 May 2021.

(Stoddard 18 May 2021). From there, Emily immediately imagined the ways in which people perceive/compose her as a box she's being placed in. The ways in which she chased the word compose to decompose in a literal sense led her straight to the complexities of composition:

First you have to know what box you're in. Then you have to literally decompose. Like I'm imagining it as cardboard that literally like you decompose, you save the parts that work or you rename them or whatever it is. And then you compost the rest and then see what's regenerating...And it's a good reminder that composition is not flat (Stoddard 18 May 2021).

Emily's words above, describing how one must look at component parts in order to escape, explore and understand a box, leads to a particular duality—one in which she understands the box while being outside the box. When working with other authors, she described this sort of practice as “wholeness instead of doneness” (Stoddard 18 May 2021). Much of Emily's self-described practice and the focus of her writing skews toward (de)composition. Emily often seemed troubled by the ways in which other people might compose her: “...my fear with my manuscript is always, ‘Oh my God, people are going to read me at some like religious nut or like it's a manifesto” (Stoddard 29 June 2021). Here Emily describes a nuanced relationship with perceived failure—not failure in regards to her poetry, but in the ways she might be unwittingly composed. In many ways, it is her relationship the relationship between theology, spirituality, queerness, self, and ecstasy, which appear thematically through her work in complex and nuanced ways, which speaks to this:

...when I think of intersection of self, it's not just Emily against institution and wrestling with that, it's also how does writing... Not fix what happened, but sort of get honest about

what we carry in with us when we're born, and what's with us, and what's in the institution and how those meet? (Stoddard 29 June 2021).

Religious institutions, academic institutions, queerness: all combine here to represent that box Emily finds herself in. At another point in our group interview, Emily described an experience with discovering a poem of hers had been taught in a class at Harvard University and being contacted by a student who wrote an essay response to her piece was in many ways disconcerting to her (Stoddard 7 July 2021). In this moment, Emily confronted the space between composition of self, self-composition and what others would compose of her. While acknowledging that reception by others is beyond her control, and that this is a part of the artistic process—one will always show up in their work to others through their lens—Emily still finds it difficult to reconcile that disconnect. She shared this with us:

They read that first person voice in the poems as me entirely. They didn't catch any of the surrealness and how that might create another layer of identity in the speaker....

sometimes I feel like my creations betray me a little bit because no matter how deep I go in the process... and I feel good about where they land and how they culminate...when they meet an audience like that... It's not comfortable, but it's also I'm not going to argue that it's true (Stoddard 7 July 2021).

The tension in this moment is palpable. Much of Emily's work explores (de)composition: the intersections of the influence of hegemonic institutions and expectations—religion and her constant feeling of “alienness” in regards to neurodivergence—broken into component parts, implications and feelings chased into unusual landscapes of sound and sight, a trust in instinct and emotion, defy in many ways, the person and writer she was trained to be. While many would affirm that art in the hands of the person receiving is valid and natural, Emily manages to

(de)compose that expectation—it is both right and wrong. The expectation that we, as writers, should acquiesce to the discomfort of being (mis)read feels very much like a particular cultural construct in Emily’s hands. It is allowed to both be and not be. In these candid moments as a group, Emily willingly (de)composes in the hands of other writers she has come to trust.

(anti)body

Emily: I'm someone who would prefer to just be a brain floating without a body.

Daye: So that'd be great. Get rid of the physical form.

*Tania: Yeah, let's ascend.*⁶⁵

In this section, I consider the (anti)body through the lens of the agency, failure, and survival narrative. I begin with a consideration of the concept of “right” bodies and the effect this hegemonic discourse has on my participants, as demonstrated by their stories. These stories appear in differing and complicated ways for each of them, as their bodies exist in the world through differing intersectionalities. What it means to be the “right” body is a narrative that coerces all bodies within social structures (in Western cultures, that body will be white. It will be heterosexual, ablebodied, cisgendered, fertile, and invested in reproduction). For some, that coercion is gentler. It’s a whisper, a suggestion that’s easy to fall into and to maintain. Although, yes, a body might fit, the concept that there is a “right” by nature indicates a set of circumstances and goals to be achieved.

However, within these structures, there will always be those existing in opposition, those that don’t fit, those for whom the coercion becomes a daily violence, not a whisper but a scream. Those whose shape, gesture, self, seem to exist within that structure simply to help demarcate and validate those for whom it just *is*. This “interloper” need not be “queer.” The body that

⁶⁵ Group Interview, 7 July 2021.

doesn't fit could be black, could be neurodivergent, could be infertile, etc. They could, and often are, an amalgamation of several "wrongs," existing and intersections of self and identity that will necessarily "fail" in the face of that which is "straight" by ideological standards. One of the great pains those who fail face is the daily lived experience of having to *be* simply in order to maintain half of a binary system. And yet.

And yet...

As Halberstam describes in *The Queer Art of Failure*, "...there is something powerful in being wrong, in losing, in failing, and that all our failures combined might just be enough, if we practice them well, to bring down the winner" (20). I believe that for my participants, what or who is considered the "winner" and what "losing" looks like in their histories—failure to have the "right" body—appears in multiple and complex ways. Specific examples include (although are not limited to) Daye's gender, Julian's color, Emily's reproductive status, along with other queer positions and markers.⁶⁶ Despite that whisper or that scream, despite the coercion of bodies and selves into particular shapes, places, gestures, I believe that all of us experienced desire to or will to, at some point in our lives, compose our bodies with longing and hope. We orient ourselves in that way, and our relationship to failure, survival, and agency is inextricably linked to that. Within the pressure of binary systems surrounding us at all times, it becomes impossible to see selves existing with longing or hope and not understand that failure walks alongside those desires. It is only when we approach failure with a queer heart, queer longing, and queer hope that we understand the beautiful potential held within queer failure.

⁶⁶ Although all three experience queer in regards to sexuality and both Daye and Emily in gender and neurodivergence (ablebodiedness), I focus on each example for each participant here with particular care in direct conversation and understanding with aspects of self that emerged specific to concepts of the body and the (anti)body. These examples are neither meant to ignore the multiple intersections of self these authors experience, nor are they meant to imply that these are the most important by any definition one might apply.

My participants' relationship to and journey with being read and reading a room (literally and metaphorically) takes on a particularly embodied turn—or perhaps, we should say, an (anti)bodied turn—several times over the course of our interviews. For each author, the complex interplay of inner perception and the external world, their relationship to their body and the way in which it interacts with or is interacted with in the world takes on different shapes. What each participant shared or described over the course of my research reveals complex interplay between inner and outer selves, inner and outer landscapes. Agency, survival, and failure play out differently for each of them, with perhaps self-perceived focus on one or two aspects. For example, one might feel as if their body has failed them in particular ways, therefore that is the aspect of the story that stands out to them most clearly.

Sometimes I feel like my body is more a body on the page than it is in real life.

—Emily⁶⁷

Of all the participants, including myself, Emily demonstrated the most resistance when the topic of embodiment came up. Previously she had confessed that her practice in writing was often more about leaving her physical and finding her way into understanding her body through language alone: “Sometimes I feel like my body is more a body on the page than it is in real life” (Stoddard 18 May 2021). She detailed to us the ways in which a part of her growing practice was having to have body workers put her back into her body.

I literally have to pay other people to put me back in my body. Bodywork, energy work is part of my creative practice because I just float away and I'm happy to float away...But then eventually, you do have a body and the body runs out before my mind does. So I

⁶⁷ Stoddard, Personal interview, 18 May 2021.

finally figured out having people who could just like tell me how my body works, literally put it back together” (Stoddard 29 June 2021).

For Emily, leaving her body is a survival tactic linked to complex feelings of trauma linked to “failure” in regards to being in the “right” body. Having to “put it back together” is also an act of survival. Although Emily does not do that herself, by seeking others who can, Emily is acting with agency. As described in Chapter Three, when I asked the authors about the relationship between writing and embodiment, Emily’s response was emphatic and quick. Although she could not remember the source, she recalled the sense of violation and anger she felt when reading a tweet in which an author stated that one cannot write without being embodied. “It just felt like such a violation,” she stated, and continued that “...it seems [they] think they know things about trauma and identity...like they’re the ones who think we can begin with an assumption of the body” (Stoddard 29 June 2021).

Tellingly, here, my initial reaction was as an interviewer and not a participant, immediately internally scrambling to understand Emily’s words in context with what I had meant by embodiment, and my sense of the work we had been doing in our conversations as a group. When Emily continued, describing experiences in writing retreats, there was a moment in which suddenly *I* was the only one in the room who did not understand what Emily was saying. Going back to re-read the interviews, it took me a while to begin to understand what was hiding in plain sight. I had approached conversations about embodiment from a deeply theoretical space, imbued with a particular Queer approach and mentality. Meanwhile, Emily’s description: “Oooh, let’s all literally...get up and dance around and move our hips because we’re women and that’s what we should do,” caught me off guard (Stoddard 29 June 2021). For Emily, connecting the

vitality of her writing practice—hinging it upon a physical, gendered body—was deeply upsetting, trauma triggering, and antithetical to her own processes.

While several of Emily’s stories appear throughout the interview data regarding the body, related to the body and queerness, some of which are more positive and carry a deeper sense of agency, it is in the interplay between being a ‘readable’ writer in spaces such as writing retreats—in an embodied sense, where Emily appeared to struggle the most. Her worst nightmare, she relates, “is being in a circle of women that are straight....I feel physically often, I stick out, and I know intellectually and psychologically...that even when I talk, I stick out...and I think this goes probably hand in hand with not getting to explore queerness...” (Stoddard 18 May 2021). A complex sense of “failure”⁶⁸ of the body crops up throughout conversations with Emily:

...when I’m in it entirely, when I’m there, I am absolutely someone who does leave my body...I do think some of the things I’ve had to deal with, like endometriosis, migraines, chronic pain, that has forced me. I mean, in a way sometimes I’m just pissed off because I’m like, “I don’t want a body. I don’t need this body. I would rather just be this brain floating outside of a body.” And yet the way my body keeps reminding me it’s here is through pain. And so I’ve definitely worked with that in the writing” (Stoddard 18 May 2021)

It is in this context that we first discussed Emily’s intense relationship with a third space she perceives during her own writing practice, a notion that crops up throughout all of our

⁶⁸ I place the word failure within quotes to clarify that it is not that Emily stated that these things are literal failures. Rather, I use the word failure in a particular sense described above, in which non-conforming bodies “fail” larger social narratives about what “fits” and what does not.

interviews. She said, “when I’m writing and really when I’m in deep work and doing some of my favorite work, it’s like a third space, it’s another kind of place” (Stoddard 18 May 2021).

As a writing coach, Emily is constantly conscious of creating “space” or holding “space” for other writers in her workshops. Emily talks about her practice without ever explaining or describing a *literal* space, without defining or clarifying what “room” this writing work is taking place in. It is never clear “where” this space is in our group interviews, because the space Emily is inviting others into is not embodied. We cannot “read” the room. Emily values her own personal third space intensely, and has struggled with the idea that others might want more intimacy than she does, more attachment. Her third space is her own and as she see it, others’ third space should only ever be *their* own. Agency and boundaries are very present in Emily’s discussion of others’ willingness to give power to her. She shared, “I am quite honestly a little horrified sometimes at how readily people will give their power away” (Stoddard 18 May 2021). In retrospect, it became clear to me that Emily’s insistence on the sacred nature of a writing room, a writing self, and her complex relationship with a physical body she would rather address through writing practice in which she leaves her body are all indicative of a very intricate negotiation between self, agency, failure, survival, and others. Emily’s approach to the body is through the (anti).

But I think it's made a wonderful thing for myself to not only acknowledge that sometimes pain creates these wounds that'll eventually heal, but you get to look back on them, you get to see those scars and say, "You know what, I survived this, and I can help somebody else survive something"
—Julian⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Winters, Personal Interview. 12 May 2021.

For Julian, questions about the body often circled back to what he initially described as a self-protective wall I reference above. Throughout his interview responses, it's clear that Julian has a complex relationship between sharing self on page versus in person, a lot of which is tied to the "body" that shows up when he is in a space: because he is black, male, queer, he is keenly aware of the fact that he will always "appear" as a perception first. For Julian, the question is not so much if aspects of his self fits stereotypes, so much as that he is constantly aware of the ways in which he moves his body or perceives himself through the perception of others:

And from a physical standpoint or body-wise I love to talk with my hands, but I might find myself pulling back on that and not doing that, and not doing certain inflections with my voice, and not a lot of different things to not be perceived a certain way...And so body wise, I find myself compacting into this form that fits, that's palpable to my audience until I feel safe, until I feel comfortable. And then I might start to slowly...unravel or whatever, and fit more into my true self from that perspective. (Winters 7 July 2021)

Julian's use of the word "unravel" was of particular interest to me, as its expected connotations do differ from the emotion or sense he is describing. I found it interesting as well that immediately after describing the sense of increased safety in being himself (unraveling), he also found that there was a "danger" of others then latching on to what they do perceive as a stereotype he is now fulfilling. "Oh, and we can talk like this and we can use this type of queer language we've heard through TV," he describes of interactions with those who have begun to feel a sense of intimacy with him (Winters 7 July 2021). This only leads to him wanting to revert back behind that wall—(re)raveling into what he describes as "that shell." The see-saw of emotional interplay with others, perception, stereotype, and the body/mannerisms he embodies deeply affect Julian's description of the interplay between his body and the world. In many

cases, Julian's languaging—*unraveling*, the *shell*, a *wall*—evoke images of literal actions or objects. They aren't an amorphous "space" as Emily describes. Instead, the Julian found in these interviews describes a self in a complex relationship with both the real and perceived body, all of which exist in complex relationality with his own understanding of agency, and the role it has or has not played in his own story of survival and the ways in which society has set his body up to "fail."

In the beginning of our first interview, when I ask if he's ever written his own embodied experiences into his work, he states, "It's kind of like an unconscious thing...it starts off unintentional, and then as I'm writing, I think I feel like that's where it kind of organically comes out" (Winters 12 May 2021). As our interviews progress, we watched Julian emerge from this place—from behind a wall, not realizing he was writing agency through his characters. Toward the very end of our second interview as Daye, Julian and I reflect on the developmental importance fanfiction communities had on us, Julian stated "...as someone who has turned to writing to be able to find, I guess, my agency, and to explore parts of myself, and to feel valid and seen...this has been such an important thing for me" (Winters 7 July 2021). This was an incredibly moving and powerful moment. This constant push and pull, the ways in which Julian's "failure" to have the "right" body are expressed in his writing in specific ways; through hiding from others, to hiding his desire for agency in his words, are all inextricably related to the body he has carried and negotiated and protected throughout his own life, and learned to mediate through his writing career and author persona. As he said, "For me, my writing, I can be honest. But when it comes to being in spaces with actual, physical people...I'm honest, but not openly honest...I give you a peek into the room, but you're not going to see all of the pieces..." (Winters 7 July 2021). Julian, as revealed in the interviews, occupies multiple subject positions—his real

life, his author persona—in a constantly fluid way. His is both aware of the ways in which he must navigate the complex ways his body is set up to “fail” and what he must do in order to survive. Julian in these interviews is and isn’t; his story traverses the being and the un-being, the “failing” body that survives, that claims agency even when he doesn’t realize it’s doing so; it is the (anti)body.

I’ll make it more obvious. That way, even though they’re they’ll never not see me as a woman, they will at least see me as a queer woman, which means that they’ll at least know that I am not what they want me to be.
—Daye⁷⁰

This sense of a shifting body constructed in relationship with other’s perceptions of a body they are encountering is beautifully described and enacted by Daye as described over the course of the interviews. Daye has a particularly keen insight into the ways in which he is perceived and constructed by others—not only does he see it, he actively fucks with these perceptions. Whether it comes to his relationship with another man or his own gender identity, Daye embodies agency through action. Although his decision to occasionally wear a wig or to shave his head during lockdown wasn’t directly tied to desire to express gender in particular ways, “I mostly bought the wig because it was winter time and my head was going to get cold and I couldn’t wear a hat at work,” he explained (Duncan 15 May 2021), it quickly became clear to him that entering into spaces, his shaved head changed the ways in which people perceived his gender, the language people used around him as well as perceptions of his relationship. Daye explains, “I can wear my wig one day to work and not wear it the next and people will think I’m a different person...I found that if I was wearing my wig...they would just assume that my partner was a man. But if I wasn’t, they would use neutral language” (Duncan 15 May 2021).

⁷⁰ Duncan, Personal Interview. 7 July 2021.

While, yes, Daye's choice to wear or not wear a wig is for him an act of (de)composition, it is a particularly embodied act, one that consistently defies how people will interact with his literal "failed" body when "confronted" by it. Daye's "putting on drag" cis-sona is an agential act of embracing and enacting an (anti)bodied perspective. Daye demonstrates consistent awareness of how much others seem to want to be able to read him; Daye also discusses time and again wanting to be read as queer by queer folk even as a teen. Those choices appear in his stories as both deliberate and as a part of his growing process. While now, his choices can be deployments, if he wants. Then, they were very much a part of a narrative of survival:

My train of thought is with physical form and being perceived definitely are a little bit different in the sense that, because I've been dealing with dysphoria for a lot of my life....starting to identify as non-binary...I think I was nineteen. It becomes this thing where you need to compromise with yourself in some ways. And I started feeling like...I don't want them to perceive me as a woman, but they're never going to stop doing that. So instead, I'd rather that they perceive me as queer, so I'll be louder about being queer (Duncan 7 July 2021).

Still, the space Daye occupies now is one that he states, like Julian, he had been writing into his work prior to realizing aspects of himself. Daye's relationship with embodiment and composition looks different in many ways. Daye found time and again that he would write himself—his trans-ness and neurodivergence—into characters prior to having recognized these things in himself, stating "...you'd be surprised about how many times I look back on my writing and I'm like, 'Oh, okay. So this was me figuring out that I was trans and I just didn't know how to say it yet.' So I was saying it through a character instead" (Duncan 15 May 2021). Often, he states, it's something other people would have had to point out to him as well. For example,

Daye describes, “You just see a lot more like genderfucking being...Pardon the language, being something that you bring up and then you look back and you’re like, “oh, okay. I was trying to say something I just didn’t *know* what I was trying to say”” (Duncan 7 July 2021). I find this take on reading of self like Julian’s, one which takes on that “reading the room” connotation, but one that is happening in Emily’s third space, a room we’re never quite sure where to geolocate, how to pin, how to point to on a map and find our way toward again.

(intra)community

The room might be the boxes we live in. It might be the ones we’re forced into. It might be bound by literal walls. By trauma, by memories of resiliency or resistance. The room might be crowded by others’ bodies or whispers. Regardless, time and again, we are asked to read and re read and re read rooms and rooms and rooms, to find places for our queer bodies and hearts and longing amidst everything else.
—Tania ⁷¹

While the practice of (re)thinking composing/composition emerged from realizations of my own biases and led me to a path of reorienting in the interest of change and growth, it was this emergent (re)evaluation of community that led me to the possibility and potential of what community *can* mean. In this chapter I invite the reader into a relationship with *our* relationship with the concept of and acts of building community. Throughout, what I attempt to do is share the story-theory in my participants’ words, describing what I came to see as (intra)community. I utilize the prefix *intra* to highlight its meanings: this (re)orientation is not a shift toward understanding (*inter*)community story. Instead, a focus on the *intra* points to something happening within a singular, between layers. The singular need not be one person, one community, one goal.

⁷¹ Free write, 15 October 2021.

Asking my participants to share why they agreed to participate in this journey immediately established a common objective and desire that then became the cornerstone for this work. Although the creation of community, story building as theory and world-making was foundational in the shaping of my research questions and designs, as I combed through the data collected, different stories from what I expected about community and what it means for or to each author emerged.⁷² In their stories, a complex narrative of agency, survival, and failure revealed a particular poignancy, an aching for even unsettled communities, complex navigational tactics that would balance distrust, feelings of being hurt, even disappointment with a constant desire and commitment to the concept of community. A belief and allowance for growth even in imperfection, resiliency even when our communities turn in ways we cannot believe. In many cases, community failure was often productive—there was an agency behind the hope my participants had that kept them seeking and enjoying, not giving up on desires for different communities.

To begin, I call back to a story already shared: my therapist advising me to ask why they agreed to participate in my study as a way of setting my anxieties to rest. I was perhaps expecting them to say something along the lines of wanting to help a friend (which they did), but was not expecting them to immediately address a desire for shared conversation and community with other queer authors writing *outside* of their usual spaces in the ways that they did. Daye stated “... I don’t have a lot of community to talk to other writers. And when I do, it’s usually in a

⁷² “One of my big goals was to see if I could kind of create the community feeling for all of us because it feels like such a segmented thing, the writing things and also the queerness in my outside world, searching for that community and trying to create it and just having those spaces is really important to me” (de Sostoa-McCue, Group Interview, 29 June 2021).

very specific niche, for example, a specific fandom or a specific genre...So it's nice to talk to other people and listen to people who have experience in other forms than I do" (Duncan 29 June 2021).

Similarly, Julian described a relationship between his professional writing space and relationships while clearly describing the ways in which such engagement with a single professional writing community was limiting. For Julian a desire to feel himself exist amongst other writers who work in different forms and spaces underscored his desire to be a part of this project:

I definitely exist in a space in young adult fiction where I get to talk about some things but don't really get to dive deep into things because it's always very much focused on that... the people that are actually part of our community is still such a small representation, that it's nice to know that we do exist in a lot of spaces (Winters 29 June 2021).

By contrast, Emily's initial answer was a bit less literal and, I believe, harder to get to the root of: "I feel like I'm still looking for kindred spirits that are willing and ready to go there. I call it sitting at the bottom of the ocean. I need more people sitting at the bottom of the ocean with me. It gets lonely down there" (Stoddard 29 June 2021). What Emily sought, it turns out, was something we all longed for: people who would go there with us. Who would sit at the bottom of the ocean in the (intra); if not with permanence, but for a few life changing moments.

... just the fact I had such an emotional response to you even asking me to be part of this that told me that it was that response of like, "I'm seen, oh." Because I think I don't get to be out as much as I would like... there are edges that I get to go to in the writing that to me come from that place. Like certain longings or certain extremes of sort of taking something all the way.
—Emily⁷³

⁷³ Stoddard, Personal Interview. 18 May 2021.

I found, in many ways, Emily's desire to participate in this project imbued with a particular poignancy. Her experience with queer communities and writing communities looked very different from anyone else's. Emily's stories didn't take place in fiction publishing or fanfiction communities. Hers exist with students who come and go in her practice, in writing retreats; in learning to navigate being the person creating space, holding space, while trying to protect and find herself at the same time.

Conversely, her queer community experience can be described at the moment as a longing:

...there's the added layer for me of not being really totally out in a lot of ways. I feel like spiritually, I'm not totally out as this kind of person. I feel like my queer identity...I'm just not fully out....honestly, Tania's email came in at a threshold season for me...selfishly I'm like, this will be so lovely to kind of be in a space where I can just be 110% myself and show up completely and be with other people who are doing that" (Stoddard 7 July 2021).

For Emily, participation and commitment were born of agency and in many ways survival, which is a thread that appears often for her. While Daye, Julian and I were talking about how we create, or struggle to, boundaries as we navigate public spaces while in our writing personas, particularly with younger people who carry different expectations of access due to social media, Emily's writing communities feel completely different.⁷⁴ In particular, the ones she is responsible for and created in her writing workshops often feel toxic and unhealthy because of

⁷⁴ This is a conversation that was referenced throughout the course of our second group interview that took place July 8.

others lack of boundaries. In her experience, often middle aged, white women haven't experienced safe spaces of their own. In the space Emily creates for them, this often creates "community" that takes and takes, often violating her own boundaries:

...when you're working with someone who feels like they're maybe approaching the last chapter of their life and they're trying to do this thing and then they find someone who can hold that space with them, sometimes they attach tight and different than if it was a college student... (Stoddard 18 May 2021).

For Emily, writing communities are spaces that have to be navigated with care, over and over. Even participant responses to writing prompts and events through her mailing list have led to these moments: "People saying things like, 'You're my spirit animal. You're my guru.'...Yeah people attach, it's really, really interesting. It's like, I don't want to be your personality..." (Stoddard 18 May 2021). The care Emily displays in navigating writing community is not just because often her participants attach in "unhealthy, toxic ways,"⁷⁵ but because even in writing retreats she attends, her body and story often make her feel like she stands out. Referenced in the embodiment section, Emily is often hyper-conscious of her height, her shape, the necessity of arriving with a body to workshops. What's more, regardless of where she writes, Emily often feels outside *within* what she writes: "I definitely feel like I end up in a purgatory of sorts...I'm not really...anywhere. I'm not in the church, I'm not perfectly outside it...People have different bias and draw different conclusions depending on how they understand me in relation to it" (Stoddard 7 July 2021).

⁷⁵ Stoddard, Personal Interview. 7 July 2021.

Emily's previous work history with philanthropic work speaks to this as well: the disillusionment felt working for organizations that are feminist oriented, feminist driven, who end up seeking funding from corporations that don't have those interests integrated into business practice. "Once we're at the table with Walmart, then we can change the system from the inside out" was how she described the mentality. But often, the people within that corporate system don't share those values, and regardless of them allowing you space for conversation, they aren't truly committed; what's more, ultimately, the companies she would work for didn't feel safe holding them accountable because of the funding on the line (Stoddard 7 July 2021). This disillusionment with a community Emily devoted a lot of time in had a tremendous effect on her. This disillusionment, the failure of the commitment and the goal she worked with a community for, opened a new, queer mindset: "...we still need people who are on the fringes....if you don't have people on the edges...then the edge gets smaller and smaller and smaller" (Stoddard 7 July 2021). Emily is sure to explain that while this isn't an easy task—this survival mindset, the agency that comes with it—is a hopeful, generative space. While Emily's stories often betray a sadness or sense of loss—loss of the ideal of queer and writing communities—what really shone through in emotional overtone and what was shared in the silences that don't carry through onto a transcript was the generosity of spirit Emily brought to the formation of *this* community. She was not deterred, nor was she naïve; her faith in communities existed in the (intra), the space within the singular longing and belief in what community can offer, can mean, or can do, even when it is not.

Writing for me, my Genesis and everything started in fandom. And as a queer person, as a black person, I just hope that somehow this conversation and more conversations, spark a change where we don't take away that space that I think a lot of people get their start in, because other spaces still have not been made available.
—Julian ⁷⁶

The complexity of our desires to belong to writing communities, and what they mean to us, began to really emerge as we discussed intersections of self being brought to writing, Julian's relationship with community—both in his experience and through the experiences of the characters he writes about in his novels—have offered particular themes of acceptance. At this stage in his life and writing career, however, he finds himself in a place in which he wants to move away from that writing stories about visible and invisible identities one must navigate in an arc toward self-acceptance, “Because it's almost like you're asking them for permission to exist” (Winters 29 June 2021). This idea of permission to exist threaded its way through both group interviews and individual ones as well: a sense that a portion of our being is tied to gatekeeping happening at a variety of levels and spaces:

I want to say it's about existing in this world and feeling safe, and feeling like you can be your full self. So a lot of my writing is looking at that and the ways that sometimes one of your identities, the community can reject you because you share these other identities and whatnot (Winters 29 June 2021).

Julian in particular feels pressure as a part of the LGBTSAI+ YA writing community, as there are expectations put upon him and his comportment. Additionally, there are pressures within the community that he worries constantly dictate there are stories he cannot tell. Julian wants to thrive, and belong, and to exist without self-inclusion hinging upon standards set by

⁷⁶ Winters, Personal Interview. 7 July 2021.

others within an established community. At the same time, Julian truly values, and wants to honor the contributions his work have to queer YA readers. In our individual interview he explained that there is “...something about being in that space and knowing I can make a serious change for someone in their formative years, that keeps me going” (Winters 12 May 2021).

There’s a particular tension Julian hones in on when we begin to really breakdown the experiences of writing queer characters, particularly outside of specifically queer spaces, or perhaps in fan spaces: “It feels like we’re always fighting the tide. You’re always feeling like we have to make these characters palpable and loved by people who are not necessarily queer” (Winters 7 July 2021). Here we see a sense of the challenges that face writers like Julian: wanting to be included and navigating personal identities and interests within communities, but also trying to navigate these stories and queerness through writing outside of the LGBTQAI+ community without having to make concessions or sacrifices that run counter to what he’s trying to do with his stories. In order to exist in the wider community, Julian has found that “it has to be an accepting version of queerness while, when it’s involving non-queer characters, it’s okay to be messy” (Winters 7 July 2021).

In other words, regardless of the space Julian inhabits, he feels a sense that he is always seeking permission to exist. Still, he never expresses a desire to leave communities or to give up. Even when the idea of community fails—for example we all discussed the forced outing of YA author Becky Albertali, who is a friend of Julian’s—he has not given up on the idea of community; he’s still the primary agent of seeking that connection, he’s still surviving and carrying on with hope. I’ve discussed the ways in which Julian learned to write character agency, and the relationship this has had with his own story of survival and failure—the complexity of his relationship with his own writing communities is also shaped by this narrative: these are

communities that do fail in many ways, that he both does and doesn't want to belong to at the same time. Julian's understanding and navigation isn't between communities or even aspects of community. Instead, what he does is exist and move in the (intra)community. He longs for agency in these moments even as he acknowledges that his choices are acts of agency, even if they're motivated by external factors. Julian actively navigates tensions within self and community in a way that belies his understanding that participation, inclusion, resistance to, survival of community don't exist as an either/or. There is not the worst of community separate from the best, much less separate from our own actions within or how we are being acted upon.

I wrote so much, and yet they were so much less of me because I was just trying to get the story itself out there. And then when I got settled into...a specific fandom...then what happened instead was I was doing things that were more character-focused and I was doing things that felt more revealing to myself.
—Daye⁷⁷

Daye's desire to work with authors outside of specific niches brought really refreshing perspectives to our conversation, often because he had such interesting insights to share based on his history within such niche spaces and the ways in which what he has learned and experiences offer so much potential on a larger scale. Of my respondents, Daye was often the quietest. Yet more than once when he spoke, he spoke to something we all very much needed to hear, needed to experience, leading to beautiful silences as we collectively sat with his insights. As the youngest of the group, Daye's coming of age was more linked to online experiences than the rest of us, which deeply informed a lot of his community relationships, particularly in regards to writing.

⁷⁷ Duncan, Personal Interview. 15 May 2021.

Of all of us, Daye seemed to have experienced queer community building in person at the youngest age. As we discussed the ways in which people find each other even in regards to invisible identities like neurodivergence, people tend to “recognize in others what we don’t necessarily recognize in ourselves...and maybe that’s why people who are queer band together so much without even noticing” (Duncan 15 May 2021). Daye later elaborated on the difference between how being “different” as a child can feel different than when you’re older when you are already creating communities around invisible identities, even if they aren’t intentional (Duncan 7 July 2021). Although this experience isn’t universal—Emily and I had no queer community until much later in life, and plenty of teens feel isolated by their differences, in context of this conversation, what Daye was relating reflected a lot on his own experiences in community building—that often, they happen when we need them, even if we don’t know we’re doing it. They are linked to “failures” that set someone on the periphery, on the outside: we seek community to survive and in seeking, are agents.

Thinking back to Emily’s statement about being the outlier, about the need for people on the edges of what’s acceptable in order to keep what’s okay from getting smaller and smaller, the ways in which Daye experienced community building often seemed to come from him; although his sister came out before him, in his friend group as a teen, he shares that he was the first to come out:

And I think that sometimes if you see someone who's brave enough to do that, at a time when it's so not a great idea to be out in a lot of cases, that you can see that bravery and decide that you want to be friends with that person even if you're not ready to be out yourself yet (Duncan 15 May 2021).

For Daye, what was perhaps unintentional community building was still predicated on agency, coming out, that led to unexpected events—often people he did not know would approach him suddenly to talk and he wouldn’t know why, until later in life through social media he would discover that they themselves are queer. Whether these people approached him, as a stranger because they saw him as a safe haven, or if it was just another example of how sometimes outliers are drawn toward each other, he couldn’t say for sure (Duncan 7 July 2021). But as he and Julian both said, it does seem as if there’s just a phenomena there: “I want to know how it happens,” Julian said, “especially if you don’t know, if you don’t have that super out person....but you still somehow find each other. And those connections usually last the longest without you even knowing these things” (Winters 7 July 2021).

The communities Daye spoke of—his involvement in various fan communities that both came and went but that also went through dramatic shifts—existed both *because of* or *in relationship* to him. Daye’s stories are exemplar of the (intra)community: the ways in which our longing creates communities, can help us find communities, both in visible and often invisible ways. We might gravitate toward others through a sense of belonging, even if we haven’t yet seen the parts of our own identities that long. In his stories are moments of reflection on the power—positive and negative—that these communities can generate. These range from expressing how beneficial and necessary fandom perspective on expressing, exploring and writing about sex is, all the way to addressing the ways in which #ownvoices movements bled from fandom into professional author spaces and how they have become increasingly weaponized. In all of these Daye expresses the most complex interplay between survival, failure, and agency in the simplest terms—ones that I have found felt the most powerful in the tone of

our conversations. When Daye spoke of these things, he drew us in, he taught us things; and when the interviews were over, that simple magic seemed gone (Duncan 7 July 2021).

Interlude #4: bath

“You see, I take the parts that I remember and stitch them back together
To make a creature that will do what I say”
—Richard Siken

When I was twenty-six, I drew a bath of nothing every night for months. I drew a line you could not see. I drew a line to divide space and time. I filled a room with steam and broke the components of a razor into pieces. When I drew that first one, and the steam parted, it bloomed, tiny and beaded and rich red. I crossed the line into that “*What if,*” across a space and into a time I’d never committed to before. I drew one bath from nothing and another, and another. I traced the bumpy scab, fingertip reading new words, a story spelled on my body. In the height of a sick romanticization, I told myself this was *it*. Finally someone could read that scratched up, scabbed over, ugly broken fascia my skin had hidden for years.

Dan slept and breathed the Georgia air and I drew lines and lines and lines in an empty house in Michigan.

This was the story I told:

That there was a girl, desperate to tell a secret. She wanted, wildly, to be seen without ever having to say a word. *She* spelled Shame and Grief and Broken on the inside curve of *my* left bicep. She knelt on the floor of a tile bathroom late at night and plotted. Moved the story forward and forward toward a climax she couldn’t see for the steam. Everything was that nothing-steam. *She* broke the components of a razor into pieces. She piled the shards on the lip of the sink and carefully washed the tiny blade. She kept it, spit-shined and ready for the next, and next, and next time. She tried to divide time and space, to write on my skin what I refused to say. Downstairs on the mantle of a fireplace we never used, my father’s ashes collected dust in a velvet covered box. If I closed my eyes in that grey nothing, what I saw was May. A May mourning on no sleep and a fine misting rain, sitting on a porch with Pilar and Tio John, calling a funeral home.

If I closed my eyes and filled out that space under my skin I’d feel it, the treacle slow spread of shame you just can’t ever wash off, the Chive Man’s ghost fingers *everywhere, everywhere, everywhere*. If I listened to the silent house, I’d feel the empty space where my father no longer was, the space I doubted and doubted while Dan was gone. If I spoke the words, I’d feel that chill, a house kept too cold without my husband there to sweetly scold me over the electric bill.

Instead, I kept my eyes open, let the rush of water soundtrack each moment as I ignored everything underneath my skin.

I drew a bath of nothing every night for months. I filled a room with steam.

I let her do the speaking. She wrote a story on me. She cut little boundaries so that I could pretend I was on the other side of *it*. One didn’t work, and then two. I turned on the water and let her draw another. I both wanted it and was disgusted by the thought. I hid her story under gauze

and long sleeves through a late waning summer. When I'd wake in the morning, I half expected a sink stained with blood. The stares of coworkers who'd know right away. That Dan would call after drinks with other trainees and *know* by the hushed singing under the plain words I recited. That he would hear *she did it again* under the mundanities recited after work each day—

I had a shitty customer, I'd say. *Bob is such an asshole*; he was limiting the bevnaps as if the hundredth of a cent saved on each made a difference, all the while ignoring entire shifts when half of the staff didn't show up and I had to work three jobs at once. *I smell like French fries*, I'd say to Dan, *I'm sorry but I just have to go shower it off, my feet hurt and yes, I miss you, I miss you*.

I didn't say *she did it again*. It didn't matter, since he wouldn't have known what the again was anyway.

I drew a bath of nothing every night for months. The blue-hinted tiles and the cherry wood of the vanity was exactly the color I wanted. Everything was new, new, new in that bathroom. My hands were cupped and my eyes were dry and something deep was shriveling, skittering from light, a small animal with no defenses. And *she*, she wanted a story told. She thought, *maybe this will work*. But she drew another line and I still wasn't on the other side. Another, and another, ten, twelve, fifteen more and there was *no other side*.

Dad was still dead.

Dan was still gone.

The Chive Man's voice sewed, silver threaded still, under my skin.

I told myself I was empty, I made a wish for emptiness with the blade of a cut up Gillet razor. Aching for that nothingness, I built a pretty lie. There was a girl. Twenty-six and lost. She wasn't *really* me, see. *I* would never really do those things. But *she* could tell a story, and so she did. I drew a bath of nothing every night for months but the tub never filled.

I told myself that this razor and these slowly beading red lines were nothing more than that. Trying to feel something. Trying to bring a thing to light. Doing something I couldn't stop myself from. That I wasn't a person who could do these things. That it made me feel grounded. That it wasn't for attention, at least not *that* kind. That the pain helped me feel present.

Name a lie, any lie, and I told myself it was true.

Ask for a story about a girl who cuts and I'll recite it back to you. Ten, twelve, fifteen lies on my tongue, in your hands.

What was it I said? I'm the most compulsive liar to myself? That doesn't make me any less of a liar to you. Because sometimes, lies taste right on my tongue.

There was no tub. I didn't turn on the water. I was *fullfullfull* of something and trying to cut myself free from a wrong skin. I don't remember how many razors I had to try to break apart, how it was *work* to figure out how to get the blade out. I had to learn just how to manipulate the plastic while telling myself *it's an impulse it's an impulse it's an impulse. You can't help yourself, you aren't thinking it through, you don't mean to.*

It was a pretty long fucking impulse. It took three nights to figure out how to get them apart. To build the courage. To weave some pretty denials. I didn't keep any of it, and I certainly didn't pile razor shrapnel anywhere in sight. I told you for years that I just wanted to feel something. That the tattoo on my arm is a positive reminder that I got through, that I *can* get through. That it's meant to cover scars no one but me can see.

It's funny, how some of these lies are also true. That's the thing about lying to yourself. You can make the prettiest lie believable if you want it enough.

*

Every week my therapist asks, *How did that feel?*

She asks it of my mother's drinking, of Dad's death, of my breakdown. She asks it of my marriage, of tense friendships, of current resentment. She asks for the circumstances around my Shame. She wants me to tell a story. She wants, hilariously, for that story to be true.

I tell her I don't remember. I don't remember and I don't remember. She puts her fingers on the cuts and presses gently. *How does that feel?* In that room, under that reading gaze, I say I don't remember. She presses just a bit harder and I when I speak, they're lies. I say what I think is expected. I get to the other side of analysis and rationalize and build a pretty wall of words. And she asks, *How do you feel?*

Like nothing. There's nothing there. A blank space, a room filled with fictional steam coming from an imagined tub, dark shapes lurking under the surface, and the only thing that's screaming is that something inside that I can't understand. I fill in that blank space with a desperate girl telling a story I don't want to. I lie for her. I lie and I lie and say, *I can't remember*. The moment is stamped on my skin. I touch the smooth skin around her pressing fingers. I skirt the truth. I tell just enough for it to be true.

I drew a line and on the other side was a *her*. I drew another and promised myself *I* would never do it again. The AC ran hard in that room and it was cold. But *she* was warm in a fictional steamed up room next to an imagined bathtub. She wove a gorgeous dream for years, silence of sinking into warm water and not coming up for air. She was a girl who could tell my story without my permission; she was a beautiful lie.

I say I can't remember. I can't remember, I can't remember. I build a box of these denials and inside that empty, steamed up room, safe and warm, I look at her blond streaked hair and ketchup stained pants. I feel the throb of overworked feet and the grit of dry two am eyes. She holds a razor and a pen. I lean into her side and whisper: *I can't really means I won't.*

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This is a cultural rhetorics project at heart, founded in the knowledge that story is theory. In it, I worked to hold space for others' stories, to witness, interact with, and to learn from the ways in which queer authors discuss and approach relationships with one another through storying and composing. This desire to learn from other queer-identified community stakeholders about their processes of composition, their relationship with embodiment and community, led to a series of conversations, through which a narrative thread of failure, survival, and agency emerged. Utilizing this narrative as a lens through which to (re)approach my primary concepts that I came to a queered perspective of these concepts: (de)composition, (anti)body, and (intra)community, a process I believe has insights to offer the future of Queer in the academy.

The White Rabbit, an Unintended Hitchhiker

While shaping this project I found that I kept accidentally referring to the word decomposition; it was an unintended hitchhiker, an idea that snuck in through the periphery. Initially I was resistant to the use of the word, as I was feeling my way around the shaping of this project, and even as I was interviewing the participants. I was both called to and repulsed by the implication of the word. I told myself I was listening to an instinct, chasing that proverbial white rabbit, and approaching this adventure of one as a queer little foray into composition I'd call (re)composition. There's a romance to the idea of recomposing. There's a making, an implicit drive toward change. It allows for a hybrid scavenger, perhaps a little magpie, imagines a phoenix: at the end of the day, it's a bird, made of mythical and real world bird-ish parts.

Decomposing, on the other hand, has always had an underlying morbidity in connotation for me. Perhaps it's a personal in-affinity with death—a mortifying terror with the realities of what happens when bodies die, along with an obsessive tendency to ruminate on what exactly it

means to *be*. From an armchair I can diagnose any number of traumas or very mundane human preoccupations in this initial reticence; throughout this process I explore them through my own story even. I can also, intellectually, appreciate every cliché about the circle of life.

And yet...

A very ingrained resistance to the idea of decomposing was informed by an internal framing that saw this as a permanent unmaking. In a dissertation about making or building—community, story, connection, theory—the idea of commitment to *un*making seemed antithetical to my purpose and goals. However—a big however—was the fact that I came into this project with a very specific idea of what composition meant to me and could mean in the hoped for end results here. My committee advisors warned me to be aware that my authors might not understand what I personally meant by composition: even a pilot study done prior to my dissertation prospectus taught me this. I kept this in mind when interviewing them, even referencing this several times. And while I did alter my questions with this in mind, as I’ve already explored, it’s clear I still carried a hopeful bias that was buried so deeply I could not see it.

Again and again my participants taught and surprised me. Their stories express over and over ways in which the world seeks to compose them: who they are expected to be, how they should move, how they should react to being marginalized or oppressed. And yet, again and again their actions not only suggest resistance in thought, but in action. They resist “norms” from within. They understand the moving parts of hegemonic ideologies and discourses, they break them apart and they put them, and compose themselves with these in mind. They (de)compose themselves through acts of survival, with agency, when faced with particular failures; even when those acts of composition might be “read” as compliance, the story-theory revealed in their

words made clear: they were the agents of their composition regardless. They (de)composed their selves, the narratives of themselves, the parts of the world that seek to compose them, in order to be the agents of their own lives.

The Specter of the Body

When revisiting queer scholarship, it is impossible to ignore the specter of the body. After all, sex, desire, sexuality, gender etc. are in many ways foundational to the emergence, development, and survival of Queer. When drawing or learning from queer scholarship and theory, concepts of gesture and body crop up often. Our bodies are, in many ways, composed by repeated gestures (Butler). We are taught what the “right” or appropriate gestures are by hegemonic structures (Foucault, Butler). As queer people moving within these structures—or being forcibly moved by them—we will always fail those.⁷⁸ These structures and ideologies strive to compose bodies by making particular—straight—gestures the benchmark. Whether they realize it explicitly or not, whether they have been doing it since they were children, teens, or adults, the process of working with the authors in this project revealed clearly that what they practice in life is not composition, a benchmark that will never be achievable, but (de)composition. Their relationship with (de)composition takes several forms and is enacted in a variety of ways, many of which were directly tied to concepts or conversations surrounding embodiment.

⁷⁸ These are themes explored in depth by many, many queer scholars and authors, some of which have been addressed throughout this dissertation. In the same way as I have given other authors and scholars who have inspired and taught me throughout the years, I wish to thank and acknowledge the work of those who have provided a rich landscape of learning and theory that have helped develop me as the Queer scholar, researcher and writer that I am. Although each approach or deploy understandings of queer failure and the pressures of hegemonic narratives in different ways, the works of contemporary scholars and creative such as Warner, Berlant, Halberstam, Rhodes, Alexander, Muñoz, Love, Cvetkovich, Chaves, Hawkins, Pritchard, Allision, Califia, Bolus, Machado, Driskill, Lourde... to name a few.

A part of the pivoting done in this dissertation is a (re)making/(re)orienting of concepts, and what emerged throughout the course of these interviews was what I came to think of as a relationship between the body, gestures ⁷⁹ and larger, hegemonic social structures culminating in the concept of the (anti)body. When we isolate that *anti*, the word immediately takes on its own negative connotation for many, means *in opposition to* or *against*. Conversely, antibody can have positive connotations linked to tragic circumstance, implications that are impossible to ignore in the wake of the current devastating global COVID pandemic,⁸⁰ as well as the historical emergence of queer theory and queer studies in the wake of the AIDS epidemic of the 1990's. Failure and survival exist in all of those spaces, as does agency, either in potential or actuality, which currently can literally be seen in an action such as choosing to get a vaccine or take medication.⁸¹ Of course more tragic shadow exists in implication: when our bodies are failed by social structure and systems of power that refuse medical care, research, or to give access to life saving medicine

Across a variety of intersectionalities, my participants all experience the phenomena of bodily “failure”—that is, their bodies fail to meet the standards of hegemonic ideologies. They are black, queer, trans, neurodivergent, female, infertile, etc. And yet, my participants, through story-theory, again and again demonstrated the ways in which they are able, through thought and action, through writing and community, to turn that failure into something positive. Although the

⁷⁹ I call back on both Ahmed and Butler. In “Orientations Matter” Ahmed points to the ways in which histories shape bodies, and how those histories are enacted and “performed by their comportment, their posture, and their gestures” (246). Here Ahmed points to Butler’s concepts of performativity, in which she discussed repetition of action by bodies (gestures) and how those performances support hegemonic ideologies/norms.

⁸⁰ A shadow this dissertation cannot escape, as previously composed questions regarding where my authors sit, what their writing spaces look like, what their bodies need most when they write were derailed by a necessity for both Daye and Julian to relearn or shift writing practice from external to isolated spaces, as shared in their individual interviews.

⁸¹ I cannot ignore that some people don’t have access, that some people resist being mandated to take them, which is a removal of agency – that this is what makes the concept complex and contradictory).

ways in which their resistance to being oppressed or boxed in by these "failures" looked different—for example, Emily's desire to leave her body vs. Daye's gender-fucking defiance vs. Julian's acts of being and not being at the same time—each author's stories reveal a narrative of agency, failure, and survival in which they navigate internal and external world with awareness of their bodies and with deliberate actions that take control of the narratives imposed upon their body/selves.

Community as Water

Throughout these interviews all of us expressed the ways in which we have sought community: as queer folk, writers, as those who have lived in the margins or behind walls. Shining through our conversation was what felt like a sort of innocent belief in the power of "finding your people," even as those stories and desires continually ran side-by-side with stories of failure, of heartbreak, of a loss of that innocence. We all seemed to survive with others by our sides, or in wanting that with us: even in moments of letdown, we find or found avenues to continue to reach out, to take agency by finding new community, making community, recommitting to existing communities. We all shared stories in which we were the agents of change, the ones who kept finding new spaces, kept having an intrinsic faith in community.

Intra, as an isolated prefix, means something that is happening within *a singular*, not between two or more things. If we isolate it as that that is happening between layers, there's a subtle shift that happens when we look at queer community, community building and even how we conceptualize our own community relations both inside and outside of the academy. I do not use this in order to imply that this singular must mean one person. If we expand our thinking, cast a wider circle in the implication, that singular in between can exist in many ways; as liminal,

as saudade,⁸² transformative. Over the course of this project I came to see and feel that *intra* in context with community as something gorgeously unsettled, untethered, and at times amorphous; as shades of failure/hope.

In so many ways looking at their stories about community was the most slippery; perhaps because community, in their story-theory, is water, and water always finds a way. My participants' stories are at the apex and the trough. There is a sense of secret-self, the one that wants and rejects in a single breath, but is always elementally the same. The sense that community is about self *with* many others, but also how desire or longing for queer community is *singular*, one large body of water that's been displaced and is seeking, seeking, seeking to find a way.

The Story-Theory of it All

Story is theory. Story, too, is foundational to my work: it guided my own approach to shaping conversations with authors, how I undertook them, and how I interacted with and learned from the data gathered. I began this dissertation hoping to encourage and witness self-storying; and I did. What emerged from these interviews was what I've come to call my participants' story-theory. As I interviewed Daye, Julian and Emily, I did so with the hopes of entering into conversation with other writers about processes of composing and how those inform or interact with persona, embodiment, and community. The practice of finding the story-theory they shared, not the one I anticipated, involved a commitment to letting go, shifting, and practices of queering beyond those even I anticipated.

⁸² Saudade is a Portuguese word that encapsulates an emotion that is difficult to truly translate into English. I see many "define" it, utilize it, often in subtly different ways. As someone who was born and spent many years in Brazil, I can say that no translation I've found truly captures the meaning of the word. For me, saudade is almost a sense of yearning, or longing, even missing, something that you already have.

There were many narratives I could have chosen to “listen” to as I analyzed the data these interviews presented me with. The interwoven, right narrative of failure, agency and survival stood out to me, called *me* to tell its story. When describing myself at the start of this dissertation, I pointed to my own tendency to lead with instinct, as well as the ways in which academic trauma has taught me to repress my own messy, instinctual approaches to learning and writing. I also describe the “letting go” that had to occur as I listened to the data I collected from these interviews. Of the many story-theories that could have come from these conversations, it was in an act of being the agent of my own sort of “failure” to be the “right” kind of academic that this dissertation took shape.

As a researcher-scholar invested in the future of Queer and in queer futures, the narrative of survival, failure, and agency I found myself listening to offered me particular insights into how practicing a (re)shifting, (re)making, (re)orienting in relationship with my primary concepts opened doors, provided insights I felt could benefit the future of Queer. While the story-theory that emerged from a look at (de)compositional practices, (anti)bodied action and orientation, engagement and investment in (intra)community doesn’t provide *an* answer to questions about the future of Queer, they did provide inroads and insights.

In this dissertation I explored aspects of both cultural rhetorics and queer theory that enabled me to do this work. These frameworks both provided support, clarity and tools—but they also highlighted spaces where disconnects between academic work about people and their stories about themselves emerge. Enacting and utilizing queer theoretical and cultural rhetorics tools and perspectives offer new entryways for understanding the (re)orientation I took toward composing, embodiment, and community. The work done here with participants who have no tie to academia offered newfound knowledges and understanding that I believe provide space to

bridge the gap between Queer and queer communities, an opportunity that I believe to be invaluable as we continue to practice cultural rhetorics approaches and do the work of Queer.

Queer theory practices resistance to inertia; a process that I understand is ongoing and often failed. Despite best intentions, queer theory, like most academic theory, revisits, builds creates argument in rebuttal to: that is to say, it rests on that which has been done—examination of past work—with previous theoretical models or concepts expanded, reproached from different angles, deployed in different settings or stories, generally shifted in order to offer new perspectives. Although theories, methods, and methodologies in Queer are often queered versions or interpretations, what might be considered seminal queer scholarship is predicated on work resting on inherently Western-centric roots. Even my work here does this; for example, it would have been remiss not to point to foundational theory such as Butler’s work on embodiment and gender when doing Queer work focusing on these very things. Therein lies an aspect of paradox. And yet, as work intended to be done within community outside of academia, I would also be remiss not to point out that theoretical work such as this (or others) aren’t particularly relevant as to or for my participants.

As an example, I point to scholars such as Halberstam, whom I utilized in my data analysis earlier, or perhaps Muñoz, whose work on queer futurity and also queer failure has been deeply influential in the development of my identity as a queer scholar and my scholarship (both within and outside of this dissertation). *In Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz works to wrench current understandings of LGBT futures from hegemonic and ideological prisons. He does so, in part, by envisioning hope as a critical methodology—a looking back “that enacts a future vision” (4).

I want, however, to draw attention to some of the arguments or positionalities these scholars take that I believe are, in some ways, contributing to that sense that Queer is “over” or mired in inertia. Not only because they also demonstrate ways in which Queer rests on what comes before, but because their work aims to *resist*, to *redefine*: that is, exists always in context with, in tandem with, in some form or another with that which it is trying to subvert. As described by Mari Ruti in *Queer Theory and the Ethics of Opting Out*, “...there seems to be no way around the fact that every attempt to subvert norms presupposes the very norms it seeks to undermine” (41). Ruti argues that queer theory has undergone a shift from theorizing performativity toward opting out, or radical acts, that wrench queer folxs from hegemonic frames; for example, what Muñoz understands as pragmatist LGBT movements as reifying hegemonic, heteronormative institutions such as marriage, or what Heather Love describes as “‘Advances’ such as gay marriage and the...visibility of well-heeled gays and lesbians...” (10). Theorizing queer failure or antinormativity for example, directly correlated with what Ruti calls “opting out” models.

And yet...

And yet, when we consider the story-theory and lives of queer folk outside of the academy, we have to realistically consider the ways in which high theory (even high theory that questions itself or points to itself while utilizing it—something both Halberstam and I do, for example) creates spaces that are exciting and interesting but, as Ruti argues, contain more “rhetorical allure” than practicality (37). Personally, my belief in the future of Queer and in the hope that supporting bridges between Queer and queer is one that believes this bridging can only be of benefit to both. This project does not have to mean abandonment of interest in, pursuit of, or learning from current, progressive queer theory. It means *conversation*. *Listening*. Making

compassionate room for the validity of story-theory *and* “High Theory.” It might even mean understanding that on both sides of the bridge, we live in context with, at all times, these hegemonic systems. We just relate to or resist them in different, differently language, and differently lived ways.

One of the original goals of this work was to participate in journey, in story, in transformation, one that could help inform, reshape and influence the trajectory and work of a field shaped by a canon of texts. The vital story-theory built and utilized between the four of us emerged from our stories, conversation, and the community we built. What was taken and learned and felt in shared moments were a reflection on things such as composition and agency that was much more relatable and hopefully, transferable as we look to the future of Queer.

Queer Futures: A Small Manifesto

“...a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart that you can't take part! You can't even passively take part! And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus—and you've got to make it stop! And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it—that unless you're free the machine will be prevented from working at all!”
—Mario Savio

As this project has progressed I've come to understand and want to reflect upon my initial approach to this dissertation, and to acknowledge that both my previous work in my academic career⁸³ and the metaphor of the writing table utilized earlier are imbued with complex and at times troubling cultural implications. Still, I do believe that the spirit behind my approach to conceptualizing Ahmed's writing table metaphor can work: after all, by doing we can create, and through creating we can do. Perhaps by (re)approaching, (re)conceptualizing, (re)making or

⁸³ For example, my academic history as described in my dissertation prospectus, includes “...a desire to connect with other authors who understand the ways in which their bodies are texts, and who utilize that knowledge to act as texts” (de Sostoa-McCue 1).

(re)orienting, we can create or expose different approaches not just to the “table,” but to the possibility of multitudes.

The truth of the matter, particularly when it comes to systemic injustice, racism, perpetuation of colonial practice, misogyny, homophobia, etc., is that most of us are caught in the machinery of various violences. As academics, theorists, writers, many of us continually attempt to turn and turn and turn from these systems even as we understand that machinations of power inherently work to recreate themselves, and therefore, recapture us. As Ahmed points out in *Queer Phenomenology*, a “table,” even when not working for a writer, will trend toward them—remake itself even as we try to turn away (27). I understand that I have inserted myself into this particular paradox through my own work and career path.

And yet.

I cannot help but want to continue the work of Queer: I do not want to give in, nor do I want to give up. My initial desire for this project, the theory that inspired it, my particular interests have still, in some respects, revealed themselves to be shaped by hegemonic narratives I have worked to shed over my years as a burgeoning feminist, queer, cultural rhetorics scholar. Despite revelations that unfolded as this project continued, I chose not to give up, nor to berate myself or undermine the good-hearted and important intent of the work. Instead, I worked to *try*. To continue knowing that I perhaps am not “there” yet, but understanding that the importance of our fields’ work demands we continue to move forward with dogged determination.

When I hear “is Queer over?” there is a deep, stubborn part of me that wants to insist that it isn’t, and that it can’t be, and that as long as we are a part of the machine we simply cannot give up. Even when I could not envision where this project would take me as I sat with myself and tried to understand the deep faults in my own thinking and actions, I knew that my

commitment to this work meant I had to continue to move forward. Perhaps breaking a chain that feels too powerful, too deeply rooted is an impossible task for one queer woman in a very large world. Still, I knew and know that the first step I could take was to open myself to a very scary process of remaking, reorientation, and commitment to a process of unlearning, searching for a small ray of hope hidden in an attempt to understand what a shifted perspective might be and could perhaps do for others.

As scholars and humans we hold on to particular concepts and their meanings, often even when we're approaching queerly, almost as if the body and history are existing in relationship to an imagined ideal or "real" that doesn't exist or that are social constructions built into the fabric of a society in order to reify hegemonic ideologies of control and repression. We know that social constructs exist, and queer and cultural rhetorics scholarship works in relationship with these in order to resist and redefine or reorient. Paradoxically, I find that the project of Queer often does the work of reification through resistance. You resist a thing because *it is*—or you believe it is. That acknowledgement alone can be constituted as a failure within the project. You bring the world you're resisting into being over and over through that address. However, I do not believe this is a hopeless bind, as queer theory is one that holds on to and values failure as potentially productive. Furthermore, acts of resistance, movements toward or against, constitute, are comprised of, and are defined by a kind of hope.

To begin, personally, the first step I needed to take in this arduous process was a reexamination of my relationship with notions of composition, textuality, and even literacies. While delinking writing and textuality have the potential to open many doors for *this* dissertation, this does not mean I can ignore or delete the fact that story can also be perceived as intrinsically textual to some, such as my participants. I must consider, acknowledge, and witness

the many possibilities for what writing might mean in order to do service to the work of this dissertation and my participants' story-theory. And while Ahmed's work I draw from is tied to the writing table, the heart, intent and understanding that I take from it can be (re)imagined, (re)worked or (re)cycled. Simply, the movement of the work, within myself as a scholar and writer, remains valuable, powerful, and vital.

Yes, I continue work with Queer scholarship. I frame much of my journey knowing that my own thinking, theorizing and story have been built by Queer. I ask myself and others to try to remake, to reimagine, to resist even knowing that I will always have been built in context with previous Queer scholars. Still, I want to try to re-envision a way we can come from this place and continue to see and understand the importance and need for Queer, and to offer something, anything, that might help do this work.

What this work has done for me has uncovered the importance and potential in shifting perspectives, in understanding the ways in which a continued gesturing toward has perpetuated a field and body of work within queer scholarship, theory and practice. Shifting my perspective and relationship to acts of or concepts of composition, embodiment, and community felt like the first step in a particularly difficult and potentially futile but intrinsically beautiful journey into inquiry, listening, and being queer: a queer writer, and a queer scholar with a willing heart.

Tiny Futures

I leave this work with deliberate uncertainty, without solid answers. I walk away from this work with the story-theory learned in my heart, informing future desires. So many things happened over the course of this dissertation; so many important conversations, narratives, threads were left un-tugged. As mentioned earlier, the narrative of failure, survival, and agency

was simply one of many stories I could tell. It was the one that spoke loudest in a room of whispers. But there were other narratives, other stories that had so much to teach and to offer.

My participants often spoke of or about concepts of space. Space held, imagined spaces inhabited, the ways in which they learned to navigate queer hearts, longing and bodies through particular relationships and construction of space. I believe there is beautiful potential in exploring these stories. Emily often spoke of a third space, a concept that we resonated with, even as we understood that it was a space she created for herself only, an imagined but also very real space where she enacted her own boundaries. I know that theories of third space are explored in other academic spaces, particularly in regards to pedagogy. Putting these into conversation would be interesting and hopefully, fruitful.

Additionally, both Daye and Julian and I spoke often of experiences in fanfiction communities, the bleeding of fanfiction trends into professional publishing spaces, such as #ownvoices, and how those trends often become weaponized. Although these conversations did emerge in context with conversation about community, I chose not to explore them further because I wanted to be sure the story-theory emergent from this particular project was relevant and included all of my participants (which Emily did not, as she was not a participant in fandoms in the way the three of us were and had been). However, I believe that utilizing tools and story-theory here, with cultural rhetorics and queer theoretical approaches, there is much to be learned and unpacked about the cyclical nature of fanfiction communities. All three of us have experienced what might be considered a rise and fall, or a crash and burn within fanfiction communities: and yet we all always sought companionship, relationships, inspiration in these communities over and over again.

Both Julian and I have experiences in navigating professional public spaces as “personas,” that is, working under pen names. Both of us have experienced the deployment of constructed selves that are real and not, that exist in a liminality, a constant negotiation with what others expect or construct and what we counter-construct. I have wanted to work with authors in publishing communities in a similar vein as I did in this dissertation, with a particular focus on that duality, the navigation of “author-life” vs. “real-life,” for years, but had previously not know how I might approach or shape such a study. Particularly in our individual interview, Julian and I connected in conversations relevant to the idea of the author self and community, composition, and embodiment that I believe have offered me insights and inroads into how I might construct and enact a future study that focuses in these spaces.

As a teacher—a queer teacher and author—there is much to consider that emerged in these interviews, especially as we consider embodiment and learning. In the past, I facilitated a workshop meant to address and encourage conversation about invisible identities all people bring into rooms, and the effect those have on the ways in which we interact with each other. As I begin to really understand the implications of agential moves made by my participants as they (de)composed narrative of who they are, how they might be composed, read or perceived, I must consider further the ways in which students coming into my classrooms might be doing the same things, and how this can inform my pedagogy moving forward: what the potential of (anti)bodied action or hopeful movement in (intra)community spaces mean about communities created in classrooms. Both queer theory and cultural rhetorics practices offer many tools and insights, particularly when considered with the story-theory learned in this dissertation, which might help me navigate a project along this vein in the future.

The COVID pandemic we have all been going through has had drastic effects on our students' relationships with learning, even with what it means to be in a classroom and how we "show up." It remains to be seen what current trends we are noticing as teachers will have long lasting effects or how they might change the ways in which we approach and shape pedagogy. Moving forward, I would love to find ways to allow students to story-theory in their own way in order to understand how they approach composition, community, or embodiment, as well.

As I began this conclusion I stated that in this project I worked to hold space for story, that I came to this dissertation ready to witness and to learn. That desire to learn, to shape, to move forward with communities inside and outside of academic spaces still remains as I look forward. Work with differing communities will always provide beautiful narrative threads when one approaches storying with that open, witnessing heart that is willing to listen. Believing in the possibility of (re)making, (re)orienting, (re)shifting—in queering even the ways we approach and listen opens doors for countless ways to learn from queer and otherwise "othered" communities moving forward.

“so many languages have fallen
off of the edge of the world
into the dragon’s mouth. some

where there be monsters whose teeth
are sharp and sparkle with lost

people. lost poems. who
among us can imagine ourselves
unimagined? who

among us can speak with so fragile
tongue and remain proud?”
—Lucille Clifton

And yet.

We invite you to story.

Interlude #5: surfacing

“He vivido tanto que un día
tendrán que olvidarme por fuerza,
borrándome de la pizarra:
mi corazón fue interminable.”
—Pablo Neruda ⁸⁴

I’ve finally chosen to tell the stories I never have before, in the way I want to; I narrate and hand them to you knowing there is a lie in the truth and it’s not what you think it is. There are secrets I will always keep. These stories are true almost always—sometimes, though, sometimes the narrator is still figuring out the alchemy of productive failure, of survival through intense vulnerability, the agency in confession.

Come to the surface, I’m ready for you, I’m strong enough.
Come to the surface, I’m ready for you, I’m strong enough.
Come to the surface, I’m ready for you, I’m strong enough.
Come to the surface, I’m ready for you, I’m strong enough.
Come to the surface, I’m ready for you, I’m strong enough.
Come to the surface, I’m ready for you, I’m strong enough.
Come to the surface, I’m ready for you, I’m strong enough.
Come to the surface, I’m ready for you, I’m strong enough.
Come to the surface, I’m ready for you, I’m strong enough.

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Come to the surface, I’m ready for you, I’m strong enough.
Come to the surface, I’m ready for you, I’m strong enough.

*

Come to the surface, I’m ready for you, I’m strong enough.
Come to the surface, I’m ready for you, I’m strong enough.
Come to the surface, I’m ready for you, I’m strong enough.

⁸⁴ “I have lived so much that some day / they will have to forget me forcibly, / rubbing me off the blackboard. / My hearts was inexhaustible.” Neruda, Pablo. “Pido silencio.”

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
PHASE ONE PRELIMINARY QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: Please provide the name you wish to use for the purpose of this study—your real name or a pseudonym.

Biographical Information:

Please provide the following identifiers according to your comfort level. Feel free to use as many or as few identifiers as you want (including none!).

- a) Age:
- b) Race, cultural and/or ethnic heritage:
- c) Gender and/or preferred pronouns:
- d) Sexual orientation:
- e) Any other identifiers you would like to share:

Short Biography: Tell me about yourself. This is a space for you to share what you feel is important for me to know about you as a person, a writer, your interests...the sky is the limit.

Writing Sample: Please attach a short writing sample (3-5 pages) along with this questionnaire. This sample will be shared with the other writers participating in the study prior to the group interview.

APPENDIX B

PHASE TWO INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Instructions

Good morning. My name is Tania de Sostoa-McCue. Thank you for speaking with me.

You will be participating in a research study examining the role of queer authors' acts of writing and composing. This project seeks to understand the ways in which queer authors actively make visible queer bodies in order make meaning within their own cultural and community contexts. In this interview we will be covering topics such as writing practice and embodiment, particularly in context with your queer lived experiences. There are no right, wrong, or undesirable answers. Overall I would like to hear about your experiences as a queer writer—as one writer to another.

Recording

With your consent, I will be recording our conversation to ensure I get all of the details and will be able to carry on an attentive conversation with you. I assure you that all of your comments will remain confidential, and that the data will be anonymized during analysis for the purposes of this study. When everything is written up, I will send you a draft to make sure you are represented fairly and that no identifying information, other than that which you have consented to, is present. If you agree to being recorded, please say “I consent.”

1. Where do you write?
2. Does your body in context with your writing environment affect your writing?
3. What centers your body in writing?
4. In what ways do you write your body into being?
5. How do you think your queerness/queer experiences affect your writing?
6. Pivoting toward conversation about composition, how would you define composition?
7. What rhetorical choices go into composing?
8. We've talked about the relationship between your body and writing. I would like to explore the relationship between body and composition. What do you think your body composes? Who or what composes you?
9. Does your identity as a queer person affect the ways in which your body composes, is composed, is recomposed?

APPENDIX C
PHASE TWO GROUP INTERVIEW ONE

Ground work

To begin, this is meant to be a generative space. Think more “writer community” than stodgy interview type space. Please don’t be afraid to ask each other questions or engage with each other or the writing samples shared. I’d like this interview, if I can pull it off, to feel more free than structured.

I’m going to have you introduce yourselves. Name, what you write/who you are as a writer.

Questions/Conversation prompts:

1. Writing Samples: To begin, I’d love for you all to share
 - a. Provide some context for your sample: what it is, where it came from.
 - b. What you think or hope these samples will tell us about you? Your process?
 - c. Why did you chose these particular writing samples in context with this particular study/project? What motivated you to share these particular pieces?
2. What intersections of self do you bring to, bring out, explore, experience in your writing?
 - a. This answer doesn’t have to be limited to your writing sample
 - b. This can be about who you are in general, and if you think these intersections or aspects of self influence your writing or your writing-self
3. Forms of physicality: We will talk about this idea more in depth, but for now I’d like to touch a bit on the body you bring to writing.
 - a. What does writing look like or feel like for you? I’d love for us all to talk about how and where we write but also what that physically feels like for each of us. What we experience, how that helps or hinders.
4. Composition: Thinking back to the conversations I had with you individually, I’d love if we could come together to talk more about composition: what came to mind for you when I asked what you think of when you hear the word composition, or even what it calls to mind now.
 - a. Kind of lead them to talking and explaining to each other what the word composition brings to mind. If I need to I can tell them what they each said.
5. Two ideas/concepts surfaced in all the interviews I did: the dichotomy of the writer self vs. what is perceived or “created” by “audience”, as well as discussion of the idea of agency.
 - a. Dichotomy of writer self vs. perceived/created self by audience:
 - i. I’m interested in talking a bit about the idea of dichotomy of self, which is something I saw surfacing in individual interviews. Do you sense a difference in the self you bring to writing vs the self people make of you when it is published (publishing being a loose there).
 - ii. How do you experience it, where do you? How does that feel? Does that affect your writing?

- iii. What do you think influences this dichotomy?
 - iv. Ppl writing someone into being
- b. Agency: Something else I saw surfacing in all of our conversations was the idea of agency. What role do you think agency has in what you write? Can be about having, not having, growing and developing it over time.
 - i. How does this relationship with agency show up in your writing, your concept of your writer self? (Does it show up?)
 - ii. Maybe guide a bit to their relationship with all of this in context of queerness?

APPENDIX D

PHASE THREE GROUP INTERVIEW TWO

1. First, conversation about dichotomy of the writer self vs. what is perceived or “created” by “audience”. The phrase “writing someone into being” was used at one point. Do you sense a difference in the self you bring to writing vs the self others make of you when it is published (publishing being a loose there)?
 - a. How do you experience it, where do you? How does that feel? Does that affect your writing?
 - b. Is it a putting together of self by others or do you experience it as a taking apart?
 - c. How to you experience or perceive this construction of self not only an abstract construction but a crossing over into “real” life.
 - d. What do you think influences this dichotomy?
2. Touching back on embodiment, which came up passionately last week, I’d like to ask: when you think about writing, particularly in regards to queerness or queer experiences, what influence or effect do you think perceived or publicly composed self we discussed plays on your body or your embodied experiences, identity, etc.
 - a. See if we can go into visible (or real life) identity has on how others compose or perceive you?
 - b. How does that influence your writing?
3. Something else I saw surfacing last week had to do with concepts of agency.
 - a. What does agency mean do you? How would you define it (kind of like approach to composition definition question)
 - b. What role do you think agency has in what you write? Can be about having, not having, growing and developing it over time.
 - c. How does this relationship with agency show up in your writing, your concept of your writer self? (Does it show up?)
4. If needed circle back to being composed/decomposed/recomposed – or things you might consider to be in tension with the word or idea of composition or agency?
5. If we have time, honesty. This is another idea that came up last week. How does honesty play into your writing? What does honesty within the context of writing and composing mean to you?

APPENDIX E
CONSENT FORM

Consent to Participate in “*Storying Embodiment: Building theory through the self-storying of queer bodies*” Dissertation Project by Tania de Sostoa-McCue

Overview and Invitation to Participate

You are invited to participate in a research study examining the role of queer authors’ acts of writing and composing. This project seeks to understand the ways in which queer authors actively make visible queer bodies in order make meaning within their own cultural and community contexts. This dissertation study is being conducted by Tania de Sostoa-McCue as a requirement for graduation from the Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures PhD program at Michigan State University.

Participation in the study involves:

1. completing a data-gathering questionnaire
2. participating in a semi-structured one-on-one interview with the investigator (60-90 minutes long)
3. sharing a sample of your writing (with the investigator and the other participants in the study)
4. participating in a semi-structured group interview with 2-4 other study participants. (60-90 minutes long)
5. depending on the data gathered during the semi-structured group interview, I may invite you to a follow up second semi-structured group interviews (60-90 minutes long)

The first interview, conducted one-on-one, will be semi-structured to foster a more natural conversation about your lived experience as a queer author. The group interview is semi-structured to foster conversation with the other study participants.

Risks

As a fellow queer-identified author, it is important to me to honor and respect the privacy of all study participants. I recognize that we are all different people in different points in our lives. As such, I recognize that some participants may not feel comfortable with their stories being analyzed. This discomfort is a risk of participation that you should be aware of and thoughtfully consider before consenting to participate in this study.

Another participation risk is that you might not agree with the resulting interpretations of the data gathered. As the party responsible for managing the ethical dimensions of this study, I give my consent in this form to you that, should you wish, I will share my progress with you during the data collection, write-up, and submission of the dissertation project. I invite you to participate in negotiating how your work is interpreted and represented.

Rights

In an effort to be as transparent and collaborative as possible, here is an outline of your rights as a participant in this study: As mentioned above, you have the right to inquire about the project's progress at any point in the research process. You also have the right to question or request deletion of passages presenting theoretical interpretations of the interview data with which you do not agree. Furthermore, participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, or refuse to participate, answer certain questions, or discontinue participation at any time without consequence.

If you choose to participate, you will not be required to speak about particularly traumatizing events if you do not wish to. I encourage all participants to speak freely about any experiences that they feel might be relevant or important to the study.

Possible Benefits

As a queer author who has greatly benefited from participation and inclusion in queer writing communities, I believe that your participation has the potential to affect changes necessary to current scholarship in Queer rhetoric and writing studies. I believe there is value to being seen and heard as members of queer communities and of having your words and stories valued as important meaning-making practices. Queer scholarship, theory, and rhetorics aim to subvert, disrupt and reimagine the ways in which queer communities can thrive and effect positive systemic change. This study aims to question queer work while doing queer work in order to further that work.

I personally feel that this work is activist in nature in contributing to creating a bridge between academic studies and non-academic queer communities to continue the work of Queer's aims. I believe that the outcomes of this study will benefit academic scholarship in Queer studies by centering the stories of non-academic queer community experiences in order to make visible the embodied experiences Queer scholarship aims to represent.

Confidentiality of Records

You have the option to choose an alias to protect your identity. All data will be encrypted and saved on a password-protected computer. Only the primary investigator will have access to the data

Dissemination

Due to the importance of a study like this, I intend to disseminate the results in the form of academic articles and book chapters that will, eventually, be adapted from the chapters of my dissertation. Should these pieces be accepted for publication, they will be further distributed amongst members of the academic community.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the study or your role as a research participant, please don't hesitate to contact the researcher:

Tania de Sostoa-McCue
Michigan State University
Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures
434 Farm Lane, Rm 235
East Lansing, MI 48824
desostoa@msu.edu
(248)931-8631

You can also contact the researcher's advisor:

Danielle De Voss
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Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures
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(517) 432-2581

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a participant, please reach out to the MSU institutional Review Board:

Human Research Protection Program
Michigan State University
hrpp@oar.msu.edu
(517) 355-2180

Documentation of Informed Consent

Please initial and sign below:

_____ I have read this consent form and agree to participate in this study.

_____ I have read this consent form and agree to select and share one or selections of my writing for the purposes of this study.

Signature

Date

Printed Name
method of contact)

Email Address (or preferred

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

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WORKS CITED

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