THE CURRICULUM OF COMING OUT: QUEER PEDAGOGIES, LITERACIES, AND RHETORICS IN LGBTQ LIVES

BY

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DISSESSATION
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English in the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015

Urbana, Illinois

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Abstract

In a meeting of Between Women, an LGBTQ support and discussion group at Centerville University, one of the participants said, “I’m here in order to get the words together.” This statement perfectly illustrates the imperative at the heart of this dissertation: people’s need to learn literacy and rhetorical practices that equip them to take decisive action in debates and discussions surrounding sexuality. While scholars in writing studies have long been interested in studies of everyday literacy and rhetoric in a range of extra-institutional sites (e.g., Gere), and recent scholarship has illustrated sexuality’s central role in shaping what it means to be literate in a democratic society (e.g., Alexander, Alexander and Rhodes, Wallace), little research brings the two together at present. In combining these threads of scholarship, I examine how LGBTQ people develop a sense of "sexual literacy" (Alexander, *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy*), defined as the ways in which we learn to talk about and understand sexuality, in extra-curricular sites of rhetorical education, or what I call the “queer extracurriculum.” My dissertation traces the intricate connections between the processes, materials, and sites by which LGBTQ people develop materially consequential literacy and rhetorical practices through two qualitative case studies. In these sites—a support/discussion group and a community workshop—I focus on the rhetorical education essential to living in the world as an LGBTQ person, terming this set of informal pedagogical practices “the curriculum of coming out.”

In such sites, I argue that my research participants come to see that LGBTQ oppression is not natural or inherent in laws, in cultural beliefs, in religious or medical texts, or in popular culture representations. Rather, justifications for oppression and discrimination are located in language, in particular rhetorical strategies, and in the ways they are mobilized. In these sites,
individuals come to see that they are not powerless to combat these strategies, and that they can learn to craft their own arguments and counter narratives through the literacy practices and rhetorical pedagogies in these sites of rhetorical education. In doing so, they engage actively with the tension between normativity (assimilating into the status quo) and destabilization (rejecting and revising the status quo), tensions that remain at the heart of scholarship on sexuality in writing studies, both inside and outside the classroom.

In contrast to approaches that advocate either acquiescence to normativity through essentialism (e.g., popular initiatives such as the Human Rights Campaign) or constant disruption and destabilization (e.g., queer academic or activist approaches) as mutually exclusive models of action, I argue for work that actively engages with the tension between these two endpoints and holds both tendencies in play simultaneously. I contend that we need to pay more attention to the material realities that make performing normative identities necessary and desirable, while simultaneously critiquing it and holding it in question. I do not advocate for a “middle ground” approach between two extremes, but a model that takes into account the material realities of people’s lives that make the performance of normativity an important tool for survival. This use of essentialism is not about an acquiescence to normativity, but about a critical and sometimes uncomfortable inhabitation of that space.

Chapter 1 defines the intellectual space in which my dissertation intervenes. It does so by bringing together relevant research in writing studies and sexuality/queer studies, highlighting their common concerns with socially situated and embedded activity: the socially situated nature of literacy and rhetorical practices on the one hand (e.g., Brandt, Gee, Street), and the social construction and production of sexual and gender identities on the other (e.g., Butler, Sedgwick). In bringing these two strands of research together, I argue for increased attention to the everyday
literacies and rhetorics of LGBTQ people, especially in “alternative” (Enoch) sites of rhetorical education, sites that often provide a unique opportunity for politically marginalized groups to revise commonplace ideas about writing, rhetoric, and their connections to identity in order to suit their specific community needs and political ends. I further theorize the role of the curriculum of coming out in aiding LGBTQ people in naming and claiming an identity for multiple audiences amidst a vast field of competing ideological forces that would take that potential away.

Chapter two introduces the feminist methodology and methods (e.g., Kirsch, Kirsch and Royster) that ground the two case studies. I elaborate on the local particulars for each site of research, both located in “Centerville,” USA, a mid-size Midwestern town with a major research university, surrounded by farming communities. The first is a workshop titled “Biblical Self-Defense for the LGBT Community” offered at the annual Pride Festival in Centerville. Since the curriculum of the workshop is similar to the work of many LGBT and queer Christian organizations, this case study offers a local, grounded example of queer literacy practices at the intersection of sexual and religious identity. The second case study examines “Between Women,” an LGBTQ women’s discussion group at Centerville University. Groups like this one have a rich history in the LGBTQ community, and while the specific, local activities are particular to the combination of people in the group, the presence of a rhetorical curriculum (the curriculum of coming out) is not. Taken together, these “little narratives” (Daniell) provide telling cases to look at the function of the curriculum of coming out, and its role in the production of LGBTQ identities, stories, and lives.

Chapter three presents my first case study, demonstrating how queer reading practices in the curriculum of coming out can disrupt dominant narratives about intersectional identities by
illustrating the instability of biblical interpretation. Participants in the “Biblical Self-Defense for GLBTQS and Allies” workshop come to see that biblically-based justifications for LGBTQ oppression and discrimination are a result of the way the Bible has been mobilized rhetorically in arguments, removed from its historical context of composition. Through the development of queer biblical literacies, participants learn to construct arguments in order to refute the “clobber passages” and articulate a religious identity that challenges the dominant narrative that LGBTQ and Christian identities are mutually exclusive by problematizing the very category of “the Christian,” a category often positioned as having a stable, consistent meaning. The interplay of both strategies, I argue, are necessary to address the complex rhetorical situations surrounding issues of sexuality and religion present in current political debates.

Chapter four presents my second case study, illustrating how rhetorical curricula are built in response to institutional, societal, and familial discourses surrounding LGBTQ sexuality. Drawing on a year-long qualitative study of “Between Women,” I demonstrate how the members subvert and challenge those discourses through their own rhetorical curriculum, reclaiming important sites of rhetorical education and literacy instruction, while showing the complex relationship to the institution that they are both a part of and yet remain critically apart from. In doing so, I argue that they create a location for the development of more community-relevant rhetorical and literacy practices, which illustrates the products, processes, and tensions of the curriculum of coming out.

I conclude in chapter five by returning to a discussion of narrative, examining two parallel coming out narratives in order to argue that queer coming out narratives challenge our understandings of identity and sexual selves by calling explicit attention to those conventions and expectations through moments of disruption. I end with directions for future research.
Acknowledgements

Despite the fact that this dissertation is a single-authored text, I have many collaborators to thank who aided in its completion.

I wish to thank my adviser, Peter Mortensen, for his guidance, patience, level-headed advice, dry humor, and his willingness to read and respond to drafts on planes, trains, and automobiles as his administrative roles took him on travels around the country.

I was also lucky to have an incredibly generous and supportive cast of characters on my committee. Gail Hawisher, my first CWS mentor, whose feedback and kindness through all stages of my degree shaped my outlook on the field and the scholarship I produced. My first case study came to fruition in Kate Vieira's ethnographic research methods course, and she helped me to form the first questions and insights that became a major part of this dissertation project. Throughout the process, she had a way of helping me to see what was interesting about my work and asking the right questions to push me farther. Finally, Ricky Rodríguez provided me with many valuable theoretical insights about queer theory, while being an unfailing cheerleader for my work.

I am incredibly thankful to all of my research participants. To the members of “Between Women,” who allowed me to record our meetings so that I might have material for this project. I am grateful for your generosity, and I will carry with me memories of our conversations, your warmth, humor, and stories always. To Pastor “Miller-Smith,” for letting a complete stranger observe her workshop, and for helping me to see the infinite possibilities for a religious practice founded on diversity, a commitment to social justice, and radical inclusion.

I was fortunate to come to a program with an incredible number of generous and supportive colleagues. To all of my CWS colleagues, past and present, I thank you for your
incredible support during this process. In particular, I am grateful for Patrick Berry, who always seemed to fit extra hours in the day to give feedback or answer questions; Andrea Olinger, whose incredible organizational skills ensured that I had a wealth of sample materials for every stage of this process; Sam Looker, who gave me the tools to find my project in my mess of interests; finally, to my fellow cohort of job searchers, Jon Stone, Yuki Kang, and Eileen Lagman: we made a hell of a team.

A very special thank you to all the many friends who supported me in this endeavor. To Missy Coleman, whose years of friendship, excellent ideas (particularly when it comes to baked goods and pizza), and general degree of awesome is unparalleled. And to Jennifer Forsyth, whose insight, excitement, and generosity I can never hope to match, but I do hope to pay forward.

I am thankful for having received two fellowships from the Graduate College that gave me much needed time and support to complete this project.

Finally, and most of all, I am grateful for Jess, the woman who showed me how I could touch the clouds, even when I didn’t see it myself. They were never out of my reach, after all.
Table of Contents

Chapter One: The Queer Turn and the Curriculum of Coming Out................................................... 1

Chapter Two: We’re Here, We’re Queer, Get Over It and It Matters:
Coming Out and Feminist Methodology................................................................................................. 32

Chapter Three: How to Fight Biblical Textual Harassment: Queer Religious Literacies........... 52

Chapter Four: “Whoever wrote this, I’m going to write them a letter”:
Challenging Institutional Discourses of Sexuality Through Queer Rhetorical Pedagogies........... 73

Chapter Five: Disruptive Composition(s): What’s Next for the Queer Turn?..........................103

Works Cited........................................................................................................................................ 128
Chapter One

The Queer Turn and the Curriculum of Coming Out

When Thursday evening comes around, the members of Between Women, an LGBTQ\(^1\) women’s discussion and support group, gather in a conference room of a cultural center at Centerville University. On one particular evening, Kara, a graduate student in the physical sciences, reflects on how interactions with friends and family members change after coming out. She pauses frequently as she speaks, and her hands move almost constantly as she tries to articulate her frustrations, almost as though she is trying to gather the words from the air around her. “How is it that they’re not asking about this other person in our lives that’s so important to us? [Instead, they ask] ‘when did this all start? Because here’s quote ‘the norm’ [“gotta love those air quotes,” she adds] and you’re not that, so tell me what you are.’” Her hands continue to move as she looks around the room and says, “I guess the only way I can—I’m trying to—I’m here in order to get the words together, can you tell?” She laughs, and those in attendance laugh along with her. “All these, these words and ideas and thoughts into one, you know, coherent piece of how to talk about this.”

This is where I begin: not with research, not with theory, but with my own attempts to “get the words together,” to make them into a coherent narrative of experience. These words are not easy to gather. I scoop them up in an attempt to hold them in my hands, only to have them fly away or else stick together in a jumble when I need them most. From my attempts to get the words together came this project. This dissertation examines the literacy practices and rhetorical pedagogies in multiple sites of rhetorical education in the LGBTQ community. In doing so, I

\(^1\) See “Community and Its Discontents” below for a note on the choice to use “LGBTQ” and “LGBTQ community” throughout this dissertation.
theorize the role of such sites in the making of LGBTQ identities, literacy practices, and rhetorical pedagogies, advancing a call for increased attention to the everyday literacies and rhetorics of LGBTQ people in alternative and extracurricular sites. The LGBTQ community is one that continues to struggle with naming and claiming their identities and lives amidst a vast field of competing ideological forces that would take that potential away. Adrienne Rich, in a letter quoted in the forward to *The Original Coming Out Stories*, emphasizes the importance of language in that identity-making process:

> When I think of the ‘coming out process’ I think of it as the beginning of naming, of memory, of making the connections between past and present and future that enable human beings to have an identity…But much depends on how she names her own past, how she remembers it, how she has been permitted to name and remember it given the limitations of language. (Penelope and Wolfe 8-9)

The editors of the collection emphasize the need for affirming contexts that allow LGBTQ people to meaningfully engage in this process that Rich describes: “In order for our self-naming to be affirmative, we must have a context of our own that makes our naming meaningful. We don’t need labels scavenged from dusty books on library shelves (homosexual, invert) or from bathroom graffiti (queer, lezzie)” (1). “Getting the words together” is a process weighted by competing identifications across diverse discursive spaces, and though these texts were written nearly 30 years ago, the need to find affirming contexts for this self-naming remains.

To be sure, the issues that complicate this process for the LGBTQ community in the United States are evolving quickly. Rapid changes in the legal and cultural landscape for LGBTQ people have led to increases in protective laws and more representation in popular culture, but to make too much of these changes or to represent them in a simplified narrative of
progress would be a mistake. Such narratives ignore the complicated, intersectional way that
ideologies surrounding sexuality operate to push some further into the margins based on race,
class, or gender identification, even while bringing others more toward the center. Examining the
ways LGBTQ people learn to navigate the complicated discourses surrounding sexuality even
within this landscape of change shows just how much work has yet to be done—and how
difficult it can be to get the words together, to navigate through complicated ideologies
surrounding sexuality.

While scholars in writing studies have long been interested in everyday literacy and
rhetoric in a range of extra-institutional, extra-curricular, or everyday sites (e.g., Gere, Nystrand
and Duffy), and recent scholarship has illustrated sexuality’s central role in shaping what it
means to be literate in a democratic society (e.g., Alexander, Wallace), there is little research that
brings the two together. In 1999, Randal Woodland identified the importance of the
extracurriculum in his study of LGBTQ students’ online literacy practices, arguing that we know
a good deal about how students develop literacies in academic contexts, but we know very little
about how they are developed—by LGBTQ students in particular—in unofficial settings, despite
the fact that these settings are central to developing “thinking, writing, acting selves that they
may (or may not) transfer to their lives offline” (77). While Woodland’s article identified the
need for more scholarship exploring this topic, it remains one of the only studies to look at the
intersection of sexuality and the extracurriculum.

This dissertation project fills this gap by combining these threads of scholarship,
exploring how LGBTQ people develop a sense of what Jonathan Alexander calls "sexual
literacy”—or the ways in which we learn to talk about and understand sexuality—in extra-
curricular and alternative sites of rhetorical education. Such queer extra-curricular sites,
especially in the LGBTQ community, often provide a unique opportunity to actively challenge commonplace ideas about writing, rhetoric, narrative, and their connections to identity, facilitating the development of meta-critical knowledge that suits specific community needs and political ends. At its core, this dissertation contributes qualitative research that investigates how LGBTQ people develop materially consequential literacy and rhetorical practices that equip them to take decisive rhetorical action in debates and discussions surrounding sexuality in the queer extra-curriculum. In such sites, I argue that my research participants come to see that LGBTQ oppression is not natural or inherent in laws, in cultural beliefs, in religious or medical texts, or in popular culture representations. Rather, justifications for oppression and discrimination are located in language, in particular rhetorical strategies, and in the ways they are mobilized. In these sites, individuals come to see that they are not powerless to combat these strategies, and that they can learn to craft their own arguments and counter narratives through the literacy practices and rhetorical pedagogies in these sites of rhetorical education. In doing so, they engage actively with the tension between normativity (assimilating into the status quo) and destabilization (rejecting and revising the status quo), tensions that remain at the heart of scholarship on sexuality in writing studies, both inside and outside the classroom.

In addition to bringing queer theory into the extracurriculum, the argument in this dissertation approaches the current conversations on queerness in writing studies from a slightly different angle than existing research. In contrast to approaches that advocate either acquiescence to normativity through essentialism (e.g., popular initiatives such as the Human Rights Campaign) or constant disruption and destabilization (e.g., queer academic or activist approaches) as mutually exclusive models of action, I argue for work that actively engages with the tension between these two endpoints and holds both tendencies in play simultaneously. I
contend that we need to pay more attention to the material realities that make performing normative identities necessary and desirable, while simultaneously critiquing it and holding it in question. I do not advocate for a “middle ground” approach between two extremes, but a model that takes into account the material realities of people’s lives that make the performance of normativity an important tool for survival. This use of essentialism is not about an acquiescence to normativity, but about a critical and sometimes uncomfortable inhabitation of that space.

While many queer scholars argue that essentialism can be reductive (and an uncritical celebration of it certainly can be), essentialist strategies also place “lesbian and gay people within a series of frames acceptable to audiences” (Smith and Windes 32). And the best response to these audiences is often determined by proximity to confrontation: while disruption and a constructivist approach to LGBTQ identity is the reigning model within the academy (that is, “in those places where opposition is least likely to be articulated”), “essentialism has become the dominant assumption for gay activists, for progay organizations, and for gay and lesbian people as they seek to legitimate themselves in both public and private contexts” (33). As a result, the case studies in this dissertation argue for far more attention to the material performances that people need to survive, performances that sometimes require normativity and essentialism, and sometimes require disruption and destabilization.

This model provides us with more nuanced discussions of identity and language as it pertains to sexuality, and, in advancing this position, answers Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace’s 2009 call for a “queer turn” in the study of sexuality and sexual identity in writing studies. Rather than being at odds with existing writing studies scholarship that queers research and pedagogy (e.g., Alexander, Alexander and Rhodes “Flattening Effects,” Alexander and Wallace), the model I put forth in this dissertation is simply a different entry point, one with a
pragmatic bent focused on the materiality of performing LGBTQ identity. Since queer approaches are always multiple and moving (not singular and static), my work contributes to this multiplicity, making room for further discussions of materiality and lived experience.

The case studies in this dissertation demonstrate what literacy and rhetorical instruction looks like in the LGBTQ community and what the implications are for research, teaching, and our cultural conversations surrounding sexuality. As a field, writing studies has much to gain from a queer turn that provides a lens through which we can critique normative and binary ways of thinking in both scholarship and pedagogy. The questions that guide this research are:

- How are sexual literacies and rhetorical pedagogies developed and maintained in extra-curricular or alternative sites of rhetorical education?
- What kind of work does sexual literacy do within the lives of individuals and communities?

In this chapter, I will lay out the general theoretical framework that supports this dissertation. I will begin by illustrating the importance of LGBT/queer studies for writing studies and describing the specific role of alternative sites of rhetorical education in the LGBTQ community. I then outline what I call the “curriculum of coming out,” a theoretical construct to help us understand and conceptualize the activity in these sites. The curriculum of coming out provides an example of the productive and generative conversations around sexuality that happen when people negotiate and inhabit the space between normativity and disruption. This concept furthers the queer turn and builds upon existing work by describing the intricate connections between the processes, materials, and sites by which LGBTQ people become sexually literate in alternative sites of rhetorical education. I conclude with a descriptive overview of the chapters of the dissertation.
The “Queer Turn”

The “social turn,” argues Jonathan Alexander, marked a significant change in our approaches to teaching and research by bringing substantive attention to the inherently political nature of language and literacy, paving the way for increased attention to issues of difference. Building on insights from across the humanities and social sciences, scholars in critical, feminist, and multicultural pedagogies offered, he argues, “…a rich sense of the connections among class, race, and gender differences and how people see themselves as literate, as being able to participate actively in a complex society by telling their own stories about their lives, or by having that participation hampered by controlling and sometimes silencing gestures of classism, racism, and sexism” (*Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy* 7, emphasis in original). While sexual identity is among those subjects that have been considered in this move to attend to the social, cultural, and political issues inherent in our teaching and studies of language and literacy, sexuality remains, to some extent, undertheorized, a gap that Harriet Malinowitz identified in one of the earliest landmark studies (1995) at the intersection of writing studies and LGBT/queer theory, warning that a lack of attention to sexual identity is damaging “insofar as the silencing of any social group creates cognitive gaps for the whole community” (28). Nearly 15 years later, in a 2009 meta-article surveying and analyzing research situated at the intersection of LGBT/queer studies and writing studies, Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace argue that the ensuing scholarly attention to sexual identity has been “spotty at best” and “provides an inadequate basis for understanding heteronormativity in our theory and practice” (302). What needs to come next in the social turn, they argue, is a “queer turn,” one that takes into consideration the multiple ways normativity operates in our teaching and scholarship (302).
Though any attempt to define what queerness “is”—and therefore what constitutes a queer turn—might be considered a rather un-queer enterprise, there are similar qualities found in the many approaches, theories, methodologies, and projects that call themselves “queer.” Alan McKee, in his critique of queer theory’s tendency to call itself indefinable, argues that “queer is not an empty signifier,” and is taken up in specific ways (237). Queer theory, like current approaches to teaching and research in literacy and rhetoric, was heavily influenced by the poststructuralist rejection of universal truths and unified, static subjects. This paved the way for a queer theoretical approach that is, “by definition, whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Halipern 62), or “a radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality and the family” (Smith 280). In order to avoid the complications associated with using queer as an identity (and the connotations of fixity that can bring with it), queer theorist Nikki Sullivan points to scholars like Janet R. Jakobsen and Michael Warner who suggest we “think of queer as a verb (a set of actions), rather than as a noun (an identity)” (50).

Moreover, queerness as a verb enables us to see that queer theory has broad and far-reaching implications (not just for those who express same-sex desire), and that any critical project that ignores sexuality as a category of analysis is lacking in some way. In fact, in her now canonical text *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, “an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern

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2 “If there is no ‘centre’ to Queer, then the uninitiated cannot discover it. If Queer cannot be defined, who then decides what gets accepted into journals of Queer Theory, is acceptable on Queer Theory courses at universities, published in Queer book series, presented at Queer conferences? Institutional decisions are being made on the basis of a certain understanding of Queer Theory” (A. McKee 236).
homo/heterosexual definition” (1). This approach focuses not on the needs and interests of an LGBTQ minority (a “minoritizing logic”), but rather, a “universalizing logic” that understands sexuality “as an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities,” all of whom are deeply affected by heteronormativity (1).

In understanding sexuality to be a key category of analysis that affects all people, queer theory is an intersectional approach that scholars like Cathy J. Cohen describe as recognizing “how numerous systems of oppression interact to regulate and police the lives of most people,” especially those who “stand on the outside of the dominant constructed norm of state-sanctioned white middle- and upper-class heterosexuality” (441). In his article on the role of queer pedagogy in English studies, William J. Spurlin elaborates on a similar point, arguing that queer theory, in its recognition of the ways cultural meanings shift within particular social, political, historical, and ideological frameworks,

Functions both as a critical lens for (re)reading the complexity of cultural signs and as a site of social transformation, exposing and critiquing (hetero)normativity as it is imbricated within a range of social norms, categories, and institutions, including, but not limited to, the family, child care, the body, censorship, health care, reproductive politics, citizenship, national affiliation, and (neo)imperialism in addition to sexuality. (10)

Queer theory’s radical potential for pedagogy and scholarship, then, comes from its wide applicability across contexts, and in dismantling and deconstructing multiple categories of identity and systems of oppression and control. However, queer theory has often “not been sufficiently self-reflexive about its own elitism” because “we must recognize that in certain contexts, the affirmation of particular identity formations may produce visible political results,
although this need not, and, indeed, should not, foreclose further theoretical elaboration or interrogation” (Spurlin 12). I argue that while questioning and deconstructing categories of identity is important political, scholarly, and pedagogical work, embodying those identity categories also has much to teach us because they impact lived experience. As a result, I focus explicitly on LGBTQ identities as they intersect with other aspects of lived experience (e.g., gender and religion), arguing that critical attention to sexuality through a lens of queer theory provides a framework for the field to continue its interrogation of normativity. In this way, my work, like Alexander and Rhodes’ work on queer archives, “focuses in particular on sexual normalization and the regimes of discursive control through which bodies are disciplined and subjectivities reified as ‘straight’ and others ‘bent’” (“Queer Rhetoric” n.p.). Such work seeks to “broaden, even to the breaking point, what counts or passes as ‘normal’...[working] to unseat the rhetorical and material tyranny of the normal itself” (“Queer Rhetoric” n.p.). Ultimately, the productive work that occurs in the space between normativity and disruption in the queer extracurriculum provides a framework to question and complicate the norms at play in current scholarly and pedagogical practices.

One crucial way that both writing studies and LGBT/queer studies already interrogates normativity is through a rejection of the “grand narratives” of modernism. In her influential article on literacy narratives, Beth Daniell draws on Jean-François Lyotard’s distinction between the “grand narratives” of modernism and the “little narratives” of postmodernism to characterize contemporary approaches to studies of literacy and rhetorical education. She argues that the kinds of stories we tell in our research about literacy illuminates our theoretical orientation: the “grand” narratives are totalizing and closely tied to the autonomous model of literacy, whereas the “little” narratives authorized by the postmodern turn are situated and contextual and thus tied
to the ideological model of literacy (“Narratives of Literacy”). In rejecting the limited autonomous model of literacy, scholars have moved to these “little narratives of literacy” to describe the literacy practices and literate activity in sites as diverse as rural women (Hogg, Powell), African American churches (Moss), working-class bars (Lindquist), and Hmong-American communities (Duffy).

A rejection of totalizing modernist narratives is also at the heart of queer theory, because of the tendency of such narratives to “leave no room for difference, for complexity, for ambiguity” (Sullivan 40). As a result, queer studies also concentrates on the “little narratives” that focus on the local and the specific, rejecting universalizing or ahistorical conceptions of, for example, sexuality or specific terms for sexual identity (Sullivan 40).

Moreover, just as literacy studies has attempted to deconstruct binary oppositions (such as those between orality/literacy), so, too has queer theory attempted to break down binaries (such as those between male/female or gay/straight). The productive potential for the partnership between writing studies and LGBT/queer studies also comes from the fact that scholars in both fields concern themselves with socially situated and embedded activity: the contextual nature of literacy and rhetorical practices and how they are shaped by cultural, historical, and political forces on the one hand (e.g., Brandt, Gee, Selfe and Hawisher, Street), and the social construction and production of sexual and gender identities on the other (e.g., Butler, Foucault, Sedgwick).

The inclusion of queer critique and attention to sexuality in research and teaching in literacy and rhetoric is more than just a call to include another set of diverse voices in our already crowded agendas in the name of “multiculturalism” or “diversity.” Rather,
Attention to queerness provides unique opportunities to engage with students in challenging discussions about how the most seemingly private parts of our lives are densely and intimately wrapped up in larger sociocultural and political narratives that organize desire and condition how we think of ourselves. Queerness helps us to see important connections between our personal stories and the stories our culture tells us about intimacy, identity, and connection.

(Alexander and Wallace 303)

Attention to sexuality and queerness, then, is integral to the field’s commitment to pedagogical approaches that recognize and value differences in identity, approaches that keep us mindful of how sexual identities, too, shape literacy practices and rhetorical pedagogies, and provides opportunities “to deconstruct one important aspect of our collective narration of culture” (305). “Ultimately,” argue Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes, “we want to move beyond, perhaps even leave behind, the multicultural imperative to ‘include’ queerness as another ‘difference’ in the composition curriculum (as well as in the profession) and explore how queerness...poses a unique and significant challenge to literacy” (“Flattening Effects” 432).

Inclusion is limited in the work it can accomplish because “it is one thing to include diverse identities and stories; it is quite something else to undertake systematic analyses that complicate our understanding of how people experience the world differently—both rhetorically and materially” (434, emphasis in original). While we are all implicated in oppressive power structures surrounding sexuality and gender, I argue that the treatment of LGBTQ people brings those structures more sharply into focus because of the ways that they are marked by their difference. As a result, the sites of research in this dissertation engage with the active tension
between both inclusion and disruption in the LGBTQ community, asking what it means to strategically engage with one or the other to accomplish rhetorical and political work.

Rejecting and revising inclusion and normativity are at the heart of both fields, too, argues John Goshert, in that they “…signal the importance of challenging persistent pressures to accommodate facile, and even injurious, conceptions of normativity at the expense of sustaining critical engagement with the cultural, aesthetic, and institutional problems that originally impelled these two fields” (11). Numerous scholars, including Goshert, point out that LGBT/queer studies fall victim to complacent normalization because “…the appearance of supposedly queer people on the dominant cultural stage—and the marginal access of queers to social spaces of the street and the academy—has come to stand for liberation itself” (17). Writing studies faces a similar dilemma when “…analogous pressures are exerted by a popular culture that sees itself as natural and self evident against the critical academic work of defamiliarizing and experimenting with existing bodies of knowledge” (18). It is these shared concerns that bring the two fields together in conversation with one another and suggests productive ways that insights from queer theory might have implications for research and teaching in writing studies.

In addition to these broader shared concerns, Jonathan Alexander demonstrates in *Literacy, Sexuality, Pedagogy* that sexuality studies and queer theory are also already concerned with issues of literacy and language:

[Both fields] have promoted an understanding of the social constructedness of sexuality and, as such, they locate the ‘meaning’ and our ‘understanding’ of sex in the symbolic field: that is, sexuality has meaning as it circulates and is articulated through a variety of complex human communications systems. Hence…this understanding of sexuality is deeply tied to issues of literacy, of what it means to
communicate, to learn how to communicate, and to find some forms of communication forbidden or foreclosed upon. (36)

Alexander captures this relationship and its importance in his concept “sexual literacy,” a critical awareness of the connections between sexuality and discourse and between senses of self and larger social norms. Sexual literacy is “an intimate understanding of the ways in which sexuality is constructed in language and the ways in which our language and meaning-making systems are always-already sexualized” (18, emphasis in original). The term is meant to evoke a sense of the importance of the connections between literacy practices and sexuality, and to

Enliven critical thought about the construction of sexuality in our culture as a dominant—and often dominating—set of tropes and narrations that organize desire, intimacy, and identity…As such, the concept of sexual literacy may be useful in helping us unpack the connections among sexuality, discourse, and their construction in language. (19-20, emphasis in original)

In light of their common concerns, queer theory can provide a foothold to move us beyond inclusion and visibility and into a more difficult process of understanding the workings of complex intersectional social forces—it just has yet to be done, according to Alexander and Wallace, in a systematic way. My work on the curriculum of coming out builds on Alexander’s concept of sexual literacy by examining how sexual literacy is developed outside of formal institutions of learning and the curriculum that shapes its development in extra-curricular or alternative sites of rhetorical education. I argue that these practices are both integral to our understandings of literacy practices and rhetorical pedagogies and a generative place for future research.
Though there is no doubt that the scholarly work done within the boundaries of writing studies has been “spotty” in respect to its treatment of sexuality and the workings of heteronormativity, numerous scholars over the last twenty years have critically examined the role of sexuality and sexual identity in writing classrooms (e.g., Elliot, Kopelson, Malinowitz, R. Miller, Regan, Spurlin) and more recent scholarship has examined the intersections of sexuality, technology, and digital literacies, primarily—though not exclusively—within classroom contexts (e.g., Alexander and Banks, Barrios, H. McKee, Peters and Swanson, Pullen and Cooper, Woodland). This existing work, according to Alexander and Wallace, has, thus far, largely been characterized by three moves: 1) Confronting homophobia in the classroom; 2) Including LGBTQ people on their own terms in both scholarship and teaching; 3) Incorporating queer theory as a critical lens for deconstructing normativity (Alexander and Wallace 305). These three moves “…illustrate the tension between the value of calling out nonnormative sexual identities as an ongoing social issue in American culture and the need to see sexual identity more broadly as a fundamental identity issue that affects all people” (Alexander and Wallace 305). This tension was first captured in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s book *Epistemology of the Closet* in the terms “minoritizing discourse” and “universalizing discourse,” and remains a tension in pedagogical, scholarly, and activist work (1). While all of our students and the communities whose literacy and rhetorical practices we study are affected by issues related to sexuality, LGBTQ bodies, in particular, have been historically constructed and marked by institutionally-anchored religious, medical, and political discourses that render them deviant, subversive, sinful, or threatening in a culture shaped by what Adrienne Rich calls “compulsory heterosexuality.” Therefore, LGBTQ people actively participate in particular kinds of rhetorical work related to sexuality, and, as we will see in subsequent chapters, are already sensitive to performativity,
audience, argument, ethos, kairos, and other rhetorical concepts, making an examination of LGBTQ literacy practices and rhetorical pedagogies in particular integral to our understandings of literacy and rhetoric.

**Alternative Sites of Rhetorical Education in the LGBTQ Community**

The sites I examine in this dissertation are just two of many sites of rhetorical education in the LGBTQ community, and are part of a long, rich history of activity that has its roots well before the Stonewall Rebellion. Historically, these sites have taken many forms, ranging from clandestine bars to support groups, community centers, archives, websites, online discussion forums, and social media pages. For the LGBTQ community, these sites are especially crucial to learn to navigate a largely heteronormative world, and provide a unique opportunity to see how specific groups of people seek out the rhetorical education they need even when it is not offered to them through traditional methods of schooling or in home communities.

The rhetorical education happening in these sites differs from the kind of curriculum we might find in traditional classroom settings. LGBTQ lives are restricted and shaped by both de jure legal structures (i.e., legal restriction with respect to marriage, immigration, and employment) and de facto traditions of exclusion. These sites are set apart as spaces where people develop the rhetorical skills necessary to make arguments for themselves as “free and equal member[s] of a self-governing community” and to delve into the messiness of the “inherent difficulties of social discourse” that support their de jure and de facto discrimination (Fleming 184).

The sites in this dissertation are informal contexts of literacy and rhetorical instruction, located in the “extracurriculum of composition” (Gere) or instances of what Nystrand and Duffy
call “the rhetoric of everyday life.” Such sites, following Gere, are characterized by a set of “self-sponsored pedagogically oriented” activities outside of the academy, spaces that, she argues, are “constructed by desire” (80). Specifically, they are part of the rich scholarly tradition of “alternative” sites of rhetorical education, characterized by both historical archival studies (e.g., Enoch, Gold, Kates, Logan, Royster, Sharer) and contemporary ethnography (e.g., Gonçalves).

While settings like schools often provide explicit training in rhetoric (including reading, writing, or speaking), “alternative sites” are characterized by mentored learning about rhetoric that happens outside of formal contexts of schooling. These sites are labeled “alternative” to indicate exclusion from—or revision to—dominant and/or primary contexts of rhetorical socialization. These sites may differ in terms of both their location and goals, but all exist on the margins or in an uneasy relationship with the larger institutions of which they are a part. In such spaces, people learn how to make interventions into important social and political conversations. Scholars who document these sites do so in order to complicate histories that only focus on canonically recognized rhetoricians or selective institutions to the exclusion of a full range of rich rhetorical activity and education (e.g., Enoch, Gold, Kates, Royster, Sharer). Such work attempts to broaden our understanding of how socially and politically marginalized groups use rhetoric toward their own ends and acquire specific kinds of rhetorical education denied to them, frequently challenging and redefining rhetorical and literacy practices in the process.

Yet even with the large, rich body of scholarly literature that takes seriously the importance of literacy and rhetorical practices developed outside of traditional writing classroom in these alternative or extra-curricular sites, there nevertheless remains a gap in how we understand such sites as they are constructed and utilized by LGBTQ people. A notable
exception is Zan Meyer Gonçalves’s study of an LGBTQ speaker’s bureau, where she studied the role of ethos in the construction of identities and arguments as students prepared for campus events. She found that these students were already engaged in crafting complex identity performances for rhetorical effect in their work as speakers on campus, and set out to find how the students “…learn[ed] to manage the rhetorical triangle with such finesse,” how the Speakers’ Bureau differed from the writing classroom, and how “…those differences contribute[d] to the sort of attention to ethos, purpose, and audience” that Gonçalves saw in students’ performances (2). The students Gonçalves wrote about in her ethnography, like the writers Gere studied nearly twenty years earlier, created an extracurricular space that was constructed by desire and “by the aspirations and motivations of its participants” who see their work as having real life social, material, and even political consequences (80). This, I would argue, illustrates the importance of the queer extracurriculum for LGBTQ people, as well as Alexander and Banks’ assertion that most LGBTQ-identified people actually understand rhetoric and rhetorical performances at an “intuitive level” because of the need to manage self-representations of their queerness based on their readings of a given situation. Such negotiations, Alexander and Banks argue, “usually manifest themselves as a meta-critical consciousness…about how dynamics in particular spaces control, contain, prompt, or provoke various self-representations” (287). Though LGBTQ people are not wholly and systematically denied access to educational institutions—and much scholarship in this trajectory focuses on those who were—alternative sites are important because they represent an opportunity to develop this specific kind of “meta-critical consciousness” that is not taught in other contexts of rhetorical socialization such as classrooms or one’s home of origin. This meta-critical consciousness is what James Paul Gee calls a “secondary discourse,” one that we are apprenticed into later in life and so must generally be developed and learned
outside of one’s home of origin. Historian Larry Gross characterizes this rhetorical awareness of self-representation as something LGBTQ people “encounter and develop at a later stage in life; it is nobody’s native tongue” (18). Because such discourses are “nobody’s native tongue,” secondary contexts of socialization such as alternative sites of rhetorical education are crucial for learning these literacy practices. Developing these rhetorical moves is essential for LGBTQ-identified people to fully participate as members of the community and will be required of them in a predominantly heterosexual—or heteronormative—world.

The Curriculum of Coming Out

In this dissertation, I analyze the role of literacy practices and rhetorical education in the LGBTQ community through the lens of what I call the “curriculum of coming out.” The curriculum of coming out is characterized by a set of informal pedagogical practices that foster the rhetorical education essential to living in the world as an LGBTQ person, aiding people in naming and claiming an identity for themselves and for multiple audiences that range from sympathetic to hostile. This concept builds on existing work on sexual literacy by describing the intricate connections between the processes, materials, and sites by which LGBTQ people become sexually literate in sites of rhetorical education.

My use of the word “curriculum” to describe the processes and practices of this rhetorical education is an intentional one, designed to emphasize the role of learning and rhetorical development that takes place. Though rhetorical education is rarely the named goal in any of these spaces, educational concerns are still present, the unnamed goal being, in line with David Fleming, “the formation of the good rhetor, the person who has mastered the ‘knowledge’ of speaking and writing well,” the LGBTQ-identified person who can articulate and argue for the
validity of their lives in different ways, based on the requirements and demands of particular
audiences (184).

But there is another reason, too, to call this a curriculum and to emphasize the role of
education and socialization into rhetorical practices. As many critical pedagogues have argued,
whether working from a libratory, feminist, or multicultural perspective, education is not always
emancipatory in its goals or end results. All education socializes students into particular cultural
norms and expectations, sometimes helping students to challenge existing power structures, but
more often reifying those structures, a fact that is visible in the history of rhetorical education
more generally: “sometimes it can empower citizens to enact change, and sometimes it sustains
unequal power relations (i.e. when it teaches people to work within and maintain an existing
political structure)” (Enoch 6).

Though conservative groups and politicians might paint LGBTQ-identified people as
being radicals with a “gay agenda,” the truth is that the LGBTQ community is far from a
monolithic whole in its approach to understanding sexuality and sexual identity—and, therefore,
the unofficial rhetorical pedagogies that shape political and community work. One of the crucial
issues where these tensions play out is in the fight for same-sex marriage. Some organizations
(e.g., the Human Rights Campaign) view same-sex marriage as a crucial issue at the heart of the
fight for social equality and as an important way to gain legitimization. This move toward
normality, according to Michael Warner, is a “retreat from [the gay community’s] history of
radicalism into a new form of post-liberationist privatization” fueled by a politics of sexual
shame, and evident in discussions of same-sex marriage, the regulation of LGBTQ space, and
responses to the AIDS epidemic (186). Other organizations (e.g., Queers for Economic Justice or
the Audre Lorde Project) view the fight for same-sex marriage as a misguided, arguing that the
institution is oppressive and out-of-date, and should be abolished all together. Thus, given these competing politics, we cannot think of the LGBTQ community or the curriculum of coming out as wholly progressive or not in need of critique because there are social and cultural forces that encourage and discourage ways of acting, being, and performing gender and sexuality. Conceptualizing this activity as a “curriculum,” as socializing, helps us apply an analytical lens through which we can see all of its functions: its movement toward liberation alongside its movement toward normativity and oppression.

My invocation of the term “coming out” to describe this curricular process is also an intentional choice. Too often, the term is used or perceived as shorthand for disclosure. Though naming and disclosure is still an important step in the creation of an LGBTQ identity, using it only in a narrow sense neglects its more complicated role in the LGBTQ community by suggesting, as Julia Penelope and Susan Wolfe so eloquently state, “that each of us has merely to come out once through a single self-declaration. We have actually to focus on the –ing of the process” (4). When I use “coming out” as a term to capture this rhetorical education, I do so focusing on the gerund, the continual and constant work that it invokes, and draw on its importance to the collective consciousness of the gay community in describing the rhetorical education happening in these alternative sites. I use coming out as a metaphor to capture the lifelong curricular process of people who identify as LGBTQ, and the ways they continually engage in rhetorical work to manage identities, construct arguments, deploy narratives, and to learn to live in and navigate the world as an LGBTQ person.

Though coming out has long been an essential rhetorical practice in the LGBTQ community, its specific role and significance has undergone dramatic changes in response to social, political, and historical forces, particularly since the early 20th century with the
dissemination of the work of the sexologists to the public consciousness (D’Emilio and Freedman, Faderman). Once terms like “homosexual,” “invert,” or “lesbian” became part of popular discourse, the terms for identity and the role of coming out continued to evolve. In his study of pre-WWII urban gay male culture, historian George Chauncey points out that the popular closet metaphor did not exist prior to the 1960s: “Gay people in the prewar years…did not speak of coming out of what we call the ‘gay closet’ but rather of coming out into what they called ‘homosexual society’ or ‘the gay world,’ a world neither so small, nor so isolated, nor, often, so hidden as ‘closet’ implies” (7, emphasis author’s). This understanding was “an arch play on the language of women’s culture—in this case, the expression used to refer to the ritual of a debutante’s being formally introduced to, or ‘coming out’ into, the society of her cultural peers” (7). With increased visibility for the LGBTQ community, coming out took on broader meanings, usually associated with moments of disclosure to the non-LGBTQ community, frequently used as an activist tactic in the 1970s. Now, coming out is incorporated into the basic assumptions of what it means to be gay, not representing “a single act, but the adoption of an identity,” a process composed of multiple, repeated rhetorical acts (D’Emilio and Freedman 323).

Nowhere is the complexity of this adoption of an identity more visible than in coming out narratives, which often appear throughout the sites of this dissertation and are discussed in more depth in chapter five. For many years, like understandings of the act of coming out of the closet itself, these narratives were solely verbal texts that circulated in and among the gay community, serving an interactional and community-building function. In later years, such stories began to

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3 It is important to note, too, that the development of terms for identity and conception of coming out evolved differently for men and women due to the fact that men enjoyed many more economic and social freedoms, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century (Faderman).
also perform important political functions, and continue to be mobilized in contemporary activist projects (Wong 27). With the increasing visibility of the gay rights movement, these narratives also began to appear in print, and, even more recently, in video blogs, thus increasing their circulation and exposure (Wong). Today, coming out narratives reflect their historical precedents and legacies. They are a distinctive, yet plastic genre based on the requirements and demands of a given audience and rhetorical situation (Bacon, Jolly, Wong). Like Carolyn Miller, I understand this genre not as a closed system or a taxonomy based on formal rules, but on what it does, “the action it is used to accomplish” (“Genre as Social Action” 151). These genres create what she calls in her later work a “rhetorical community,” one that is “invoked, represented, presupposed, or developed in rhetorical discourse. It is constituted by attributions of characteristic joint rhetorical actions, genres of interaction, ways of getting things done, including reproducing itself” (“Rhetorical Community” 73). This view, according to Charles Bazerman, helps you to focus on “what people are doing and how texts help people to do it, rather than on texts as ends in themselves” (319). The narratives told in these educational spaces are an important piece of this rhetorical curriculum because of their engagement with issues of identity, community, and argument, and because they are “so central to the collective consciousness of gays and lesbians as to constitute a literary genre” (Bacon 254). It is well established that this “literary genre” involves rhetorical choices based on the requirements of a given situation and audience (Bacon, Jolly, Plummer) and that they play a key role in the process of socialization into the “gay imaginary” (Wong). This dissertation will show that these narratives also serve pedagogical functions.

Though such narratives may overlap with other genres such as the coming of age story (Wong), coming out narratives are specifically understood as “narratives of the intimate life”
(Plummer 6) that are not solely about individual moments of disclosing one’s sexuality, but function to “[solidify] a current moment of identity by highlighting its trajectory through time” (Bacon 251). They perform important work whether crafted in moments of solitude or contexts of community, whether written, spoken, or performed online and off, or whether altered for different contexts and audiences. They circulate and get taken up, they are traded and built upon, they are used to interrogate and solidify norms and identities, and they become calcified by community norms and expectations while sometimes, at the very same time, challenging those norms and expectations for understandings of sexuality. Thus, these stories are “much more than a string of words, [they are] a shift in perspective. It is a shift from the private sphere to the public, and also a shift from silence into speech” (Bacon 251). As Jan Clausen notes in her memoir on the complexities of sexual identity, “Who I am is not a noun, but a narrative” (248). The complexities of sexual identity cannot be captured in a single term, but in narratives that must be created in response to the demands of particular audiences and purposes.

**Literacy Practices and Rhetorical Education/Pedagogies: A Note on Terms**

Throughout this chapter, I have made multiple references to both “literacy practices” and “rhetorical pedagogies,” often talking about them in tandem. Literacy and rhetoric are related terms that have interrelated histories, but ones that still have somewhat distinct meanings. Therefore, to avoid conflating these two concepts, I will take the opportunity here to talk about their relationship to my larger project.

Chapter three, “How to Fight Biblical ‘Textual Harassment’: Queer Religious Literacies” focuses on the queer literacy strategies Pastor Miller-Smith teaches in her workshop, while chapter four, “‘Whoever wrote this, I’m going to write them a letter’: Challenging Institutional
Discourses and Developing Queer Rhetorical Pedagogies” focuses more explicitly on the development of queer rhetorical frameworks, theories, and strategies. While each case study offers a distinctive glimpse into different kinds of activity, I talk about them together because of their close relationship under the rubric of rhetorical education.

Pastor Miller-Smith’s approach to teaching employs a set of literacy practices that recognizes the production of texts, in line with scholars in New Literacy Studies, as socially, historically, and politically situated activity. In her workshop, this knowledge is used advantageously to then create arguments based on queer readings contextual interpretations of the Bible. Though she is not an English teacher, this approach nevertheless considers such literacy practices to be “the tactical—or rhetorical—knowledge of how to employ those [literate] skills in the context of one or more communities” because “what is entailed by this literate know-how always varies according to its situation of use” (Hobbs 1-2). Hobbs’ definition of literacy is particularly apt for this case study because the workshop is focused on the application of this knowledge across situations of use—the emphasis is on taking these queer reading practices and using them “for the purpose of shaping conceptions of reality” (Duffy 15). This is what John Duffy calls a “rhetorical conception of literacy” where the focus is on the “ways of using language and other symbols…for the purpose of shaping conceptions of reality” (15). While some groups use a particular kind of literacy, a certain kind of reading practice, to make the argument that LGBTQ people should be excluded from Christian communities, queer reading strategies can also be used to respond and to negotiate those discourses by constructing new narratives and possibilities for identity. These queer religious literacies, in other words, are closely related to rhetorical education because at the same time certain Christian groups use literacy practices to impose control over the interpretation of religious texts and narrative of the
relationship between LGBTQ identity and Christianity, so, too, can LGBTQ people use these strategies to negotiate and resist these narratives and interpretations. A rhetorical conception of literacy enables us to see the “means through which individuals may respond to and influence the institutional forces that work to define human possibilities” through their literacy practices (Duffy 18).

The case study of Between Women focuses less explicitly on literacy practices and more explicitly on the development of rhetorical frameworks, theories, and strategies. Though all definitions of rhetorical education are “unavoidably interested,” David Fleming articulates a definition that “makes educational considerations explicit and central,” emphasizing its role in education over its role in theory (172). In Fleming’s definition, rhetorical education is conceptualized as “a rich and rewarding course of study whose end is the development of a certain kind of person: engaged, articulate, resourceful, sympathetic, civil” (173). The goal of a rhetorical education under this model is “the formation of the good rhetor, the person who has mastered the ‘knowledge’ of speaking and writing well, and who is conceived first and foremost as a free and equal member of a self-governing community…such an education would be necessarily author-centered, concerned primarily with the inherent difficulties of social discourse” (184). This engagement with social discourse and its difficulties is at the heart of this site, as the members of Between Women integrate theory, practice, and inquiry in community-specific activities as a means of resisting the ways they are being taught to talk about their sexuality by the larger institution (Centerville University).

Taken together, the queer reading practices and the queer rhetorical pedagogies make up the curriculum of coming out. In Pastor Miller-Smith’s workshop, the queer literacy practices she teaches are rhetorical (in that they are used to construct arguments against particular ways of
interpreting the Bible), and in Between Women, the queer rhetorical pedagogies that are developed also include literacy (in the ways that the members rely on critical readings to develop their own frameworks, theories, and strategies that make up the queer pedagogies). Therefore, throughout this project, I reference “literacy practices and rhetorical education/pedagogies” together as a way of both showing their interconnected relationship in the curriculum of coming out while resisting the urge to conflate them as the same thing.

“Community and Its Discontents”: A Note on Language

Up to this point, I have used the phrases “LGBTQ community” and “LGBTQ people” to refer to a decidedly heterogeneous group of people, but I do not do so unproblematically, nor do I do so to erase the differences that affect the daily, material lives of LGBTQ-identified people. As Nikki Sullivan writes in a chapter aptly titled “Community and Its Discontents,” the idea of a community is premised on “a sense of commonality” (136), a sense that “[implies] that community membership is a straightforward issue” (137). This view of community comes from the idea that identity pre-exists and a community forms around it. But since identity is never straightforward and always in flux, membership can never be a straightforward issue. Being a member of any community “…entails policing the community and its boundaries, making sure that those who are on the inside really are members of your ‘tribe’ and that those who are not, remain outside” (144). In such a model, there is often little or no room for difference, no room to interrogate other intersectional identities (of race, class, or gender, for example) that affect its members’ lives.

So, then, how can I speak of an LGBTQ community? I do so for several reasons, without being able to fully escape the inherently problematic nature of any term I may choose to apply.
Since all of the participants and individuals I write about in this dissertation use a range of labels to identify themselves—and some not at all, or some that change on a weekly basis—I want to resist imposing a label that they do not claim. Using “queer,” for example, as an umbrella term assigns a label that many do not claim or identify with; it implies that those in this dissertation align themselves with the theoretical understandings of queer theory that I outlined earlier; and, moreover, can actually reinforce the problematic understandings of community that scholars try to resist, implying “…the existence of some sort of queer solidarity” that can “…have the effect of (mis)representing us as one big happy (queer) family” (Sullivan 44, 45). Since that is not the case, my use of “LGBTQ community” of “LGBTQ people” is used as a matter of convenience. It allows me to reference not only the people in my studies as a whole, but to call them by a term that unites them in some ways, and calls them as members who share identifications based on their gender and/or sexuality. While there are important differences (differences that will become apparent in the later chapters of this dissertation project, they are nevertheless a part of what Kath Weston calls the “gay imaginary,” a term that builds on Benedict Anderson’s concept of the “imagined community” whereby “people feel an attachment to a necessarily fictional group” where they “interpret themselves through that attachment, so their subjectivity becomes inseparable from constructions of ‘we-ness’” (34, emphasis author’s).

Yet even as I refer to them as a group in this dissertation, I do so in a way that resists homogenization, recognizing difference even as I refer to them as a whole. Shane Phelan, a scholar working in queer studies, argues that we should not abandon the problematic notion of community but “think of it as a process…Persons do not simply ‘join’ communities; they become microcosms of their communities, and their communities change with their entrance” (87). Like identity, this view of community is one that is always provisional, contingent,
negotiable, and continually being remade. It is a coalition of people that is always emerging, always becoming. Many queer scholars have found the concept of “coalition politics” to be a useful way of describing communities and the work they undertake because “as long as unity of identity...is not considered a prerequisite, or even an end goal, coalition politics has much to offer because a group’s coherence is formed precisely on the lack of coherent identity” (Chávez 268). This kind of provisional, temporary coherence allow for an effective coalition or community of people to be built around their difference and resist the impulse to remain divided under those differences. Karma R. Chávez, drawing on the work of Audre Lorde, argues that division only serves the interests of the oppressor, “which is why those who are oppressed must build coalitions even when they have different identities or understandings of what those identities mean” in order to bring about change (268). As I examine the sites of rhetorical education in this dissertation, I strive to keep in mind the ways that participants are aligned, as well as the ways that their multiple identities affect, in very real ways, their experiences of the very identity they supposedly have in common.

**Chapter Overviews**

Chapter two introduces the feminist methodology and methods (e.g., Kirsch, Kirsch and Royster) that ground the two case studies. I elaborate on the local particulars for each site of research, both located in “Centerville,” USA, a mid-size Midwestern town with a major research university, surrounded by farming communities. The first is a workshop titled “Biblical Self-Defense for the LGBT Community” offered at the annual Pride Festival in Centerville. Since the curriculum of the workshop is similar to the work of many LGBT and queer Christian organizations, this case study offers a local, grounded example of queer literacy practices at the
intersection of sexual and religious identity. The second case study examines “Between Women,” an LBGTQ women’s discussion group at Centerville University. Groups like this one have a rich history in the LGBTQ community, and while the specific, local activities are particular to the combination of people in the group, the presence of a rhetorical curriculum (the curriculum of coming out) is not. Taken together, these “little narratives” (Daniell) provide telling cases to look at the function of the curriculum of coming out, and its role in the production of LGBTQ identities, stories, and lives.

Chapter three presents my first case study, demonstrating how queer reading practices in the curriculum of coming out can disrupt dominant narratives about intersectional identities by illustrating the instability of biblical interpretation. Participants in the “Biblical Self-Defense for GLBTQS and Allies” workshop come to see that biblically-based justifications for LGBTQ oppression and discrimination are a result of the way the Bible has been mobilized rhetorically in arguments, removed from its historical context of composition. Through the development of queer biblical literacies, participants learn to construct arguments in order to refute the “clobber passages” and articulate a religious identity that challenges the dominant narrative that LGBTQ and Christian identities are mutually exclusive by problematizing the very category of “the Christian,” a category often positioned as having a stable, consistent meaning. The interplay of both strategies, I argue, are necessary to address the complex rhetorical situations surrounding issues of sexuality and religion present in current political debates.

Chapter four presents my second case study, illustrating how rhetorical curricula are built in response to institutional, societal, and familial discourses surrounding LGBTQ sexuality. Drawing on a year-long qualitative study of “Between Women,” I demonstrate how the members subvert and challenge those discourses through their own rhetorical curriculum, reclaiming
important sites of rhetorical education and literacy instruction, while showing the complex relationship to the institution that they are both a part of and yet remain critically apart from. In doing so, I argue that they create a location for the development of more community-relevant rhetorical and literacy practices, which illustrates the products, processes, and tensions of the curriculum of coming out.

I conclude in chapter five by returning to a discussion of narrative, examining two parallel coming out narratives (Irene and Eleanor) in order to argue that queer coming out narratives challenge our understandings of identity and sexual selves by calling explicit attention to those conventions and expectations through moments of disruption. I end with directions for future research.
Chapter Two

We’re Here, We’re Queer, Get Over It and It Matters: Coming Out and Feminist Methodology

Have [feminist scholars] departed radically from the rhetorical tradition? Yes and no…No, because the rhetors they have added to our picture of the history of Western rhetoric seem to me to be working within this tradition and enriching it, rather than constituting utterly separate or parallel rhetorical traditions. But yes, because in order to get at the activities of these new rhetors, researchers have had to adopt radically new methods as well, methods which violate some of the most cherished conventions of academic research, most particularly in bringing the person of the researcher, her body, her emotions, and dare one say, her soul, into the work.

Patricia Bizzell

March, 2011. Armed with recent IRB approval and a stack of consent forms, I show up to the weekly meeting of Between Women to act as the facilitator, something I have done every week for the last year. I have moved through several roles in this group, beginning with shy, then eager participant, followed by reluctant, then eager facilitator. Tonight, I will ask the women to give their permission for their stories, their conversations, and their lives to be a part of my dissertation project, signaling the start of yet another role in this group: researcher.

August, 2013. Included among the advertisements for Centerville’s 2013 Pride Festival is a list of workshops on adoption, estate planning for LGBT people, healthcare rights, and, most interestingly, “Biblical Self-Defense for GLBTQs and Allies.” The workshop was to be offered by Pastor Lauren Miller-Smith of the United Church of Christ, a church located in the heart of
Centerville University’s campus. Though I had never met Pastor Miller-Smith, she graciously gave me permission to sit in on the workshop and observe her teaching.

My relationship to each of my sites of research, as illustrated by the brief anecdotes above, differed greatly. In Between Women, I was a known and trusted member and facilitator of the group, while in Pastor Miller-Smith’s workshop, I was a complete stranger, introduced to her only through a brief e-mail exchange. My vastly different relationships to each site of research shaped my methodological decisions by impacting my interactions with participants, the data I was able to gather, and the way I interpreted that data.

While the specific methods for each site of research differ, the methodology that undergirds this dissertation project is an explicitly feminist one. As the opening quote from Patricia Bizzell’s article on feminist research methods indicates, the work of feminist scholars has both enriched existing scholarship by working within its borders, and radically departed from it by challenging existing narratives and established research methods. I understand this research to be, in line with Gesa Kirsch and Jacqueline Jones Royster, honoring “the concept of ‘feminism’ as variously articulated commitment to justice, equality, empowerment, and peace, while keeping the contours of this notion dynamic and open, resisting the deep desire to speak as if there is no need for negotiation…There just is” (“A Search for Excellence” 644). Negotiation and dialogue, in a feminist tradition, form the foundation for qualities of research excellence. “Excellence” requires critical attention to the ways lived experience shape our perspectives as researchers and ways our subjects make meaning in their own lives. It requires a constructive dialogue that helps us deepen our exchanges with our research participants in order to meaningfully and respectfully render “the words and works of those whom we study…It entails an open stance, strategic contemplation, and creating a space where we can see and hold
contradictions without rushing to immediate closure, to neat resolutions, or to cozy hierarchies and binaries ("A Search for Excellence" 664, emphasis mine). Thus, while feminist methods are variously articulated and enacted, feminist methodology departs radically from traditions of research where the researcher is an authority figure observing research subjects from a distance, and whose own life and experiences have no place in the work.

Feminist methodology undoubtedly has the potential to enrich research in a variety of scholarly areas of inquiry, but these methodologies are particularly well suited for queer work. In addition to their common commitments to dialogue and resisting neat closures and easy binaries, both queer and feminist scholars question normativity as it operates in various systems of oppression. Among the items on her list of essential qualities of feminist methodology, Gesa Kirsch includes the imperative to "correct androcentric norms by calling into question what has been considered ‘normal’ and what has been regarded as ‘deviant’" (5). While I want to resist conflating queer and feminist approaches since they originated in different traditions, this focus on critiquing constructions of the “normal” and the “deviant” makes feminist methodology particularly well suited for queer work because of their common commitments to dialogue, resisting binaries, and critiquing normativity.

Like the central argument of this dissertation—about the productive work that comes from inhabiting and negotiating the space between normativity/assimilation and disruption/destabilization—my methods negotiate the space between searching for future answers and running from past questions, engaging in a dialogic process of what Ellen Cushman calls in her contribution to a multi-vocal piece on methodology “social reflexivity” (in contrast to the more common “self-reflexivity”) (Brandt et al. 46). In what follows, I embody this in my
writing through a hybrid style that mixes the personal and the academic, illustrating the critical role the researcher plays in the design, implementation, and analysis of the research.

A crucial part of this methodological negotiation is an extension of coming out as a metaphor not just for a productive and innovative rhetorical curriculum, but also a metaphor for engaging in dialogic and ethical feminist research. In chapter one, I explained the importance of talking about the practice of coming out not as a single moment of self-declaration, but as a repetitive performance of identity: as a process of concealing and revealing strategically and a practice of navigating and negotiating changing rhetorical situations. Given my different level of access that was shaped by my relationships with the participants in each site of research, coming out serves as an apt methodological metaphor for the ways I navigated the challenges and opportunities in each site through dialogue and negotiation. Despite the ways all metaphors are limited in their descriptive power, Kirsch and Royster illustrate the ways our most deeply held metaphors can help to make sense of new experiences and insights:

We have the habit of choosing for ourselves symbols from our past experiences that help us translate and align new experiences and to transform them into knowledge and insight. By such transformative connections, we can see more clearly where and how we stand, how we interpret what we see, and consequently how we make sense out of the chaotic effects of various encounters and observations in creating new knowledge. (New Horizons 15)

As this chapter will demonstrate, coming out has served as a powerful metaphor not just in my own life, but in the lives of my participants as well. It functions as a framework that helps them to make sense of their own experiences as much as it can serve, I argue, as a powerful metaphor for ethical methodological negotiations. In each site of research, I made strategic decisions about
what to share with research participants in order to establish trust in an ethical way. This metaphor for ethical research negotiations fits nicely with feminist research because it is feminists, argues Gesa Kirsch, who have been at the forefront of asking questions about research ethics in ways that have had a significant impact on how we conduct, represent, and interpret our research projects. To this feminist emphasis on the ethics of dialogue, negotiation, and reflection, I argue that we must also consider “adequacy” in our methodological decisions as a measure of ethical research, as illustrated by the case study of “Biblical Self-Defense for GLBTQs and Allies” (chapter three). In negotiating access to our research sites and deciding where our data-gathering and interpretive focus should be, we must ask ourselves what ethical research looks like in that particular space and craft appropriate critical reflections that accompany our writing to account for the shape of our projects.

To that end, this chapter will first situate this research in the tradition of feminist methodology, particularly in making visible the politics of the personal and how they shape what Gesa Kirsch calls “the politics of location, interpretation, and publication” (Ethical Dilemmas). In keeping with this feminist value of acknowledging our “passionate attachments” (Royster) as they shape our work and construction of new knowledge, I will also introduce each site of research and their particular methodological challenges more fully.

The Personal Can Be More Political: Feminist Methodology and the Politics of the Personal

In 2001, College English published a symposium collective titled “The Politics of the Personal: Storying Our Lives Against the Grain,” a piece that offered short reflections and arguments on the place of the personal in academic work from eight different scholars. While each differed in where they fell on the question of the role of the personal, all of them critiqued
an uncritical celebration of the personal in academic writing. For example, Deborah Brandt, in her section titled “Protecting the Personal,” argues that the personal does not have a place in academic writing, saying, “A lot of my person goes into this work, obviously, but my person does not matter” (44). Worried that the psychological lives of the participants become the primary interest at the expense of her theoretical insights about literacy, Brandt has been “trying to figure out how to responsibly get [the personal] out” of her work (43). Anne Herrington, in contrast, argues that there is sometimes “a methodological imperative to write of what we might view as private” based on the particular writing task at hand (47). While Herrington did not feel this imperative to write about her own experiences of schooling and test taking for her work on assessment, she argues that it was necessary for another piece she was asked to contribute to Comp Tales, a narrative reflection where it was important for her to be visible as a lesbian in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” world. In some of her work, Herrington chooses to “come out” as a lesbian as a way to challenge LGBTQ invisibility, particularly when it is meaningful to her professional work. These stories are always personal and situated in individual experience, but when they are presented critically and effectively, they are not simply so. With a critical edge, personal stories become effective ways to speak to larger social issues and to examine the ways that the researcher actively shapes their project.

The distinction that Herrington makes in this article is essential to my own methodology. While I agree with Brandt and others that an uncritical celebration of the personal risks turning our research into an exercise in narcissistic navel gazing, one that takes away from the larger insights into the workings of literacy practices and rhetorical pedagogies, the personal is more political for some of us. My status as a lesbian and my identity as a queer woman have shaped this project from the very beginning and has actually enabled my access to these sites of
research. A straight woman or straight man simply could not have gotten access to a discussion group designed only for LGBTQ-identified women, and while they would have, perhaps, had a much easier time attending a public workshop at a festival designed for both LGBTQ and allied people, my status as a queer and formerly religious woman helped to explain my interest in the workshop to the pastor who led it. This is what makes coming out such an apt metaphor for feminist methodologies in queer work: like Herrington, I “come out” strategically in a way that enables access to my sites of research, and view these personal connections to the research as “a powerful yet often-neglected source of insight, inspiration, and passion” (Kirsch and Royster, *New Horizons* 22).

More than just enabling access to research sites, employing the personal for professional purposes actively shapes the process of knowledge creation. In Jacqueline Jones Royster’s *Traces of a Stream*, she urges researchers to acknowledge their “passionate attachments” to the research because

knowledge is produced by someone and [its] producers are not formless and invisible. They are embodied and in effect have passionate attachments by means of their embodiments…It is important, therefore, to specify attachments, to recognize who has produced the knowledge, what the bases of it are, what the material circumstances of its production entail, what consequences or implications are suggested by its existence, and for whom the consequences and implications hold true. (280).

The way Royster has specified these attachments in her study of 19th century African American women “pointedly rejects an essentialized notion of identity” by orienting herself to multiple communities, grounding her work in the wisdom of both her scholarly community and the
community she studies, and by devising a style of academic writing that mixes the styles of both (Bizzell 13).

With the goal of orienting this work to multiple communities, scholars have found ways to critically integrate the personal in their academic work. “A personal voice, if creatively used,” argues anthropologist Ruth Behar, “can lead the reader, not into miniature bubbles of navel-gazing, but into the enormous sea of serious social issues” by drawing “deeper connections between one’s personal experience and the subject under study” (14). In addition to bringing these deeper connections to the work, Victor Villanueva argues that “There must be room for elements of autobiography, not as confession and errant self-indulgence, not as the measure on which to assess theory, not as a replacement for rigor, but as a way of understanding our predispositions to see things certain ways, of understanding what it is that guides our intuition in certain ways” (Brandt et al. 51). In the autobiographical stories I bring to this work, I interrogate and make visible my predispositions to see particular kinds of connections and the ways my experiences have shaped the questions I came to. These personal stories, used for critical professional purposes, enables me to draw deeper connections and see what shapes the knowledge that is produced. The stories I tell below aim to accomplish what Ellen Cushman calls “social reflexivity” instead of “self-reflexivity,” a narrative that is “less about the individual and more about the relations between the researchers and participants” (Brandt et al. 46). Below, I tell the essential stories of how this dissertation came to be, how I gained access to my sites of research, and the “passionate attachments” that come from my own embodied experience in order to bring, as Patricia Bizzell so eloquently states in the epigraph, “the person of the researcher, her body, her emotions, and dare one say, her soul, into the work” in a critical way (16).
Sites and Stories of Research

Because this project is a convergence of my own stories around a set of academic questions, I can’t untangle them from the lines of inquiry or the threads of my argument. I found one site in a search for answers. I found another while running away. To leave these origin stories out would omit a critical part of the narrative of the research, a narrative that shapes my arguments. Origin stories, in their many forms, describe a coming-into-being, a creation of a world. In these worlds—in the world of this dissertation in particular—these origin stories reflect the sociocultural contexts that converged around a set of academic questions. In my sites of research, I argue that the participants inhabit and negotiate a productive space between normativity and disruption in these sites of rhetorical education. Similarly, the stories that led me to my sites of research have their own tension between searching for new answers and running from past questions. My arguments are embedded in my own stories and methodological choices, and so I present them here as an integral component of my research—and besides, everyone loves a good story.

Site #1: Between Women (A Search for Answers)

I came to my first site of research in a search for answers. In the fall of 2008, I started my graduate program at the University of Illinois, leaving the mountains and valleys of Pennsylvania for the corn and soybean fields of the Midwest. At the same time, I also started living my life openly as a lesbian woman. For the record, I don’t recommend that many major changes at once—the ground underneath you will begin to shift too quickly and leave you feeling unsteady and perpetually trying to find your feet. When I came to Illinois, I vowed to be “out.” I decided that I would tell the new people I met that I was a lesbian. The first time was the worst, and I
nearly choked when I said, “my partner” to the first new friend I made. This happened more than once: I was so uncertain about the new rhetorical performances that were required of me that I found words sticking in my throat on their way out, restricting my breathing and giving me a slight stutter that was never there before. I sometimes found myself rehearsing simple sentences six or seven times before I could say them. I suddenly saw language used to mark me as deviant and position me as an outsider. I was facing hundreds of new questions, and I came to Between Women to find answers.

For two years I was a member of this support/discussion group, one of many who came to talk about their lives and experiences as LGBTQ-identified women.¹ In the fall of 2010, the two facilitators had to leave the group—one because she started a new PhD program in another part of the country, the other because she was making changes to her schedule to suit her expanding family. In order to keep the group running, I agreed to take over as a facilitator. After all, a lot had changed in those two years: I no longer found myself gasping for air as much and the ground under my feet felt considerably more steady.

When new members would ask about my role as facilitator, I would usually say that my job is simply to maintain the e-mail list and secure a confidential space to meet. While this is most of it, I am also responsible for what happens in the space, ensuring that confidentiality is maintained and working to facilitate conversation by checking in with everyone, asking questions, and making connections between people’s experiences, falling somewhere between an organizer and a sympathetic ear. I care about these women because the inspiration they have provided for my research makes them, to paraphrase Ruth Behar, angels in my path (175). I am also a member of this community of women—I am one of them. When they tell their stories,

¹ See chapter three for more on the history of the group.
they strike a chord with me: we nod. We know. Sometimes there are tears. Usually there is laughter. Always, though, there is the process of sharing with a sympathetic researcher, a process that can, as in Ellen Cushman’s “Activist Methodology,” be mutually beneficial and healing (The Struggle and the Tools).

My roles as both researcher and facilitator in this group were not mutually exclusive ones. Both required—for different reasons and toward different ends—that I maintain the confidentiality of participants, and that requirement of confidentiality provides a point of intersection for the two roles. My IRB authorization to conduct this study required that I protect the identities of participants by assigning pseudonyms and changing identifying details, and my position as a member/facilitator required that I do the same. While there are few set rules in Between Women and the topics for discussion remain up to the participants each week, the “one hard and fast rule,” as I told Kara in her first meeting in September 2011, “is confidentiality, because people are out or not out on campus.” Everyone was required to respect the confidentiality of the group members and were not allowed to mention people by name outside of the group in order to protect those who do not wish to be out on campus.

Even with permissions and safeguards in place, writing about a confidential group can present a considerable ethical dilemma. Beth Daniell faced a similar challenge in her study of Mountain City women’s literacy practices in the Al-Anon program. Some argue that AA and Al-Anon groups should be treated as secret, and Daniell acknowledges that those who view these organizations in that light would not approve of her work. Most importantly for Daniell, however, is the approval of her research participants. She writes, “my Mountain City friends are comfortable with my telling their stories as long as mine is the only anonymity I break” (A Communion of Friendship 23-24). Furthermore, she writes, “Once I began the project, the idea of
not disseminating what I was learning about these extracurricular uses of reading and writing never really seemed an option for me,” feeling both “pulled to tell the story and at the same time to protect [her] research participants’ anonymity” (24, emphasis in original). To that end, Daniell made strategic decisions about how much of her participants’ writing to share, choosing to omit certain kinds of writing on the basis that they are “too private to be published, revealing, as they would, both intimate and public details by which the women could be identified” (24). Because of my close relationship to the members of Between Women, the particular ethical challenges about what I chose to study were similar to those that Daniell faced, and my decisions about what to report were shaped by these relationships and the ethical obligations I felt to the women who so generously helped me with my research.

While Between Women is not guided by the strict rules and procedures of programs like AA and Al-Anon, the emphasis on confidentiality makes for an apt parallel. Like Daniell, I felt compelled to provide an opportunity for my participants to decide if something was too private to be a part of my research, offering them the opportunity to say when a meeting (or portion of a meeting) could not be used for research purposes. If they ever shared something that they did not want to see written about—even with all identifying details removed—they had the right to tell me so. While none of the participants took me up on this offer, providing this opportunity was one way for me to navigate the ethical dynamics of a confidential group, to avoid what Thomas Newkirk calls “the seduction and betrayal” of qualitative research. In “coming out” as a researcher who wanted to view these conversations through the lens of rhetorical education, I allowed participants the opportunity to decide what to conceal and reveal strategically if they chose.
Despite the ethical complications that my status as member/facilitator presents, that status is also the very thing that allowed me to have access to this site of research in the first place. Groups like Between Women are, in a sense, exclusive spaces: not everyone is welcome. In order to participate in this group, you must identify as a woman (trans or cisgender) and identify as LGBTQ(IA) or questioning. Without being a trusted member of the group, I would not have had the opportunity to study their conversations. In order to mitigate some of the effects of my close relationships with the members when analyzing the data, I let the transcripts sit for nearly a year before drafting chapter four. This allowed some much needed distance and had the effect of making the conversations feel new again because I could not rely on outside context to do my analysis—I had only the transcripts and my field notes to draw from.

Chapter 4 is the result of one academic year of data collection. From March 2011-April 2012, I recorded meetings of Between Women every Thursday, meetings which lasted approximately an hour and a half. There were eight members of the group: four who attended regularly and four who attended as their schedules permitted. My focus in this study is the four focal participants who attended regularly so that I could see patterns in order to draw conclusions about their rhetorical practices: Kara (a doctoral student in the physical sciences, in her early 40s), Whitney (a community member who holds an MBA, in her mid-20s), Paula (a graduate student in social work, in her late-20s), and Irene (a graduate student in the humanities, also in her late-20s).

In order to analyze the data in this study, I based my analysis on a constructivist approach to grounded theory drawn from the work of Sociologist and Faculty Writing Program director Kathy Charmaz and the work of literacy researchers Kerrie R.H. Farkas and Christina Haas. Grounded theory is less a theory and more an approach to data analysis that builds theories
grounded in data. These theories “must of necessity arise from the situated particular: localized and specific detail, or data” (Farkas and Haas 81). This method is particularly suited to this project because the constructivist approach assumes that the researcher is a part of what they study, and that we “construct” our theories through analysis. Even though “grounded theorists often refer to theory as ‘emerging,’ emergence really is a metaphor for the interpretive and constructive work of theory building” and does not refer to the positivistic idea that there is an external reality waiting to be discovered by the researcher (Farkas and Haas 81). This approach gave me a way to systematically organize and analyze my data while recognizing that my role as the researcher actively shapes the process of data analysis and knowledge construction. In analyzing my relationship to the sites of research and describing how I arrived at my conclusions, I seek to make my assumptions and biases clear to the readers of my work, opening the pages of my research notebook, in a manner of speaking, for evaluation. Rather than making my work less reliable, academic, or “true,” this approach makes the always invisible situated, vested, interested nature of scholarly work visible.

After transcribing each Between Women meeting, I coded the data, narrowing my focus to conversations that pertained directly to LGBTQ identity. I coded these conversations by attaching labels that identified what was happening, writing analytical memos that began to put the data into dialogue and helped me to look at the relationships between codes. As I wrote memos and transcribed more meetings, I further refined the codes by identifying what specific kind of rhetorical education was happening. Chapter four presents an analysis of the three most frequently occurring categories that I put into dialogue with each other: developing rhetorical theory and frameworks, revising existing rhetorical theory and frameworks, and educating
others. In addition, I included short excerpts from other categories to frame the argument and provide narrative context.

My own stories are integral to this process of analysis and coding. In hindsight, I realize that when I first joined Between Women in a search for answers to all the new questions I found myself asking, what I was really looking for was a new way to talk about and frame my life. I see now that I was looking for a rhetorical education of my own, and so it is no surprise that that is exactly what I found in my research. Rather than an instance of confirmation bias, however, it is my own connection to the topic that allowed me to see that my own story as a part of a larger process. I was not the only one looking for answers, looking for ways to talk about my life. Many of the women—including those written about in this dissertation—were seeking the same. The story that led me to this site of research also allowed me to come to deeper insights about the development of rhetorical theory on the margins of university campuses. The story I have told is my own, but it is not exclusively so.

Site #2: Biblical Self-Defense (Running Away)

I came to my second site of research while in the process of running away. The truth is, I thought I might want to be a nun at one point in my life. This coincided, surprisingly or not, with a period of time when I was heavily involved in my local (Catholic) church communities, first in high school, then in college. But coming out had created a great schism: I found myself suddenly shut out by some close friends and former mentors. I didn’t think that anything about me had fundamentally changed, but to others it appeared so. Part of the reason why the ground had shifted so radically under my feet when I started my graduate program was because I walked away from the edge of that schism that had been created, ceasing to attend weekly Mass and say
the Rosary. The spaces that had been such a source of community and support for me were suddenly closed to my lesbianism, my feminism, and the “radical” ideas that I had been developing over the last few years. I found myself running away from religion, rarely pausing in my sprint to even look back. Never mind the twinges of obligation I still felt on Holy Days, or the tendency to cross myself when I was nervous. There was nothing there for me: I was done, I was running, and I was never going back.

Why, then, was I so intrigued by a workshop at Centerville’s 2013 Pride Festival called “Biblical Self-Defense for GLBTQs and Allies”? After all, the intersection of religion and sexuality had caused me quite a bit of personal trouble, but it turns out, it isn’t just me: there is a lot that tells us that religion and gayness are in compatible because gay people are not Christians and Christian people are not gay. While we know that this simply isn’t (and statistically can’t be) true, I, along with countless others, have been told that one identity simply isn’t compatible with the other, that they exist as mutually exclusive categories of binary opposition. One need only to look at the news to see evidence of this uneasy and often contentious relationship between LGBTQ and Christian communities, with religious groups typically being the most vocal opponents to any political issue concerning LGBTQ rights.

Furthermore, religion is a part of almost any contemporary political debate concerning sexuality: not just same-sex marriage and adoption, but also abortion, sexual assault, and access to birth control. What this intersection reveals is that whether or not you personally identify as a religious person, religion—particularly conservative Christianity—is shaping political discourse on these issues in ways that are almost impossible to escape. I say “impossible to escape” quite deliberately because even as someone who thought they left behind a religious upbringing, I found myself intrigued by the title of the workshop, by the promise that there was a way to
intervene in religious discourses and a way to defend yourself against accusations of sin and
deviance based in the Bible. Here was a religious woman—a pastor, no less, which is still a
pleasant surprise to this Catholic-raised woman—who was challenging the narrative that religion
and LGBTQ identity were irreconcilable. Moreover, this sounded to me like a perfect example of
the kinds of sites of rhetorical education I was interested in, the sites located on the margins of
larger institutions where people could learn to make important interventions through literacy and
rhetorical practices. And what interventions are more important than the ones that get at the heart
of issues with great personal and political importance for such a large number of people?

A few weeks before Pride, I contacted Pastor Lauren Miller-Smith quite out of the blue to
ask her if I could observe the workshop as part of my dissertation research, explaining to her my
interest in similar “alternative” sites of rhetorical education in the LGBTQ community. Though I
had never met her, she graciously gave me permission to attend the workshop as an observer.
Throughout the hour-long workshop, I furiously scribbled field notes, watching with some
degree of awe something I had never seen before: a female pastor (the Catholic Church is
decidedly against such a thing) showing a captive audience how to form arguments against
biblically-based attacks on their sexual identity (also something the Catholic Church is decidedly
against).

During this workshop, I was only able to report on Pastor Miller-Smith and her teaching,
not on any of the workshop participants and what they might have done with what they learned.
The workshop was open to all attendees of the Pride Festival and did not require anyone to
register in advance. Since we had no way of knowing who might attend, I had no opportunity to
introduce myself to the group in order to secure permission to talk with them and report on their
interactions within the workshop. Arriving with a stack of permission forms as a stranger,
without having an opportunity to establish a trustworthy ethos of my own, would have been wholly disruptive, especially in a space where no one is expecting to become a research participant. For that reason, this chapter focuses only on Pastor Miller-Smith’s teaching.

This methodological decision, I argue, extends feminist scholars’ concerns with ethical qualitative research by considering “adequacy”: what data is “adequate” enough for you to draw substantial conclusions while still respecting the communities you are researching? While I was unable to study the ways Pastor Miller-Smith’s lessons traveled beyond the confines of the workshop to be used in the participants’ lives, studying her rhetorical curriculum still offers valuable insights because it is part of a larger body of work. Her workshop is similar to a number of initiatives whose aim is to foster the integration of religious and sexual identity through queer literacies. Groups like “Believe Out Loud” and “Would Jesus Discriminate?” provide information on and justification for LGBTQ-inclusive Christianity, and queer theologians have, for many years, worked to deconstruct essentialist understandings of sexuality and gender as they relate to religious faith and practice. Since the material in the workshop did not originate with Pastor Miller-Smith herself and is part of a larger tradition, this case study serves as a “little narrative” of queer literacies, providing an opportunity to examine literacy practices at the intersection of sexual and religious identity. Studying the curriculum—even without knowing how it was used by the participants of the workshop—allows us to see the pedagogies that are shaping the literacy practices that enable people to intervene and participate in conversations with great cultural and political importance.
**Concluding Thoughts**

Taken together, the two sites of research that make up this dissertation offer different methodological challenges, and investigate different facets of the rhetorical curriculum of coming out. The methods in “Biblical Self-Defense for GLBTQs and Allies” are built on the premise of “adequacy” by accounting for the limitations that my position as an outsider to the community posed for my investigation of this space as a site of queer religious literacies. The methods for Between Women, on the other hand, require a fuller accounting of my role in and relationship to the group and how that shaped my investigation of the development of rhetorical theories and frameworks. Both cases show the importance of critically analyzing the role of the personal acknowledging our perspectives not in an attempt to, as Gesa Kirsch argues, “overcome these limits—an impossible task—but to reveal to readers how our research agenda, political commitments, and personal motivations shape our observations in the field, the conclusions we draw, and the research reports we write” (14). Of course, this approach to research depends on a fair amount of serendipity and luck. For example, by giving the participants in Between Women the opportunity to omit conversations or information from my research, I opened myself up to the potential that my project would fall apart without conversations that formed a central piece of my argument. Or, while I argue that the data I gathered from the “Biblical Self-Defense for GLBTQs and Allies” was adequate enough to form an argument about these queer literacy strategies, the chapter would have, without a doubt, been fuller had I been able to interview the participants about the role this rhetorical education played in their lives, and how they had used these queer reading practices to form arguments in conversation with others or in their own process of forming identities as both LGBTQ and Christian. Furthermore, having the best of ethical intentions does not guarantee that you will not make blunders, that your research is
always and automatically better. The lesson we take away from engaging with these methodological questions is that despite the ethical complications present in our research, engaging with them directly has the potential to lead to richer, more nuanced research that brings these challenges to the forefront, rather than sweeping them under the rug in an effort to pretend they do not exist.
Chapter Three

How to Fight Biblical Textual Harassment: Queer Religious Literacies

If you stood outside the venue of Centerville’s fourth annual Pride Festival, you might not know that anything out of the ordinary was happening. There is little to indicate that there is any disruption to the usual activities of this small, Midwestern mall, that is, until you see a young teen wearing a Pride flag as a cape on her way through the door, or maybe you notice an unusual concentration of Human Rights Campaign bumper stickers in the parking lot. Although Centerville’s Pride may not be the kind of large, spectacular festival you might find in a city like San Francisco, New York, or Chicago, it represents a unique moment to celebrate the presence of LGBTQ lives in a community where they are typically rendered invisible.

Each year, Pastor Lauren Miller-Smith of the United Church of Christ has offered her “Biblical Self-Defense for the LGBT Community” workshop at this Pride Festival (see figure 1). This year, approximately twenty participants took a break from dancing, drag performances, and games to attend, making this event far more popular than any of the other workshops offered. As music from the festivities filtered in through the closed door of the conference room, Pastor Miller-Smith, accompanied by a colorful PowerPoint presentation, provided the audience with a set of strategies that constitute a queer reading practice, one that takes into consideration the social, political, and historical contexts under which the Bible was composed. In doing so, participants in the workshop came to see that

Figure 1
biblically-based justifications for LGBTQ oppression and discrimination reside in the way the Bible has been mobilized rhetorically in arguments, removed from its historical context of composition. Through the development of queer biblical literacies, participants learned to engage with audiences who use the Bible as a justification for anti-LGBTQ arguments and articulate an identity that disrupts the dominant narrative that LGBTQ and Christian identities are mutually exclusive, a narrative that infuses political discourse in powerful ways.

Over the course of the hour-long workshop, participants were taught to counter the biblical “clobber passages” (what biblical scholar Mona West calls a “defensive” strategy) and to disrupt and problematize the very category of “the Christian,” a category often positioned as having a stable, unified meaning (a destabilizing strategy). Taken together, the push and pull between these two strategies challenge deeply engrained ideas about the relationship between sexual and religious identities. And since sexuality and religion are deeply interconnected in a number of visible and highly contested political debates—including same-sex marriage, abortion, and birth control—queer reading practices take advantage of the instability of textual interpretation in order to engage in the complex rhetorical work such political debates require.

Religious and Sexual Literacies

Among the categories of identity that have received extensive attention in the “social turn” are religion/spirituality and sexuality/gender identity. Beth Daniell, writing about spirituality and religion, warns that “one consequence of our failure to examine such issues is the gaps it leaves in our knowledge” (“Composing as Power” 240), a statement strikingly similar to Harriet Malinowitz’s observation in her landmark study Textual Orientations: Lesbian and Gay Students and the Making of Discourse Communities: lack of attention to issues of sexual identity
is damaging “insofar as the silencing of any social group creates cognitive gaps for the whole community” (28). In an effort to fill in these gaps in our knowledge, scholars have argued for more nuanced understandings of the connections between spirituality, literacy, and academic discourse (e.g., Daniell, Moss, Rand, Ringer, Vander Lei) and have illustrated the ways sexuality is central to our understandings of what it means to be literate in a democratic society (e.g., Alexander, Regan, Wallace). Despite these rich bodies of scholarship, the relationship between sexuality and religion has typically been cast as a contentious one in both popular and scholarly treatments of the subjects, and are rarely brought together in conversation.

Recent scholarship, including a panel I participated in at the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication, is beginning to put sexuality and religion in conversation with one another in an attempt to overcome what Mark McBeth calls the “mutual and consensual distrust” or the “indecorous cacophony” that has put a stranglehold on conversation between queer and religious communities (“God Hates Fags...Fuck This Guy”). The intersection between sexuality and religion has an important place in studies of literacy and rhetorical education because of the ways the two discourses interanimate each other to “saturate ideological formations, inform individual and community lives, and shape persuasive possibilities,” playing a key role in contemporary political discourse (Geiger 249). There is no issue concerning sexuality—whether it be abortion, same-sex marriage, or access to birth control—that is unaffected by religious discourses. Given the ways sexuality and religion are interrelated, critical attention to extra-institutional sites of rhetorical education is necessary to understand the ways materially-consequential literacy and rhetorical practices are learned since such sites often provide opportunities to challenge commonplace ideas about writing, rhetoric, and their connection to identity. Bringing together work that is well underway from both queer theologians
and LGBTQ Christian organizations, the queer reading practice Pastor Miller-Smith advocates in her curriculum challenges binary arguments and rhetorical constructions of sexuality and religion, thereby creating new possibilities for those who hold both LGBTQ and religious identities. As an example of the curriculum of coming out, these queer reading practices negotiate between calling for inclusion into religious communities and questioning the normative assumptions that have traditionally formed the foundations of those communities.

“Who are you and why should we trust you?”: Constructing Ethos

Because of the ways religious discourses converge with issues of sexuality in the public sphere, Christianity has come to be viewed with suspicion in many sectors of the LGBTQ community, and with good reason: it is often “a tool used by the radical right for the imposition of certain moral beliefs on organized society” (Rand 350). One of the most enduring debates over the intersection of “homosexuality” and religion concerns nature and nurture (Caramagno 97). This debate “considers whether ‘homosexuality’ is a biologically or psychologically natural state, or whether it is the result of social and environmental factors ranging from parenting and the media, to confusion or personal choice” (Chávez 257). Of course, there is as much divergence in the beliefs of the conservative or evangelical Christian community as there is in the LGBTQ community, but some of the most vocal evangelical leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson fall on the “choice” side of the debate and have constructed the issue “as a deliberate and conscious choice that is both immoral and mutable” (257). Despite the variance in evangelical or conservative Christian beliefs, the view of LGBTQ identity as an immoral choice permeates social and political discourse, from the campaigns of the most visible and vocal politicians and the sermons of preachers in the smallest local churches.
The effects of this rhetoric are deeply felt in the LGBTQ community. While “anti-LGB bullying and hate crimes, in addition to the suicides of LGB people, may not be the direct and immediate results of the anti-LGB messages of conservative Christianity...the official discourse of many conservative Christian churches and schools certainly contributes to a culture where violence against LGB people is not only legitimized but also sacralized” (Spencer and Barnet 31). Thus, “to the degree that it serves the interests of hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy, and homophobia, religious anti-LGB rhetoric is complicit in the bullying, murder, and suicide of LGB people...Such religious messages, then, are more than merely rhetorical or even merely spiritual. They are material and consequential. They are toxic” (31). Conceptualizing this rhetoric as “toxic” highlights very real and very physical impact of conservative Christianity: much like chemical toxins, “rhetorical toxins are especially hazardous for marginalized populations who find themselves most frequently subjected to and unable to escape them” (38). Even if someone leaves a home life or church community structured by these rhetorics, they permeate political discourse in ways that everyone—especially those most marginalized—cannot escape.

Mel White, founder of Soulforce, an organization dedicated to changing the conversation around religion and sexuality, uses the metaphor “stranger at the gate” to capture the sense of estrangement that people who are both Christian and LGBTQ feel because of the dominant discourses surrounding religion and sexuality: “This metaphor reflects the feeling many LGB people of faith have of not fitting fully in LGB spaces because of their religious identities and not feeling comfortable in religious spaces because of their sexual orientation” (Spencer and Barnet 29). These feelings of estrangement and this contentious history were major themes at Centerville’s Pride Festival. At a number of information tables, local churches, including Pastor
Miller-Smith’s, went to great lengths to counter this image by advertising themselves as welcoming and affirming. One group, for instance, offered apologies for the ways LGBTQ people had been treated by Christians, while another brought a white “closet” door where people could write messages of support to LGBTQ people who were still closeted about their sexuality.

In light of this atmosphere, Pastor Miller-Smith began the workshop with a question: “you may be wondering,” she asked, “who are you and why should we trust you?” This question is an important one, especially since she is a heterosexual woman who is not a member of the community she is addressing. In order to establish herself as an effective and trustworthy leader for this workshop, she drew from personal experience and articulated her commitments to the LGBTQ community in her long history as a heterosexual ally.

At the age of 17, Pastor Miller-Smith first became a self-described “outspoken ally” when her school tried to fire a music teacher because he was gay. She continued this work by starting a Gay-Straight Alliance chapter at her undergraduate college and served as a pastor at several “open and affirming” churches. Her particular denomination, a United Church of Christ church in the heart of Centerville University’s campus, ordained the first openly gay minister in 1972, has been officially open to and affirming of LGBTQ people since 1995, and overwhelmingly voted to support “same-gender” marriage in 2005. By linking these two histories, she bridges her identity as an ally to the LGBTQ community with her role as a church leader. Pastor Miller-Smith’s introduction acknowledged the reality of the fraught relationship between Christian churches and the LGBTQ community, but fostered a sense of trust between herself and the audience by narrating a story that positions both her and her church as allies, not adversaries.
Pastor Miller-Smith built on the theme of trust by framing the first part of her lesson with a contrast between kinds of Christian identities. Her next slide read, “out of ignorance and fear, there are people who will use their Bibles as weapons against you.” The slide contained several pictures of the infamous Westboro Baptist Church and their placards reading “God Hates Fags,” “Turn or Burn,” and “No Tears for Queers.” She contrasted this slide with one that read, “though these people exist, it is important that you know there are also these kinds of people who will affirm you,” accompanied by pictures of Christian-identified people showing support for the LGBTQ community. One picture, for instance, showed a woman holding a sign that reads, “God blessed me with a gay son! Amen.” These visuals contradict the usual religious readings of gayness, turning what some groups of Christians view as a negative—using the language of “sin,” “deviance,” and “abomination”—into a positive, a “blessing,” with an ending like a prayer: “Amen.”

Though there is ample evidence that Americans’ attitudes toward LGBTQ rights are rapidly changing, especially among young people (e.g., “The Global Divide on Homosexuality,” “Poll: Attitudes Toward Gays”), Pastor Miller-Smith cited boundary cases like the Westboro Baptist Church to create a contrast that remains a reality in more than just the popular imagination. Though many participants are unlikely to actually engage with members of the Westboro Baptist Church, she uses them as an example to stand in for the imaginary audience of less extreme—though hardly less vocal—religious opponents. As Ralph R. Smith and Russel R. Windes contend in their analysis of pro-gay and anti-gay rhetorics, “strident versions of these [rhetorics] are more salient than moderate ones,” partly because antigay organizations “have a vested interest in making extreme statements, designed to capture the attention of potential donors” and partly because “progay advocates support claims that their antigay opponents are
fanatics by selecting for quotation their most extreme statements” (31). Therefore, evoking extreme organizations like the Westboro Baptist Church serves to set up a contrast against which Pastor Miller-Smith can establish the ethos of the members of the UCC church and other churches with similar viewpoints. By drawing this contrast between “types” of Christians (that is, those who view members of the LGBTQ community as “blessings” and those who view them as “abominations” or “sinners”), she resists characterizing Christians as a monolithic whole, drawing attention to multiple examples of affirming Christian communities. This allows Pastor Miller-Smith to align herself with the former in order to prepare the audience to engage with the latter. This introductory strategy serves a two-fold purpose: in combining the history of her church and her own life with visions of Christians and Christianity, she not only established herself as an effective leader for the workshop, but created a space for a relationship between Christian and LGBTQ identities, demonstrating that the two do not have to be mutually exclusive, regardless of how popular discourses may position them.

Despite the presence of Christian-identified people who may support gay rights or identify as LGBTQ themselves, the reality of a heterogeneous Christian population requires that LGBTQ-identified people be ready to encounter audiences who will levy biblical passages against them. Though many Christians affirm the lives of the LGBTQ community (like the woman calling her son a “blessing”), Pastor Miller-Smith offers the workshop to prepare people for accusations of deviance and abomination.

**Countering the “Clobber Passages” with Your “Blaster Shield”**

The “clobber passages” of the Bible are so named by queer Christian organizations because they are the passages most often used as weapons in an effort to exclude, marginalize,
and silence LGBTQ people. These few passages, according to biblical scholar Mona West, have turned “…the whole Bible into a text of terror because of the ways in which our abuse has been justified by the misinterpretation of a few obscure passages” (35, emphasis mine). In order to counter the use of the Bible and the clobber passages as texts of terror, Pastor Miller-Smith told participants, “arm yourself with the following information…I hope this information will be like a blaster shield that protects you from all the hate in the world” (emphasis mine). Clobber. Armed. Shielded. Protected. Because of the way these passages have been mobilized in religious and political discourse, these words reference the need for self-defense in a metaphorical war against the texts of terror, employing language that evokes the “armor of God” passage in Ephesians: “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (6:11, NRSV). Instead of standing against the devil, this armor, this “blaster shield,” provides both protection from arguments that exclude and marginalize LGBTQ people from Christian communities and enables the construction of counter arguments to wage their own attacks.

In total, Pastor Miller-Smith analyzed four clobber passages, teaching the audience to read contextually should someone use these passages in an argument against them. She encouraged the workshop participants to examine each passage through the lens of social, cultural, and historical context and to use that to form counter arguments. “You are reading something written a very long time ago,” she said, “so this context is your best weapon.” She called this context a “key” that can be used to question dominant understandings of biblical passages. These keys, far from imposing a new “correct” way of reading, opens the text to a new range of possibilities that show how unstable interpretation can be, and how this can be used advantageously.
The first passage she selected as an example is from the book of Leviticus. Leviticus 18:22 is part of a book that prohibits, among other things, eating shellfish, tattoos, and mixing cloth, but also includes the oft-cited phrase “you shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” (NRSV). The contextual “key” to open up and destabilize the interpretation of this passage is the purpose of the book of Leviticus. “It’s a purity code, written to keep people safe,” she told the audience. “It represented the worldview of a pre-science culture. It’s important to remember that these people were just trying to survive. They needed to procreate. So, anything that could kill you or not produce life…Forbidden!” Explaining the original purpose of the book of Leviticus is her way of positioning the text as serving a particular function, one that does not apply to a modern context. This passage is usually mobilized to prove LGBTQ relationships are morally wrong through emphasis on the word “abomination,” but this interpretation situates that passage in a cultural—not moral—framework, effectively taking away its strength as an argument.

Pastor Miller-Smith continued this strategy in the next passage she selects for scrutiny from the book of Timothy. In 1 Timothy 1: 8-10, the passage reads,

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching. (NRSV)

The reference to “sodomites,” classified here with other “unrighteous” people, is, according to Pastor Miller-Smith, an issue of a “mysterious Greek word translation.” For this passage, the
contextual “key” to open up interpretation is a complicated translation issue. She explains that the English translation of the original word, arsenokoitai (“ἀρσενοκοῖταί”), is something that Greek scholars contest. When it is translated as “homosexual” or “sodomite,” that is a decision on the part of the translator, and not a decision that all scholars agree with. In reality, there is no word in Ancient Greek equal to our contemporary understanding of “homosexual” because homosexuality itself is a modern construct.¹ Some scholars, Pastor Miller-Smith explained, think the word might have referred to a man paying for sex in a bathhouse, usually with a young boy, which, of course, is not the same as our contemporary understanding of consenting relationships between two adults.

Though the pastor is not a scholar of Ancient Greek (and she didn’t expect the participants to be, either), questioning translation is a powerful strategy that opens up the field of interpretation, as the very act of translating is an active decision and has a profound impact on the way we read and interpret texts. She explained, “Someone made a decision and now we have to live with it. People don’t think about the fact that they are passive recipients of someone else’s translation choice.” To argue that a very old text can be translated definitively is not just an argument over particular words, but with the whole scholarly tradition of translation studies and a number of experts who would say—and prove—otherwise. The ability to make this argument doesn’t necessarily require one to speak ancient languages or to have a deep level of expertise in

¹ Scholars of sexual history demonstrate that the concept of homosexuality did not exist prior to the work of the sexologists in late 19th/early 20th century and its subsequent dissemination into the public consciousness (D’Emilio and Freedman, Faderman). Lillian Faderman, for example, argues in her history of lesbian life in America that until the sexologists defined same-sex attraction as deviance or “sexual inversion,” there was only “the rare woman who behaved immorally, who was thought to live far outside of the pale of decent womanhood” (2). With the introduction of this concept, what was once seen as isolated cases of immoral behavior now became an abnormal sexual disorder.
matters of translation. Simply familiarizing oneself with these debates and being able to reference potential difficulties with translation enables workshop participants to challenge arguments that often hinge on a single word. This kind of challenge opens up interpretive possibilities, in contrast to relying on definitive translation choices, which closes those possibilities down.

“God Doesn’t Make Mistakes”: Disruptive Queer Reading Strategies

Countering the clobber passages is primarily a strategy that allows individuals to counter arguments for the exclusion of LGBTQ people from Christian communities. The queer reading practices in this workshop, however, go beyond the formation of arguments for inclusion that can be used as defense against attacks. After presenting workshop participants with potential defenses against the clobber passages, Pastor Miller-Smith shifted her focus to the ways queer reading strategies can ultimately challenge what it means to be a Christian by reading the Bible through a queer lens and constructing queer identities for biblical characters.

This turn toward deconstructing essentialist understandings of Christianity echoes the efforts of scholars in writing studies to use queer theory as a theoretical foundation to critique and disrupt normativity as it appears in and influences both teaching and scholarship (e.g., Alexander and Wallace). In calling for the inclusion of queer critique and attention to sexuality, it is important to re-emphasize that this is more than just a call to add another set of “diverse” voices to our already crowded research and teaching agendas. In fact, Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes argue that we should leave the practice of inclusion behind altogether because, in their words, “…it is one thing to include diverse identities and stories; it is quite something else to undertake systematic analyses that complicate our understanding of how
people experience the world differently—both rhetorically and materially” (“Flattening Effects” 434). The second part of Pastor Miller-Smith’s workshop can be read through this lens, as she ultimately calls for the transformation and disruption of understandings of religious identity and the way people engage with religious texts.

The story of David and Jonathan is often held up as a male friendship that exemplifies the ideals of brotherly—and, of course, utterly platonic—love. When read through a queer lens, however, the pastor shows how this traditional reading is unstable when the reading is situated in historical and social context. After David defeats Goliath with only a slingshot and returns to Saul’s court, “the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David” and Jonathan gives David his armor and cloak (1 Samuel 18:1, NRSV). We know from historical context, Pastor Miller-Smith argued, that a soldier’s armor was considered a prized possession, a symbol of status. Furthermore, the Bible says that “[Jonathan] loved him as his own soul” (1 Samuel 18:1, NRSV) and she argued that if David were a woman and Jonathan had given her his most prized possessions, surely we would consider this to be a great love story. Much like her argument about the translation of 1 Timothy 1, it is important to note that she is not arguing that David and Jonathan were a gay couple in any contemporary sense of the term, especially because this concept only emerged in the late 19th century. Rather, she queers their relationship in a move that destabilizes heteronormative interpretations, opening up interpretive possibilities when read through this lens.

She uses this same queer reading technique in the story of Ruth and Naomi, drawing linguistic parallels between the book of Genesis and the book of Ruth. After losing their husbands, Ruth and Naomi stay to make a life together instead of returning to their families, a risky decision in a culture where women had no social standing outside of their relationships to
men. Ruth “clung” to Naomi, making a vow in a passage often read at (heterosexual) weddings: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1: 15-17, NRSV). The key to Pastor Miller-Smith’s queer reading lies in the verb “clung.” It is the same Hebrew word used to talk about Adam and Eve: the “way Adam felt about Eve” is the “way Ruth felt about Naomi.” After God creates Eve in the book of Genesis, the Bible says, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (2:24, NRSV). In drawing attention to the fact that the same word was used for the relationship between a man and a woman as the relationship between two women, she disrupted a heteronormative interpretation of Ruth and Naomi’s relationship. Like David and Jonathan, though, she did not assert that the women were lesbians in the modern sense of the word. “Were they a couple?” she asks. “I don’t know. But the fact is, in a society that said you shouldn’t make a life together, they did. That’s telling, regardless.” Drawing on linguistic and historical context, Pastor Miller-Smith underscored both the significance of the language used in their relationship and the fact that their decisions run counter to established cultural expectations. Taken together, these strategies can be used to destabilize traditional conceptions of biblical relationships.

In addition to constructing queer identities for biblical figures, she identifies several passages that can be read as affirming queer identities. One of these passages is Galatians 3:28, which reads, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (NRSV). She says, “our human divisions are called into question,” and argues that this passage can be used to demonstrate that there is no reason to exclude anyone from a church community, and what she sees here is a story of “inclusion…of radical, full inclusion.” This is not, however, the kind of inclusion that queer
scholars in our field are actively working against, but an actual breaking down of important identity categories (“male and female,” for example). Similarly, she references a passage in Acts 8:26-40 where an Ethiopian eunuch asks Philip, “what is to prevent me from being baptized?” and Philip replies, “nothing” and baptizes him. She believes this passage can be particularly affirming for trans people because one of the most meaningful rituals in Christianity—an initiation into a community of faith—is open to everyone, regardless of gender identity (or, by extension, sexual orientation).

In moving away from constructing arguments for defense, this queer reading strategy authorizes multiple interpretations of biblical passages that challenge unquestioned textual authority. Pastor Miller-Smith doesn’t argue that you can say the text means absolutely anything you want it to, but that there is a way to read it historically, to look at its authorship and the factors affecting translation, all of which open up a wide territory for interpretation. Her queer biblical literacy practices illustrate that there is more than one way to ground arguments, more than one possible interpretation. Unlike those who would use the Bible to offer interpretations that foreclose those possibilities against LGBTQ people, her strategies open up interpretive possibilities. This strategy facilitates a vision of LGBTQ people as full and equal members of Christian communities, not as people who should either be fully excluded for engaging in “abominations” or partially excluded because of a “love the sinner, hate the sin” philosophy, but

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2 Philips’ reply of “nothing” is Pastor Miller-Smith’s narration/interpretation of this passage. The actual text reads, “As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?’ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down to the water, and Philip baptized him” (Acts 8:36-38).

3 Scholars have pointed out that this philosophy is an attempt to reduce accusations of hate: “In response to the charge that they are hate-filled bigots, many antigays strive to project an image of moderation and political centerism. For example, antigays attempt to establish a benign public image by playing on the notion of loving the sinner but hating the sin” (Smith and Windes 34).
as people who can challenge seemingly fixed categories of identity that uphold and underpin
traditional Christian views of family, sexuality, marriage, and gender roles.

**Exclusions of the Queer Religious Curriculum**

A number of organizations that work to counter anti-gay religious rhetorics through
similar tactics have been critiqued for being complicit with evangelical rhetoric because their
rhetorical approaches reduce the range of possibilities for LGBTQ identity formation. Karma R.
Chávez’s work on Soulforce, a large organization dedicated to countering anti-gay religious
rhetoric through nonviolent resistance, shows how they rely primarily on essentialist
understandings of LGBTQ identity to counter anti-gay religious rhetorics, therefore allowing
“evangelicals to set the parameters for discussions on sexuality” (255). In doing so, Soulforce is
not “representative of the experiences of many people it purports to represent” (258). Chavez
herself was interested in their initiatives because, despite her membership in the organization,
she didn’t see herself in the narrative they created. Her scholarship works to revise their script
“by both being part of the struggle and finding ways for Soulforce to be more representative of
people like me” (258). By accepting the choice/non-choice binary, where LGBTQ identity is
either a psychological/biological phenomenon determined by nature (non-choice) or a cultural
phenomenon determined by nurture (choice), Soulforce limits the range of LGBTQ experience in
a way that is complicit with harmful evangelical rhetoric. Subsequent scholarship has illustrated
the ways that Soulforce’s later initiatives present more rhetorically complex visions of sexual
identity (e.g., Spencer and Barnett), but many initiatives across the country still rely on an
uncritical celebration of a “natural” LGBTQ identity.
In Pastor Miller-Smith’s two-part workshop, she makes occasional gestures to this choice/non-choice binary. The third clobber passage she examines comes from Romans 1: 26-27, and is the only instance where women are mentioned at all:

For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same ways also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. (NRSV)

In this passage, same-sex relations are characterized as “unnatural,” “degrading,” and “shameless.” The contextual key that she provides offers an alternate reading. She argues that the real issue here is “orienting to your orientation,” that is, doing what is natural for you. The people under discussion in this passage were those who had converted back to Paganism and were participating in the accompanying rites. These people were presumably heterosexual, but under the influence of these rituals engaged in same-sex relations. It was the fact that they had turned away from a Christian God that caused them to go against their “natural” sexual orientation. Pastor Miller-Smith again points out that the Bible was written before we had scientific knowledge of the world, and so she argues that it is easy to get caught up on the word “natural”: “In a pre-scientific context,” she says, “when people don’t understand that your orientation is who you are, you’ll get caught on that. The issue here is that people were not following who they were, not that their actions were inherently wrong” (emphasis mine). Here, the pastor understands the concept of (sexual) orientation to be inherently who you are, a natural, pre-determined quality of your life. She argues that the people in this passage were not
“naturally” inclined toward same-sex desire, and the punishment referred to in the passage is a result of going against their nature.

With the exception of her interpretation of that particular clobber passage, her queer literacies offer far less reductive rhetorical strategies to form arguments against LGBTQ exclusion from Christian communities, both because the second part of her workshop offers queer readings of the Bible that challenge normative religious readings, and because her work as a whole does not engage directly with questions of whether gayness is a cultural or biological phenomenon. Rather than engage with questions of whether being LGBTQ is a choice or not (and therefore acceptable or not), her workshop begins somewhere beyond that debate: people come to the workshop for ways to integrate their religious and LGBTQ identities and are taught how to do so, without exclusively engaging in a conception of identity organized around an uncritical choice vs. non-choice (natural vs. cultural) binary.

Of course, it is worth noting that even with the important interventions Pastor Miller-Smith’s curriculum makes into conversations about religion and sexuality, these conversations still exclude certain identities. One of Pastor Miller-Smith’s central claims is that the Bible can never capture the complexity of life in modern America because it is a text so deeply enmeshed in its social, cultural, and historical contexts of production. Recognizing this gap between where and when the text was produced and its current use in contemporary religious practice forms the foundation of these queer literacy strategies. At the same time, it is because of this gap between when the Bible was authored and contemporary life in America that there continue to be exclusions of some LGBTQ identities, and writing these identities in takes considerably more imagination. The readings of passages that she provides, when contextualized in biblical times, have to do with mostly same-sex relations between men, or in the case of the example from Acts
8:26-40, transwomen. There are few references to lesbians who, as women, would have been excluded from the culture of biblical-era bathhouses, nor are there any references to transmen who would not have been “eunuchs.” Like so much of the history of scholarship on sexuality, biologically-born women are largely absent from biblical passages about non-normative gender and sexuality, even though they are included in contemporary discussions of the same. Thus, these exclusions in what is an otherwise admirable rhetorical curriculum are not—and perhaps can not—be fully addressed, leaving space for these conversations—and their rhetorical curricula—to evolve.

Conclusion

Scholars who work at the intersection of queer theory and writing studies argue that it is simply not enough to include LGBT/Q people in our research or our teaching, because, as Mark McBeth pointed out in his 2014 CCCC talk on the history of the Queer Caucus, “we’re here, and getting used to it doesn’t cut it anymore” (“Putting the ‘QQ’ in LGBT”). Instead, scholars who are interested in the transformative potential of queer work are interested in the ways that we can use queerness as a lens to challenge normativity and anything considered “normal,” “given,” or “natural.” Merely including queerness, Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes argue, can result in a “flattening effect” where crucial differences are elided in favor of narratives of common humanity. They argue we should instead proceed with “both a recognition of our common humanity and a strong critical sense of our radical alterity, of the critical differences that exist among different people’s and different groups’ experiences of the world” because “collapsing distinctions in our experience of equality and justice in order to narrate the story of
our common humanity runs roughshod over the very critical stories that show us systems of inequality and injustice at work” (“Flattening Effects” 431, 443).

The particular approach to developing queer literacies in this workshop illustrates an example of the productive tension between both tendencies. While the defensive strategy of countering clobber passages may represent a more conservative, less transformational rhetorical impulse (much like inclusion), silencing the “texts of terror” is still a necessary use of these literacy strategies. Countering the clobber passages to argue for inclusion is the performance of a strategic essentialism for people to whom it is important to continue being members of religious communities. It may be unfortunate that it is still necessary to make these arguments, but as long as the clobber passages are being mobilized against LGBTQ people and carrying significant weight in the political arena, then this strategy is still needed.

This does not mean, however, that we wait for disruption until defense is no longer needed, if such a point in time could even be imagined. In the meantime, reading the Bible for affirmation and constructing queer identities for biblical characters moves toward transformation and disruption, questioning interpretations of the Bible that rely on heteronormative worldviews and ideologies, calling into question what makes a Christian, a marriage, a family, and other similar issues that are at the heart of contemporary political debates. In that way, this is not just about winning or losing arguments or convincing people to stop excluding or bracketing the participation of LGBTQ people in Christian communities, but about creating new narratives of Christianity, of challenging the meaning of important categories like Christian, or family, or woman, or man. The interplay between these literacy strategies allows us to see where work still needs to be done, and where we can transform more foundational understandings of seemingly naturalized categories. The interplay between constructing arguments for defense and
destabilizing conventional norms in this workshop illustrates the complex, overlapping, intersecting work of queer literacies, in both their merely inclusive and wholly transformational forms.

When the workshop comes to a hurried end because the next group is waiting to use the room, Pastor Miller-Smith sums up her presentation while handing out additional literature. “I hope that when you leave and feel like this,” she says, snapping to a picture of an angry man yelling at a gay couple, “I hope you can return to this [workshop], knowing what the Bible really says, and know that God did not make a mistake.” In a world where religious groups may be some of the most vocal objectors to LGBTQ rights, many LGBTQ people have experienced great pain and ostracism from religious communities. For those who wish to have connection to those communities, the workshop gives them a way to read an important religious text and find themselves in it as a way of affirming dual identities as Christian and LGBTQ, while painting a more complex picture of these identifications. Moreover, it allows them to engage with audiences who would challenge those connections, that place of belonging in religious communities. In this site of rhetorical education, participants learned to see that the ostracism and oppression they have experienced is not inherent in the Bible itself, but in the way it has been mobilized in arguments. Such arguments are their own rhetorical strategy, and no one is powerless to combat that. There are no “mistakes,” as Pastor Miller-Smith emphasizes in her conclusion, but a space for the fullness of everyone’s lives, and the recognition of that fullness can be a productive space for future change. As people gather their things and file out the door, a few stay behind to ask additional questions, eager to continue the conversation. As I leave, I also feel their eagerness, and I wonder what further conversations these queer literacies can generate.
Chapter Four

“Whoever wrote this, I’m going to write them a letter”:

Challenging Institutional Discourses of Sexuality Through Queer Rhetorical Pedagogies

Kara arrives to the weekly meeting of Between Women fired up about a recent discovery: while at the Counseling Center for a meeting, she noticed that among the center’s client education pamphlets is one on coming out. She noticed the pamphlet contained a section where the authors describe sexual identity as a continuum, an image that evokes Dr. Alfred Kinsey’s Kinsey Scale. Though this is a fairly common metaphor to describe sexuality, it is one that Kara has always had some difficulty understanding and applying to her own life. She describes how she prefers to think of a day time/night time image with gradients in between. This is a revision that allows for more variation because, while still a binary of sorts, it contains more transitional moments of time (I elaborate further on these revisions later in this chapter.) As a group, we compose out loud an imaginary letter to the writers of this pamphlet. “Dear Counseling Center pamphlet people,” I begin, “I would like to suggest the following revision.” With a laugh Kara adds, “we’re peer reviewing—your pamphlet is undergoing peer review,” and “this confused me and did not help,” Paula quips. Though this letter is an imaginary composition, they are definitely intrigued by the contents of this pamphlet. Paula asks skeptically, “how do you fit coming out into one pamphlet?” (2-23-2012). Together, we decide that this document merits a closer look, and we make plans to bring copies to the next meeting for further discussion.

The critique and analysis of this pamphlet is one of many instances where the members of Between Women build their own rhetorical curriculum and theories to respond to institutional,  

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1 In this chapter, dates of meetings are listed in parenthesis to illustrate that the themes recurred over time.
societal, and familial discourses surrounding their LGBTQ sexuality. Drawing on a year-long qualitative study of Between Women, I argue that the members challenge and subvert those discourses through their own rhetorical curriculum by teaching and learning how to critique institutional resources and discourses through critical literacy practices, building rhetorical frameworks and strategies, and preparing to use their knowledge to engage with and educate others. Between Women, as a site that exists on the margins of the university, offers a space to challenge the ways the women are being taught to think and talk about their sexuality. By writing themselves into and revising the institutional scripts for understanding and talking about their sexual identities, they reclaim important sites of rhetorical education and literacy instruction at the university, illustrating their complex relationship to the institution that they are both a part of and yet remain critically apart from. This activity, I argue, creates a location for the development of more community-relevant rhetorical and literacy practices. While the rhetorical pedagogies they develop offer an opportunity to challenge normative and binary ways of thinking about sexuality, this case study also illustrates that the queer extracurriculum is not without tension and exclusions, reminding us of the importance of a critical eye toward the activities in the curriculum of coming out.

Sites of Rhetorical Education a Part of and Apart from the University

Between Women started as a support and discussion group in response to a perceived need for spaces that served LGBTQ-identified women at Centerville University. At the time (c. 2006), the many LGBTQ student organizations on campus were run by men, and the only LGBTQ women’s group consisted primarily of undergraduates and was mostly for socialization, not discussion and support. A graduate student in psychology and a professional in the Counseling Center teamed up to facilitate Between Women and opened it to both graduate and
undergraduate LGBTQ women. Their goal was to make it a discussion space to “exchange ideas, experiences, and opinions,” and “an opportunity to decrease the alienation and isolation of being a lesbian or bisexual woman in a majority heterosexual environment” (Hund). Over the course of the year that I recorded the weekly meetings, I had the opportunity to witness and participate in the rich rhetorical education that was a consistent part of the discussions. Interwoven with discussions of relationships, family, work, popular culture, homophobia, and political issues were detailed considerations of language and its implications for their lives.

One illustration of this was a recurrent discussion of the kind of linguistic maneuvers necessary to navigate concealing or revealing LGBTQ identity, captured by the image of the “closet,” a metaphor that tends to be at the center of many narrations of LGBTQ identity. At a meeting in October 2011, Irene tells the group, “It’s so difficult for me to imagine being in the closet [and] part of that is because I have no filter. I just don’t self-monitor before I say things, so I’m not very good at being in the closet” (10-6-11). Being “good” at being in the closet or rather, at coming in and out of the closet as the scenario demands, is one rhetorical situation LGBTQ people must navigate continually, and is a topic Irene brings up for discussion multiple times. Irene made this comment after a discussion of her artist partner’s search for a job. Depending on where she is applying, Irene says, Eleanor may or may not be able to safely disclose her lesbian identity. When Irene talks about helping her write artist statements and their process of creating multiple versions as a way to navigate being in or out of the closet, she tells us that her partner has a document that is “actually her statement” and another version where, even though her work focuses on immigrant and queer experience, uses “neither the word immigrant nor the word queer.” “It’s, yeah. Fun,” she says (1-26-12).
Irene’s experiences of coming out are somewhat unusual. Over the course of the data I’ve collected in Between Women, most of the women have dealt with this kind of rhetorical situation from the beginning, and do more than just, as Irene says, “have visions of it through [her partner] and just listening to other people” (10-6-2011). In a brief description of her coming out story, a story she elaborates on over several meetings, she says, “I’ve never had to do it…maybe if I had been gay in high school or known I was bi in high school that would have been an issue. And even there, I don’t think it would have been…And academia does make such a safe space, college and then grad school2” (10-6-11).

Being a graduate teaching assistant, however, has changed that for her. In not wanting to be out to her students, she was “nervous” about what she considers her first experience of being in the closet. She says, “this is the first time where I’m like, ‘oh, yeah. I have to think about this’—watch my pronouns or just not even bring up that topic [sexuality] because I’m not good at jumping around the pronouns” (10-6-11). Having been fortunate enough to be in too many situations where she did not have to make an effort to hide her partner’s gender, she didn’t develop an important rhetorical skill: “jumping around pronouns.” Her story illustrates how a simple, usually unacknowledged part of speech can have a big impact with a range of consequences. Pronouns, in this group, do more than just take the place of a proper noun: they are rhetorical choices that index a particular identity.

This issue with pronouns was a recurring theme in the discussions. Paula, a self-identified bisexual, references the difficulty of pronouns in thinking about her interactions with her colleagues at work and how to respond to questions about dating. If she was asked, specifically, about her dating life, she says she would “play the pronoun game” (a reference to Irene’s phrase

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2 See chapter five for a more detailed analysis of Irene and Eleanor’s stories.
“jumping around the pronouns”) in an effort to avoid disclosing the gender of her partner, especially if she was currently dating a woman (2-23-12).

Pronouns, as these excerpts illustrate, represent a complex rhetorical situation, are linked to bigger (and sometimes more serious) rhetorical choices, and their deployment often depends on audience and context. This talk about pronouns—about “games” and “jumping around”—illustrates the kinds of rhetorical choices the women had to learn to navigate, choices that are specifically linked to sexuality and/or gender identity, and choices indicative of the rhetorical education that takes place, as the members navigate the implications of linguistic and symbolic choices in their everyday lives.

At first glance, such activity appears to have only a tenuous connection to rhetorical education. After all, the group was established as an informal discussion and support space with no agenda, no curricular materials, no evaluation, and few texts—in short, none of the traditional hallmarks of educational spaces. Despite the absence of these more traditional educational elements and the lack of explicit engagement with rhetorical theory or literacy instruction, Between Women is a rich site for learning about both rhetoric and literacy, as this example of grappling with pronouns illustrates. Previous studies of “extracurricular” (Gere) or “alternative” (Enoch) sites have found that despite a lack of explicit training, these sites populated by marginalized people nevertheless includes rhetorical activity (Logan). This is because rhetorical education is not defined by the space or the resemblance to school, but rather, it “occurs at the intersection of symbol use and symbol reception. It informs both rhetorical production and rhetorical response. Sites of rhetorical education are located in those spaces where people and language and a need to communicate come together” (Logan 3). In this case, it is LGBTQ-identified people, their discussions of language, and a need to learn rhetorical and literacy
practices required of them to navigate a predominantly heterosexual world that create the need for these particular sites of rhetorical education.

Jessica Enoch’s work on teachers teaching Chicano/a, African American, and Native American students develops this idea further by defining rhetorical education as:

Any educational program that develops in students a communal and civic identity and articulates for them the rhetorical strategies, language practices, and bodily and social behaviors that make possible their participation in communal and civic affairs. Such a definition complicates the idea that rhetorical education leads to full civic involvement or that it maintains the status quo. (7-8)

While Enoch’s work focuses on sites with teachers, students, and other elements that are markers of institutional learning, her definition of rhetorical education is in line with my understanding of what happens in the curriculum of coming out. The activity in Between Women both disrupts and maintains aspects of the status quo, engaging with questions of identity, strategies, practices, and behaviors necessary for living in the world as an LGBTQ person, aiding in the development of what James Paul Gee calls “secondary discourses.”

“Whoever wrote this, I’m going to write them a letter”: Critiquing Institutional Resources for Coming Out

The coming out pamphlet is one prominent example of the ways the members of Between Women would create their own curriculum by bringing materials of interest with them to meetings. Over the course of two meetings, Whitney and Paula closely analyze the coming out pamphlet Kara found in the Counseling Center (Kara, despite her keen interest, was not able to

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3 See chapter one for a more information about secondary discourses and their connection to alternative sites of rhetorical education in the LGBTQ community.
attend the second meeting due to a scheduling conflict). Though they deem the pamphlet to be an inadequate support tool, such institutional artifacts are useful for generating rich discussions about language and fostering critical literacy practices that challenge the institutional support systems that are in place for LGBTQ people. By talking about the complexities of coming out and reflecting on their own experiences in relation to the discourses of the pamphlet, the women critically respond to and challenge the ideologies about coming out and sexual identity that the authors employ in their work. Though this particular pamphlet has since been updated both in print and on the Counseling Center’s website, the information was already far out of date and inadequate when the discussion took place in February and March of 2011, and yet the document was still widely available as a support tool for LGBTQ people on campus.

Paula began the discussion with a critique of the pamphlet’s approach to “coming out to heterosexuals”: “Coming out to others is likely to be a more positive experience when you are more secure with your sexuality and less reliant on others for positive self concept, [a] process that usually takes place over time,” she reads. She looks up from the pamphlet and says, “I feel like it would be more important to come out for support, you know, [not,] ‘oh, just hang out with yourself until you feel comfortable enough.’” Here, she uses her interpretation of the pamphlet’s advice to take a stance toward its approach, one that asserts what she sees as the central importance of support in going through the initial coming out process, not what she characterizes as “just hanging out with yourself.” Whitney points out that what the authors are probably trying to convey is that “if you have a bunch of negative reactions and you’re pretty insecure with yourself, you’re going to crumble.” At the same time, she assures Paula: “but, I see what you are saying.” After all, being “secure with your sexuality and less reliant on others for positive self concept” is sage advice for someone who might face resistance from their audience. While the
creators of this pamphlet probably didn’t think that this process was supposed to be a solitary one, they also do not suggest that the reader make finding support in other people a part of this process of coming to be “secure” with their sexuality. In Paula’s phrase “oh, just hang out with yourself until you feel comfortable enough,” she takes a stance toward how that advice could potentially come across, making an argument that this is not the best way to frame a discussion of the coming out process.

Paula continues to read another passage, this time taking note of the particular language choices: “Be prepared for initially negative reactions from some people, and do not forget that it took time for you to come to terms with your sexuality.” She shakes her head and says, “See? Even the phrase ‘come to terms,’ I don’t know that I care for.” When I ask her why, she says, “I don’t know. That’s still negative to me.” Whitney replies, “yeah, I’m trying to think if that phrase is ever really used in a positive sense. ‘Come to terms with your mother’s death.’”

“Right!” Paula replies. “Right. It’s not ever used in a positive way. [I don’t have to] come to terms that I won the lottery.” Whitney agrees, saying, “usually you come to terms with a death, or a separation. Something really horrible.” In their reading, Whitney and Paula deploy critical rhetorical analysis to highlight the connotations of a crucial phrase in this document. Whitney and Paula similarly object to the phrase “negative consequences” used in the “Coming Out to Heterosexuals” section (“It is at this step that you may feel most likely to encounter negative consequences”). “Negative reactions, maybe, but negative consequences? Really?” Paula asks. As Whitney continues to read the “Coming Out to Heterosexuals” section (which she calls the “gloom and doom where the het-ros make you feel like an outcast” section), she argues that the language choices made create a negative tone for the entire section, saying, “this is kind of depressing. I never really encountered all of these things. I’m like, ‘Oh, my God, I’m going to
get kicked out of my house and I’m going to lose my job, this is horrible!’” “These things” that the writers of the pamphlet are preparing you for include “loss of employment or housing” and that heterosexuals may be “shocked or confused initially,” all of which paint a pretty grim picture of a post-coming out future. And those consequences can be very real: in 29 states, it is still legal to fire someone for being gay. In an aggregate report on LGBTQ employment discrimination compiled by The Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation Law and Public Policy, 27% of LGB-identified people had experienced some form of workplace discrimination, with 7% reporting job loss as a result of their sexual orientation. For transgender people, the rates of workplace harassment are even higher, with as many as 78% of people reporting some form of harassment, and 47% reporting discrimination in hiring, promotion, or retention (Sears and Mallory).

However, Whitney’s reaction to reading this (“Oh my God…this is horrible!”) highlights that this is not the most reassuring way to frame this support tool because in many ways, these “negative consequences” are drastically over simplified. What about the potential good that can come from coming out? What about the unexpected allies, the potential for surprise, for new understandings, for change? What about, instead of painting this grim picture with a laundry list of potential “negative consequences,” they instead prepare the reader better for their individual rhetorical situation by asking the reader to evaluate what consequences are likely so they can prepare their response for those? Instead, Whitney and Kara’s critique stems from the pamphlet’s oversimplification, arguing that its approach does not adequately address the rhetorical situation of coming out.

Given that the audience for this pamphlet is probably composed of people who are struggling with coming out, Kara and Whitney point out that the use of positive and supportive
language would be a more effective way to address those strugglers and any (likely)
“consequences” or challenges the person will face. While part of the rhetorical situation for
coming out is considering the others they will encounter, the women present argue that the
person coming out should be, first and foremost, supported, and the language of this pamphlet
should reflect that. Even before we looked at the pamphlet in detail, Paula had ideas about the
kind of tone such a document should take at our initial meeting: “[I would just put], ‘it’s okay,
you’re okay’…‘Here’s a bunch of people to talk to. Call.’” This is consistent with her later
comments critiquing the “just hang out with yourself” approach: a person should be reassured,
first and foremost, and should be connected with supportive others. Doing so prepares them for
any potentially difficult interactions they may have later.

During the actual meeting where we discussed the pamphlet, Paula reads, “Be aware of
what the other person is going through. The best time for you might not be the best time for
someone else.” She responds by suggesting alternate phrasing that captures the sentiment behind
this statement, but puts the emphasis elsewhere: “I know you’re going through a really tough
time and if they don’t respond appropriately, remember that they might be going through
something.” “No,” she says jokingly, “[the pamphlet says] you should think about [them] first.”
Paula’s rewording changes the emphasis of the statement: it should be first and foremost on
supporting the person coming out, and secondly on the person they are telling, not the other way
around. This change alters the very framing of the process in a way that demonstrates both a
critical reading and a critical revision.

After critiquing the strategies presented in the pamphlet, Paula offers suggested revisions
that are consistent with her emphasis on support, affirmation, and resources that come from
within the community. In our initial meeting, she had expressed doubts that a pamphlet could
ever adequately address coming out, saying, “well, how do you fit coming out into one pamphlet?” (2-23-12). After critiquing the pamphlet’s approach, she offers a succinct piece of advice for the composers of this pamphlet: “[I feel like the coming out pamphlet] should be, ‘go visit the LGBTQ Resource Center.’ You know what I mean?...Instead of like, ‘I’m going to try and put this in a pamphlet.’” I follow this by saying, “well, your question, ‘how do you fit that in a pamphlet?’, yeah, what would I put in a pamphlet on coming out? I have no idea.” Paula laughs saying, “it would [say], ‘it’s okay, you’re okay…Here’s a bunch of people to talk to. Call.” Later, Whitney echoes this by saying, “everything’s all right. This is the year 2000 blah blah blah. Times are a changin’” (3-8-2012). Again, the emphasis is on the need for support that involves other people and comes from the LGBTQ community itself, a critique of the approach the pamphlet takes.

Of course, the authors of the pamphlet do offer additional resources, but since the pamphlet was twelve years old at the time of this discussion, those resources are similarly outdated. All of the books suggested are ten to fifteen years old, three out of the four community and campus organizations listed no longer exist, and the online “switchboard” chat feature was characterized by a visitor to our meeting as “pretty automated” (and therefore, not especially useful). It is important to re-emphasize, at this point, that this pamphlet is not the only resource available to LGBTQ students on campus. The LGBT Resource Center (the only organization listed on the pamphlet that still exists) is still in operation, and it provides a wealth of more relevant resources: support groups, student organizations, regular speakers, a DVD and book library available to students, even maps of gender-neutral bathrooms on campus. Thus, the point of this critique is not to say that the university doesn’t offer any relevant and useful resources to LGBTQ students, but that this particular resource—provided in a medium that is difficult and
expensive to regularly update—does not and can not capture the complexity of coming out or discussing sexual identity. It does, however, provide good curricular material to generate discussions of language and rhetoric, allowing for an opportunity to develop and practice critical literacy. This activity generates revisions not to be included in the pamphlet, but revisions that reflect a more nuanced understanding of the rhetorical situation of coming out. Between Women, a part of and apart from the university, provides a space for the development of more complex rhetorical education in the LGBTQ community, rhetorical education that substantially revises the scripts offered by widely available university resources.

**Between Women’s “Gay Agenda”: Developing and Revising Rhetorical Theories, Strategies, and Curricula**

The production of more nuanced literacy practices and rhetorical pedagogies was interwoven in the discussions during meetings. Since Between Women exists as an unofficial educational space, or an “alternative” site outside of the primary educational mission of the university, the structure is a flexible one. During these meetings, the members of Between Women co-created their own rhetorical curriculum, theories, and strategies, developed both in their own lives and during the meetings themselves, a curriculum that responds to and critiques discourses of sexuality from their families, acquaintances, and Centerville University as an institution. As a site of rhetorical education and inquiry, Between Women is also a site where the rhetorical curriculum comes from the community itself: they set their own agendas for meetings, build and revise metaphors necessary for the narration of their identities, develop rhetorical theories, and they prepare themselves to educate others, to take their knowledge and apply it to their lives outside of the meeting. The interwoven activity in Between Women captures both the
resources formed and the tensions produced in spaces where the curriculum of coming out operates.

The “gay agenda” is a phrase often invoked in the media, a phrase used to reference a supposed sinister plot on the part of the LGBTQ community to, in some cases, advocate for the acceptance of LGBTQ people, or, in its most nightmarish form, to actively “recruit” heterosexuals. Though not a term taken very seriously by (most) mainstream media outlets or political figures, members of Between Women often made their own references to this supposed sinister “gay agenda” as a way to make fun of anti-LGBTQ sentiment. Kara, for example, talks about wanting to start a queer prayer service at her synagogue, telling us “there’s a conspiracy afoot!” to do so, a conspiracy that, I tell her, must be “a subset of the wider secret homosexual agenda” (10-27-11). Similarly, when Whitney, an employee at a major department store, finds out her company had just hired a well-known lesbian woman to be their new spokesperson, she says, “I was so proud. I got a text from my gay co-worker and she was just like, ‘the gays are taking over! We are coming up! One store at a time’…I was like, ‘come shop at Major Department Store. We will turn you” (2-2-12).

Though these references to the “gay agenda” are always made in jest, I employ the word “agenda” here to capture both the explicit and implicit curricular practices that operated in the group to shape the rhetorical curriculum. On February 9th, Kara, Paula, and Whitney discussed the goals for the group, setting an “agenda” that included the creation of a new term for LGBTQ identity, wanting to learn “about random things,” and “recruitment” (a reference to a facetious plan to “recruit” heterosexuals, a play on the recurrent references to the non-existent sinister homosexual agenda). Though rarely explicit, the curricular agenda represents the two sides of the curriculum of coming out: the generative and disruptive potential for community-based
rhetorical theory and strategies, as well as the suppression of particular articulations of non-binary lives and identities in the service of uncritical normativity.

“We’ll just call ourselves the umbrellas”: Rhetorical Exclusion of Non-Binary Identities

As part of the conversation of group goals on February 9th, Whitney proposed that the group create a new “umbrella” term that would replace the cumbersome acronym “LGBTQ.” This conversation first appears, on the surface, to represent an impulse to create solidarity and unification among the members of the group. However, the discussion of this term ultimately illustrates tensions over non-binary identities and understandings of sexuality, tensions that played out on multiple occasions and are intimately bound up in particular uses of language that includes some identities and excludes others. In these discussions, we witness a rupture as what at first seems to be a simple discussion of a term turns to a conversation that reveals reductive, binary ideologies that shape conceptions of sexual identity.

Early in the meeting on February 9th, Whitney admits that she tends to generalize, using “lesbian” as a broad term for “ladies who love ladies,” subsuming bisexual (and, I would argue, trans or queer) identities in the process. “Otherwise,” she argues, “there's too many names. I'm just like L, G, B, T, Q, BLT, blah blah…I wish they would just come up with a new term. I think we just need to, we need to create our own term” (2-9-12). Later, she suggests this be “an umbrella term for everyone” saying, “We'll just call ourselves umbrellas. The umbrellas.” At first, she argues that her broad use of the term lesbian is only a matter of sidestepping a more cumbersome string of letters and her proposed “umbrella term” would solve that problem by creating a group identity that unifies and includes all non-heterosexual identities under one term.

However, the cohesion indicated by this new proposed term is not always actually present,
despite the way this term at first seems to address the problem of subsuming identities by unifying all non-heterosexual sexual identities. This is best illustrated in the recurrent tensions over discussions of bisexuality, the very conversation that spurred the creation of the “umbrella term.” After Whitney says that she uses the term lesbian to “generalize,” Paula says, “I feel like I have to out myself that I, I'm not, I don't identify as lesbian, but bisexual,” to which Whitney replies, “okay. Bisexual. That's acceptable.” Paula continues: “All this lesbian talk I just wanted to make sure before you offend me.” Whitney quickly jumps in to clarify, saying, “No, that's perfectly fine! No, no, no, no, that's fine. I'm only against the bisexuals who turn out to be straight. This is the only thing that I'm against. Completely, perfectly fine.” Later, she tells us, “my history with bisexual girls is horrible, but I still try to remain open minded” (2-9-12).

As self-identified bisexuals within the group⁴, both Irene and Paula struggled with negative perceptions of bisexuality, from both inside and outside the LGBTQ community. Irene, for example, recalled a lesbian and bisexual discussion group she was part of as an undergrad, where she discovered “there's this assumption…that bisexuals are untrustworthy in some way” because “they might become straight at any moment and then they won't care about our issues anymore” (11-3-11). Irene’s bisexual identity was erased in the context of this group that, while supposedly open to both lesbian and bisexual women, was shaped by a group consensus that bisexuals are “untrustworthy” because of their multiple attractions. Paula has had similar experiences, citing an experience where she needed to counter the assumption that bisexuals are automatically non-monogamous: after telling a man she was dating that she was bisexual, he said, “I wouldn't want you going off to be with a woman while you're with me,” which Paula interprets as “pretty much

⁴ In the interview discussed in the conclusion, Irene describes herself as “97% straight” during our conversation, but identified as bisexual in the meetings of Between Women and other settings in her life (such as the lesbian and bisexual discussion group she participated in as an undergraduate).
the stereotype that you wouldn't be monogamous or that you could date a guy or a girl at the same time” (11-3-11).

Similar tensions were present within the group, and the exclusions played out rhetorically in the use of language. Despite Whitney’s insistence that she tries to remain open-minded about bisexuals and her desire to create an inclusive “umbrella term” for all non-heterosexuals, she repeatedly excludes bisexual identities. When, for example, she describes going to Pride with some of her straight friends a few months later, she automatically includes a bisexual friend who is married to a man under the label “straight”:

*Whitney:* I went to Pride last year with all my straight friends…well, there's one bisexual, who's married. She’s polyamorous. I don't know why I discount bisexuals, like when they get married I immediately am just like, "you know, you’re bisexual," but I don't include them in my people.

*Paula:* [She’s] married to a man?

*Whitney:* Yeah. They got all hetero'd.

*Paula:* That's not fair, though. They still live the life.

*Whitney:* Oh, I know. I know. But that's why I'm like, "I go with my straight people" and then I'm like, "oh, and there's a bisexual." I included her (3-29-12).

This inclusion of her bisexual- and polyamorous-identified friend as one of her “people” is an afterthought, with the rhetorical exclusion of bisexual/polyamorous people in heterosexual partnerships as a “them” (not part of the LGBTQ community) in contrast to the “us” (those in same-sex relationships). The discussion of the “umbrella term” when juxtaposed with the recurrent tensions over bisexuality illustrate the ways that uncritical performances of normativity can reinforce binary ways of thinking about identity, and this can happen even in a space where
the curriculum is created by the LGBTQ community, for the LGBTQ community.

Revising the Continuum Model of Sexuality: Metaphors for Navigating and Narrating Sexual Identity

The tensions that play out over understandings of LGBTQ identity are, as we saw in the above example, sometimes an instance where the curriculum of coming out tends toward uncritical normativity, without the kind of nuance needed to navigate being an LGBTQ person in the world. At times, discussions of other terms or metaphors do the work of nuancing and complicating experiences of sexual identity. Specifically, discussions of metaphor aid the women in narrating and working through the nuances of their sexual identities. Since metaphors are so important to explaining and narrating sexuality, we need more critical attention to the ideologies about sexuality that these metaphors implicitly and explicitly promote.

As we saw in the introduction, the coming out pamphlet employed a continuum metaphor as a way of thinking about sexual identity. This metaphor evokes the Kinsey Scale, a 0 (exclusively heterosexual) to 6 (exclusively homosexual) spectrum to describe sexual orientation (“It helps to think of a sexual orientation continuum that ranges from exclusive same-sex attraction to exclusive opposite sex attraction”). While the Kinsey Scale doesn’t cover all elements relevant to sexual identity (gender identity, for example, is not a factor), a spectrum (or continuum) is a common way to think about sexuality, and can also be a useful metaphor to avoid exclusively binary treatments of sexual orientation. One is not just gay, straight, or bisexual, but could conceptualize their sexual orientation as, for example, predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual, or predominantly homosexual, but only incidentally heterosexual. This kind of metaphor captures more (though not all) of the
complexity of sexual orientation and, in a document aimed at people who might be having
difficulties “coming to terms,” as the authors of the pamphlet say, with their sexual orientation,
allows for more variation and nuance without having to claim one extreme (exclusively
homosexual) or another (exclusively heterosexual).

Even though this metaphor is a common one, not all of the women completely understood
it or found it to be applicable to their own lives, as we saw in the opening narrative about Kara.
As a result, they spent a considerable amount of time revising it over the course of two meetings.
This particular revision activity differs significantly from the rest of the critiques of the
pamphlet. Those critiques focused on revisions that would make the pamphlet more generally
helpful to a broader audience that is starting to come out for the first time. These revisions,
however, use a discussion of the continuum metaphor as a springboard to discuss the nuance and
complexity of their own understandings of sexual identities and, by extension, ideologies. This
discussion illustrates the importance of metaphors in the process of understanding sexual
identity, as well as the importance of rhetorical negotiations in this process.

It is Kara who first brings up the continuum model of sexuality for discussion. After seeing
it in the pamphlet, she tells us, “I’ve had the hardest time with this idea forever. How do you
have a continuum?…I don’t know.” As she started thinking about it more, she revised the image
in her head to a metaphor that, instead of using numbers on a line, instead thinks about time:

\begin{quote}
Kara: You have daytime and you have nighttime. But you have sunrise and
sunset. So, you have night and day, but then you have, those are really opposites,
right? That’s how we think of night and day. But yet you have sunrise and sunset.
You have high noon, you have a full moon, you have no moon in the sky, you
have all of these different ways of thinking about night and day. And that was my
\end{quote}
breakthrough. That’s the only way I can understand it, but it helped. (2-23-12)

This metaphor still, in some ways, relies on the Kinsey model of anchors on either end (night and day), but differs in that it allows for far more variation not just between day and night as opposites, but for different conditions that affect day and night (a full moon or a moonless sky, for example, are both conditions of night, but are different experiences of nighttime). She further elaborates saying, “And then you have weather. Climate change. Climate change definitely explains your sexual orientation, your gender identity. Is it raining? Yes. We’re good.” Her image of time also allows for weather, conditions that also affect how daytime and nighttime are experienced.

This is a model that makes more sense to Kara, and helps her to conceptualize her own sexual orientation because of the ways it not only allows for gradients, but because of how it allows for conditions to affect those gradients, something that we see in the stories of her own life that she narrated over the course of many meetings. A continuum doesn’t account for gender identity, which is a factor (or, perhaps, a “weather condition”) that affects her understanding of her sexual orientation and her decision to use particular labels. In the fall, she tells us that she’s “gone through the range of identifying as a lesbian, as a gay person, whatever—what label fits” because of both her experiences in coming out and her perception of her gender identity (11-3-11). When she first came out to her mother, an experience she characterizes as “traumatic,” she didn’t use the term lesbian because she “was still interested in men.” Instead, when her mother asked her if she was a lesbian after Kara shows her a pair of wing-tipped shoes she just bought (“I was really excited. They were burgundy, they were snazzy, I thought I looked good in them”), she “freezes up” and says, “well, I wouldn’t say lesbian…I would say I’m not straight.” Kara describes the ensuing conversation as “very debilitating. I don't even know if that's the best
word to capture how I felt, but it was completely, de-legitimizing any kind of non-heterosexual love or experience.” Thus, when thinking about her identity and how to narrate it, she contends with how to capture both sexual and gender identity. She tells us she’s “on queer right now” as a label, but also thinks about “transgender in an appearance sense,” but admits: “I don’t think I identify at all as—I don’t feel like a man, so I’d, I’d have to research that idea.” Her initial difficulty with the continuum model of sexuality is probably because it didn’t quite capture all of the factors that affect her sexual and gender identity. With the addition of weather, however, she could think of conditions (gender) that affect time (sexuality), a model that relies less on binary anchors.

When Kara asks Paula what she thinks of her model, Paula replies, with a laugh, “I don’t think in continuums, is what I’m realizing.” When I ask her how she thinks of sexual identity or orientation, she says, “I don’t know. I don’t see it as—I just see a bunch of different, everywhere. I don’t see there’s one thing and there’s another and there’s all these things in between. There’s just a bunch of different kinds of people and different types of identities. I don’t, yeah, I’ve never thought of a continuum before.” She has a problem with this model because, in her understanding of a continuum, “there’s one definite thing and there’s another definite thing and so you fit somewhere along there. And I don’t, I don’t think in the definites” (2-23-12). For Paula, having any kind of anchor on either end, any kind of definite, does not fit in with her conception of sexual orientation: “I think that my problem with the continuum is the line. I do not—I’m in no way straight. And I don’t want to be on the same line [as heterosexuals]…I’m right in the middle [bisexual]. People are people to me” (3-8-12). This is in line with her understanding of her own sexuality she has expressed in previous meetings. During a discussion of terms for identity, she says, “I date people for people. It doesn’t matter what they have
between their legs,” an echo of her “people are people” comment later in March (11-3-2011).

Her revision, which looks less, perhaps, like a new model or metaphor, but is still a critique, does not anchor people onto binaries, as one might have to do with the continuum model. She does not want any “definites” in her model, and thus struggles with a metaphor or image to capture her sexuality because it contrasts with the most common ideologies for sexual identity.

Whitney is the one for whom this metaphor resonates the most. While she understands the critiques Paula makes, she thinks that the continuum is easy for people to understand:

> It’s easy for people to think in terms of gay and then bisexual, 50/50, in terms of percentages. Because some bisexuals would lean more toward I would think…they lean more towards the gay end of the spectrum. They would say, ‘I would tend to find more women attractive as opposed to men. But…say if you had a room full of people you might notice the girls 6-4, a little bit more. I don't know. Do some stats! (2-23-12).

Whitney comes from a business background, which could partially account for the ease she has with thinking of numbers, of statistics, of percentages. She also has perhaps the most binary understanding of sexuality of anyone in the group, as her discomfort with bisexuality illustrated. When Paula says, “people are people to me,” Whitney replies, “that’s good. I’m a little jealous of that. I would absolutely love that. Seriously, though, I’m so over here,” stretching her arm as far as it will go to indicate her position at the far end of the spectrum (completely lesbian) (3-8-12).

Her understanding of the sexual orientation is very much in line with the way it is described in the continuum metaphor found in the pamphlet:

> I think of a color spectrum. And I think of a color spectrum being different shades, so kind of as you progress you're something different at each individual
stage. That's just what I picture. So when I think of the spectrum, I'm like, “okay, you go from red, then you're orange, and then you're yellow,” so nobody's really the same, but you're on the same spectrum, creating this spectrum of sexuality.”

(3-8-12)

Like the continuum metaphor and the Kinsey Scale, this conception does allow for variation and gradients when thinking about sexuality. But describing it in terms of a color spectrum is much more linear. A color spectrum has a specific order, especially the way Whitney describes it: it’s a line where you proceed from one thing to another, moving, in a particular order, from one end to another. Though the colors may bleed into one another, there are still “anchors” on either side, anchors that allow for a more binary understanding of sexuality.

As we can see from the discussions of the continuum metaphor, this discussion doesn’t present critiques that should theoretically be integrated into the pamphlet, but rather, that particular piece of the pamphlet provides material around which they can base their discussions, discussions that help them to articulate and conceptualize sexuality. This is one important element of the curriculum of this space: there are materials (like pamphlets) that become curricular materials, even though that was not their original intention. In this case, this small excerpt fosters a discussion where the women work through and articulate their sense of sexual identity through metaphor. This activity represents an important element of the curriculum of coming out because when your sexuality is defined as against the norm, sexual identity needs to be explained and narrativized. And it is sometimes not enough to merely claim a label like “lesbian” or “bisexual,” because, as these women demonstrate, everyone understands those identity labels in slightly different ways. Metaphor can be helpful for providing more tangible explanations of sexuality, and so developing the right personal metaphor in these extra-curricular
educational spaces to explain these senses of self to others is an important part of this requirement.

*Rhetorical Frameworks for Coming Out: Kara's Pyramid*

While some of the frameworks for negotiating rhetorical situation surrounding sexuality were worked out within the context of the meeting, sometimes the members came with their own frameworks that structured how they handle particular rhetorical situations related to sexual identity. Kara, in one of our earliest meetings, shared the rhetorical framework she has developed, a framework that helps her determine whether she should come out to a person and how to do it:

> I have this diagram, it's a theory of how to tell people. And it's in the shape of a pyramid. And I figure that you have to have the foundation of the pyramid first in order to tell people the other stuff that builds on who you are...and so to get to that top point, to get to that last—is it a brick? ((laughs)) Whatever it is that makes the point of the pyramid, you know...there has to be that really, really firm foundation. And I had this all mapped out in my head. Despite that, I told my mom before I knew [it'd be right] because we don't have that normal emotional kind of connection and foundation. And that's sort of how I approach it. And so I think I sort of did myself in...You know, you have reasons to not tell people, but I really think it's part of that image for me, it's just, it's part of the whole composition of the relationship, and I want to know that it's going to be sturdy and survive what I have to say and vice versa. If somebody's coming to me with something that's urgent or important or defining about them, I want to make sure that that's in place.
I know my parents [and I] didn't really have that before I came out to them. And that was with my first girlfriend. (9-29-11)

This mental map, wherein she visualizes a pyramid that needs to be built before telling someone a crucial piece of information (such as sexual identity), frames how she thinks about how to come out to people and what sort of story she should tell. For Kara, it is a certain kind of relationship that is most important—a certain kind of connection that will allow coming out to be easier or harder. Thinking about that relationship as the foundation to the rhetorical situation helps her to structure her responses to particular coming out situations in a way that is helpful to her. With this model, she can determine what she is likely to face when she decides to come out to someone based on their relationship. When she doesn’t ensure that this frame is in place first, the interaction may not have the desired results, as we can see from her description of coming out to her mother. In that case, not having the right framework—the right foundation—to support the interaction “sort of did [her] in” because they don’t have what she calls “that normal emotional kind of connection and foundation.” This framework pays attention to the particularities of the situations she faces. Rather than working from the assumption that all coming out scenarios have the potential to be (very) negative, Kara can think about the person she is going to come out to. She can think about their relationship, whether or not it’s “sturdy,” and whether or not it can “survive what [she] has to say.” This is a model, while it emphasizes the importance of preparation much like the pamphlet, pays more attention to the particularity of the rhetorical situation. It also emphasizes how important social relationships are, and thinking about how the people you are interacting with are likely to respond to you coming out. Unlike, for example, the model of coming out in the pamphlet, it does not rely on precise steps, but an accounting of your own audience and rhetorical situation. A framework like this one does not
automatically assume that coming out will be a negative process, that LGBTQ identity is always fraught with violence and exclusion and anger.

“Start Sending Her Articles in Envelopes”: Educating Others

As the members of Between Women grapple with the impact of language through their storytelling practices within this space, this curriculum includes both their desire to, in Kara’s words, “get the words together” and learn to speak to others, but is also about the need to teach others, particularly to counter problematic uses of language that erase and/or silence them. Paula’s interactions with several members of her family illustrate this dual nature of the curriculum operating under the stories that are being told.

Over the course of two meetings, Paula told several stories about coming out as bisexual to her grandmother and sister. While she never actually had a direct conversation with her grandmother, she says “my family talks and my family kind of knows everything about everybody without saying it.” One day, she received mail from her grandmother with “an article about teenage brains…It was about, well, pretty much that you can change and you don’t have to be gay because it was in your brain, you know? And that was the only thing in the envelope.” When re-explaining this story the following week for Kara, who was joining us for the first time, she adds, laughing, that she thought “okay, Grandma knows and she’s trying to help me out in her way.” While Paula considers this article a well-intentioned gesture on her grandmother’s part because, in her words, “she doesn’t really go off on tangents or, you know, is really anti-anything. I think she just kind of might’ve freaked out or thought that she [was helping],” this article still represents an attempt on her grandmother’s part to educate Paula about the potential to change her bisexual identity. If it’s in your brain—not, for example, your genes—then it is
Her grandmother is not the only member of her family she has had difficult interactions with. Paula also tells us about the general impact of “hetero” (normative) language on her, tying it specifically to her identity as a bisexual and the fact that she has both male and female partners. Once again, we see the importance of pronouns and the worlds of rhetorical meaning they can carry with them. For example, Paula describes a pattern of conversation with her sister, who she describes as “kind of in the hetero thought and hetero pronouns” whenever she talks to Paula about relationships. She says, “and so my sister, when we were having some conversation, it was just like, ‘oh,’ you know, ‘if you had a boyfriend would you be doing that with him?’ Or just the automatic—not ‘if you were in a relationship,’ not ‘is this something you would do with your partner?’” Here, Paula objects to the fact that when she and her sister have conversations about potential future relationships, her sister always refers to Paula’s hypothetical partners as men, when Paula dates both women and men. She even half jokingly wonders if she has to come out again: “so now I’m just like, well, October 11th is coming up [National Coming Out Day], maybe I should just come out all over again ((chuckles)) to my family and just be like, ‘remember? I really don’t appreciate…’” to which the group responds with laughter. Because she hasn’t brought many women home to meet her family, she concedes that it’s “not that everyone forgot [that she is bisexual], but it’s not, it’s not on their radar so much,” and there is a need to reassert this part of her identity. Her sister’s use of “hetero” language is not just a slip of the tongue or inconsequential to Paula, because this kind of language actually erases part of her identity that she wants to be included in her interactions with members of her family.

A similar example comes when Paula told her sister about a mouse that had taken up residence in her oven. The mouse was proving difficult to catch, and since Paula wasn’t crazy
about the little creature, this situation was a source of some stress and concern to her. When she
told her sister about it, her sister replied, “Can’t you get one of your boyfriends to take care of
that?” Paula is frustrated with this automatic default: “really? With all the hetero language
always, always, always…I want to say, ‘no, actually my lesbian friend came over [to set a trap
and help]’” (3-29-12). Her sister uses this language “always, always, always” to erase part of
Paula’s identity, once again demonstrating how even small parts of speech like nouns and
pronouns have significant rhetorical effect.

Paula hopes to “correct” this erasure through explicit discussions of the language that gets
used in everyday conversations. She says, “I want to work on the language we use because it’s
really starting to bother me. And just have a little lesson. That’s what I feel it is sometimes. You
have to teach your family.” For Paula, the kind of language that is used is inextricably tied to the
presence or erasure of her identity as a bisexual woman, and explicit discussions of language are
the best way to counter this linguistic exclusion. In these discussions, you have to “teach” your
family about the impact of language. Much like the use of pronouns, everyday terms have a
strong rhetorical impact, affirming or erasing identity.

After Paula tells this story about her sister and the way she wants to “teach” her family the
proper conventions of language, the conversation shifts as the group takes up an earlier piece of
Paula’s story, that of her grandmother and the article in an envelope. Kara says, in response to
Paula’s desire to educate her sister,

Kara: Well, there is the Internet.

Paula: Yeah.

Kara: That can bring the world to you.

Paula: Yeah. I should start sending her articles. ((chuckles))
*Alexandra:* Start sending *her* articles in envelopes.

*Paula:* Or e-mails.

*Alexandra:* No notes!

*Kara:* ((laughs loudly))

*Paula:* Yeah, just forwards. Here you go.

*Alexandra:* Here's a link. No commentary.

In telling this story about her sister, Paula picks up once again on the “article in an envelope” which begins to function as a rhetorical trope that comes to stand in for the meaning of another entire line of conversation—that is, outside attempts to educate us about the nature of our own identities. In suggesting that Paula send her sister articles in envelopes, the group recontextualizes her earlier story about her grandmother’s attempts to educate Paula in order to create a new stance within the group, one that affirmed the need for others to be educated, not us. This conversation illustrates that the rhetorical education in this space is not just about the women learning and thinking about their own uses of language, but about a need to both educate others and, in some cases, counter efforts to educate them about their own identities. Part of the rhetorical education in the curriculum of coming out is being able to discern when and which parts of the “lesson” must be repeated over time because even though Paula has told her family she identifies as bisexual, their use of “hetero thought[s] and hetero pronouns” does not reflect that the lesson has been fully internalized.

**Conclusion**

Between Women serves as an important point of entry to further examine how literacy practices and rhetorical pedagogies are theorized and disseminated in alternative and extra-
curricular sites of rhetorical education. Building on such case studies can help us to see the ways that specific groups of people seek out the rhetorical education they need even when it is not offered to them through traditional methods of schooling or in their home communities. Furthermore, it affords an opportunity for them to speak back to the discourses of sexuality promoted by institutions. In doing so, these sites operate in a nebulous space between institutional and community rhetorics, allowing participants to negotiate the intersections of personal and societal understandings of self. In this case study, we saw the ways the members of Between Women critiqued the university’s approach to institutional resources and developed their own frameworks and pedagogies in response as a way of navigating and educating others about their LGBTQ identities in a more complex way. In the process of doing so, their activities revealed that the curriculum of coming out is not without its tensions and its exclusions. In the process of revising language, identities are both written in and written out of cultural scripts.

We have much to learn from the spaces that energize our students to be rhetoricians beyond the classroom, as well as the implications of those strategies, the work they do in the world. Some of the techniques and strategies in Between Women effectively queer and complicate how we think of sexuality, breaking apart, for example, binary understandings of sexuality and gender, concepts that are fundamental to our sense of self (and, as Jonathan Alexander argues, fundamental to literacy), yet others reify binary understandings. Like any educational program, the rhetorical education in the curriculum of coming out can be both liberating and oppressing, reminding us that critical attention must be brought to bear on performances of normativity. The rhetorical curriculum in Between Women includes both disruptive rhetorical work that questions and revises dominant sexual ideologies and gestures to normativity and exclusion, sometimes without critical reflection. This illustrates that there is always room for the rhetorical curriculum
of coming out to evolve, but you have to start somewhere. Sometimes, this starting place is not in dismantling hetero- or homo-normativity, but in simply understanding your particular place in discourses of sexuality.

The rich activity in such sites can enrich our understanding of the ways discourses are navigated from the margins in order to build identities. The curriculum of coming out is about learning to articulate personal and public senses of sexual identity and the complex rhetorical negotiations that process requires, with all its starts and stops, with all its leaps forward and steps backwards, and with all its exclusions and disruptions. The curriculum has the potential to speak back to the ways sexuality is scripted in powerful institutions, and call for cultural recognition and public expression in small ways and large in ways that are materially important to LGBTQ people’s everyday lives.
Chapter 5

Disruptive Composition(s): What’s Next for the Queer Turn?

What does the curriculum of coming out teach us?

Queer scholars have established the critical importance of difference, of resisting the urge to reduce and tame difference to make it legible, packaged neatly, easily commodified. In doing so, this perspective challenges the ways that language and our understandings of identity reinforce social injustice, not exclusively as it pertains to sexuality, but as it intersects with other categories of difference like race, gender, class, and ability. While acknowledging common humanity is still necessary, as Alexander and Rhodes argue, it is only a first step toward truly critical pedagogies and literacy practices (“Flattening Effects”). Once the “revelation” comes, as Jackie Rhodes asked me on my visit to California State University, San Bernardino, what comes next? What comes after the revelation of our common humanity? What allows us to move forward, past the multicultural imperative of “inclusion” and toward difference in a way that keeps inequality and injustice at the forefront of our analyses?

One of the places to begin is in queering—a verb, an action, not a noun—our understanding of narrative. While there are a multitude of places to look for narratives, queer coming out narratives (narratives that break normative conventions) challenge our understandings of identity and sexual selves by calling explicit attention to those conventions and expectations through moments of disruption. In that act of disruption is an important space for rhetorical work. Throughout this dissertation, I have offered examples of people working in the tension between normativity and disruption, and in that space, finding opportunities for building literacy practices and rhetorical pedagogies. In these spaces, there is a crucial interplay
between stability and fracture, assimilating into the norm and challenging that norm. There are tensions, cracks, and ruptures in understanding that reveal a way forward after “the revelation.”

In all good stories there is an ending. There is closure, loose ends that are tied up, questions given answers—a happy ending, perhaps. But in the spirit of the queer work that both inspired and supports this dissertation project, my conclusion exploits those ruptures, breaks, and cracks to resist neatly tied up ends. In these last pages, I resist closure and completeness (the expected qualities of a good narrative) in order to explore the potential of disruptive queer narratives and to open up my work to yet more inquiry. This is a story that is not yet finished.

The curriculum of coming out, in the way its practices create a productive space between normativity and disruption, teaches a deferral of an endpoint. The work of analysis and critique is paused and suspended, but not closed. Within the curriculum of coming out, the normative or disruptive performances of identity are strategic and changing, not fixed and final. Like those performances, this ending is temporary and provisional. In that spirit, I will conclude—temporarily—with a discussion of narrative disruption and with future directions for this research, arguing that writing studies is a field uniquely positioned to take up the lessons and questions of the curriculum of coming out because of our field’s history of disrupting normativity in our scholarship and in our pedagogical approaches to teaching writing.

**Revising Expectations for Sexual Identity: Coming Out Narratives**

At the end of this dissertation, I return to the beginning. I return to my earliest site of research, Between Women, in order to examine two parallel coming out stories that illuminate taken-for-granted ideas about sexual identity. Narratives have been a theme throughout this dissertation, and I take up these questions of narrative more explicitly in this temporary ending
because they often form the foundation of social issues and permeate discussions of sexuality. As Ken Plummer, a sociologist concerned with the sociology of “deviance,” argues in his book on sexual narratives, social and political issues “have to become infused with life—animated, legitimated, demonstrated—through arguments, statistics, rhetoric. And one of the central strategies of infusing life is to tell a life: many problems require a strong personal story to become well established” (129). For this reason, campaigns for LGBTQ issues almost always include stories to infuse their work with life—the lives of the people deeply affected by their marginalized position. But how these stories are told matters because they frame the terms of debate, and the last few decades have seen a significant shift in how those debates are framed. Richard K. Herrell argues that “in the 1960s and 1970s sex itself was foregrounded as the revolutionary act,” but recent political approaches have left this rhetorical approach in the background: “presenting the gay community as composed of families, of churches and sports leagues, of clubs and professional organizations, of everything about normative society except simply sexual behavior, has become the new strategy” (233). In these campaigns, we must pay critical attention to whose stories are getting told, how those stories are getting told, who is being brought forward, and who is getting pushed to the side, out of sight.

As LGBTQ issues begin to move more and more into mainstream consciousness, a number of highly visible (and often financially motivated) initiatives have gained a good deal of momentum. Same-sex marriage campaigns, the Human Rights Campaign and their many initiatives, the “It Gets Better Project,” and the Born This Way foundation are all spaces where LGBTQ narratives are given prominence. At the root of many of these initiatives is a “born this way” rhetoric. This phrase is probably most commonly associated with Lady Gaga’s song of the same name, but actually has a long history in the LGBTQ community, “grounded in scientific
discourses concerning genetics, hormones, or evolutionary biology” (Bennett 213). It is a strategy that is often critiqued because it “can never account for all forms of gender and sexual identification, cultural contexts, or more fluid understandings of sexuality and gender” because “the claim that people are hardwired with their sexual orientation is precarious because the diversity of the human world prevents a complete classification of desire, identification, and praxis” (215). “Born this way” rhetorical strategies are critiqued because they regulate LGBTQ identity in ways that are not very welcoming to those who don’t fit into the most legible or widely-recognized categories of sexual identity. Speaking more broadly about the implications of this kind of widespread official and unofficial regulation, Judith Butler argues that these discourses and the categories of identity they produce “tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a libratory contestation of that very oppression” (“Imitation” 308). Problematic discourses of sexuality do not have to come from the outside—they can come from within the LGBTQ community itself, even in efforts that (at first glance) look like liberation.

In a recent article, Jeffery Bennett argues that LGBTQ people can (and frequently do) make use of this rhetorical strategy in ways that resist binary and regulatory conceptions of sexual identity. By examining actual entries on the Born This Way blog (which is not officially affiliated with Lady Gaga, despite sharing the same name as her song), he argues, “offering emphasis to the contingency and provisionality of LGBT lives, users on the Born This Way blog affirm that discourses of identity are sites of negotiation” by appropriating the slogan and “indicating a slipperiness of crafting a visually queer subject” (213, 227). While I have argued throughout this dissertation that LGBTQ people perform normativity in ways that rely on binary or essentialist constructions of identity for reasons that are materially consequential in their
everyday lives, critiques of that normativity must coexist alongside those performances. The queer religious literacies in “Biblical Self-Defense for GLBTs and Allies” and the queer rhetorical pedagogies in Between Women illustrate the ways this can be done, though not, of course, without complication. And what Bennett’s work shows us is that even within sites and initiatives that rely on essentialism in very reductive ways, there is still the potential for disruptive or innovative work.

However, the frameworks that structure these sites should make us more than a little wary. The stories on the Born This Way blog have been published as a coffee table book and, as Bennett points out, “padding the pockets of CEOs who actively work to dismantle LGBT communities is assuredly no gain to the people on the site reimagining how their lives might unfold” (228). Furthermore, I am less certain than Bennett that a blog like this one can “open up opportunities for capturing the complexity of queer lives” because, despite the disruptive ways LGBTQ identity is presented, the “born this way” rhetoric still frames the site as a whole, and without the tools of an academic rhetorician, I wonder how many people can see beyond this framing into those disruptive possibilities (228). Within these initiatives and projects, there is the potential for critical compositions and representations, but not the critical rhetorical education that equips people to challenge the ideological frameworks for sexual identity and coming out.

This, I argue, is where the importance of non-commercially motivated alternative or extra-curricular sites of rhetorical education become most evident. In order for any projects that represent queer lives and narratives to have the disruptive potential that Bennett finds in his analysis, people must be given the rhetorical tools to analyze and question these ideological frameworks away from serving corporate interests. We need more spaces for disruption and intervention that are not linked to commercially-motivated initiatives in order to reconceptualize
and expand our ideas about sexuality in ways that encompass the complexity of lived experience. We need to expand and re-imagine the boundaries of the narratives we tell, beyond the expected scripts we are implicitly told to follow. We can look to the curriculum of coming out and alternative sites of rhetorical education for such lessons. Since these sites sit on the margins of institutions and sometimes in uneasy relationship to those institutions, these spaces offer an opportunity institutional discourses about sexuality (discourses about religion and sexuality on the one hand, and discourses about coming out on the other), and are sites of innovative rhetorical education because of the ways they actively engage with the tension between normativity and disruption to develop innovative literacy practices and rhetorical pedagogies and frameworks.

How, then, do we emphasize the use of narratives in public discourse that keep difference at their center, rather than focusing on commonalities in a way that erases the critical differences that operate to uphold social inequality? How do we shift focus to the disruptive work done both outside of and within mainstream LGBTQ initiatives? I ask again: what comes after the revelation? What can the curriculum of coming out teach us about such work? The curriculum of coming out, as it operates in non-commercial alternative sites of rhetorical education, has the potential to move discussion of difference to the forefront of public debates of sexuality because of the ways these spaces teach LGBTQ people how to analyze, navigate, and engage with rhetorics of sexuality. While each case study in this dissertation illustrated the ways that these sites of rhetorical education can fall short, they also demonstrate that the rhetorical curriculum of coming out is well matched to the task of moving difference to the center of public discourse.

In order to illustrate the potential of disruptive narratives in non-commercially motivated alternative sites of rhetorical education, I draw on Irene and her partner Eleanor’s coming out
stories. I demonstrate how the contrast between the two experiences offers an example of a disruptive composition that creates a space to challenge dominant rhetorics of sexuality. In chapter four, I described Irene’s difficulty with what she calls “jumping around the pronouns.” She has this difficulty because she has usually inhabited what she calls “safe spaces” where she doesn’t face a whole lot of criticism or scrutiny of her identity. She often contrasts her experiences with her girlfriend Eleanor’s, who she describes as having “very much the sort of stereotypical coming out to yourself process.” Whenever Irene tells her coming out stories, especially when she starts from what she sees as the beginning, she often tells her and Eleanor’s story in tandem, partially because they “realized they were lesbian or bi meeting the other,” and partially because their two stories provide such a marked contrast.

When Irene says that Eleanor’s story is more “stereotypical,” she means that it follows the narrative expectations of the genre, one that frequently follows what Diana Fuss calls the “‘inside/outside’ model of gay and lesbian identity, as a tension between that which is always there (but has been buried under layers of cultural repression) and that which has never been socially permitted (but remains to be formed, created, or achieved” (qtd. Jolly 479). In such stories, “There is a self-consciousness at work here which scans the past life for clues to one’s sexual being,” resembling “classical stories of redemption and transformation” (Plummer 33, 50). This story often “stumbles around childhood longings and youthful secrets; it interrogates itself, seeking ‘causes’ and ‘histories’ that might bring ‘motives’ and ‘memories’ into focus; it finds a crisis, a turning point, an epiphany; and then it enters a new world—a new identity, born again, metamorphosis, coming out” (52). The coming out stories that circulate with “born this way” rhetoric follow a more linear or “modernist” structure and often sound remarkably similar because of the tendency to look for clues of what has always been, but was never socially
permitted, hidden away until the epiphanic moment of coming out. Such narratives often
describe a unidirectional, chronological path to sexual identity, one with a beginning (usually in
the closet) and a finish (a coming to a particular identity). The closet takes center stage, and
thoughts of suicide, internalized homophobia, violence (discursive and physical), and
ostracization from friends and family are common features. These elements become not only
expected features of the stories, but expected features of LGBTQ identity itself, a fact that is
deeply troubling.

Eleanor’s story includes many of these components. According to Irene, very shortly
after they became friends and started rooming together in college, they realized that “friendship
was not the only thing that was going on.” What followed this revelation was “this whole long,
awful, traumatic process [for Eleanor] over the next three or four weeks.” “Eleanor comes from a
very unsupportive family,” Irene says, “to put it mildly.” While Irene received nothing but
support from her parents, she characterizes Eleanor’s family as a “whole other kettle of fish.”
She says, “[Eleanor’s] sister and her brother-in-law have been really great, and her brother-in-
law’s whole family, although the first thing her sister told her when Eleanor first came out was,
‘you know you can never tell Mom’…which, maybe not the first thing you want to hear.”

Irene describes these three or four weeks as an “awful” process because Eleanor was
experiencing a radical shift in her identity as a result of her new relationship with Irene: “So for
her it was really a period where not only was she trying to figure out if she wanted to pursue a
relationship, but she was trying to figure out coming out to her sister, and, ‘what does it mean
that I’m gay?’ And ‘am I a bad person?’ And ‘am I really gay, or is this just a one off odd thing?’”
In addition to these questions, Eleanor “went looking back through her life and was like, ‘oh, and
from five years old, I had crushes on girls.’ And she only had crushes on girls.”
In Eleanor’s story, we see a number of the expected conventions of coming out narratives, characterized by “born this way” rhetoric: Eleanor saw her lesbian identity as having been buried (since she did not identify as a lesbian until she met Irene), but always having been there, which she “discovers” upon reflecting back to her childhood (she only had crushes on other girls). When Eleanor was trying to answer a number of new questions about her life, a process that was both “traumatic” and “long,” Irene said that they would talk every night, but Eleanor “wouldn’t start talking until really late, which would be when her defenses were lowered,” right before drifting off to sleep. Eleanor’s coming out story involves the “stereotypical” elements of looking back on the life story to construct a new narrative that presents a consistent vision of an identity that always was.

A story like Eleanor’s avoids what Margareta Jolly calls “narrative disruption.” While the initial realization that she was attracted to women was a disruption in how she had understood her life up to that point, she works to mitigate that disruption by looking back on her prior experiences and reinterpreting them to create a life narrative that folds her sexual identity in with a coherent vision of her self—she actually “always had crushes on girls.” Christopher Plummer calls these stories “modernist” tales, in that they use causal language and seem that they are “discovering a truth” (83). While we don’t have Eleanor’s story from her point of view, we can see in Irene’s narration an attempt to create a story that shows a cohesive and unified self—the “discovery” of an identity that has always been.

The problem with these narrations of sexual identity is that it doesn’t allow for complexity, for a shifting, fragmented, vision of the self—a queer sense of “coming out,” if you will. Of course, it is understandable how such narratives came to be so standard. That people—across the world—are socialized into culturally specific narrative practices from a very young
age is well documented (e.g., Linde; Miller and Koven; Miller, Koven, and Lin), and narrating sexual identity is no exception. A linear narration of the sexual, LGBTQ self where the narrator shows that they were always “this way” has its roots in the early 20th century. As the work of the sexologists on theories of “inversion” began to be disseminated in the early 20th century, Lillian Faderman argues that some accepted these theories because “They perceived real benefits…If they were born into the ‘intermediate sex,’ no family pressure or social pressure could change them” (57-58). In fact, it was “much better to be a congenital invert than one who had the option of being heterosexual and chose homosexuality out of free will. Since a conscious choice in those unexistential times was an offense to society…For many, to claim a birth defect was preferable to admitting to willful perversity” (59). If you were born with this “disorder,” if it was something that always was and was just awaiting discovery, it simply couldn’t be helped. “Inverts” and “homosexuals” were to be pitied, not punished.

Despite the challenges from queer and radical theorists and activists, this has remained a compelling argument for accepting LGBTQ identity, and this is reflected in a large number of narratives and the ways that issues are framed in public discourse. Look at nearly any campaign for same-sex marriage and you will notice a common underlying argument: You were born heterosexual, we were not, but LGBTQ folks are just like you despite their sexual preferences. We have houses, jobs, and families. We pay our taxes, obey the law, and don’t dress too outlandishly. We’re not here to challenge much or trouble the system—we just want to participate in it. We were “born this way.” In this approach, there is an attempt to appear as normative as possible, which has the effect of ignoring the ways that LGBTQ folks are crucially different and have the potential to challenge norms. Telling stories this way makes queer identity
legible and understandable, but it does nothing to challenge a system that makes coming out so necessary in the first place.

The job of the queer theorist and the queer approach is to trouble this tendency toward the normative, to reveal its limitations for participating in discourse surrounding sexuality. After all, it is how queer people differ from the norm, how they are excluded from laws and protections, that necessitates these campaigns in the first place, and “the drive to narrative coherence forecloses on some possibilities for acknowledging radical differences” in ways that can bring about substantive change (Alexander and Rhodes, “Flattening Effects” 446). In order to do this, we must begin to understand narrative differently because “there will always be dimensions of the queer experience that are irreducible to tropes of shared humanity; and they should be irreducible, because they tell us much about how people are positioned socially through their differences” (450). So, how do we craft narratives, literacy practices, and rhetorical pedagogies that challenge the normative, thereby creating new discourses around key social and political issues? Let me turn, for a moment, to Irene’s story to offer an example how a disruptive narrative works to intervene in reductive assumptions about sexuality.

Irene’s story(ies) include very few of the same elements as Eleanor. In chapter 4, Irene’s difficulty with “jumping around the pronouns” and navigating the gay closet comes from the fact that she has such an atypical coming out experience. The closet, in her narrative, does not take center stage as it does in Eleanor’s. When she and Eleanor “realized that friendship was not the only thing that was going on,” it didn’t cause as much trouble for her. She says, “I’m one of those lucky people. [My family is] super supportive and I knew that they would be going in.” She continues: “for me it was just sort of a surprise because I had always been attracted to guys before so it was just like, ‘oh, okay, well this is new and different.’ But my family’s really
accepting and I knew they were going be totally supportive so it wasn’t scary to me.” In this story, we see the potential for narrative disruption: Irene was always attracted to men, so where is this attraction to a woman coming from? Rather than go back through her life and attempt to avoid narrative disruption and explain away inconsistencies, she just allows them to...be. She allows them to remain in her narrative. She allows them to exist without attempting to smooth over the interruption in her life story thus far. She finds herself suddenly attracted to a woman (and is still, more than ten years later, in a relationship with Eleanor), and simply thought that this was “new and different.” There was no attempt to explain away earlier parts of her life or present a conversion story “in which an inconvenient past is instantly invalidated” (Jolly 481).

Conventional understandings of narrative in western cultures require the narrator explain away inconsistencies in order to craft a coherent and consistent sense of self (Linde). However, in the curriculum of coming out, these inconsistencies serve an important purpose: they disrupt not just the way we expect people to tell narratives, but they also disrupt our understandings of the construction of sexual identity itself. Beyond just the coming out narrative, embracing disruption and inconsistency allows difference to remain at the center of our understanding of identity, and is a lesson we can apply to our teaching and scholarship.

Not only does Irene allow for a narration that does not explain away inconvenient truths in an attempt to create a liner, cohesive self, she has also continued to allow for this ambiguity and complexity ever since, which is apparent through the ways she uses labels for her sexual identity. Labels contain complex worlds of meaning, and can be “implicated in [LGBTQ] oppression at the same time [they are] used by [LGBTQ] liberation movements” (Whisman 36). While identity labels are often used as if they have stable meanings, Butler argues that we should resist stability and see these categories as sites of contestation. She writes, “I am permanently
troubled by identity categories, consider them to be inevitable stumbling-blocks, and understand them, even promote them, as necessary sites of trouble” (“Imitation” 308). Implicitly, Irene’s multiple and ambiguous uses of identity labels promote these categories as a “site of trouble” because she disrupts binary conceptions of sexuality and the homo/hetero divide and resists polarization. In much the same way she resists explaining away the narrative disruption in her story, Irene also resists a single, legible label:

_Irene:_ It’s hard to figure out how I define myself because I’m a lesbian because I’m in a lesbian relationship and that’s what my future is going to be, but then I’m not, really, but I am attracted to Eleanor, so yeah. And whenever I think of bisexual I always think of 50-50 which is not the case. I don’t know why I have that association but it still feels odd to use that descriptor, so.

_Alexandra:_ So you don’t like that one.

_Irene:_ No. And I’ve been toying around with queer but I feel like I haven’t read enough to start using that yet. I mean, when I talk about it [sexual identity] to people, I use lesbian for political purposes.

_Alexandra:_ okay.

_Irene:_ But then it always feels like I am hiding something. And usually, if I’m talking to other lesbians I’ll maybe explain more because I don’t know. It feels like there’s always these multiple layers of coming out to people. You come out “I have a girlfriend” but then you’re also, well, and that’s not the only thing that’s going on here…When I try to describe it to people sometimes I’ll say I’m 97% straight…I don’t know. I find that a useful way to think about it.

_Alexandra:_ How do people react to that, generally?
Irene: Um…Mostly, they just sort of go “mmmmmm.” ((Laughter)). Um, people don’t usually, unless they’re in the LGBT community, don’t usually seem to want to engage or have a conversation, or they feel embarrassed, almost.

The most common labels—queer, lesbian, bisexual—don’t fit Irene’s sense of identity. While “lesbian” may describe her current relationship and the political reality of her life, using that label makes her feel like she is hiding something: her attraction to men. In theory, bisexuality would encapsulate that attraction, but it still doesn’t seem accurate because of the “50-50” (50% gay, 50% straight) associations, “which is not the case” for her. She continually resists explaining away the fragmented and contradictory pieces of her identity. When among lesbians—women who are in romantic relationships with women—she might try to explain that even though she is also in a relationship with a woman, “that’s not the only thing that’s going on here,” often taking to describing herself as “97% straight.” She finds “97% straight” to be perhaps the most useful descriptor, but when I ask her how people react to that, she tells me that they don’t seem to know how to respond, nor do they want to have a conversation about it. In fact, she thinks they almost feel “embarrassed” by this characterization of her sexuality. If we are born straight, gay, or bisexual (the most widely recognized labels), where does a 97% straight woman fit? If, as Rebecca Ripley argues in her essay on the challenges of naming sexual identity, “the words that people create, and the meanings they give to adopted words, depend on the realities they are trying to name,” then Irene’s use of labels creates a reality that challenges the fundamental ways people conceive of sexual identity (93).

The way Irene understands her identity also challenges the narratives other people in her life want to construct:
Irene: One of the funniest things about coming out to people: I’ve had three friends when I said, ‘okay, so I’m dating Eleanor’ say, ‘oh, I always knew that.’ And I think that’s just hilarious because what they mean is they always knew I was a lesbian and I’m not in the way that they mean. So that’s been very interesting. I mean, because I’m bookish, because I never dated in high school because no guys were ever interested in me, like, that’s their problem, not mine. ((laughter)) And then the teacher who said it to me her son was our age and went to the boys’ school across the street and I had a huge unrequited crush on him for all four years of high school, which my teacher knew about ((laughter)). Sadly. ((laughter)) So, I don’t know, my mother’s theory is that Tom, her son, is actually gay, and Miss Shoemaker suspects this, and therefore thinks that me having a crush on a gay guy is proof that really I was a lesbian. I think this is a little convoluted, frankly, but ((laughter)).

When Irene has come out to significant people in her life with a story that is complex, fragmented, and resists easy classification (a post-modernist account that contrasts Eleanor’s modernist account), they try to resolve the disruptions for her. Her narrative is that she was always interested in men until she met Eleanor, and she still considers herself “97% straight.” Since this challenges the way people think about narratives of sexual identity, they come up with a different story for her: she must have always been a lesbian (her friends “always knew,” in fact) because she never dated in high school. Even when she points out that she had a “huge” crush on a student from the boys’ school across the street (something her friends were aware of), they feel an impulse to smooth over this disruption with a “convoluted” narrative: she must have developed feelings for a boy she would never have (because he was supposedly gay), which was
her way of protecting herself from the knowledge that she was really attracted to women. In this attempt to resolve narrative disruption, they are trying to impose a stable, coherent identity, while she is trying to maintain her difference.

The narrative that Irene’s friends have constructed for her is an attempt to compose her identity legibly, even though they have to rely on a “convoluted” narrative structure in order to do so. Irene’s narrative is challenging because it disrupts the ways we think about sexual identity as “knowable,” as something that has always been, awaiting discovery. Despite the challenges this presents, Irene resists reducing the complexity of her narrative. Her sexual identity isn’t necessarily discoverable—it resists classification and presents a challenge to a modernist narrative of identity. Her story is fragmented, disruptive, ambiguous, unknowable, and in that sense of unknowability we find “the proper subject of writing itself”—the way forward to create more complex narrations of identity that can participate in important political debates in more complex and nuanced ways, ways that do not reduce the complexity of lived experience and push those who do not easily and readily fit into the most legible and easy recognized categories (Alexander and Rhodes, “Flattening Effects” 451).

Even Butler, who is perpetually troubled by identity categories, does not argue that they should never be used, but that they should be a site for critical inquiry: “Clearly,” she writes, “I am not legislating against the use of the term [gay or lesbian]. My question is simply: which use will be legislated, and what play will there be between legislation and use such that the instrumental uses of ‘identity’ do not become regulatory imperatives?” (“Imitation” 309). Butler’s proposed entry point for discussion requires that we acknowledge the importance of “the ways in which heterosexual norms reappear within gay identities [and] to affirm that gay and lesbian identities are not only structured in part by dominant heterosexual frames, but that
they are not for that reason determined by them” (314). Instead, they can be “running commentaries on those naturalized positions as well, parodic replays and resignifications of precisely those heterosexual structures that would consign gay life to discursive domains of unreality and unthinkable” (314). Irene’s “play” between categories of identity causes trouble because it disrupts binary understandings of sexuality, and yet illustrates how such “playful” uses of labels can be an entry point for nuanced discussions of discourses of sexuality.

**Future Research: Multimodality + Queerness**

It is practically a given that attention to the digital and multimodal is an essential component of any discussion of literacy practices or rhetorical education in the twenty-first century. Now more than ever before, most messages do not come to us in the form of traditional 8.5-by-11” print texts. To be a fully literate citizen in the twenty-first century—to intervene effectively in the discourses that surround us—requires the ability to read critically and write strategically in a variety of media. Because the digital and the multimodal permeate our lives more widely than ever before, scholars have focused on the myriad ways that digital and multimodal literacies are changing literacy practices and rhetorical education (e.g., Ball, Kress, Hawisher and Selfe, Shipka, Wysocki).

While the sites in this dissertation project did not lend themselves to a discussion of the digital and multimodal, scholars who work at the intersection of writing studies and sexuality/queer theory have recognized the importance of these discussions in researching queer literacy practices and rhetorical education. In an early article on this topic that appeared in a 1999 issue of *Computers and Composition*, Randal Woodland illustrates how computer-mediated communication impacts and changes the coming out process and the formation of LGBTQ
identity by arguing that “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people use computer mediated communication (CMC) in a variety of ways as they come to understand their sexual identity and begin to identify with larger communities” because “the opportunities offered by the Internet and other online channels for relatively anonymous access to resources have been especially welcomed by those LGBTs who have chosen not to be open about their sexuality or who are in the process of coming out” (73). In an online environment, LGBTQ people “create virtual identities, trying on new definitions of self, performing those identities to see what fits...They meet other people like themselves, form friendships, flirt with strangers, fall in love, and break up—all in a virtual space somewhere between the physical world and the life of the mind” (76). It becomes an important space to try on identities and find information, particularly for those who would otherwise be denied resources.

While many of Woodland’s conclusions may seem obvious now, his study was an important early example of making explicit the impact of the digital on the LGBTQ community in particular. Five years later, Computers and Composition published an entire special issue devoted to “Sexualities, Technologies, and the Teaching of Writing,” an issue edited by Jonathan Alexander and William Banks. This issue expanded and developed work in this area considerably, exploring the ways that sexuality is “integral to the ways that we already conceive of technology and writing, as well as the bodies that produce texts (and are texts themselves) in the writing classroom” (274). The articles included in this issue illustrated the myriad ways that the intersection of sexuality and technology can contribute to conversations in our field about the impact of the digital on composing and pedagogical practices.

Over the last ten years, the intersection of sexuality and technology has been addressed in a variety of scholarship (e.g., Alexander, “Out of the Closet,” DeWitt, O’Riordan and Phillips,
Webb). Especially of note for this dissertation project is Jonathan Alexander and Elizabeth Losh’s 2010 study of coming out videos. Alexander and Losh argue that these videos, in aggregate, afford “a unique opportunity to consider the management of sexual identities in online spaces. This occurs particularly since the coming out video is often an intentionally broadcast statement that attempts to negotiate the boundary between intensely personal desires and public identities” (38). The “vernacular” (non-commercially sponsored) coming out videos that are created “make explicit the difficulties of managing multiple, sometimes even competing networked publics and of editing the self, and they frequently go ‘off message’ in ways constitutive of their discursive practices” because “unlike linear narratives of commercially produced videos, many amateur YouTube videos emphasize themes of contingency and accident” (44, 45). What Alexander and Losh’s study of these narratives demonstrate is that the medium in which they are produced—videos that circulate on YouTube, a website that values confessional disclosure—impacts their construction, circulation, and the ways they function, rather than simply being a new mode of distribution.

While much scholarship demonstrates the particular importance of the digital in the LGBTQ community and the way it impacts identity and community, what is just only beginning to be developed is an examination of the rhetorical pedagogies that circulate digitally and how they impact online composing practices and the identity-building process. In Woodland’s article, he says, “I think LGBT people become incredibly resourceful to get the information they need to make decisions about their lives and to learn what it means to live as an LGBT person,” an acknowledgement of the important role of CMC in learning what it means to be an LGBTQ person in the world (74). What’s missing, though, is an explicit discussion of how that happens and the implications of the pedagogies/ideologies of coming out and LGBTQ identity that
circulate on some of the most popular websites and social media networks. I am left wondering how the curriculum of coming out operates differently online and what the implications are for literacy practices and rhetorical education in digital environments.

Furthermore, since queer work engages explicitly with intersectionality and the ways that sexual identity is impacted by other categories of identity, this work is ripe for a discussion of the ways sexuality and class intersect in shaping access to the resources of online environments. Again, Woodland asks in his article, “For every life that has been changed in the ways I outline here—for every life that has been saved—how many have been lost? How many will be lost of we do not pay attention to the ways in which people gain and are denied access to these resources?” (84). This question is not hyperbole—the number of LGBTQ people—youth, especially—who have committed suicide or have been killed for their sexuality is astronomical, and in the last three months, it seems like not a week goes by without hearing a story of yet another trans person killed. This question of access, however, remains to be answered. How are literacy practices and rhetorical education impacted for LGBTQ people who do not have access to the resources afforded by an Internet connection? And how can a queer analysis that considers the ways sexuality, class, and the digital intersect begin to address this gap?

**Future Research: Religion + Queerness**

In chapter 3, I illustrated the importance of queer biblical literacies and argued that those literacy practices provide nuanced frameworks for addressing many contemporary political and social issues that have great personal and material importance. The two strategies that Pastor Miller-Smith presented (both the defensive strategy to counter the clobber passages and the disruptive strategy to trouble normativity in religion) illustrate the importance of intersectional
frameworks for religious and sexual identity, ones that consider the ways these identities intersect with multiple aspects of lived experience. Queer literacies, I contend, can help push these conversations forward. While much has been written from a religious perspective, less has been written from a queer perspective, and this chapter seeks to fill that gap.

One of the most challenging contexts for this work is the composition classroom, a “contact zone” where discourses of religion often collide with discourses of sexuality. Through situated ethnographic studies, a number of scholars have examined the complexity of integrating academic and religious identities in the writing classroom, proposing pedagogical frameworks to help teachers respond more effectively to the work of our religious students and to come to a more nuanced understanding of faith and academic discourse (e.g., Perkins, Rand, Ringer, Vander Lei). Many of these pedagogical approaches to religion in the writing classroom seek to foster a critical awareness in students and to help them analyze received truths and develop new critical vocabularies.

The problem, of course, with inviting religion into classroom discourse is that writing teachers often “do not know how to teach critical thinking and argumentation to students whose approach to textual authority runs so counter to mainstream cultural literacies” (Perkins 586). This dilemma is often illustrated in specific rhetorical moves students make in their writing. Juanita M. Smart’s reflection on an essay where a student uses Jesus as a lens to examine Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* illustrates the reasons this language proves to be so challenging and problematic:

> What seems so clear to me, but what my student may not yet understand, is that much of the religious discourse he invokes is verbal code that can be estranging for an audience not conversant in that code, or whose identification with it is
something ‘other’ that what the writer values. [This code] polarizes readers who have experienced those references as threatening incantations, words invoked to bolster the stereotypical, ostracizing, and ‘monstrous’ charges that too often misrepresent and nullify the ethos and identity of [an] other. (18, first bracket mine, second in original)

Smart’s characterization of religious rhetoric as potentially “threatening” and “polarizing” is familiar to LGBTQ people generally, particularly to writing teachers who seek to address sexuality in the classroom. Douglas Downs and Richard E. Miller are among those who write about the enormous challenges writing teachers face when addressing homophobia in student writing, as well as in finding appropriate pedagogical frameworks to help religious students be successful academic writers when writing about LGBTQ issues. Indeed, much scholarship that looks at the intersection of religion and sexuality in the writing classroom has looked at the relationship as a contentious one because of the homophobic and “threatening incantations” characterizing much of the religious rhetoric that gets invoked.

The challenges that arise from bringing discussions of religion into the writing classroom in an attempt to take religious identity as seriously as any other usually stem from a radically different view of textual interpretation and engagement. As Pricilla Perkins argues above, some ways of engaging with religious texts are the source of great conflict because they run counter to the goals of the composition classroom. As teachers of writing, we want students to analyze, interpret, and argue with texts. We want students to see texts as arguments, as socially situated, contextually embedded, and rhetorical.

One of the questions that my case study of “Biblical Self-Defense for GLBTQs and Allies” leaves unanswered is how to reconcile these two different ways of reading. The
foundation of Pastor Miller-Smith’s workshop is a contextual reading of religious texts, a view that sees them as open to interpretation and to change, and historically, politically, and socially situated. Participants in the workshop are able to form arguments about LGBTQ issues and challenge heteronormativity in religion because of this view of textual interpretation. This is a common technique that has been employed by a number of other organizations, scholars, and activists in order to accomplish similar work. For example, the editors of the *Queen James Bible* (a “big, fabulous Bible,” of course) have taken it upon themselves to “resolve interpretive ambiguity in the Bible as it pertains to homosexuality” by editing the verses that refer to homosexuality “in a way that makes homophobic interpretations impossible” (“A Gay Bible”). The editors have chosen what is “arguably the most popular Bible in history” (the King James Bible) because “many English Bible translations that actively condemn homosexuality have based themselves on the King James Version and have erroneously adopted its words to support their own agenda” (“Editor’s Notes”). By acknowledging that this very old text can be interpreted in many ways, they decided to “modify existing interpretively ambiguous language, or simply to delete it” because “[they] wanted [their] Bible bulletproof from the ones shooting the bullets” (“Editor’s Notes”).

However, orthodox readings view texts (particularly religious texts like the Bible) as static, fixed, and unchanging. An orthodox view relies on the authority of the text, on an unchanging view of scripture that is not open to interpretation through a modern lens. “Revising” the Bible, as the *Queen James Bible* editors have done, is simply not acceptable. These changes to the texts and these interpretations of the process of translation or historical and social context are inaccurate at best, and wildly blasphemous at worst. Furthermore, in addition to sacred texts, a number of religions have a higher (earthly) authority to clarify any ambiguity that might exist
in situations like this. The Catholics, for instance, have the pope and the Mormons have modern revelations, either of which can change or clarify the church’s position on an issue. The two different ways of reading the Bible don’t acknowledge the text as the same fundamental object.

Addressing the tension between these two views of texts remains an important challenge for work in writing studies where the lines of religion, sexuality, and literacy converge. We need more work that fosters conversations between religious and queer scholars so that this tension does not leave us at an impasse, but becomes the foundation for further conversations. The tensions between religion and sexuality do not have to be a foregone conclusion, but a starting point for dialogue.

One of the places to begin this conversation is to acknowledge that queer and religious scholars do have common ground: both have found their work to be marginalized in the field, even in a discipline that prides itself on acknowledging and engaging with difference. Religion and sexuality are topics that cause a good deal of discomfort because both are viewed to be personal topics, rather than academic ones. While this is certainly changing as the proliferation of scholarship at the intersection of sexuality/literacy and religion/literacy illustrates, this silencing of the so-called “personal” and the discomfort of discussing these topics in academic work is something that religious and queer scholars have in common. Though challenges certainly remain, this presents an opportunity for fertile conversations to develop. When it comes to the disagreements, the fissures and cracks in perspective, future research must see this divergence not as a barrier that forestalls conversation, but as a way to move forward. With the

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1 It is important to recognize that although sexuality and religion have both been marginalized in academia, religion undoubtedly has a privileged place in political discourse outside of the academy, whereas sexuality does not. Furthermore, some religious communities have actively oppressed and marginalized LGBTQ people on the basis of their sexuality, while LGBTQ people have not systematically marginalized and oppressed religious people on the basis of their faith.
lines of sexuality and religion converging in our classrooms, our scholarship, and on the political stage, we simply can’t afford to ignore these conversations.


McBeth, Mark. "Putting the QQ (Queer and Questioning) in LGBT." Conference on College Composition and Communication, Indianapolis, IN. March 2014. Address.

---. "God Hates Fags...Fuck This Guy: Rhetorics of Repulsion and Their Non-Dialogue or Confronting Consensual and Mutual Distrust." Conference on College Composition and Communication, Tampa, FL. March 2015. Address.


