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A Victim No More: An Arts-Based Autoethnographic Inquiry

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A VICTIM NO MORE:

AN ARTS-BASED AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

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Heteronormative culture and curriculum have traditionally prevailed within the college classroom (MacGillivray, 2000). Many LGBTQQIA+ students still find challenges regarding acceptance and integration which may impact their learning experiences (Nodin, 2022). Addressing heteronormative curriculum and pedagogy includes discussing the relevance of LGBTQQIA+ inclusivity, visibility, and histories. For schools to become safe and welcoming environments for members of the LGBTQ+ community, and for the negative consequences of heterosexism to diminish for all, homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, and heterosexual privilege must all be explicitly addressed and interrogated in students' learning (Nunn & Bolt, 2015). One of the ways to do this and ameliorate the adverse effects of heteronormativity is through the creation of autobiographical dramas that construct meaning from LGBTQQIA+ experiences in an attempt to expand ways of knowing, seeing, being, and teaching.

DEDICATION

The completion of my doctoral studies and dissertation would not have been possible without the love and support of my family, friends, relatives, professors, and colleagues. All the glory and thanks to God my father, Jesus my saviour, and the Holy Spirit my guide and comforter, in whom I still believe.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES: MY JOURNEY TO UNDERSTANDING

The purpose of this dissertation is to use arts-based inquiry to lend insight into the ways in which LGBTQQIA+ are often excluded from and/or oppressed by curriculum in schools. Excluding LGBTQQIA+ students can be intentional by teachers and administrations (Collins & Ehrenhalt, 2020), as well as harmful to students who are struggling with their own sexual identities (Yoshino, 2006). The problem of heteronormativity in the classroom comes to light in my personal history as I try to make sense of my own feelings of isolation and inferiority while attending public school. I knew I was gay, but I was not encouraged to come out of the closet, nor was I taught LGBTQQIA+ histories, nor did I have any non-closeted mentors. This problem of exclusion and oppression within a heteronormative curriculum is one that I was forced to acknowledge as I embarked on a personal journey to make meaning of my experiences through autoethnography and through arts-based inquiry. I began to understand my own experience differently on an individual level but also others' sexuality and gender experiences within the educational system. I began to explore the precarious spaces in which I am required to view myself as a subject in the world, rather than an object to be acted upon.

I am then led to question *how* to address, with the intention of making meaning of and, possibly ameliorating, this systemically occurring problem. Mesner (2014) explains, "I want to interrogate the places where institutional guidelines support structures of unexamined privilege, where existing procedures serve to censor voices and stories that are already systematically

marginalized" (p. 17). However, I recognize that before I interrogate others' experiences, I must look at my own experiences and make meaning of them. In this study, I do this through systematic reflection, writing these reflections down, recombing them, and retelling them through arts-based inquiry. The arts-based inquiry is materialized in the form of an original play. My journey is one of transformation and reconciliation, as I reflect on personal experiences, explore societal implications, recognize injustices, and ultimately free myself from a victim mentality and self-loathing.

I employ the concept of critical pedagogy, various theories of critical theatre pedagogy and then initiate queering critical theatre pedagogy as a way to make sense of an unjust world, in hopes of inspiring others to work collectively towards positive change. Employing critical pedagogy, I reference Freire (1970, 1998, 2002), Giroux (1989, 1992), McLaren (2009, 2022), and Dell'Angelo (2014, 2016, 2017). Essentially, critical pedagogy is a problem-posing approach to being in and transforming the world, one which acknowledges our objective and subjective worlds are internally related (McLaren 2022). Freire (1970) stated these ideas as the development of critical consciousness for the liberation of humanity. This leads to the development of a transformative praxis, both individually and collectively, as students and teachers move from dialogue to solidarity to action.

I draw expertise and insight from the following arts-based academic researchers: Johnny Saldana (2003, 2015, 2018) Joe Norris (2009, 2016, 2017), and Patricia Leavy (2007, 2016, 2020). Like these researchers, I have recollected and written down my experiences in and around education, expressing them in an autoenthnographic script, with the end goal of it being used as part of a classroom curriculum. This script can then serve as a pedagogical tool, a way for students and teachers to begin discussing heteronormativity in the classroom and the ways in which it can be addressed and critiqued.

The autoethnographic script I have written is an autobiographical account of my personal experiences in and around my years in public education. Looking back and remembering past behaviours afforded me the opportunity to assess my own education. I was then able to analyze my past teaching and learning experiences and view them with a critical lens. This type of introspection and personal evaluation proved to be difficult and painful. This kind of reflexivity required me to look at the shame I felt, the secrets I kept, the inferiority I harboured, and the anger I had that, at times, became dangerous. Specifically, my autoethnodramatic script serves as qualitative research that allows me to convey, in an authentic and measurable way, how the tradition of heteronormativity in the classroom and society in general has affected me. The working title of my autoethnographic script is: *A Victim No More*. It is a true-to-life memory play about growing up gay. It is the retelling of my personal experiences of how I often felt as though I were a victim of society because I was not celebrated as the gay man I am. I specifically emphasize and center my experiences in and around my educational experiences in college, high school, and middle/elementary school.

CHAPTER II

KEY THEORIES: A HOLISTIC VIEW OF THE PROBLEM

This chapter reviews literature that undergirds my study. This includes research regarding the omission of LGBTQQIA+ in educational curricula, the systemic problem of Heteronormativity and how its characteristics impact the in-classroom experiences of students and instructors, and an exploration of ways to address this problem. In order to hone in on key ideas related to my own and others' experiences of curricular heteronormativity and my attempt to use creative narrative to write against it, I use several key ideas that help frame the focused literature review that follows. These key ideas are interwoven throughout multiple sections of the dissertation and engage the processes of inquiry that help shape the script in form and content. First, I discuss literature that introduces, offers definitions, and explains heteronormativity as it exists in schools, as well as the ameliorative tolerance multicultural approaches that offer a response. This highly problematic notion of tolerance shaped, in part, my educational experiences and is one I hope to problematize in my script. I then contextualize the work of this study to talk back to heteronormativity and tolerance approaches broadly within Critical Pedagogy and Queer Theory. Then, more specifically, this focused literature review discusses literature from a critical theatre perspective and what it might mean to queer theatre pedagogy.

Heteronormativity

Adverse effects of heteronormativity in the classroom have been well-documented. Heteronormativity is defined as "the belief that heterosexuality is the natural, normal, and ideal

form of sexuality – the way people *should* be. All other forms of sexuality are subordinate and devalued, even though they may be tolerated and even accepted" (Steyn & van Zyl, 2009). Thus, heteronormativity fosters the promotion of heterosexuality and offers evidence of 'heterosexual privilege' (Duggan, 1994). Heterosexuals are privileged because their identities as straight people as well as their opposite-sex relationships are affirmed and celebrated in every facet of culture, from the popular media to the law (MacGillivray, 2000).

According to Oesterreich (2002), heteronormativity is the idea that society and political economy presuppose the consistent pairing of women and men. Consequently, the way our society is structured – everything from gender roles to job categories to standards of dress – reflect and extends the assumption that men and women will pair off, reproduce, and grow old together. Therefore, heteronormativity inherently limits who is counted as a citizen and the way in which a citizen can participate in democratic citizenship (Blumenfeld, 1992). Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh (2004) state that heteronormativity is ubiquitous within most structures and institutions, including schools. It maintains the power of heterosexuality as dominant and privileged within the classroom or school, and within more general notions of who might be termed a full citizen. According to MacGillivray (2000), the U.S., for the most part, is a culture based on heteronormativity – that is a culture where heterosexuality is taken to be the norm. The teaching of heteronormativity may be taught explicitly and implicitly from early childhood. We absorb and attach meaning to the idea that heterosexuality is favored among our peers and families. In the classroom, heteronormativity is often present in the pedagogy and curricula, from pre-school to higher education. Giroux (2003) states that Education is a democratic public sphere. That is, students enter into classrooms as public citizens; their private lives seemingly inconsequential to their participation, unless they fail to fit neatly within dominant identity frameworks.

Therefore, it is important for me to highlight the need for teaching tolerance in the classroom. By teachers initiating conversation and communication about LGBTQQIA+, my hope is that LGBTQQIA+ students will feel seen, validated, and valued. According to Nunn & Bolt (2015), one way to ameliorate the adverse effects of heteronormativity in the classroom is to address, discuss, and make room for nonheterosexual voices in the curricula. They go on to assert that for schools to become safe and welcoming environments for members of the LGBTQ+ community, and for the negative consequences of heterosexism to diminish for all, homophobia, heterosexism, heteronormativity, and heterosexual privilege must all be explicitly addressed and interrogated in students' learning. Similarly, Airton (2019), Gorski et al. (2013), and Macintosh (1989) assert that the pedagogy that is needed moves beyond simple anti-homophobic discourse that focuses on individual acts of aggression. According to MacGillivray (2000), discussions about gender identity, sexual orientation, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in the curriculum can help schools destigmatize nonheterosexual identities and deconstruct gender role stereotypes that limit all students. As examples, teaching tolerance in the classroom would include acknowledging the fear boys may have as being perceived as gay, which restricts them to making choices that affirm what it means to be a man in our society, or the choices that girls will make that affirm what it means to be a woman. Thus, it is important to consider the number of men whose lives could have been enriched by exploring their interests in ballet and other arts but instead chose competitive sports because of the chastisement from their friends and maybe even their parents. Consider also the women who could have had successful careers in math and science but picked up on the societal message that "that's not what girls should be interested in" (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). More contemporary literature such as Lilenthal, et al (2017), approach issues of gender and sexual identity from a place of greater

complexity and discuss additional identifiers such as transgender, transneutral, nonbinary, asexual, pansexual, and more. According to Lilenthal, et al. (2017), diversity in schools includes sexual orientation, gender, and gender/identity expression. In addition, in today's school communities, not just students but their parents as well may identify as LGBTQ (Adams & Persinger 2013). There are many good reasons, liberation of full human potential among them, for eradicating heterosexism and homophobia from our schools. A good way to do this is to ensure that all students' sexual orientations and gender identities are represented appropriately and fairly in the curriculum, pedagogical practices, and polices of the schools (MacGillivray, 2000). If LGBTQQIA+ orientations and identities are excluded, students can feel (as I did) invisible, isolated, or on the periphery of "straight society." LGBTQ+ students' lack of self-worth, lack of self-esteem, lack of belonging, or harassment from other students can lead to depression, anxiety, and fear. To put it another way, I think that even if teaching tolerance, albeit problematic, was a prime concern when I was a student, I might have at least felt more included, valued, safer, and more confident.

To ground the ethical discussion of systemic marginalization, Mesner (2014) frequently refers to the seminal article *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, by P. McIntosh. This article challenges writers who benefit from the myriad of unearned, often unexamined, privileges accrued simply by nature of their (white) skin. Since McIntosh's article was published in 1989, a multitude of similar articles have sprung up which explore areas of systematically sanctioned privilege in areas such as heteronormativity, sexism, ableism, and cisgenderism (Mesner, 2014). As McIntosh (1989) described, the privileged work from a base of unacknowledged privilege and much of their oppressiveness is unconscious. McIntosh (1989) acknowledges, "I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible

systems conferring dominance on my group. My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture" (p. 30). McIntosh's experience with privilege may similarly coincide to how heteronormative dominance works and maintains its power. Uncovering areas of privilege (such as heterosexual privilege or white privilege) is often uncomfortable. Poulos (2008) suggests that today's culture buries traumatic narratives in an effort to avoid the discomfort such narratives will produce. However, I embrace the idea of not being afraid to discuss these uneasy topics. This dissertation research presented an opportunity for me to critically explore traumatic events related to a curriculum of heteronormativity in my own experience. Representing these events theatrically in a play provides an avenue for others to connect and explore my discomfort within the context of their own lived curriculum of gender and sexuality. Buddhist nun Chodron (2002) suggests that "uncomfortable feelings are messages that tell us to perk up and lean into a situation when we'd rather cave in and back away" (p. 98). Chodron (2002) adds that this means allowing ourselves to feel what we feel and not pushing it away. It means accepting every aspect of ourselves, even the parts we don't like (pp. 101-102).

To further emphasize the importance of uncovering and addressing heteronormativity in the classroom, Yoshino (2006) explains that part of the harm in covering up teacher and student identities is that the system targets "minority cultures rather than minority persons" and "shows how "all outsider groups are systematically asked to assimilate to mainstream norms in ways that burden our equality." Yoshino (2006) suggests that covering up identities in the classroom suppresses students from attaining fuller self-expression which hinders human flourishing in all dimensions. Additionally, Lee (2002) explains that Teachers need to realize that being welcoming and supportive of LGBTQ students and organizations can have a positive impact on

students who are questioning their sexuality and being supportive can send a signal that different sexual orientations and family configurations are acceptable. Fortunately, as Hsieh (2016) states, in accordance with growing changes in classroom culture, today's preservice teachers are becoming aware of LGBTQ issues in their future classrooms and finding resources to learn strategies to support their future LGBTQ students.

While many schools have instituted some form of multicultural education program, the majority do not address the concerns of queer youth within the official curriculum. These missing discourses tell queer youth that they are not worthy of inclusion, that they are and ought to remain invisible (Crocco, 2001). Literature focusing on curricular exclusion suggests that there are vast amounts of K-12 and university curricula that exclude various kinds of sexual identities and uphold (or praise) only those students with heteronormative sexual identities. Such literature identifies exclusion as the central problem and identifies solutions based on notions of inclusion. Kinds of inclusions include, for example, rewriting and redesigning curricula to include students who identify as LGBTQQIA+. Literature that falls within this approach also suggests that in addition to more inclusive curriculum, there is a need for pedagogy aimed at students who identify as straight so that they can identify straight privilege and work to ameliorate it. Therefore, many times it is necessary for educators to envision themselves as change agents (Ritchie, 2012). Without a robust body of research, teachers might continue to perpetuate the idea that queerness needs covering (Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth, 2020). The following section on Critical Pedagogy departs from the tolerance perspective on heteronormativity in several key ways, and lends academic insight as to how to approach the problem.

Critical Pedagogy

First, it is important to understand Critical Pedagogy as an ancillary of Critical Theory and that Critical Pedagogy is separate, but informed by, Critical Theory. According to Bronner (2011), Critical Theory, in its essence, is Western Marxist thought with the emphasis moved from the liberation of the working class to broader issues of individual agency. Critical Theory suggests that one must critically view society as a whole, in order to assess who holds power and why. However, Critical Theory is more than just this key concept. It is the application and analysis of this concept within a methodology that allows critical theory a more in-depth interrogation of society. For example, in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire's overall aim is to draw our attention to the current oppressive society we live in, by using the classroom as a microcosm of society. Freire claims that the system of education used in school is oppressive in nature, and he provides an alternative liberatory system of education. In the same way, one must view our education system as a whole in order to understand the power hold heteronormativity has in the classroom and evaluate ways to assess and ameliorate this problem. The crucial first step is conversation.

Conversation, dialogue, and communication are crucial to the goal of change. Marx (1962) stated that dialogue must serve as an empowering tool for evaluating, refining, and actuating tangible change. Dialogue is valuable as an initial step, but also crucial for creating real change. Instructors have the responsibility to initiate and nurture conversations about the dominance of heteronormativity, or change will not occur. Freire (1970) emphasized the importance of dialogue: "Dialogue with the people is radically necessary to every authentic revolution" and that "a true revolution must initiate a courageous dialogue with the people. Its very legitimacy lies in that dialogue." Horkheimer (1982) stated that dialogue must lead to action

that "…liberates human beings from the circumstances that enslave them." These statements tie into my study because conversations about heteronormativity in classrooms is necessary, the hope being that students will be propelled to change the injustices they find. Burbules (2000) describes dialogue in the following way:

> Dialogue represents, to one view or another, a way of reconciling differences; a means of promoting empathy and understanding for others; a mode of collaborative inquiry; a method of critically comparing and testing alternative hypotheses; a form of constructivist teaching and learning; a forum for deliberation and negotiation about public policy differences; a therapeutic engagement of self- and Other-exploration; and a basis for shaping uncoerced social and political consensus (p. 275).

Dialogue, as an ideal, does have its limits. Burbules (2000) criticizes claims that dialogue is an inherently liberatory pedagogy. He questions the insistence that dialogue is somehow self-corrective, that if there are unresolved power differentials or unexamined silences and omissions within a dialogue, simply persisting with identical forms of dialogical exchange cannot bring them to light. This kind of ineffective dialogue seems to be not only counterproductive but itself a form of hegemony: if dialogue fails, the solution to the problem is more of the same. The vital question is if dialogue is sufficiently sensitive to conditions of diversity, different forms of communication, different aims and values held by members of different groups, and the serous conflicts and histories of oppression and harm that have excluded marginalized groups from public and educational conversations in the past. However, Burbules (2000) also states that it remains true that the ideal of "dialogue" expresses hope for possibility of open, respectful, critical engagements from which we can learn about others,

about the world, and about ourselves. Dialogue's capacity for active and continuing participation by all parties and the room it makes for coconstruction of understanding and knowledge displays still has weighty potential.

As necessary as effective dialogue is for change, it remains only a part of the process. As Horkheimer (1937) suggested, the important distinction between 'traditional theory' and 'critical theory' – which had, above all, a practical or utilitarian purpose. For Horkheimer a theory is 'critical' to the extent that it not only seeks to explain, understand, and interpret society, but also to the extent it seeks to liberate and change human beings (Horkheimer, 1937). Many other critical theories have evolved in the social sciences and humanities since the time of the Frankfurt School, including feminism (freeing women from forced societal norms and expectations), race theory, and queer theory, as means of explaining society and culture. In this study, I utilize this generally critical approach in that I take a critical view of my lived experiences with the educational system I grew up in.

Therefore, it is necessary to view Critical Pedagogy as an ancillary of Critical Theory, one which is informed by Critical Theory and supports Critical Theory, but whose aim is to create action towards justice. According to Dell' Angelo, et al (2014), the defining aspect of Critical Pedagogy is that it has social justice through empowerment as a central objective. People must understand and reflect upon their ideals and then act upon them in order to create social revolution. The goal of Critical Pedagogy is to become conscious of factors that limit human freedom within curricular and pedagogical spaces (both within schools and within broader communities) and then carry out a plan of action through praxis aimed at transforming these spaces into more liberating ones. This goal is realized through collaboration with all the stakeholders (Dell' Angelo, et al, 2014). I use this approach in reflecting upon the curricular and pedagogical spaces of my past and

representing them in my play's critique of the heternormativity of these spaces. I hope that when reading or performing the play that is in part this research, students may become conscious and inspired to action to fix inequities in curriculum and pedagogy. The script allows for conversations about how to make positive changes in classroom culture.

Finally, Apple (2019) poses two major critical questions about the capacity of schooling to serve as spaces of liberation: Can education actually participate in changing society? Or does it function to reproduce inequalities? Critical Pedagogy recognizes the complex nature of our society and that determining who is responsible for the unequal distribution of power is challenging. Critical theorists, on one hand, enact a form of critical theory anytime they question the ways in which identities are defined, portrayed, categorized, or essentialized (Dell' Angelo, et al, 2014). On the other hand, Critical Pedagogy ultimately opposes the idea that there can be a single "fix" for oppression. Instead, critical pedagogical approaches provide ways to examine one's situatedness and sense of self in the broader social structure and history, as well as in the local context in which the individual may be able to have the greatest impact, and then engage in praxis aimed at liberation (Dell' Angelo, et al, 2014). In a sense, my arts-based research or writing a play functions as this sort of praxis through which the process of critically reflecting and representing the discomfort and trauma I associate with the lived curriculum of heteronormativity allows me the critical distance to connect these very personal experiences with larger critiques. Rather than "fixing" the problem of heternormativity, a critical pedagogical approach to reflection un-fixes my trauma from the personal and opens it up to shared spaces of critique and potential praxis. For example, students that read or perform this play may be prompted to identify effective ways to make a change in their own classroom and local community or transform the meaning they make of these spaces.

Pedagogy can be seen as the art and science of teaching. Or, according to Aguilar-Hernandez (2020), it is how teachers and students create a learning environment. Since societal inequity is reproduced in educational institutions, what students learn in teaching practices often privileges the experiences and perspectives of people in positions of power. One of the ideas of Freire (1970) suggests that those in power may also be oppressors. Critical Pedagogy tries to identity how and why those in power can be oppressive, and then tries to present and establish ways in which change can be rendered. Critical Pedagogy research operates from the idea that:

> knowledge acquired in school – or anywhere, for that matter – is never neutral or objective but is ordered and structured in particular ways…Critical Pedagogy asks how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture while others clearly are not. (McLaren, 2009, p. 63)

Once again referring to Freire's work, McLaren (2009) asserts that education is political, and historically education serves the interests of those in power. This kind of systems keeps minoritized peoples oppressed, as they are systematically denied an educational experience that centers and values their histories and knowledges. McLaren (2009) adds that Critical Pedagogy "is fundamentally concerned with understanding the relationship between power and knowledge" (p. 72). These are important ideas to consider as I critique the education system and I approach the idea of implementing LGBTQQIA+ histories and experiences into curriculum and pedagogy.

Drawing from the ideas of Critical Pedagogy, Drazenovich (2015) argues for the need to center conversations about queerness and sexuality within the classroom. He iterates that "While it is true that schooling should be a process of understanding how multiple levels of identities are produced, sexuality cannot be fully considered without an awareness of how

heteronormativity functions in the educational setting" (Naidoo, 2007, p. 3). Bryson and De Castell (1993) argue that "In the various fields of education, however – whether discursive or embodied – heterosexism and homophobia are rife" (pg. 286). Queer Pedagogy, like Critical Pedagogy, is invested in subverting dominant ideologies within the classroom. However, Queer Pedagogy unveils how power and knowledge is also impacted by homophobia and heterosexism, thereby asserting that sexuality is also a place to question power and knowledge production, and therefore brings that conversation into the classroom (Aguilar-Hernandez, 2020). The script I am creating explicitly bring these issues to light, prompting students to reflexively look at themselves, each other, and their classroom environment and to seek and harness the freedom to be themselves.

Critical Theatre Pedagogy

Theatre as Critical Pedagogy is the next important topic to discuss. The art of live theatre has been used and is still used to educate people and express resistance to oppression. I will look at how theatre has been used as a form of resistance against oppression in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and poverty. According to Langellier (1986), all theatre is a social dialogue. Capo (1983) states that all theatre serves as a source of collective memory. Performance is a sociopolitical process because it serves as an indicator of social change as it illuminates problems, encourages awareness or dissent, and serves as a forum for civic discourse (Howard, 2004). Turner (1988) adds that performance has "reciprocal and reflexive" characteristics because it is "often a critique, direct or veiled, of the social life that grows out of it, an evaluation…of the society handles history" (p. 22).

Garoian (1999) persuasively states that "performance art pedagogy" (p. 5) can allow for continuous explorations of new identifications with the curriculum. According to Garoian

(2002), both teachers and students can benefit from opening spaces for more critical interrogations of the relationship between themselves, the curriculum, and the world. He continues to add that it is the responsibility of teachers to guide students towards a process of making curriculum personally engaging. According to Bey and Washington (2013), critical pedagogy and performance art pedagogy have been effective as strategies for actively involving teachers and students in the curriculum. The challenge is to create projects that move beyond "art for art's sake" to projects that showcase the utility of art for learning to live in the world (Bey & Washington, 2013). At the heart of queer pedagogies in the theatre or performance fields is a practical question about how queer artists learn to do what we do, about how we learn to be a (queer) artist, and at a deeper level, how we negotiate life as queer folk (Campbell, 2020).

Brazilian Augusto Boal, for example, created and adapted his Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to give people an alternative language to discuss, analyze, and resolve oppressions (Howard, 2004). Boal is a prime example of someone who transitioned from theory to practice by combining critical pedagogy with interactive performance. This combination creates a learning community that empowers participants, generates critical understanding, and promotes transformation (Howard, 2004). The creation, reading, and performance of my script provides students an alternate language to discuss heteronormativity and how it affects classroom teaching, learning, and culture. Students who feel oppressed may become aware of their oppression, while other students may realize how they are contributing to the oppression of those oppressed. According to Howard (2004), Boal's techniques offer a practical example of how performance can be a "kinetic" activity as well as a tool for critical pedagogy. By teaching people to become aware of personal behaviours and their social ramifications, performance enables them to re-examine behaviours, evaluate the benefits and the harms, and make

behavioural modifications. In other words, performance techniques can encourage personal awareness that leads to personal change (Howard, 2004).

German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) may be best known for organizing and popularizing his Epic Theatre (also known as Theatre of Alienation). Epic Theatre is a form of drama which intends to provoke the audience "into a heightened social and political awareness, rather than involve them emotionally in a realistic or naturalistic situation" (Klaus, Gilbert, & Field, 1995). Brecht desired to alienate the audience (via the dialogue and actors) in order to keep them from becoming emotionally involved. He used elaborate plots, an episodic structure, rapidly changing locales, insertion of prose and song, and nonrealistic staging devices such as posters, slides, film, stylized sets, and garish lighting effects – all to the end goal of awakening his audience to a political message. Furthermore, he wanted his audiences, as members of society, to take ownership of the message, go forth into their communities, and make a positive change. Brecht wanted to challenge the audience to change an existing social order, one that he perceived as enslaving human beings through bureaucracy, war, and capitalism (Klaus, Gilbert, & Field, 1995).

According to Koutsourakis (2015), it was in 1931 that Brecht:

> developed his theory for a pedagogical theater—the Lehrstiicke. The main pedagogical aim of the Lehrstiicke was the teaching of dialectics as "a principle" which would encourage thinking in contradictions (Steinweg 87). These plays abolished the distinctions between actors and audience and were experimental exercises in political and social behavior, aiming to motivate practical thinking.

Brecht saw that whatever was good and humane in human nature is usually flooded out by inhumanity, by the cruelty of what he first thought of as the universe, and later as capitalist society.

In Brecht's world, badness is active, while goodness is usually passive (Bentley 1961). One of the intents of creating my original script is to not only present opportunities for discussion in my classrooms, but also to inspire students to contribute to making positive changes by being active, not passive, participants in their pursuit of justice. Like Freire, Brecht's writings aimed to inspire efforts to make life more humane for those oppressed by economic and ideological structures that denied them their dignity, rights, and self-determination (Glass 2001). According to Glass (2001), Freire inspired people to engage in "progressive struggles for justice – teachers, students, community organizers, workers, movement activists, and citizens from every walk of life." Freire and Brecht's writings tie directly to critical pedagogy: the act of critiquing society and those who hold power in society, while permitting the oppressed to view their positionality through this critical lens. In accord with their writings, my play provides a critical reflection of my experiences, an assessment of how I responded to my experiences, a chance to revise my current thinking, and an opportunity to reinvent my future.

Mexican American playwright Luis Valdez is well-known for plays about the injustices experienced by Californian migrant workers. Valdez (1971) defines his *Actos* (a collection of scenes created collaboratively, through group improvisation), in the following way: "Actos: Inspire the audience to social action. Illuminate specific points about social problems. Satirize the opposition. Show or hint at a solution. Express what people are feeling." He continues, "the major emphasis in the *Acto* is the social vision, as opposed to the individual artist or playwright's vision" (p. 12-13).

Boal, Brecht, and Valdez wrote, directed, and performed their plays, not only for didactic reasons, but also to call the people to action. This is important because I situate myself in this position as well in my own creative work. I am critical of the saturation of heteronormativity in

education and its expression in the creative/dramatic arts, and I am using the creative/dramatic arts to promote change. In this way, not only I am asking myself to change, I am asking my students to consider change as well. In line with the Critical Pedagogy approach, I attempt to address and expose oppression brought about by heteronormativity and have a discussion about it. Creating and presenting an autoethnographic play presents an opportunity for various points of reflection and an interrogation on the subject, which in turn leads to a call to action.

Queering Critical Theatre Pedagogy

In this section, I build on the tradition of Critical Theatre Pedagogy discussed above and "queer" it a bit. The idea is to use Critical Theatre Pedagogy to further discuss and critique heteronormativity via nonheteronormative autoethnographic accounts. By inserting Queer Theory (QT) here, I am asking the audience (students/teachers) to envision a world where sexuality and gender are allowed to play themselves in more complex and humane ways, regardless of an individual's sexual orientation.

It is first necessary to take a look at Queer Theory and how it has been used in Education. The term *queer* is unique because it is generally understood to be distinct and separate from labels such as *gay, lesbian*, and GLBT (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004). Each category has historical and current usages with implications that are complicated. In using the term *queer*, the push is to complicate the binary of gay and straight, a refiguring of identities containing unstable, and always multiple and partial positions (Butler, 1993).

Similar to other public spaces, the classroom is shaped by formulaic restrictions of heteronormative discourse (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004). Therefore, students who identify with an identity outside of a heterosexual identity, face the pressures of having to fit in, having to hide, and risk becoming largely isolated. The queer student may become socially and politically

identified as a misfit, because of their Otherness. For queer students, this takes the form of a hidden and explicit curriculum that is unable to and unwilling to fully incorporate pedagogies and contents that more that tolerate the inclusion of queer content through specific and planned curricular goals (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004).

According to Keenan and Hot Mess (2020), it is important to differentiate between "queer" as an identity that individuals claim for themselves and "queer" as an analytic. Though queerness refuses crystallized meaning, our use of the term in this article generally refers to our desire to practice an embodied political resistance to confining constructs of gender and sexuality as they are produced by the institutions and social relations that govern our lives. As an analytic frame, however, "queer" is not limited to the individual person. Queer theory can be used to examine how often-impossible standards of normalcy are formed, not only through institutional categorizations of gender and sexuality, but also through social expectations produced through the racialized structures of capitalism that are inextricably intertwined with that hierarchy (p. 444).

Queer Theory then must embrace the Other, whomever the Other is and how they identify. The inherent rights and freedoms of heteronormative citizenry are not accorded equally to the queer body, the body of color, the Othered bodies of those who do not fit neatly within the sociopolitical parameters…the result is the formation of boundaries in our classrooms (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004). Connecting these ideas to the pedagogies of Boal, Brecht, and Valdez as mentioned above, queer theory can advance and extend the ways in which we think about LGBTQIAA+ students as the Other in our classrooms via representation in dramatic literature, i.e., the way the Other (myself, as playwright) experiences oppression as portrayed and identified in the context of my play. Not only do I recognize that I am able to identity as the

Other, oppressed though my lived experiences, I am asking students to consider if they see themselves as being oppressed or if they are contributing to the oppression of others in some way. If so, how can we affect change? It is through voicing our objections that we can affect change.

According to Tierney and Dilley (1998): [Queer Theory] research does not come out of psychology, it is not survey-based, and rather than deal with how to contain deviance or treat everyone similarly, queer theory seeks to disrupt and to assert voice and power. Indeed, even the evocation of the term queer is decidedly defiant; as opposed to the clinician's use of medical terminology (homosexual) or the assimilationist's deployment of less explicitly confrontational terms (gay, bisexual, and lesbian), the theorist from this perspective seeks to bring even language itself into question. As opposed to a previous era when queer was used as a derogatory term for the homosexual, theorists of this persuasion claim the term as a linguistic badge of pride (p. 59).

While theatre can be seen as a critical pedagogy that can work to disrupt heteronormativity in the classroom, as Elsbree and Wong (2007) suggest, critical pedagogies can stop short of disrupting binaries upon which heteronormative epistemologies rely. Both students and teachers can critique and assess the problem of heteronormativity through live theatre, performative art, and/or performative ethnographies/autoethnographies. However, the volume of developmental work that addresses heteronormativity in the classroom is still lacking.

Elsbree and Wong (2007), used the play *The Laramie Project* to disrupt homophobic attitudes amongst pre-service teachers in teacher education courses as a means of interrupting homophobia in schools (Kaufman, 2001). The term "disrupt" refers to a pedagogical interruption or interstice that creates a break in the status quo. Disruptive strategies shake up, shift, or destabilize what is known to create opportunities for difference to be embraced and supported,

instead of perpetuating oppression (Elsbree and Wong, 2007). According to Elsbree and Wong (2007), educational interventions in teacher education programs are necessary to disrupt homophobia at the K-12 public school level. Purposeful interruptions (Sears, 1992) like these are necessary to disrupt homophobia and must be accompanied with support for teachers in creating and practicing anti-homophobic pedagogy, in developing their curricula content, and in implementing instructional strategies. Although most pre-service teachers could identify how the play and the class activities informed their pedagogical actions to support LGBTQ issues and individuals, many articulated a need for more instruction to develop anti-homophobic classrooms and schools (Elsbree and Wong, 2007). My script is intended to add to the anti-homophobic collection of curricula.

According to Jones, et al. (2021), educators are beginning to explore the myriad possibilities for supporting youth engagement with roleplaying and social-justice focused aims. Munoz (1999) cites two important concepts regarding performative pedagogy: disidentification and queer futurity. According to Munoz (1999), disidentification is a practice by which queer people use "damaged stereotypes" and recycle "them as powerful and seductive sites of self-creation" (p. 4). Queer futurity refers to simultaneously critiquing a problematic status quo and envisioning a transformative utopian future. Queer futurity "is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present (p. 1). Munoz argues that queer futurity "is a critical discourse" (p. 21-22) in that it employs critique yet simultaneously includes a radical imagining of a queer future. Queer futurity is ultimately a rejection of the status quo and a centering of "concrete possibility for another world (p. 1). Queer futurity acknowledges the limitations of one's cultural present while refusing to let the present constrain imagination – instead focusing on world-building potentialities (Storm & Jones, 2021).

As I reflected upon my lived experiences and wrote about them, I was compelled to consider how I could make a better future, not only for myself, but for others: could I envision a better future, and what would it look like?

Meyer (2007) states that educators need to have accurate information and support to educate their students and communities around issues of gender, sex, sexual orientation and how discrimination based on any of these grounds harms everyone in schools. By developing a more nuanced and critical understanding of gender, sex, sexual orientation and how these identities and experiences are shaped and taught in schools, educators can have a profound impact on the way students learn, relate to others, and behave in schools (Meyer, 2007). Thomas (2010) suggests that this kind of education would include queer theatre, which reflects the sorrow, anger, and fear of a community responding to patriarchal heterosexism, homophobia, AIDS, and threats of violence; yet at the same time, queer theatre can provide joy, pleasure, and fulfillment by questioning the concept of normal and celebrating difference. These two objectives often work in unison, with the intention that as an audience member, you laughed your ass off and cried your eyes out at the same time (Nakas, 2008). These ideas suggest queer theatre is an effective pedagogical tool for building empathy in the classroom. Reading and/or performing my play in a classroom may open a door for conversation, making room for the Other, and ultimately critical assessment of heteronormativity in curriculum.

Duggan (1994) further explains that Queer Theory, located within or in proximity to critical theory and cultural studies, has grown steadily in publication, sophistication, and academic prestige. Queer theorists are engaged in at least three areas of critique: (a) the critique of humanist narratives that posit the progress of the self and of history, and thus tell the story of the heroic progress of gay liberationists against forces of repression; (b) the critique of empiricist

methods that claim directly to represent the transparent "reality" of "experience," and claim to relate, simply and objectively, what happened, when, and why; and (c) the critique of identity categories presented as stable, unitary, or "authentic" (p. 181). Callis (2009) reminds us that Queer also became an identity category unto itself. Individuals who wanted to label themselves with a nonlabel, who wanted to be fluid or inclusive in their own stated desires or who wanted to challenge hegemonic assumptions of sexuality described themselves as queer (Doty, 1993; Jagose, 1996). Halperin (1995) stated that queer is "by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers" (p.62). According to Halperin's definition, the term *queer* is then deliberately meant to be ambiguous with the specific intent of not labeling oneself or one's group. Furthermore, *queer* can be defined as being *different*…a kind of difference that indeed is also worthy of attention and respect. So then, the term *queer* is purposefully meant to disrupt how identity is constructed and the term *queer* is still changeable. Talburt (2003) notes that queer theories seek to disrupt the discrete, fixed locations of identity by understanding sexuality and its meanings not as a priori or given, but as constructed, contingent, fashioned and refashioned, and relational. This notion of queer theory builds on the critical aims of critical theatre discussed earlier but focuses on the contingencies and contextuality of identity and its categories as well as the contingencies of their disruption. In this study, I attempt to use queer theory in critical ways to reflect on and represent my lived curriculum of heteronormativity in ways that critique sexuality as a priori or given. However, like many critical pedagogical efforts, my work to construct, fashion and refashion a script that seeks to disrupt, sometimes simultaneously reifies. Similarly, Sullivan (2003) notes that queer theory often ends up reifying identity as well in its implication that heterosexuals are "situated in a dominant normative position," that all gays and lesbians "aspire to be granted

access to this position," and that all queers "consciously and intentionally resist assimilation of any kind" (p. 48). Building on the idea that queer identity resists assimilation of any kind, it becomes evident that applying this kind of fluid queer theory approach to the critical pedagogy of theatre may prove to be beneficial when addressing sexuality and gender identity in the classroom. In writing my script, I was thoughtful about how to breach the idea of not assuming another's sexuality with my students and how this idea may be received by students who have not yet ever considered nonheteronormative viewpoints.

I think of my play as a kind of Critical Queer Theatre Pedagogy, representing autoethnographic praxis. The text of the script is what stands in the gap between theory and practice, connecting memories to reflection and ideas, then to writing, then to discussion, then to reader or audience identification, and finally ending with a call to action. It is at this intersection that I can see myself more clearly and in turn I ask others to see themselves as well.

CHAPTER III

DEVELOPING A PERFORMANCE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY:

A VICTIM NO MORE: A MEMORY PLAY IN THREE ACTS

It is important to again highlight the fact that LGBTQQIA+ identities are often excluded from traditional educational curricula. Exclusions of this kind can be intentional by teachers and administrations (Collins & Ehrenhalt, 2020), and as Yoshino (2006) suggests, harmful to students who are struggling with their own sexual identities. Again, this problem comes to light in my personal history as I try to make sense of my own feelings of isolation and inferiority while attending public school. I was not encouraged to come out of the closet, nor was I taught LGBTQIA+ histories, nor did I have any non-closeted mentors. Once again, I highlight this problem of oppression and exclusion because it is one that I must acknowledge as I continue on this autoethnographic journey to make meaning of my experiences through autoethnography and ethnodrama under the umbrella of arts-based research.

Adams and Jones (2011) suggest that evocative autoethnographic research combines autoethnography, queer theory, and reflexivity; they contend that this interwoven approach can serve to disrupt traditional academic research and discourse, building towards social change (Mesner, 2014). Indeed, discussing lived experiences, who has lived them, and the importance about thinking how we are all affected by them is a provoking exploration of thought for the college classroom. Chang (2008) describes autoethnography as a research method that engages the individual in cultural analysis and interpretation. Both ethnography and autoethnography are

related in terms of the research process but the distinct difference is in the role of the incorporated and integral self as the lens through which we gain new knowledge relating to culture and society (Chang, 2008). Incorporating the lived experiences of LGBTQQIA+ persons into classroom discussions is vital because it provides the opportunity to see each other and our individual selves more clearly. These autoethnographic stories help us to see how and why we behave as we do. Again, this is my reasoning for writing an autoethnographic script.

Autoethnography in education has a particular value because it critically explores the lived experience of education combining and recombining phenomenological elements of the social and interior worlds as lived by LGBTQQIA+ students. According to Starr (2010), one can look to the reconceptualist work of Pinar (1984) for evidence of self-exploration he termed *currere* – derived from the Latin infinitive verb meaning to run the racecourse where the process, the running, is emphasized over the product, the racetrack itself. Schubert (1986) recapitulated this view in his interpretation of curriculum:

> In order to reside and function within the social nature of curriculum, one must first locate him- or her-self as a curriculum inquirer. The individual seeks meaning amid the swirl of present events, moves historically into his or her own past to recover and reconstitute origins, and imagines and creates possible directions for his or her own future. Based on the sharing of autobiographical accounts with others who strive for similar understanding, the curriculum becomes a reconceiving of one's own perspective on life. It also becomes a social process whereby individuals come to greater understanding of themselves, others and the world through mutual reconceptualization (p.33).

Starr (2010) adds that self-exploration has its place in curriculum study as evidenced by Pinar (1984) and Schubert (1986). However, autoethnography extends beyond self-study. The

focus of autoethnography is not the literal study of self but the space between the self and the larger social world with which it is imbricated. Autoethnography requires parity in data gathered from the self and others as well as in how they are brought together to create meaning (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Neumann (1996) asserted that autoethnographic "texts democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in a tension with dominant expressions of discursive power" (p.189). Because the personal is the domain for autoethnography, a study using this methodology provides evidence and analysis in research relevant to a context that extends beyond a reconstruction of lived experience into the deeply personal and transformative (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). For writers and readers who engage in autoethnography, this process of engagement can be transformative and has the potential to result in positive change. Goodrich, et al (2016) describe their autoethnographic research as this:

> An autoethnography is an ongoing dialogue wherein the experiences of a culture-sharing group are described, analyzed, and interpreted to provide a critical autoethnographic "thick description," a sort of *cultural portrait* of the participants' experiences (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Merriam, 1998) and of our own attitudes, beliefs, and experiences as colleagues from differing backgrounds…We examined our work to increase queer identity awareness in teacher education (Hillman-Wilmarth & Bills, 2010), and documented how dominant societal discourses from the past and in the present influenced our experiences – collectively and individually (Mizzi, 2010). Using reflexivity and introspection, we came to better understand the complexities of our individual and collective actions, practices, and lived experiences… (p. 216).

Ryan and Hermann-Wilmarth (2020) suggest their autoethnographic research, perhaps most importantly, provides a mechanism through which our experiences connect to experiences of those with other marginalized identities. These authors emphasize Ellis' (2004) statement that the understanding of "stories are always about more than [our] own experience." There is a universal view, a common thread that must be understood: we are linked inextricably together as members of one human race.

As Leavy (2009, 2011) says: Arts-based research practices encourage us to think about our work holistically, to forge coalitions across differences, to seek and build synergies. Leavy (2009, 2011) explains that arts-based research practices and a/r/tography allow us to get at, explore, and illuminate aspects of life that are difficult to reach in other ways. For example, these practices allow us to explore integral aspects of our humanity – the stuff of life, as I tell my students – such as love, loss, grief, depression, pleasure, and joy (Leavy 2009).

Ethnodrama as Autoethnographic Representation

Specifically, I have chosen the art of ethnodrama to represent my autoethnographic data drawn from my lived experiences on the outskirts of the official curricula. According to Saldana (2015), ethnodrama refers to the creation and writing of dramatic scripts. Qualitative research has utilized performance ethnography for several decades. This genre, which also goes by such terms as ethnodrama and ethnotheatre (Saldana, 2005a, 2011a), employs the conventions of theatrical performance to stage for an audience a selected representation of fieldwork. Actors portray participants as characters voicing their stories and values systems through monologue and dialogue. Ethnodramas – the scripts – can be created from research with an acting company or written as original yet authentic autoethnographic works by the researcher-as-playwright (Saldana, 2015). Ethnotheatre refers to the live production of these dramatic scripts, where actors

portray the research participants as characters, and voice their stories through monologues and dialogue. Some well-known examples of ethnodrama and ethnotheatre are: *I Am My Own Wife* (2004 Tony and Pulitzer Prize winner) by Doug Wright, *The Laramie Project* (2001) by Moises Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project, and *The Vagina Monologues* (2001) by Eve Ensler.

Ethnodrama is often used to help audiences engage in thinking about "the other." In the case of my study, I use ethnodrama to represent my experiences as a script that poses questions regarding the marginalization as I lived it, connects these to the larger lived curriculums of marginalization, and compels audiences toward thinking through these questions along with me. In other words, I have created an original ethnodramatic script that reflects own life experiences. According to Saldana (2015), ethnodrama can serve as an ideal way to assess students' thoughts, values, behaviors, and attitudes about a topic (in this case dealing with non-heteronormative sexualities) *before* reading the play and to assess if/how their thoughts, values, behaviors, and attitudes may have changed *after* reading the play. This kind of performative autoethnography has the potential to unlock insights among the scriptwriter and the audience, provoke relevant discussions, and help to create a sense of critical empathy or praxis.

Johnny Saldana is a leading contemporary scholar in ethnodrama. His extensive body of publications are expert, detailed, and are defining references for ethnodrama and ethnotheatre. Saldana makes a very strong point of reminding those researchers who wish to use ethnodrama or ethnotheatre, that creating dramatic narratives from qualitative research requires theatrical knowledge and the use of media and conventions of theatrical production. A researcher's criteria for excellent ethnography in article or book formats don't always harmonize with an artist's criteria for excellent theatre (Saldana, 2003). Saldana insists that theatre's primary goal is not to

"educate" or "enlighten," but to entertain. Therefore, a thorough knowledge of live theatre itself is necessary in order to make a "playable" play. Saldana also relays a folk saying among theatre practitioners, "A play is life – with all the boring parts taken out." He reminds researchers not to be afraid of editing; that using an economy of words can make a more dramatic impact. Lengthy sentences or extraneous passages within an extended narrative, whose absence will not affect the quality of the data or their intent, could be edited (Saldana, 2003).

Saldana (2015) also reminds ethnodramatists that they should consider how their texts will affect an audience. The characters in the text need to display dimension and objectives (goals). Saldana reminds us that there should be logic and flow to the performance and to remember the popular adage, "Don't tell it, show it." Writings for the stage should be aesthetically rich, emotionally evocative, and visually stunning. Researchers, performers, and audience should be able to gain understandings not possible through conventional qualitative data analysis, writing, and presentation from ethnotheatre's artistic rigor and representational power (Saldana, 2003).

Additionally, ethnodrama and ethnotheatre should allow for perceptive insights into the human condition. The voices of the participants should shine through. But there is still a need for more salient and excellent scripts in both theatre and qualitative inquiry. Saldana states the need for quality and quantity in this area, as well as more collaborative efforts among theatre artists and researchers.

Saldana (2015) encourages the researcher to think theatrically by assuming the lenses, filters, and angles of all major production members: the playwright, actor, designer, and director. It is not just creating a written script out of your research but imagining it as a realized performance. Choosing to use the artistic medium of theatre, you may be required to give up the

conventions of academic writing and consider that the actors will be directly speaking to an audience about who they are and what's important to them (Saldana, 2015).

In this study, I have tried to follow the process, ideas, and formatting as utilized by Saldana and also those used by award-winning autoethnographer Manovski. Manovski (2012) wrote that his autoethnographic work contains numerous crafted stories from his own life in an effort to understand particular phenomena in his life. Once the stories were written, he analyzed them for emergent themes, as any ethnographic researcher might have. He then chose stories that best represented and portrayed the emergent themes and recrafted them into a narrative that would communicate the larger issues and developments that emerged from his experience (Manovski, 2014). Manovski states, "I found myself organically working as a writer, away from being an author, crafting stories that were more novel than epic (Barone & Eisner, 2012), allowing the laying bare of questions which have been hidden in the answers (Baldwin, 1962) through my art" (Manovski, 2014).

This study is at the intersection of autoethnography and ethnodrama, but it also intersects with arts-based research (ABR). Leavy (2020) states that in order to cultivate new ways of getting at research questions and bringing the resulting knowledge to broad communities, we need to be able to see and think differently. While researchers often use the language of form or format to talk about the structure of research reports, I use the word *shape* (see Leavy 2009, 2011a). The word *shape* speaks to the form of our work but also to how the form *shapes* the content and how audiences receive that content. Therefore, I think about building research projects and representing the research in terms of "shapes." By emphasizing the need to see and create research in different "shapes," I also hope to highlight the ongoing role of the research community shaping our knowledge-building and transmission practices (Leavy 2011a). In order

to address different issues successfully and communicate effectively with diverse audiences, we need to be able to see in different shapes and to produce knowledge in different shapes (Leavy 2011a). Arts-based researchers see and guild in different shapes (Leavy 2020). I include this information from Leavy here to further explain my choice and use of ABR in this dissertation. What may seem unusual or abstract to some, is to me a very powerful research tool that describes at length my personal experiences as a gay man within the culture of America's educational and social systems, and how these experiences have shaped me as a person. To fortify Leavy's points about seeing and creating research in different shapes, I acknowledge the way Skukauskaite (2020) wrote about ethnography as a way of seeing and being in the world, a way of learning with and from others, and a way of continuously creating connections and new ways of working with continuities, discontinuities, and liminal spaces of our complex lives. This is an effective way to express what I hope the outcome of sharing my play with others will do.

CHAPTER IV

ACT ONE: MEMORIES FROM MY COLLEGE CAREER

For reference, it is important to contextualize my educational history. I attended Kindergarten through 12th grade in the 1970's and 1980's in Poulsbo, Washington, a remote suburban area about an hour and a half northwest of Seattle, whereupon racial demographics were and are predominantly white. After I graduated high school in 1987, I took classes at the nearby junior college at Olympic College in Bremerton, Washington (a thirty-minute drive from Poulsbo). In the 1990's as an undergraduate, I attended Pan American University in Edinburg, Texas and finished my bachelor's degree at West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas. (Side note: my mother and her family were from Edinburg, Texas and my father grew up in West Texas. Those are my connections to Texas.) Later (2009-2011), I went on to get my master's degree at The University of Texas Pan American in Edinburg, Texas. As of this writing, I am finishing up my doctorate degree in education at what is now called The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in Edinburg, Texas. The scope of memories included in my play are from five years old to 30 years old. These places of my schooling are important because both Poulsbo and Edinburg are suburban areas, not always progressive, where by and large only traditional values are taught and celebrated.

From time to time during my academic career, I had toyed with the idea of writing down my lived experiences as a gay man, autobiography-style, if nothing else but as a form of personal catharsis. However, it was when enrolled in my doctorate program that I was asked to complete a

creative assignment for a class, that situated my pedagogical stance, that the idea began to come to fruition. From that relatively brief writing assignment, came the idea to extend and elaborate on that project as a part of my dissertation.

As I began recounting memories in my head, I would briefly jot the memory in the form of a phrase, sentence, or short paragraph. I would write the memory down…sometimes in a Word document, sometimes on a notepad at work, sometimes on a scratch piece of paper in my nightstand drawer. The memories I chose to recount were the ones that stuck out. Perhaps it was a memory that made me laugh, that made me ashamed, or that made me recall a painful event that scarred me. In each case, the memories were chosen because they were important in shaping the way I formed an opinion about myself and/or the world around me. All of the memories were experiential, formative, and worthy of further investigation. The memories I chose to include were the experiential moments that affected the way I thought, whether concretely or abstractly, and ultimately helped me to better understand and analyze my past choices and behaviors. These remembered moments I kept together in a Word document, and I would revisit them often to add more details. Initially I put them in order chronologically but when thinking in terms of a play, I decided to group them according to specific educational periods: university, high school, and middle school/elementary.

I make the above statements to highlight the process of creating ethnodrama. Saldana (2003) says that "ethnodrama, the script, consists of analyzed and dramatized significant selections from interview transcripts, field notes, journal entries, or other written artifacts." This is precisely what I have done with my autobiographical memories. Saldana (2011) also says that there are four primary methods for generating ethnodramatic scripts:

1. Adaptation of interview transcripts

2. Adaptation of nonfiction texts
3. Original autoethnodramatic monologue
4. Devised work through improvisation.

Saldana (2011) then writes in detail the descriptions about each of these methods:

The adaptation of interview transcripts transforms qualitative data into monologic or dialogic form, though most scripts utilize the former for participant representation. The adaptation can consist of a condensed and rearranged narrative, or verbatim excerpts from a longer interview. Adaptation of nonfiction texts extracts monologic and dialogic passages from different sources and, in some cases, requires the playwright to create plausible oral narratives based on the suggested action. Original autoethnodramatic monologues are somewhat comparable to the development of autoethnographic texts, but the intent is to stage and perform the work rather than simply write or read aloud one's personal story. Devised work assembles a company of actor-researchers who bring their collected data into the rehearsal studio to improvisationally and collaboratively create a production under a director's helm. A traditional method of playwriting instruction asks students to compose an original monologue as their first exercise in dramatic writing. The assignment challenges students to think carefully about a single character, his or her possible stories, and the most appropriate language and form for telling one of them. For qualitative researchers, this parallels the one-person case study and provides an opportunity for learning how to adapt an excerpt from a participant's interview transcript into a brief (1–3 minute) self-standing monologic account. Writing ethnodramatic dialogue exchanged between two or more participantcharacters is a more complex endeavor. Naturally occurring conversations documented in field notes or audio recordings can be adapted easily for the stage. Dialogic interactions found in nonfiction texts can also be transformed readily from the page to

the stage. But most often ethnodramatists must cull authentic passages from different participants and sources to creatively reassemble them into a coherent dramatic narrative. Another tactic relies on the playwright's imagination to develop plausible stage dialogue inspired by the nonfiction source's prosaic descriptions and summaries of action. Though it may be stating the obvious, qualitative researchers with a strong theatre background tend to write better ethnodramatic scripts. Several non-theatre scholars experiment with this writing modality, but too often their attempts are little more than a conventional research article – including footnotes, citations, and references to the academic literature – awkwardly adapted into play script format with tedious academic discourse. I try to offer constructive revision recommendations as a peer reviewer of their scholarly work, yet I always include two admonishments: *A play is not a journal article. So, stop thinking like a social scientist and start thinking like an artist*. A playwright is a storyteller in the best sense of the word. And the story an ethnodramatist tells must be told in accessible and authentic language for a lay audience (Saldana 2011).

In addition, Denzin (2014) lays out Faulkner's three criteria for evaluating research poetry:

> *scientific criteria*: depth, authenticity, trustworthiness, understanding, reflexivity, usefulness, articulation of method, ethics
>
> *poetic criteria*: artistic concentration, embodied experience, discovery, conditional, narrative truth, transformation
>
> *artistic criteria*: compression of data, understanding of craft, social justice, moral truth, emotional verisimilitude, sublime, empathy.
>
> Faulkner's first two categories are applied to any form of critical qualitative inquiry. Her third category can be extended. Is the performance text effective

aesthetically? Does it exhibit accessible literary qualities? Is it dramatically evocative? Is it lyrical? Does it invoke shared feelings, images, scenes, and memories? Does it express emotion effectively, economically? Does it establish objective correlatives for the emotions the writer is attempting to evoke (see Eliot, 1922)? Does it meet the criteria attributed to Emily Dickenson: "If I read a work and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know it is poetry" (p. 77).

Denzin (2014) also describes performative criteria: Building on the above normative understandings, I value those autoethno-graphic performance texts that do the following:

1. Unsettle, criticize, and challenge taken-for-granted, repressed meanings
2. Invite moral and ethical dialogue while reflexively clarifying their own moral position
3. Engender resistance and offer utopian thoughts about how things can be made different
4. Demonstrate that they care, that they are kind
5. Show, instead of tell, while using the rule that less is more
6. Exhibit interpretive sufficiency, representational adequacy, and authentic adequacy
7. Are political, functional, collective, and committed.

In asking if a performance event does these things, I understand that every performance is different. Further, audiences may or may not agree on what is caring, or kind, or reflexive, and some persons may not want their taken-for-granted understandings challenged (p. 78).

These descriptions lay the groundwork and set the footwork in motion for ethnodrama as qualitative research. My play contains both the adaptation of nonfiction texts (taken from the

journal of memories in the Word document) and original autoethnodramatic monologues (carefully constructed expressions of those memories). These memories serve as appropriate data for qualitative research because they are authentic representations of lived experiences. This data is then reconstructed into the form of a dramatic script, written with the express goal of purposely translating effectively from page to stage. The results become a combination of life vignettes, significant insights, and epiphanies.

Saldana (2003) reminds us that in dramatic literature, plot is defined as the overall structure of the play; storyline refers to the progression of events within the plot. Dramatic structures include the number of acts, scenes, and vignettes and the timeline can be laid out as linear or nonlinear. The story line is the sequential units of action within the plot. These units of action are dramatized through the use of monologue, dialogue, and physical action (the stage directions and descriptors which are usually listed alongside the monologue or dialogue in parentheses or Italics).

The objective of ethnodrama is to highlight the themes and topics that have emerged from our observations and data. Once I had written my first draft of the script, it was necessary for me to go back and re-read it multiple times. I read it out loud to myself and imagined how it would look and take place on stage. Then began a series of edits, where I chose to omit certain details, or even topics, that simply did not have enough weightiness or time to fully develop. Cutting the monologue, dialogue, and physical action was a necessary step in the process, in order to highlight the most important themes and topics that I felt should clearly emerge for the reader or audience member.

Of the many topics addressed in my play, one of the most devastating is molestation. Interestingly, while completing my writing of this play, I had two very close women friends at separate times disclose to me that they too had been molested when they were younger. One of

these friends I have known for thirty plus years, and I found it hard to accept the fact that she just now decided to tell me. I felt we could have bonded and helped each other if we had known what both of us had been through. For her, it had also been a brother that molested her, from the ages of seven to fourteen. For my other friend, it was her dad that abused her for eight years. Both of these friends confided in me that they had dealt with anger issues, had sought counseling, and found writing/education as an effective ameliorant.

This brings me to the point that writing can be a very helpful tool for dealing with trauma. I, too, strongly agree with this statement and the healing power of writing. Laura Davis (2009), abuse survivor and author of the acclaimed book *The Courage to Heal Workbook for Women and Men Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, beautifully states the following:

> I've always used writing as a way to express myself and get in touch with my feelings, so it was natural for me to turn to writing when I began to recover memories of having been sexually abused. I wrote to quell the feelings, to deal with the panic, to express my feelings, to find answers. Writing opened up realms of information I couldn't reach with my conscious mind. It was a way to talk about what had happened to me. There was something about putting the words on paper that made me really believe they were true. In the early stages of healing, when I despaired that I wasn't getting anywhere, that all this therapy and introspection and work on myself was a cruel joke, writing was a way for me to chart my course, to mark my progress. I could go and read my journals and see that things really had changed. And I could make commitments through my writing: "I will not give in. I will say no to sex I don't want. I won't let myself be abused anymore." Writing was a tremendous relief, and at many points my lifeline.

And so it was with *my* writing as well. Each memory written in the form of word or phrase became a sentence, then sentences, then paragraphs as the memories became more vivid. Some days it was difficult to persist…I would have to take a lot of deep breaths and breaks to walk. I found myself clutching my head in my hands, yanking my hair or letting the tears flow. At the end of a painful day, I was still grateful that I had written these memories down.

Below, I have included the text of my script, interjected periodically with numerous thoughts, reflections, and citations to help explain my positionality. The script in its unbroken entirety is included in the Addendum. My script is divided into three acts: Act I begins as I look back at my undergraduate years in college. These years consisted of finding my way as a young adult and in particular making life choices about my religious beliefs. I also uncover how inferior I felt knowing that I was naturally attracted to men, instead of women. The pressure I felt to conform to heterosexuality, in turn, compelled me to date women. Act I begins like this:

ACT I

ACT I, Scene 1

ALL:

The College Years.

ACTOR ONE:

Growing up gay in America can give a person an inferiority complex. I…I feel…inferior. I grew up feeling inferior. Did I grow up *learning* to be inferior? Does God want me to feel inferior? Why would God create me to be inferior? I don't want to be inferior.

ACTOR TWO *(as a college student)*:

People try to make you feel small so that they can look big.

ACTOR FIVE *(as a college student)*:

Straight people just can't understand gay people.

ACTOR THREE *(as a college professor)*:

It's what we're talking about in our class. This is another form of systematic oppression. One group trying to lord over another group, for control.

ACTOR FOUR *(as a college student)*:

What a minute, you mean dealing with growing up gay is the same thing as growing up dealing with racism or misogyny or anti--

ACTOR THREE *(as a college professor)*:

No. My point is that gay individuals might share a similar feeling of oppression with these races, ethnicities, or other peoples who have experienced oppression in our history. Gays are another group of people in society who have been made to feel "less than," even loathed. Historically, gays have been diminished, held down, and have had their human rights taken away.

ACTOR FIVE *(as a college student)*:

What is the truth here?

ACTOR THREE *(as a college professor)*:

The truth is that one person or a group of people does not have the inherent right to cast another group down, judge them, or deny them their human rights.

ACTOR TWO:

So, society and governments try to coerce us into thinking that certain people, or groups

of people, are better than others? Attempting to enslave us into a certain kind of belief system and existence? I mean, who do they think they are?

ACTOR ONE:

Yeah! I protest against this kind of dogmatic rule and societal hierarchy. I rebel against this idea that I have to conform to be like the majority, or I'm not good enough. That I'm not good enough until I am just like them. That *who I am* is not good enough.

ACTOR TWO *(mocking as an enemy now)*:

You're not acceptable.

ACTOR FOUR *(mocking as an enemy now)*:

You're not right.

ACTORS TWO, THREE, FOUR, FIVE *(all projecting to ACTOR ONE)*:

You're not enough!

ACTOR ONE:

Wow, some people really know how to make you feel inferior.

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 1 is meant to quickly begin the discussion about the oppression and exclusion of homosexuals in society. In particular, I wanted to immediately let the audience know that I felt isolated, judged, not good enough, and simply inferior. I thought the best way to begin was to set the characters in a classroom with a professor. This lends itself to a presumably safe environment where ideas and questions are addressed and discussed. These conversations, though often uncomfortable, as Greene (1993) states, signify a need to reject single dominating

visions or interpretations, whether they come from textbook publishers, school superintendents, local religious bodies, teachers, or even students. Greene (1993) further states that we are only beginning to realize the importance of including, whenever possible, alternative visions on what is offered as historical truth or literary renderings or even certain empirical discoveries. ACT I, Scene 2 continues the classroom discussion and purposely introduces the phrase *Heteronormative Activity*, as well as objections to the pervasiveness of it.

ACT I, Scene 2

ACTOR THREE *(as a college professor, to the audience)*:

> Heteronormative Activity is what the scholars call it. You see, in the traditional educational environment, it has been the norm to assume that everyone in the classroom is straight. Or at least *aspires* to be…or *should* aspire to be…so that they are in accordance with societal norms and religious traditions. Therefore, our classroom communication is as such, and our textbooks are as such. The activities, assignments, and readings all project that the acceptable way to be in society is heterosexual or "straight."

ACTOR FOUR *(to the audience)*:

> Throughout our educational experiences, there are certain events that happen in college, high school, and middle school…that inevitably shape who we are as people. So many things and people pull us in different directions. In regards to sexuality, we are generally pulled in the direction of Heteronormative Activity. *(Sarcastic:)* And those of us who do not identify as straight, have the easy, luxurious task of assimilating into these classrooms…

ACTOR ONE *(to the audience)*:

> For the rest of this play, I'll refer to Heteronormative Activity as "Straight Privilege."

ACTOR TWO:

Kind of like “White Privilege?”

ACTOR ONE:

Perhaps similar. A group of people who have given themselves a stamp of approval. Because it’s what they know. It’s what they deem to be right and acceptable. It’s what they believe is superior. Anything outside of *their* normal way of life is not acceptable.

ACTOR FOUR:

Actually, most of the world *is* straight.

ACTOR THREE:

But not *all* the world.

ACTOR FIVE:

But then do those who are not straight really matter?

ACTOR ONE:

Of course, they do.

ACTOR TWO:

Yep, that’s the question. Do *we* matter?

ALL *(to the audience)*:

Of course, we do!

Blackout.

Greene (1993) states that if there is a truly humane, plague-free community in this country, it must be one responsive to increasing numbers of life-stories, to more and more "different" voices. Even in the small, the local spaces in which teaching is done, educators may begin creating the kinds of situations where, at the very least, students will begin telling the stories of what they are seeking, what they know and might not yet know, exchanging stories with others grounded in other landscapes, at once bringing something into being that is in-between (Greene 1993). Through these classroom relationships, while speaking directly to each other, persons begin to recognize each other and, in the experience of recognition, feel the need to take responsibility for one another.

In ACT I, Scene 3, I begin to uncover my story, a not-so-shiny past, as I endeavored to date women in college in an attempt to assimilate into heteronormative campus culture. This scene introduces the facts about me having sex with a woman for the first time. The scene then describes three very vivid memories of three women in particular that I dated, all of which succumbed to failure. I also describe how detestable I felt from keeping up the charade for so long.

ACT I, Scene 3

ACTOR FIVE:

> I tried. My first couple of years at college were all about me trying to make myself "heteronormatively active." So, I dated girls. (I was dating guys too on the side, low key, of course.) I got so wrapped up in trying to meet these societal norms and religious expectations that I began to do just about anything to fit in. I wanted desperately to please my family, my friends at school, and my church. *(Beat.)* So I dated several women. Not at the same time. Girlfriend #1 was Angela…relatively short-lived…I actually lost my hetero-virginity to her…at night…on the passenger side of my car. It's *not* a good

memory. *(Beat.)* But losing my homo-virginity was even worse! I'll tell you about that later. Now, Girlfriend #2 was Darlene…really special, I mean I think we connected. Girlfriend #3 was Mia…well by #3, I knew I had to start being completely honest…so after dating her for three months, I told her flat out that I was attracted to guys. That brought Girlfriend #3 Mia to a quick end! Later she told me she immediately went to the bathroom and threw up…and persisted to cry for the next eight weeks. *(Beat.)* So then…I went back to Girlfriend #2 Darlene. The point is…I was trying. I honestly tried. I tried to live up to what the world said I should be. I just…knew I wasn't being fair to her, or to any of them. Or to me. We had been good friends…and even okay lovers. But while we were walking down the street holding hands, I was checking out guys. I was lying. And keeping up appearances was eating me alive. *(Beat.)* I was jealous of the men who could lead this kind of double life. The men who seemed to have the stamina to keep up with the lies and even willing to go so far as to get married and have kids. Anyway, eventually I knew it was time to say goodbye to Girlfriend #2 Darlene…*again*. I went to Darlene's house. We argued. We screamed at each other. I left, and slammed the door shut. As I walked to my car, I could hear her throwing things at the door. I could hear her yelling, crying, and cursing my name. *(Beat.)* That was my final try. I knew I had tried my best. Now no one could ever say that I didn't try. Even God could not possibly be angry with me, right? *(Beat.)* Well, that night, I promised myself that I would *never* put another human being through that. Including myself.

ACT I, Scene 4 was placed purposefully where it is because it is meant to be an ice-breaker and a tension-breaker for the audience. If the audience has felt remotely uncomfortable up until this point, they are about to be awakened further by the content of the coming scene.

Although this scene is meant to be funny, there is some serious psychology to unpack here. Navigating my way through understanding my sexuality, there were times when a men's restroom was a respite in more ways than one. It was a space where you could find someone as lonely as you, looking for some kind of connection with another human being. You had something in common with the man, or men, around you. So in some ways, it was a haven for the sexually unsure/insecure, those in hiding, the desperate, or simply the experimental.

I recently saw a video on Tik Tok where a young man was recording an older man coming out of a restroom. The young man was ranting about how the older man was propositioning him at the toilet. The young man took it upon himself to publicly humiliate the older man by yelling at him as he exited the restroom, and posting the video for the world to see. Can you imagine what the older man's family or employers thought? I definitely had conflicting thoughts of that video: part of me was, yes, it is a good thing to expose a predator and another part of me was thinking that poor man, he never asked to be outed to the world about his sexuality nor his proclivities. Not in this way, perhaps not in any way. What will happen to him?

For a time, restroom activities felt like a consolation, or even validation for me. As Dr. Alan Downs (2012) states: "The validation we achieve through sexual encounters is immediate and stimulating, even if it is essentially inauthentic. We play a role, one that we have mastered over years of being onstage, that seduces our beautiful conquest-to-be. When he gives up his resistance and succumbs to our siren call, we feel the rush of immediate validation. If no one else does, at least this one man sees something of value in us. This blissful moment rarely lingers, but in the moment, it satisfies." I address an additional restroom scenario further along in the script when I am caught in a proposition in ACT II, Scene 4.

ACT I, Scene 4

The Actors are men lined up at five imaginary urinals, backs to audience, facing the US wall. From SR to SL, the order should be Actor Two, Actor Three, Actor One will join at center, Actor Four, and Actor Five.

ACTOR ONE *(to audience)*:

> The Magical Urinal Universe. It really wasn't until college that I discovered the magic of the men's urinals. *(Whispers:)* One could get a glimpse of another man's genitalia. And sometimes it was more than just a glimpse… (*He moves to the urinal at center and joins the other Actors, between Actor Three and Actor Four.)*

ACTOR THREE Coughs and clears his throat uncomfortably as ACTOR ONE joins the line. ACTOR ONE glances over his shoulder SL, then SR, mimics the cough and clears his throat too. ACTOR FIVE slowly makes a deliberate head turn, it is obvious that he is checking out ACTORS FOUR and ONE. Then he glances down at their privates. He likes what he sees. Beat. ACTORS FOUR and ONE slowly look at Five. ACTOR FIVE, realizing he's caught, coughs and clears his throat, and quickly stares back at the wall. ACTORS FOUR and ONE stare back at the wall too. ACTORS FOUR and ONE are interested now and slowly turn their heads to look at ACTOR FIVE. ACTOR FIVE still staring at wall. They like what they see. ACTOR THREE flushes his urinal. At the sound of the flush, ALL ACTORS face the wall again. Now ALL ACTORS simultaneously do a slow head turn towards ACTOR FIVE, then ACTOR FIVE boldly glances at them, then down at himself and smiles, proudly showing off his goods. ALL ACTORS are now agog, staring at ACTOR FIVE's goods. Beat. ACTOR ONE flushes to break the tension. ALL ACTORS stare back at the wall. ACTOR FIVE does the slow peek again, scoping all the way down the line this time. Only ACTOR TWO looks at ACTOR FIVE this time. He becomes annoyed at ACTOR FIVE and gives

him the stink-eye: ACTOR TWO has had enough, coughs, flushes, and exits angrily SL. ACTOR FOUR suddenly moans to a climax, zips up, and saunters off happily SL. ACTOR THREE gets scared at the sound of the moans, turns red, and runs out as fast as he can SL. ACTORS ONE and FIVE look around and notice they are the only ones left. ACTOR FIVE moves to the urinal next to ACTOR ONE. They look at each other, up and down. Excited and pleased. More glances at each other. Then ACTORS ONE and FIVE reach for each other and start to kiss.

Blackout.

The next scene is ACT I, Scene 5, which is a significant scene because it is the first time I introduce the idea of a person literally being stretched and pulled in all directions. This scene, and all the future scenes like it, are a kind of ballet, describing in a visceral way how my mind was feeling. The outer mirroring the inner. So many inner battles and struggles, which increased in magnitude over time.

ACT I, Scene 5

A strange, haunting music begins. Two ACTORS on either side of ACTOR ONE. Pulling, tug of war. Real Struggle.

ACTOR ONE is being pulled in opposite directions. Desperate.

Blackout.

In ACT I, Scene 6, I introduce one of the major struggles that pulled me in all directions while in college: faith and religion. I was a very active churchgoer and devout Christian. Like my parents, I grew up in the church…my mother was a Southern Baptist and my father a Methodist. It was natural for me to go into some kind of ministry like this. The group was called The Continental Singers, they put together a dozen groups or so each year that would travel the world. Each group had about 40 singers and musicians. We spread the Gospel through music.

It is here that I begin to unpack my relationship to religion, how it both helped me and how it complicated my life experiences. At this time in my life, in many ways, I was still seeing myself as needing to uphold the dominating consciousness in order to adhere to what is seen as good. Conversely, this was also a time of scrutinizing what is generally called the "truth." I had to recognize that I was striving to identify myself, articulate my beliefs, and criticize mystifications that falsify so much, in order to shape a better existence and future for my life.

ACT I, Scene 6

ACTOR ONE:

After the spring semester was over at college, I auditioned for a singing touring group. It was my way of getting away for the summer and having the chance to perform. It was a show choir: the kind that sings inspirational songs and does choreography? But did I mention it was a Christian touring group…a very strict religious ministry. I aced the audition, made the cuts, and finally was accepted to tour with them. I sang and danced all over the world that summer. Don't get me wrong, I actually enjoyed it and most of it was a positive experience. But one day on the tour bus, I was made to feel so inferior…by an assistant director *(ACTOR TWO enters).* He was assigned the task of "talking to me." The conversation quickly turned to my sexuality. During the conversation, he point-blank asked me:

ACTOR TWO *(as director on the bus, whispering accusingly)*:

Are you gay?

ACTOR ONE:

"Of course I'm not gay!" I replied with the pat answer that I thought I should say. "That's wrong, and I would never want to be like that!" I knew I could not be honest

with him. Not only would I risk humiliation, but I would be risking being sent home from the tour. My answer seemed to satisfy him. *(ACTOR TWO gets up and exits the stage.)* Just like I had been "in hiding" at college, I realized that I would be "in hiding" for the rest of this tour…and for all I knew the rest of my life. It was not the summer of freedom I had hoped it would be. I was in hiding to make sure I would survive. *(Beat. He stands and moves to a new light:)* After that conversation on the bus, I felt differently about that assistant director, about the tour, and about everything in general. I was suddenly overcome with grief and depression. I felt like I was rejected. Like I was not really what they were looking for. I was not who they were hoping I would be. I was not good enough. I was inferior. *(Beat.)* We were performing at a school auditorium that night. Before the concert started, I went into the men's locker room, laid on the bench, and stared up at the ceiling. *(He lies down on a bench.)* If I was straight, none of this would be happening to me. I realized I could study the concept of "straight privilege," but I would never actually have the privilege of being straight. I spiraled into a very dark emotional place that night. A place of hopelessness and aimlessness. *(ACTOR THREE enters.)* One of the choir members came in, saw me laying there, and asked:

ACTOR THREE *(as choir member, genuinely)*:

Are you all right?

ACTOR ONE:

I said, "Oh yeah, I'm fine, I just have a headache." *(Beat. ACTOR THREE exits. ACTOR ONE sits up again.)* I got to be really, really good at hiding my feelings.

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 7 is a memory I cannot forget. It is so interesting to me that even when you think you know a person, you never really know them. This trainer revealed his true thoughts and feelings to me in just those few short words. His heart was harbouring hatred for homosexuality, homosexuals, and the very idea that his offspring could be gay was unfathomable to him.

I feel like the educational system had let us both down. I assumed that he had not previously been exposed to oppositional world views, alternative perspectives, nor oriented to dimensions in diversity curriculum. This created a (necessary) cognitive dissonance within both of us. He was unable to reconcile his beliefs to the question I posed to him. I was unable to process his obvious prejudice towards LGBTQ+ persons.

ACT I, Scene 7

ACTOR FOUR:

> At one point in college, I decided to work out with a personal trainer. I was getting lean and pumped and confident. Eventually I felt comfortable enough to come out to this guy and we had very open conversations. We would disclose interesting facts about our lives to each other. He would often talk to me about his young son. During one of our sessions, I felt compelled to ask him, "What would you do if one day your son came out to you as gay?" His demeanor immediately changed and he answered, "Oh hell, no…not my son!" I instantly shrank inward, back to the dark places of my past…of not feeling good enough and being forced to hide in shame. Why did I come out to this guy? He still doesn't get it. I realized that no matter what I did, or how much I explained myself, there are people who will not fully accept me. Or ever change their thinking. Straight privilege, indeed.

Blackout.

Along the lines of wishing for children one day, ACT I, Scene 8 discloses one of my biggest regrets in life: that I never had kids. Growing up, I would have bet money that at some point in my life, I would have at least one child, or perhaps adopt a child. But that wish never materialized, and that hurts my heart. At 54 years old, I realize that it is not too late and having a child could still be possible. However, there are many facets to consider such as the necessary money and financial security to will I be able to play ball or ice skate with the kid?

ACT I, Scene 8

ACTOR THREE:

> I remember once in college, I had a beautiful dream. I dreamt that a child was sleeping on my chest. He was adorable, about a year old. I patted his blond hair… and I felt contentment like I had never known before. I don't know if the child was mine or someone else's. But I felt the joy and love he had for me and the joy and love I had for him. I wanted to embrace him forever and protect him from all the evil in the world. Then I woke up. To be honest, part of my grief of being gay was that I thought I could never have any children, adopted or of my own. And I love children. *(Beat.)* But look how things have changed now. Look at Anderson Cooper with his babies *(he sighs).* When I was growing up, that was virtually unheard of. Maybe we are making progress.

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 9 details the true frustration I felt while attending church every Sunday. I kept believing something in my life would change. I have attended services at many denominations of Christian churches in my life, including Baptist, Southern Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Pentecostal, United Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Metropolitan Community, Calvary Chapel, and Four-Square Gospel. I attended or visited each of these in search of a deeper

understanding of God and myself. I would think to myself: Maybe I will make up my mind to totally swear off homosexuality. Maybe going to an LGBTQ-affirming church would make me feel guilt-free. Maybe I would meet my human within one of these particular congregations and we would get married, changing the trajectory of my life. Maybe I would never really be happy in church? Scene 9 intends to reflect the confusion I felt and the questions I never got answers to.

ACT I, Scene 9

ACTOR TWO:

> Eventually, trying to fit into hetero college life became too much for me and I chose to "sit out" for awhile. *(The other ACTORS sit or lay down on the floor to listen.)* I became more reclusive. I stopped doing things I typically would do. For example, going to church. *(Beat.)* I just stopped entirely. One Sunday morning, after years of faithful attendance, I could not bring myself to go. There were so many crazy emotions running through my mind. Did I feel truly loved there? Did I fit in there? I felt lonely sitting in the pew by myself for every service. Slowly…I stopped *feeling* anything while I was there. In the midst of the hellos and handshakes and families sitting together, the guilt of being who I was crept in and overwhelmed the calm assurance I had felt at previous times in church. Yeah, don't get me wrong – I loved church. Part of me was happiest in a place where I could worship and praise God, and serve people. But I wasn't free to do that anymore, I felt bound by condemning words, synthetic traditions, and especially dubious reactions from people when they asked me if I had a girlfriend… *(Beat.)* I remember one Sunday, the pastor preached about how homosexuals were just like dogs. I'm sure an immediate red flush was apparent on my cheeks, embarrassment tinged with anger. Embarrassed because he was speaking of people like me, angered because I WAS NOT a

dog. I AM NOT a dog. At that moment I realized most others are completely oblivious to my life's journey: my plight, my pain, and my search for relationship. The other congregants were most likely completely clueless about what I was going through. So the battle in my mind oscillated between dreaming of an euphoric gay relationship and thoughts of…well, becoming a monk. After all, that is what the church was telling me, right? Since I cannot have a same-sex relationship of any kind, then my only other option is complete denial of self and cessation of all sexual activity. Unless of course I could enter into the façade of a heteronormative relationship and lie to the woman throughout our marriage. I've known men who have done just that; but I could never live that life. I could not feel good about myself. So how…how could I live a life absent of relational love? *(Ranting now:)* What if suddenly all the straight people in the world were told that they must no longer have sex with the opposite sex? How would they feel? What would they do? The reaction they would have is the same reaction I have: this seems impossible! The worst part of it all is this feeling that I'm *displeasing* God. I thought to myself, if God thinks a same-sex relationship is wrong, then I must stop…any thoughts, all participation. All the guilt and shame came back…all the questions, the sadness. Everything paralyzing me. Is this what God really wants? Am I to be miserable and paralyzed for the rest of my days here on earth? As the sermon ended that day, I thought: Wow, I'm just like Dorothy in Oz. *(He laughs to himself: the perfect gay analogy. Beat. Then serious again.)* I've come to this beautiful place, full of promise and hope, but I all I want to do right now is go back home. I thought of what I could to say to the pastor, as he shook my hand at the end of the service. The only thing that came to my mind was Dorothy's line in the Wizard of Oz at the end of the movie… "I don't think there's

anything in that black bag for me." I didn't really say it, but that's how I felt. Whatever promises were granted to others, I had no chance of getting them. There was nothing in there that could "fix" me. There was no magic elixir in that bag for me, no cure, no real answers to my questions, no consolation, not even a chance to share my truth. So I walked out of the sanctuary, drove out of the parking lot, and my feelings and I returned to my empty apartment.

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 10 is an attempt to illustrate how brilliant I became at escapism, and the dark spiraling truth that was necessary to face: I had become an avid binge-drinker. Sometimes after a wild night out, my friends would tell me what I had done…and I did not remember any of it, or perhaps vague flashes of it. Sometimes I would wake up beside someone whose name and face I did not know. This is a sad, but true memory of how reality hit me in the face that night. This scene is also meant to have a bit of levity; perhaps the audience needs another good laugh at this point.

ACT I, Scene 10

ACTOR ONE:

Desperate. Lonely. No one knows me. Let's drink. Drink to forget. Party. Try it all. All night. The molestation. MD 20/20. Long Island Iced Tea. Vomit in the stall. Lose myself. Popular at the clubs. I find consolation at night. I find peace drinking with friends at night. Away from my family and memories. Overdo it. Hangovers. Blackouts. Phone numbers scribbled on napkins. Fast food at 3 a.m. Promiscuity.

ACTOR TWO:

Let's go out again tonight! New dance club on Jackson! I'll drive.

ACTOR ONE:

He picks me up. We shut down the bar. Start to drive out of the parking lot. Bump into the car ahead of us. Police officer sees it. Sobriety tests. Handcuffs. DUI. Humiliation.

ACTOR TWO:

We'll be fine. I've driven while being much worse.

ACTOR ONE:

In back of police car. Then police station. Fingerprinted. Car towed. Bail money set. We're thrown in the drunk tank. *(ACTOR FOUR enters as a prostitute, ACTOR FIVE enters as a member of a drug cartel. They surround them.)* Twenty other criminals in with us.

ACTOR TWO: *(Beat.)*

Let's pray and sing to Jesus…

ACTORS ONE AND TWO, still slightly inebriated, begin to sing Amazing Grace, in perfect harmony. They finish two verses, then the guard interrupts.

ACTOR THREE *(enters as jail guard)*:

Okay, guys, come on. *(He opens the cell with his keys and approaches them. To ACTORS FOUR and FIVE:)* Easy, Smiley. Easy, Hot Lips.

ACTOR TWO:

What, sir?

ACTOR ONE:

Are we in trouble?

ACTOR THREE:

No. I've been ordered to put you in your own holding cell down the hall. They don't want any conflict in the tank. *(He takes ACTORS ONE and TWO by their arms and starts to lead them down the hall.)*

ACTORS ONE and TWO *(in unison):*

Thank you, Jesus!

ACTOR ONE:

This is awfully nice of you guys.

ACTOR TWO:

We've always relied on the kindness of strangers. Like yourself.

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 11 is also a true memory (I say that in case you had any doubts), and a troubling one to write about. For years I have had to reconcile myself to the fact that the night I lost my virginity to a man went down like this. So, for one, it took bravery on my part to put it on paper. For two, I was concerned about how others may perceive me after they read this. I was afraid of the shame they would put upon me…and I had already unendingly shamed myself. We still have this ideal that once you have been "had," you are unclean and perhaps don't belong to one person, but to everyone. In reality, I know there are many other stories like mine, and worse. I know there are others whose first times felt shameful too, instead of the happy, loving ideal experience we conjured up in our heads. This brings me to an important discovery I made along the way of writing this play: the importance of forgiving myself and forgiving others. I will speak more about forgiveness at the end of the play, which is also a huge part of the religion that I (still) have chosen to belong to.

ACT I, Scene 11

ACTOR FIVE:

Well, as promised, here is the story of how I lost my homo-virginity. Like losing my hetero-virginity, it is *not* a good memory because it was *not* a good time. I was young, naïve, and drunk. I had been talking to this guy for awhile…a passionate, handsome Latino guy. One night we met out at the bar…one thing led to another…and we wound up at his place in the early morning. The problem was that he was still living with his parents. And we were both really loaded. And we were talking loud and dropping things. They of course woke up and came knocking on his bedroom door in their pajamas, asking him what was going on. I know, awful, right? He somehow convinced them that we both simply had too much to drink, and we just needed to sleep it off. Fine. But then we started to get hot and heavy. Mind you, I was innocent, drunk, and supremely horny at this point. We both wanted to get down and dirty. He wanted to do the nasty. He had condoms…but no lube. He searched everywhere for his lube. He went into the bathroom, and said he found something that would work. Did I mention that I was drunk at this point? Before I knew it, he was pushing his way into my back door using TOOTHPASTE! My friends, that fresh, tingly wintergreen flavor took on a whole new meaning. Boy, was that awful! And did I let him have it! I cursed him out, gathered my things, and left that instant. *(Beat.)* See, I told you it was *not* a good time. Aren't you sorry you asked? Oh, wait, you didn't ask. Aren't you sorry I told you? *(Beat.)* Oh, and no, we never saw each other again. *(Beat.)* Think of me when you brush your teeth tonight.

Blackout.

Since Scene 11 is intended to be a kind of climax in the play, pun intended, then ACT I, Scene 12 must show the audience a physical struggle again, reinforcing the mental struggle. It should allow the audience a sense of satisfaction that signifies the end of ACT ONE, but also arouse their interest in what is coming next in ACT II.

ACT I, Scene 12

Music. Four ACTORS now have ACTOR ONE by each limb. Pulling, tug of war. Real Struggle. ACTOR ONE is being pulled in all four directions. Desperate. Music crescendos.

Blackout.

CHAPTER V

ACT TWO: MEMORIES FROM MY HIGH SCHOOL YEARS

Act II is a survey of my years as a student in high school. There were formative moments that were uncomfortable and even embarrassing to write about. However, those moments helped to bring to light my insecurities, confusion, and naivete. I wanted to show the real struggle of being pulled in different directions and having to make up one's mind and heart. Here is ACT II, Scene 1:

ACT II

ACT II, Scene 1

ALL:

The High School Years.

ACTOR FOUR:

You should never rely on your feelings.

ACTOR THREE:

Feelings are your emotions. And we never follow our emotions.

ACTOR TWO:

Head, not heart.

ACTOR ONE:

I don't understand, it was my feelings that brought me to God. I mean that He loves me. I *felt* His love. And I love Him. He's my wonderful Creator.

ACTOR FIVE:

We should never let our feelings guide us.

ACTOR ONE:

But that doesn't make sense. We are creatures of both thought and feeling.

ACTOR FOUR:

You must use your head to follow God.

ACTOR ONE:

That makes us like robots, doesn't it? God doesn't want us to feel human emotions?

ACTOR THREE:

More studying, less questioning.

ACTOR FIVE:

More doing, less feeling.

ACTOR ONE:

You're asking me to leave all feelings aside? That's worse than a robot. That's like…hell.

Blackout.

ACT II, Scene 2 portrays my teenage arousal to the male form, much of which I had never seen before. Having not been in athletics growing up, locker rooms were odd places to me and most times I felt the need to rush out of there quickly. It was here that I saw my friends in their birthday suits for the first time. Of course, for the play their real names are changed. I noticed changes in their musculature and manhood, which included showing off and trying to one-up each other. Alpha males would fight for territory on the changing bench and attempt to rule the conversations. I wondered, was there anyone like me here? Was there anyone else trying to hide their true self? Furthermore, what would these guys to do me if they knew my truth? This question always lingered in the back of my mind as I dressed and undressed in the locker room.

ACT II, Scene 2

ACTOR THREE is at center. The other ACTORS are around him, drying off with white towels.

ACTOR THREE:

> It was in the high school locker room after gym class when I got my first glimpse of a real live, all-nude, full-frontal young man. I caught myself creepily staring, I just couldn't help myself. Staring not just once, but many times. Staring not just at one, but glancing around at all of them. I saw all kinds, shapes, sizes, bush-lengths, and even…the occasional hard-on. These memories later provided many years of jack-off material. There was my good friend, Kyle, previously only seen in street clothes: big balls! (*ACTOR TWO as Kyle quickly pulls up his towel to hide the jewels*.) There was the Latin jock, Adrian, spunky, and into every sport: dark and curvy! (*ACTOR FOUR as Adrian quickly hangs up a towel, blocking ACTOR THREE's view*.) But mostly, there was the revelation named Jason Stratford. Tall, tight curly blond hair, swimmer's build, and the

longest pink penis I have ever seen in my life! To this day! Soft and hard! Why would he regularly get a hard-on in the locker room? I could only imagine. *(All Actors turn away from ACTOR THREE now.)* Were all these guys onto me now? Could they see right through me? Could any of these guys blow my cover at any moment? Kyle went to my church…would he tell my parents? Adrian was in my Health class…would he expose me to the other kids? And Jason…Jason was in my History class right after Gym class…well, I think I would have let him done anything to me. (*ACTOR FIVE smiles, winds up towel and snaps ACTOR THREE in the ass.*) I had to snap myself back into reality real fast and continue pretending to be straight. It was not time to come out of the closet – I was not brave enough yet.

Blackout.

In ACT II, Scene 3, I knew structure-wise I need variance in the script. I thought bantering back and forth with questions and answers was an effective tool to use. All the while enforcing the idea that those around us seem to always want a clear answer and have it quickly. However, clear and quick answers are not always possible. Many times, one quick answer does not fully address the complexities of the problem and / or is faulty. The mind, heart, and spirit must navigate issues and situations to make decisions which are not hasty and that are in the individual's long-term best interest. Maybe when we make decisions out of pressure and haste, it is these decisions are the ones that turn out to be mistakes.

ACT II, Scene 3

ACTOR ONE:

I don't know, we're taught in high school to be one thing or the other. We always choose sides, like in Debate, like in Gym Class.

ACTOR FIVE *(as if at lunch counter)*:

What's it going to be?

ACTOR THREE:

Eggs or ham?

ACTOR FOUR:

Emerson or Thoreau?

ACTOR TWO:

Alfredo or marinara?

ACTOR FIVE:

Men or Women?

ACTOR THREE:

Dodgeball or Stickball?

ACTOR ONE *(in spotlight, to audience)*:

Now I think this is why I've never been good at making decisions. I mean, college is a time to make up your mind, right? But navigating your choices can be a complex process.

Lights change again.

ACTOR TWO:

Catholic or Protestant?

ACTOR FOUR:

Baptist or Pentecostal?

ACTOR FIVE:

Rum or vodka?

ACTOR FOUR:

Light or dark?

ACTOR THREE:

Walk or run?

ALL ACTORS:

Well?!

ACTOR ONE *(back to lunch counter)*:

I'd like to try both! Alfredo and marinara, please.

Lights change again. ACTOR ONE is at center now, the ACTORS in various sultry positions around him.

ACTOR ONE *(to audience)*:

So I tried my best to *try*.

ACTOR THREE:

To taste.

ACTOR FOUR:

Both.

ACTOR FIVE:

Everything.

ACTOR ONE:

To change.

ACTOR FOUR:

Everything.

ACTOR TWO *(as flirty girl)*:

So you wanna go out on Friday?

ACTOR ONE:

Yeah.

Blackout.

ACT II, Scene 4, which takes place in a restroom stall, is another moment that is difficult for me to talk about. However, I felt it was necessary to include this scene because it was a pivotal moment for me. I almost got into real trouble here, it could have been a physical fight or it could have been an arrest. Writing this scene, I could see that I had an affinity for a rush of excitement and risky behavior. These acts of acting-out were my way of expressing frustration (sexual and otherwise) and rage at the world I was growing up in.

ACT II, Scene 4

ACTOR FOUR:

One of my first clandestine experiences happened when I was 17 years old in high school. After class one day, I went to the grocery store and I could not help but notice a very handsome, muscle-y man. An Adonis like I had never seen before. He went to use the men's room and I followed him. I took up the stall beside him. In the only way I knew how (at the time) to connect with someone I was interested in, I wrote (with trembling

hands) a sexual proposition to him on a little piece of paper and handed it to him underneath the divider. In an instant he jumped up and started banging on my door, shouting, “Come out of there and I’ll give you something!” Shocked, I immediately thought, “Oh my God, what have I done? This guy is probably going to kill me, and at the very least he’ll make sure that I am publicly humiliated!” He then left the restroom. Relieved, but too terrified to exit the stall, I stayed in there, hyperventilating, and starting to cry. Soon the man returned with two of the store’s managers and they insisted I come out and come talk with them in the office. I learned a great lesson there in that office: that acting boldly out of desperation and insecurity can bring about all kinds of unwanted consequences. The man mentioned pressing charges, but did not, and the managers actually turned out to be very sensitive to the situation. They each commented on how young I looked. They advised me never to attempt something like that again. My inner thoughts were: “Yes, I know, you’re right. And I need someone to come fix me, correct me, cure me.” I timidly headed home alone, realizing I had put myself in danger. *(Beat.)* The realization that I had no idea how to navigate romantic / intimate relationships left me dumbfounded. Here I was, blossoming into a young adult, not having even mentioned the fact that I might be gay to anyone. I had no clue how to approach the idea of same-sex dating because I had never been taught that it was a possibility. I had implicitly been taught that I should be ashamed of what I was feeling and that I must conform to a hetero world. Throughout my junior high and high school years, I had yet to experience the use of confirming, positive, or affective language regarding homosexuality. From myself, or anyone else.

Blackout.

ACT II, Scene 5 is one of my most vivid memories. It was a sunny summer day when I received my friend's first reply to my letter. His letters were long, usually four to six handwritten legal-pad pages. It was as if writing these letters were therapy for both of us. My friend's name is David Zinn, an enormously accomplished set and costume designer in the theatre. But I just know him as a kind, super smart, funny guy that I grew up doing live theatre with on Bainbridge Island, Washington.

ACT II, Scene 5

ACTOR TWO:

> The summer after graduating high school, I decided to come out to a good friend. I suspected he also was gay. I wrote my coming out story to him in a letter and mailed it to him. When he wrote me back, I was so thrilled – elated! Because he confirmed to me that he too was gay! Finally, there was someone who knew how I felt. He understood all that I was feeling and going through. And he was loving towards me. And I could sense he really supported me. In that moment, the darkness had parted and a sense of joy like I never had before welled up in me. I literally began running and dancing around my bedroom. Tears of joy. I started to kiss the dresser, the mirror *(smack, you're beautiful!)*, the walls, the doors, my clothes, my shoes. I had never felt such happiness. It was like the world was hugging me, and I was hugging it right back.

Blackout.

The next scene once again emphasizes the immense pull present in my mind. It represents the way I felt: that I was being pulled in multiple directions, by multiple people and ideas, and that all of this pulling, stretching, and growing was painful.

ACT II, Scene 6

Music. The four ACTORS continue to pull ACTOR ONE by each limb. ACTOR ONE's arms and legs are now being elongated like a gumby, each limb magically extending to a corner of the stage. Excruciating pain. Music crescendos dramatically.

Blackout.

CHAPTER VI

ACT THREE: MEMORIES FROM ELEMENTARY

Act III delves into some of my earliest memories, from my elementary and middle school years. Even at a young age, I was able form an impression that I was different, and there were aspects of my personality that were not celebrated. It was where I began to learn how to navigate a world that could react judgmentally and negatively towards me. ACT III, Scene 1 begins like this:

ACT III

ACT III, Scene 1

ALL:

The Elementary Years.

ACTOR TWO:

Even in kindergarten, I understood there was something different about me. At five years old, I remember liking a boy in my class. His name was Samuel. He had curly, dirty-blonde hair. I wanted to be friends with him, to be close to him. He seemed to be outspoken and confident. *(Beat.)* I couldn't explain it, but something attracted me to him. I felt a warm, fuzzy feeling when I saw him. I felt drawn to his energy. His smile. *(Beat.)* When it was my birthday, my mom said I could invite any of my classmates to my party. The person I was most excited about inviting was Samuel. I made hand-written invitations and handed them out. When I extended the invitation to Samuel, he was not

impressed. He didn't even open it and handed it right back to me. I don't know why he did that. And he never came to my party. *(Beat.)* I understood from that moment on that I was different from the other boys. I did not have the privilege of being straight and naturally falling into a straight world…a world that was made for them. My world was different, and my kind of difference seemed like a bad and scary thing.

Blackout.

ACT III, Scene 2 describes sexual arousal feelings I instinctively had at a very early age. Somehow, physically, I remember being very attracted to this guy reading us stories, even "turned-on." He smelled good too. His name was Dougie Simms and his family was very active at my home church of North Kitsap Baptist Church. My mother, who was our church's secretary and taught Sunday School, was friends with Dougie's mom.

ACT III, Scene 2

ACTOR FIVE:

In Sunday School, I remember we had high school boys come in and help the teacher with the lesson. This guy named Bobby would often read us stories from the Bible. I would always want to sit right beside him. He had big, athletic legs. He wore tight-fitting corduroys. One time I decided to run my fingers up and down his thigh. He just took my hand and put it back in my lap. I don't know why I was drawn to touch him. But, yeah, in Sunday School…I couldn't have been more than five or six years old…

Blackout.

ACT III, Scene 3

ACTOR ONE:

By fifth grade, I discovered I *loved* looking at *Gentleman's Quarterly* magazine. You

know…the latest men's fashions on the hottest men? The sensual, hipster men in the cologne ads. The brooding brunettes in leather. The bleached blondes in bathing suits. All showing more male skin than I'd ever seen at the time. Anyway…*(smiling:)* I ordered a personal subscription. I would hide them under the cabinet sink in the bathroom …at the very back, behind a box of tampons, and underneath the bathroom scale…so no one would find them. They were there for only my private pleasure, if you will, when needed. Growing up in a family of ten, the bathroom was pretty much the only place you could be alone…so, I'd occasionally lock myself in there and escape into a world of fleshly fantasies. *(Beat.)* The fascination with the male body only increased when my gay older brother showed me his copy of a *Playgirl* magazine. I was shocked! Enthralled! Stimulated! My face immediately turned red, blood gushing to every extremity. I brushed the whole thing off, and pretended like I wasn't even interested, all the while dying for time to be alone in the bathroom with that *Playgirl*. Men in every kind of sexual pose, exposing every inch of their bodies. *(Beat.)* Looking back now, there was no doubt I was a full-fledged gay by the fifth grade. But, again, I kept all my thoughts hidden and buried, just like those magazines under the sink.

Blackout.

ACT III, Scene 4's event really did mortify me. I was so embarrassed and, frankly, hurt that these guys actually did this. I could not get an accurate read of their faces. I wish I knew who these guys were because I fantasize about confronting them.

ACT III, Scene 4

ACTOR THREE:

A really embarrassing thing happened when I was in sixth grade. (He sits as in a car, ACTOR FIVE joins as his mother.) My mother was driving me back to school in the evening for marching band practice. I played the alto sax. As we came to a stop at a red light at an intersection, I recognized two upper classmen, better described as "two upper class-douchebags," zooming up beside us in a truck. As they pulled up, they must have recognized me too, and they suddenly yelled out, "Justin Granger is a faggot!" Oh my God, they knew my name. Immediately I became frozen with shame, fear, and guilt. I could see in the side view mirror that my face had blushed to the color of beet red. I did my best to just ignore their voices and pretended to be blissfully unaware of their outburst. I had been publicly made fun of, in front of my mother, about something that I thought no one even knew about. I had been "outed" in a sense, about something I was not ready to confront. Was that their intention, I wondered? I was not ready to have any kind of a conversation about being gay at that point in life, especially not with my mother. Apparently neither was she: not a word was spoken about what happened, and we continued in silence to the band hall. (The car stops, they get out. Mother exits. ACTOR THREE alone on stage.) In fact, we continued in silence about the event forever. Again, I recognized that in fact I was different from the majority of my peers and that my personal journey would also be very different.

Blackout.

Somehow, I never got caught making obscene phone calls, like the ones I describe in ACT III, Scene 5. I don't know if anyone ever knew what I was doing, but I think back and

wonder how could my family not know I was doing this? We had one landline party line phone, which hung on the wall in the middle of the kitchen. Once, I was frightened when one of the guys I called put his dad on the phone and proceeded to cuss me out. If I were a parent, I would have done the same thing.

ACT III, Scene 5

ACTOR TWO:

I started doing it in the sixth grade. *(Surprised face.)* Oh! I mean, not *it*! I mean making prank phone calls! When I was attracted to a guy in my class, I was often too shy to talk to them in person. So…I would find their number in the phonebook and call them…not as myself though…as a prankster with a different voice saying dirty or flirtatious things. Okay, I admit this was creepy of me. Thank God this was before caller I.D! I would have been arrested! But somehow, this made me feel closer to them. All I really wanted was to connect with them.

Blackout.

I can look back now and realize that yes, my friend Joe Vee was my first love. I was super head-over-heels, madly in love with him. I thought he was perfect for me in every way. My feelings for him were intense. Everyone in my family loved him, too, and he accepted us all lovingly. He has been happily married now for years and has three grown kids.

ACT III, Scene 6

ACTOR FOUR:

For me, sixth grade was when I think I fell in love for the first time. His name was Jack Seward. It was the best and most terrifying thing. I was overwhelmed with his friendship and beauty. So I would write down my feelings for him in this journal I had. It helped me

deal with everything I felt for him. The way he looked me in the eye and smiled at me. The way we would wrestle on the carpet at his house. The curves of his legs. The many sleepovers.

Until one day when I accidentally left my journal in the pocket of mom's lean-back chair. My brother said my mom had read my stupid book and she was crying.

(Lights change.) Flushed red. Heart beats rapidly. Crawl into hole. Hate myself. My mean brother. My poor mother. How could he? How could she? How do I explain? Is this love or death? Run away. Hide myself. Hide my feelings. Lie. *(Lights change back to before.)*

My mother and I never talked about that journal.

Blackout.

This final scene in ACT III culminates in the disclosure of my experience of being molested by one of my brothers. I considered omitting this scene altogether because its subject matter is deep and difficult to address, especially at the end of the play. Not to mention that if any of my family members read this dissertation, the impact could be severe. However, the molestation at the very end I believe is powerful because it traces back my actions and behaviors to this initial event. I blame a lot of my problems (socially, emotionally, relationally) on this past trauma. As other abuse survivors will tell you, there is such pain in the betrayal of a family member hurting you, one who is older and supposed to be protecting you. Did someone abuse him, too? Who was it? A member of the family? There are many questions I still have but, as per usual, the bonds of silence rule in my family. I have asked those who have read this script if I should take this scene out. The answer was always a resounding no.

ACT III, Scene 7

ACTOR ONE:

But the summer before 7th Grade, a terrible thing happened. *(Suddenly angry:)* How can I forget? It happened at night, as most insidious things seem to. I had a brother – I *have* a brother. No one in the entire world was watching when he slipped into my bed. He would sneak out to drink with his friends at night and creep back in through a window so mom and dad would not find out. Many times. He touched me. I hated him for it. I hated myself for it. I would spend most 30 years hating myself for it and *dealing* with the memories of those incidents…oh, yes, and there were *multiple* incidents. No one knew. Neither of us told anyone. I hated myself for not telling someone. And worse, I hated myself for liking some of it. (Beat.) It was then I started to lose a lot of weight. Friends would comment…look at you, you look so cute, those new clothes look great on you. My 4.0 grade average slipped to nearly failing. And when school started back in the fall, people commented "What happened to you?? You lost weight, but now your grades suck." If they only knew what I was dealing with. If they only knew how fucking fucked-up my life had become…

Blackout.

C.S. Lewis (1941) stated:

To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you. This is hard. It is perhaps not so hard to forgive a single person great injury. But to forgive the incessant provocations of daily life -- to keep on forgiving the bossy mother-in-law, the bullying husband, the nagging wife, the selfish daughter, the deceitful son -- how can we do it? Only, I think, by remembering where

> we stand, by meaning our words when we say our prayers each night "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those that trespass against us." We are offered forgiveness on no other terms. To refuse is to refuse God's mercy for ourselves.

Forgiveness, in this case, for me means having to forgive the ones in my past who caused me pain or trauma, including and especially my brother. It also meant that I had to forgive myself…for not speaking out, not standing up for myself when I should have. It is at this point that I reconciled my past trauma with my religion. I indeed learned that I have to stop seeing myself as a victim…whether a victim of society, organized religion, or a victim of the brother that molested me. For decades I am sure I saw myself as a victim, even if subconsciously. I lost my voice. I felt like I had shrivelled up because that was what I was being told to do. One crime was *society* telling me to be quiet, another crime was telling *myself* to be quiet.

Utterly freeing myself included not only revisiting and writing about the events of my past, but also the act of forgiving myself and my brother. It was only when I did this that I gained a peace that surpassed all understanding. My carnal self was telling me to be angry, seek revenge, and cut off all ties. But my spiritual self said something different. There are times when moving on and letting go of the past is the right thing to do. Not forcing myself to forget, but moving into the future with renewed hope and freedom from emotional weight that held me down. The purpose and outcome of this play may ultimately be to help others. As Gloria Steinem stated, "The final stage of healing is using what happened to you to help other people" (Duncan 2023). Once I have been to a certain place and learned something, I must be willing to lead others to healing.

The following scene, ACT III, Scene 8, portrays a breaking point, or what could have been a breaking point in my life. This scene crescendos into the finale of the play, in which the

worst imaginable outcome happens: utter breakage, utter severance from this life. I do consider myself fortunate not to have crossed that edge into utter despair, although I came close. I know of several others who unfortunately did cross that edge.

ACT III, Scene 8

Music. The four ACTORS continue to pull ACTOR ONE by each limb. ACTOR ONE's arms and legs are still being extended beyond the corners of the stage, perhaps into the audience. ACTOR ONE screams in terror and excruciating pain. Music crescendos. All the limbs break off. Snap! Then silence.

Blackout.

Actors exit with the extended, now detached, body parts.

The final movement of the play is an epilogue, which endeavours to wrap things up effectively and poignantly. This epilogue serves as the play's denouement and is a place of reckoning and acceptance, but most importantly, it serves as a landing place for my own mental and emotional peace. Actor One resolves his emotional experiences by stating, *I am not inferior* and *others cannot make me feel inferior.*

Creating the play took hours of reflective and isolated writing. It was therapeutic, but also painful at times. Many revisions, edits, and additions have occurred since I first started writing my experiences down in the spring of 2017. Here is the final movement of the play, the Epilogue:

EPILOGUE

ACTOR ONE *(waking up in bed, to audience)*:

I had a dream last night that I was literally being pulled apart. *(He rubs his joints as if sore. He laughs. Longer beat. He remembers:)* Then suddenly I was at the golden threshold.

(Beat. Lights begin to brighten. ACTOR ONE moves to the edge of the bed, as we see the other ACTORS appear as angels behind him.) I could feel the presence of God. God said to me, you are safe now…I love you just as you are…you are mine…I've got you. I had a giant lump in my throat, and I couldn't speak. *(Beat.)* My heart was racing, I had tears – and the lights were so bright I couldn't see anything. *(Beat. Lights change back to normal.)* When I stood up from the bed *(he stands*), I had such a strange peace. I thought to myself "I'm okay." Straight privilege or no straight privilege, I have the *privilege* of being exactly who I am. *(The ACTORS gather around him, as his friends this time. He gradually steps downstage.)* I can *be* anything.

ACTORS:

Yes, you can.

ACTOR ONE:

I can *do* anything.

ACTORS:

Yes, you can.

ACTOR ONE:

Others cannot break me.

ACTORS:

That's right!

ACTOR ONE *(steps forward)*:

And others cannot make me feel inferior.

ACTORS:

Don’t let them.

ACTOR ONE *(steps forward)*:

I won’t. *(ACTOR ONE smiles.)* I am not a victim.

Slow fade to black.

CURTAIN.

CHAPTER VII

FINDINGS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Teaching and discussing Critical Pedagogy, Critical Theatre Pedagogy, and Queer Critical Theatre Pedagogy can be seen as significant approaches in the on-going process of exploring the adverse effects of heteronormativity. Critical pedagogy poses the problem of heteronormativity in society and the classroom and suggests avenues of transformation. McLaren (2022) said that the dust never settles on critical pedagogy – it's a fluid social movement and philosophy. It is a way of teaching that goes against the grain, making the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical (McLaren 2022). Likewise, Giroux (1989) stated that [critical pedagogy] means moving outside and alongside conventional boundaries concerning class, race, gender, and sexuality; creating the contexts for learners to independently think critically. By queering critical theatre pedagogy, I am asking students to not only think critically about their personal, societal, and educational worlds, I am asking them to use their lived experiences to establish lifelong projects to help and serve others. The end goal may be helping students and their communities transform while holding established power relations accountable (McLaren 2022). In particular, critical theatre pedagogy and queering critical theatre pedagogy may provide conditions for educating creative thinkers who can, individually and collectively, contribute to the betterment of society and help the most immiserated and vulnerable. Students develop a 'political criticality' spawned in the lifeworld of dialogical engagement that leads to transformative praxis (McLaren 2022).

Regarding my arts-based ethnodramatic product itself (the script), multiple themes became clear as I wrote and it is necessary to highlight and interrogate the more dominant themes of shame, secrets, inferiority, and anger that emerged in my writing. I found that I had felt shame for many years from just being who I am. I found that I had kept many secrets for far too long – not just the fact that I was gay but also about the clandestine behaviours that haunted my memories. I now understand these behaviours to be a kind of feigned hubris – ways of boldly reaching out to the light, but ostensibly were acts of a desperate search for comfort and identity. I was able to see through my writing just how inferior I felt to my peers. I constantly had a feeling of "I'm not good enough" in the back of my mind; my peers were straight, what problems and worries would they have? I sensed that I could tell they were celebrated just for being heterosexual and I was being diminished just for being homosexual. These inferior thoughts led to having feelings of anger: anger because others had what I wanted and anger at myself for being the way that I was and not knowing how to live as a gay man.

This theme of shame prompts me again to think about the theory of Greene (1993) and how she stated that we are only beginning to realize the importance of including, whenever possible, alternative visions on what is offered as historical truth or literary renderings or even certain empirical discoveries. I can attest, as experienced first-hand, these alternate visions are often omitted or suppressed. I was able to see that I was left out, or that people like me had been traditionally left out. This harkens back to the poignant quote by Crocco (2011) that "these missing discourses tell queer youth that they are not worthy of inclusion, that they are and ought to remain invisible."

I remember and emphasize the words of Freire (1970) as I ruminate on the theme of secrets. Keeping secrets is the antithesis of open, *meaningful conversation* which these three

theorists have stated as crucial to the goal of change. As Freire (1970) stated, the very idea of change lies in the legitimacy of dialogue and only after dialogue can authentic revolution happen. Speaking up in conversation – which could lead to criticism of those in power and the systems of power – must occur, even if one fears ostracization or retaliation of some kind. As I can attest to myself, keeping secrets about oneself can often bring about emotional and psychological trauma. I realized I had one life I kept in secret and one life was purposed to keep up appearances.

Inferiority, as Freire (1970) explains, is brought about by feelings of being inadequate, as he himself battled illiteracy, poverty, and hunger. He discovered there is a "culture of silence" of the dispossessed; ignorance and lethargy are a direct product of the economic, social, and political domination. However, Freire fought to confront and reclaim his education as he struggled for the creation of a new world (Shaull, 1970). It is in the confronting and reclaiming that my story lies; this autoethnographic script provoked a formidable and complex look at significant events that made me who I am today. I am forced to critique not only myself, my actions, and my own educational experiences, but also the American educational system and its systemic shortcomings. Alas, again, critique is not enough…I must reclaim my voice and persist in making my voice heard.

Finally, the theme of anger in the play is apparent as I dealt with thoughts of inferiority, frustrations of various kinds, suppression of self, and even self-loathing. A necessary part in dealing with anger, as Apple (2019) and Dell' Angelo, et al, (2014) suggest, is to realize there is no single "fix" for oppression, but the use of critical theory provides ways to examine one's situatedness and sense of self in the broader social structure and history, as well as in the local context…" Keeping this broader view in mind while examining the root causes of my anger were

key revelations for me in my writing and helpful in my journey to healing. I discovered there is a certain amount of "letting go" and forgiveness toward myself and others I had to do in order to move forward in life. Forgiving and moving forward is my wish for others as well. As Greene (1993) so eloquently said:

> There must be deepening consciousness of the plague and the need for healing. There must be a confronting of the contradictions, the instances of savagery, the neglect, and the possibility of care. We require curriculum that can help provoke persons to reach past themselves and to become. We want to see them in their multiplicity linking arms, becoming recognized. We want them in their ongoing quests for what it means to be human to be free to move. We want them – and we want to enable them – to exist (p220).

Retelling my personal experiences was, and is, beneficial in understanding myself. Writing this script proved to be not only a painful trip down memory lane, but also a wake-up call to recognize that for much of my life I had been playing the role of the "victim" and I was forced to acknowledge the fact that I often still find myself falling into the mindset of a "victim mentality." Thus, autoethnography has proven to be an effective and valuable form of qualitative research for me. This process of researching, writing, and reflexivity has further solidified the importance of making space for a discussion about experiences from my own life, but also for discussion of heteronormativity in the classroom. Both tasks are necessary, and often daunting. I recognize that incorporating autoethnographies into classroom materials may help garner understanding and bolster empathy among students and educators. Bochner (2000) says that autoethnography seeks to "extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly how it was lived. Adams and Holman Jones (2008) explain that autoethnography

"hinges on the push and pull between and among analysis and evocation, personal experience in the larger social, cultural, and political concerns." My study explicitly uses these two methods as just mentioned: remembering my past experiences and extracting meaning from the broader problematic and prevailing issue of heteronormativity throughout my educational career.

As an educator, I continue to look for ways to insert these opportunities for discussion in my classrooms. Surely it is through these discussions that revelations can occur. I project that others will find these retellings enlightening, eye-opening, and provocative of further discussion. I encourage other educators to also look deep within themselves to uncover their own past experiences, facing even the traumatic, with the aim of retelling them in appropriate and effective ways within their classrooms. The retelling of personal stories, especially in dramatic or theatrical writing, has the potential to provoke discussion that may help to ameliorate the negative effects of heteronormativity. These types of discussions in the classroom help to promote cooperative learning, including positive interdependence among students, individual accountability, face-to-face sharing, interpersonal communication skills, as well as group assessing and processing (Johnson, et. al. 1992). Ideally speaking, the students would gain empathy towards individuals who may be considered on the periphery of society – those who have experienced judgement or exclusion while receiving an education because of their sexual identity or orientation.

Indeed much more work and research needs to be done in order to transform America's traditional ways of heteronormative teaching, which are often driven by the continual use of archaic or religion-based materials in the classroom. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) proposes the need for educators to employ a culturally relevant pedagogy to engage students in active learning. Therefore, there is a clarion call for educators to envision themselves as change agents (Ritchie, 2012), prepared to critique societal structures that perpetuate injustice and inequality, particularly with

regard to LGBTQQIA+ persons (Goodrich et al., 2016). As I contemplate this call, I acknowledge that I must be critical of my personal habits and traditional ways of teaching in the college classroom. As an educator, there have surely been times when I wrongly assumed a student's sexuality or gender identity. What made me revert and conform to heteronormative thought and discourse, and how can I reorder my thinking? Have I relied too much on traditions, and not enough on criticism, personal revelation, and revolutionary thinking? Like my students, I too have been guilty of receiving knowledge passively, in a decontextualized form. Critical Pedagogy urges us to move from the 'banking education' tradition that Freire condemned to dialogical learning, where we are made and remade as learners and teachers. In addition, Critical Pedagogy encourages all of us, students and teachers, to grasp knowledge dialectically in relation to current problems and injustices to transform society in the interest of social justice, within an ethics of compassion, caring, and fairness (McLaren 2022). I support this kind of futuristic thinking, that is necessary for change. We must be able to imagine what a more just society looks like. As Greene (2000) stated, "Imagination summons up visions of a better state of things, an illumination of the deficiencies in existing situations, a connection to the education of feeling, and a part of intelligence" (p. 7).

Further analysis includes understanding additional autoethnographic stories and viewpoints from those who have felt excluded or could not identify with what they had been taught or experienced in school, concerning multiple nonheteronormative perspectives. There are many lived experiences still to be uncovered and told, in others and even myself. For example, one story not included in my script is an additional experience I had in Health Class in high school, where no other sexual identities were discussed outside of heterosexuality. The Health Class teacher mentioned gay and lesbian activities only one time, in brief passing, which connotated (for me) that the topic of homosexuality was taboo or shameful. This experience

made me want to thwart the very idea of thinking about homosexuality. What are the other stories? One current hot topic is transgenderism and the lived experiences that comes with it. Another current topic is agender individuals, those who do not identify as any gender at all. My suggestion is to tell these stories, using ethnodrama as a vehicle of conversation to introduce and discuss non-heteronormative sexualities in classroom curricula. These kinds of autoethnographic ethnodramas in classroom curricula have the potential to engage all types of students by lending insight, diminishing fears, fostering empathy, and providing a truer, more holistic education. Queer Critical Theatre Pedagogy, then, can sensitize students to the suffering of marginalized groups in society and create the conditions for dialogue and debate, specifically around the issues and struggles of LGBTQQIA+ communities in America and the world.

Eventually, I hope *A Victim No More* will be read aloud or performed in a classroom or theatre. Leavy (2020) states that the greatest potential of arts-based research is its ability to advance public scholarship and thus be *useful*. Through reading or performing a critical pedagogical script, will students be prompted to identify effective ways to make a change in their own classroom and local community? With these questions in mind, it would be significant to measure an audience's perceptions before and after performances. Would their thoughts change, and how? How did they feel about LBGTQQIA+ persons and their experiences *before* reading or seeing the play versus how they feel *after* reading or seeing the play? Further research is necessary to determine these kinds of outcomes of student / audience perceptions before and after reading or viewing the script. I encourage other teachers to recount, write down, and retell their formative experiences and to create and write their own autoethnographies to be read or performed as part of a course curriculum. It is imperative that nonheteronormative students cease to view themselves as inferior, ashamed victims on the periphery of a straight society.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

A Victim No More: An Autoethnographic Play

This is a memory play: the set is metaphoric; the times and locales may be defined by changes in lighting and minimal props. The scenes are all my personal, true-to-life memories of what it was like growing up gay in America but told through five separate male characters who take on various identities in each scene. The costumes also should be minimal: actors in basic black, perhaps adding a hat or scarf, or a prop to suggest who they are. I encourage directors to cast actors from diverse backgrounds and who are representative of various ages, races, and ethnicities. An Intermission may be taken, if necessary, between ACT ONE and ACT TWO.

The Cast:

ACTOR ONE

ACTOR TWO

ACTOR THREE

ACTOR FOUR

ACTOR FIVE

ACT ONE – *College*

ACT TWO – *High School*

ACT THREE – *Elementary*

EPILOGUE

ACT I

ACT I, Scene 1

ALL:

The College Years.

ACTOR ONE:

Growing up gay in America can give a person an inferiority complex. I…I feel…inferior. I grew up feeling inferior. Did I grow up *learning* to be inferior? Does God want me to feel inferior? Why would God create me to be inferior? I don't want to be inferior.

ACTOR TWO *(as a college student)*:

People try to make you feel small so that they can look big.

ACTOR FIVE *(as a college student)*:

Straight people just can't understand gay people.

ACTOR THREE *(as a college professor)*:

It's what we're talking about in our class. This is another form of systematic oppression. One group trying to lord over another group, for control.

ACTOR FOUR *(as a college student)*:

What a minute, you mean dealing with growing up gay is the same thing as growing up dealing with racism or misogyny or anti--

ACTOR THREE *(as a college professor)*:

No. My point is that gay individuals might share a similar feeling of oppression with these races, ethnicities, or other peoples who have experienced oppression in our history.

Gays are another group of people in society who have been made to feel “less than,” even loathed. Historically, gays have been diminished, held down, and have had their human rights taken away.

ACTOR FIVE *(as a college student)*:

What is the truth here?

ACTOR THREE *(as a college professor)*:

The truth is that one person or a group of people does not have the inherent right to cast another group down, judge them, or deny them their human rights.

ACTOR TWO:

So, society and governments try to coerce us into thinking that certain people, or groups of people, are better than others? Attempting to enslave us into a certain kind of belief system and existence? I mean, who do they think they are?

ACTOR ONE:

Yeah! I protest against this kind of dogmatic rule and societal hierarchy. I rebel against this idea that I have to conform to be like the majority, or I’m not good enough. That I’m not good enough until I am just like them. That *who I am* is not good enough.

ACTOR TWO *(mocking as an enemy now)*:

You’re not acceptable.

ACTOR FOUR *(mocking as an enemy now)*:

You’re not right.

ACTORS TWO, THREE, FOUR, FIVE *(all projecting to ACTOR ONE)*:

You're not enough!

ACTOR ONE:

Wow, some people really know how to make you feel inferior.

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 2

ACTOR THREE *(as a college professor, to the audience)*:

Heteronormative Activity is what the scholars call it. You see, in the traditional educational environment, it has been the norm to assume that everyone in the classroom is straight. Or at least *aspires* to be…or *should* aspire to be…so that they are in accordance with societal norms and religious traditions. Therefore, our classroom communication is as such, and our textbooks are as such. The activities, assignments, and readings all project that the acceptable way to be in society is heterosexual or "straight."

ACTOR FOUR *(to the audience)*:

Throughout our educational experiences, there are certain events that happen in college, high school, and middle school…that inevitably shape who we are as people. So many things and people pull us in different directions. In regards to sexuality, we are generally pulled in the direction of Heteronormative Activity. *(Sarcastic:)* And those of us who do not identify as straight, have the easy, luxurious task of assimilating into these classrooms…

ACTOR ONE *(to the audience)*:

For the rest of this play, I'll refer to Heteronormative Activity as "Straight Privilege."

ACTOR TWO:

Kind of like “White Privilege?”

ACTOR ONE:

Perhaps similar. A group of people who have given themselves a stamp of approval. Because it’s what they know. It’s what they deem to be right and acceptable. It’s what they believe is superior. Anything outside of *their* normal way of life is not acceptable.

ACTOR FOUR:

Actually, most of the world *is* straight.

ACTOR THREE:

But not *all* the world.

ACTOR FIVE:

But then do those who are not straight really matter?

ACTOR ONE:

Of course, they do.

ACTOR TWO:

Yep, that’s the question. Do *we* matter?

ALL *(to the audience)*:

Of course, we do!

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 3

ACTOR FIVE:

I tried. My first couple of years at college were all about me trying to make myself "heteronormatively active." So, I dated girls. (I was dating guys too on the side, low key, of course.) I got so wrapped up in trying to meet these societal norms and religious expectations that I began to do just about anything to fit in. I wanted desperately to please my family, my friends at school, and my church. *(Beat.)* So I dated several women. Not at the same time. Girlfriend #1 was Angela…relatively short-lived…I actually lost my hetero-virginity to her…at night…on the passenger side of my car. It's *not* a good memory. *(Beat.)* But losing my homo-virginity was even worse! I'll tell you about that later. Now, Girlfriend #2 was Darlene…really special, I mean I think we connected. Girlfriend #3 was Mia…well by #3, I knew I had to start being completely honest…so after dating her for three months, I told her flat out that I was attracted to guys. That brought Girlfriend #3 Mia to a quick end! Later she told me she immediately went to the bathroom and threw up…and persisted to cry for the next eight weeks. *(Beat.)* So then…I went back to Girlfriend #2 Darlene. The point is…I was trying. I honestly tried. I tried to live up to what the world said I should be. I just…knew I wasn't being fair to her, or to any of them. Or to me. We had been good friends…and even okay lovers. But while we were walking down the street holding hands, I was checking out guys. I was lying. And keeping up appearances was eating me alive. *(Beat.)* I was jealous of the men who could lead this kind of double life. The men who seemed to have the stamina to keep up with the lies and even willing to go so far as to get married and have kids. Anyway, eventually I knew it was time to say goodbye to Girlfriend #2 Darlene…*again*. I went to Darlene's

house. We argued. We screamed at each other. I left, and slammed the door shut. As I walked to my car, I could hear her throwing things at the door. I could hear her yelling, crying, and cursing my name. *(Beat.)* That was my final try. I knew I had tried my best. Now no one could ever say that I didn't try. Even God could not possibly be angry with me, right? *(Beat.)* Well, that night, I promised myself that I would *never* put another human being through that. Including myself.

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 4

The Actors are men lined up at five imaginary urinals, backs to audience, facing the US wall. From SR to SL, the order should be Actor Two, Actor Three, Actor One will join at center, Actor Four, and Actor Five.

ACTOR ONE *(to audience)*:

The Magical Urinal Universe. It really wasn't until college that I discovered the magic of the men's urinals. *(Whispers:)* One could get a glimpse of another man's genitalia. And sometimes it was more than just a glimpse… (*He moves to the urinal at center and joins the other Actors, between Actor Three and Actor Four.)*

ACTOR THREE Coughs and clears his throat uncomfortably as ACTOR ONE joins the line. ACTOR ONE glances over his shoulder SL, then SR, mimics the cough and clears his throat too. ACTOR FIVE slowly makes a deliberate head turn, it is obvious that he is checking out ACTORS FOUR and ONE. Then he glances down at their privates. He likes what he sees. Beat. ACTORS FOUR and ONE slowly look at Five. ACTOR FIVE, realizing he's caught, coughs and clears his throat, and quickly stares back at the wall. ACTORS FOUR and ONE stare back at the wall too. ACTORS FOUR and ONE are interested now and slowly turn their heads to look at ACTOR FIVE.

ACTOR FIVE still staring at wall. They like what they see. ACTOR THREE flushes his urinal. At the sound of the flush, ALL ACTORS face the wall again. Now ALL ACTORS simultaneously do a slow head turn towards ACTOR FIVE, then ACTOR FIVE boldly glances at them, then down at himself and smiles, proudly showing off his goods. ALL ACTORS are now agog, staring at ACTOR FIVE's goods. Beat. ACTOR ONE flushes to break the tension. ALL ACTORS stare back at the wall. ACTOR FIVE does the slow peek again, scoping all the way down the line this time. Only ACTOR TWO looks at ACTOR FIVE this time. He becomes annoyed at ACTOR FIVE and gives him the stink-eye: ACTOR TWO has had enough, coughs, flushes, and exits angrily SL. ACTOR FOUR suddenly moans to a climax, zips up, and saunters off happily SL. ACTOR THREE gets scared at the sound of the moans, turns red, and runs out as fast as he can SL. ACTORS ONE and FIVE look around and notice they are the only ones left. ACTOR FIVE moves to the urinal next to ACTOR ONE. They look at each other, up and down. Excited and pleased. More glances at each other. Then ACTORS ONE and FIVE reach for each other and start to kiss.

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 5

A strange, haunting music begins. Two ACTORS on either side of ACTOR ONE. Pulling, tug of war. Real Struggle.

ACTOR ONE is being pulled in opposite directions. Desperate.

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 6

ACTOR ONE:

After the spring semester was over at college, I auditioned for a singing touring group. It was my way of getting away for the summer and having the chance to perform. It was a

show choir: the kind that sings inspirational songs and does choreography? But did I mention it was a Christian touring group…a very strict religious ministry. I aced the audition, made the cuts, and finally was accepted to tour with them. I sang and danced all over the world that summer. Don't get me wrong, I actually enjoyed it and most of it was a positive experience. But one day on the tour bus, I was made to feel so inferior…by an assistant director *(ACTOR TWO enters).* He was assigned the task of "talking to me." The conversation quickly turned to my sexuality. During the conversation, he point-blank asked me:

ACTOR TWO *(as director on the bus, whispering accusingly)*:

Are you gay?

ACTOR ONE:

"Of course I'm not gay!" I replied with the pat answer that I thought I should say. "That's wrong, and I would never want to be like that!" I knew I could not be honest with him. Not only would I risk humiliation, but I would be risking being sent home from the tour. My answer seemed to satisfy him. *(ACTOR TWO gets up and exits the stage.)* Just like I had been "in hiding" at college, I realized that I would be "in hiding" for the rest of this tour…and for all I knew the rest of my life. It was not the summer of freedom I had hoped it would be. I was in hiding to make sure I would survive. *(Beat. He stands and moves to a new light:)* After that conversation on the bus, I felt differently about that assistant director, about the tour, and about everything in general. I was suddenly overcome with grief and depression. I felt like I was rejected. Like I was not really what they were looking for. I was not who they were hoping I would be. I was not good enough. I was inferior. *(Beat.)* We were performing at a school auditorium that night.

Before the concert started, I went into the men's locker room, laid on the bench, and stared up at the ceiling. *(He lies down on a bench.)* If I was straight, none of this would be happening to me. I realized I could study the concept of "straight privilege," but I would never actually have the privilege of being straight. I spiraled into a very dark emotional place that night. A place of hopelessness and aimlessness. *(ACTOR THREE enters.)* One of the choir members came in, saw me laying there, and asked:

ACTOR THREE *(as choir member, genuinely)*:

Are you all right?

ACTOR ONE:

I said, "Oh yeah, I'm fine, I just have a headache." *(Beat. ACTOR THREE exits. ACTOR ONE sits up again.)* I got to be really, really good at hiding my feelings.

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 7

ACTOR FOUR:

At one point in college, I decided to work out with a personal trainer. I was getting lean and pumped and confident. Eventually I felt comfortable enough to come out to this guy and we had very open conversations. We would disclose interesting facts about our lives to each other. He would often talk to me about his young son. During one of our sessions, I felt compelled to ask him, "What would you do if one day your son came out to you as gay?" His demeanor immediately changed and he answered, "Oh hell, no…not my son!" I instantly shrank inward, back to the dark places of my past…of not feeling good enough and being forced to hide in shame. Why did I come out to this guy? He still doesn't get it.

I realized that no matter what I did, or how much I explained myself, there are people who will not fully accept me. Or ever change their thinking. Straight privilege, indeed.

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 8

ACTOR THREE:

I remember once in college, I had a beautiful dream. I dreamt that a child was sleeping on my chest. He was adorable, about a year old. I patted his blond hair… and I felt contentment like I had never known before. I don't know if the child was mine or someone else's. But I felt the joy and love he had for me and the joy and love I had for him. I wanted to embrace him forever and protect him from all the evil in the world. Then I woke up. To be honest, part of my grief of being gay was that I thought I could never have any children, adopted or of my own. And I love children. *(Beat.)* But look how things have changed now. Look at Anderson Cooper with his babies *(he sighs).* When I was growing up, that was virtually unheard of. Maybe we are making progress.

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 9

ACTOR TWO:

Eventually, trying to fit into hetero college life became too much for me and I chose to "sit out" for awhile. *(The other ACTORS sit or lay down on the floor to listen.)* I became more reclusive. I stopped doing things I typically would do. For example, going to church. *(Beat.)* I just stopped entirely. One Sunday morning, after years of faithful attendance, I could not bring myself to go. There were so many crazy emotions running

through my mind. Did I feel truly loved there? Did I fit in there? I felt lonely sitting in the pew by myself for every service. Slowly…I stopped *feeling* anything while I was there. In the midst of the hellos and handshakes and families sitting together, the guilt of being who I was crept in and overwhelmed the calm assurance I had felt at previous times in church. Yeah, don't get me wrong – I loved church. Part of me was happiest in a place where I could worship and praise God, and serve people. But I wasn't free to do that anymore, I felt bound by condemning words, synthetic traditions, and especially dubious reactions from people when they asked me if I had a girlfriend… *(Beat.)* I remember one Sunday, the pastor preached about how homosexuals were just like dogs. I'm sure an immediate red flush was apparent on my cheeks, embarrassment tinged with anger. Embarrassed because he was speaking of people like me, angered because I WAS NOT a dog. I AM NOT a dog. At that moment I realized most others are completely oblivious to my life's journey: my plight, my pain, and my search for relationship. The other congregants were most likely completely clueless about what I was going through. So the battle in my mind oscillated between dreaming of an euphoric gay relationship and thoughts of…well, becoming a monk. After all, that is what the church was telling me, right? Since I cannot have a same-sex relationship of any kind, then my only other option is complete denial of self and cessation of all sexual activity. Unless of course I could enter into the façade of a heteronormative relationship and lie to the woman throughout our marriage. I've known men who have done just that; but I could never live that life. I could not feel good about myself. So how…how could I live a life absent of relational love? *(Ranting now:)* What if suddenly all the straight people in the world were told that they must no longer have sex with the opposite sex? How would they feel? What would

they do? The reaction they would have is the same reaction I have: this seems impossible! The worst part of it all is this feeling that I'm *displeasing* God. I thought to myself, if God thinks a same-sex relationship is wrong, then I must stop…any thoughts, all participation. All the guilt and shame came back…all the questions, the sadness. Everything paralyzing me. Is this what God really wants? Am I to be miserable and paralyzed for the rest of my days here on earth? As the sermon ended that day, I thought: Wow, I'm just like Dorothy in Oz. *(He laughs to himself: the perfect gay analogy. Beat. Then serious again.)* I've come to this beautiful place, full of promise and hope, but I all I want to do right now is go back home. I thought of what I could to say to the pastor, as he shook my hand at the end of the service. The only thing that came to my mind was Dorothy's line in the Wizard of Oz at the end of the movie… "I don't think there's anything in that black bag for me." I didn't really say it, but that's how I felt. Whatever promises were granted to others, I had no chance of getting them. There was nothing in there that could "fix" me. There was no magic elixir in that bag for me, no cure, no real answers to my questions, no consolation, not even a chance to share my truth. So I walked out of the sanctuary, drove out of the parking lot, and my feelings and I returned to my empty apartment.

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 10

ACTOR ONE:

Desperate. Lonely. No one knows me. Let's drink. Drink to forget. Party. Try it all. All night. The molestation. MD 20/20. Long Island Iced Tea. Vomit in the stall. Lose myself. Popular at the clubs. I find consolation at night. I find peace drinking with friends at

night. Away from my family and memories. Overdo it. Hangovers. Blackouts. Phone numbers scribbled on napkins. Fast food at 3 a.m. Promiscuity.

ACTOR TWO:

Let's go out again tonight! New dance club on Jackson! I'll drive.

ACTOR ONE:

He picks me up. We shut down the bar. Start to drive out of the parking lot. Bump into the car ahead of us. Police officer sees it. Sobriety tests. Handcuffs. DUI. Humiliation.

ACTOR TWO:

We'll be fine. I've driven while being much worse.

ACTOR ONE:

In back of police car. Then police station. Fingerprinted. Car towed. Bail money set. We're thrown in the drunk tank. *(ACTOR FOUR enters as a prostitute, ACTOR FIVE enters as a member of a drug cartel. They surround them.)* Twenty other criminals in with us.

ACTOR TWO:

(Beat.) Let's pray and sing to Jesus…

ACTORS ONE AND TWO, still slightly inebriated, begin to sing Amazing Grace, in perfect harmony. They finish two verses, then the guard interrupts.

ACTOR THREE (enters as jail guard):

Okay, guys, come on. *(He opens the cell with his keys and approaches them. To ACTORS FOUR and FIVE:)* Easy, Smiley. Easy, Hot Lips.

ACTOR TWO:

What, sir?

ACTOR ONE:

Are we in trouble?

ACTOR THREE:

No. I've been ordered to put you in your own holding cell down the hall. They don't want any conflict in the tank. *(He takes ACTORS ONE and TWO by their arms and starts to lead them down the hall.)*

ACTORS ONE and TWO *(in unison):*

Thank you, Jesus!

ACTOR ONE:

This is awfully nice of you guys.

ACTOR TWO:

We've always relied on the kindness of strangers, like yourself…

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 11

ACTOR FIVE:

Well, as promised, here is the story of how I lost my homo-virginity. Like losing my hetero-virginity, it is *not* a good memory because it was *not* a good time. I was young, naïve, and drunk. I had been talking to this guy for awhile…a passionate, handsome Latino guy. One night we met out at the bar…one thing led to another…and we wound

up at his place in the early morning. The problem was that he was still living with his parents. And we were both really loaded. And we were talking loud and dropping things. They of course woke up and came knocking on his bedroom door in their pajamas, asking him what was going on. I know, awful, right? He somehow convinced them that we both simply had too much to drink, and we just needed to sleep it off. Fine. But then we started to get hot and heavy. Mind you, I was innocent, drunk, and supremely horny at this point. We both wanted to get down and dirty. He wanted to do the nasty. He had condoms…but no lube. He searched everywhere for his lube. He went into the bathroom, and said he found something that would work. Did I mention that I was drunk at this point? Before I knew it, he was pushing his way into my back door using TOOTHPASTE! My friends, that fresh, tingly wintergreen flavor took on a whole new meaning. Boy, was that awful! And did I let him have it! I cursed him out, gathered my things, and left that instant. *(Beat.)* See, I told you it was *not* a good time. Aren't you sorry you asked? Oh, wait, you didn't ask. Aren't you sorry I told you? *(Beat.)* Oh, and no, we never saw each other again. *(Beat.)* Think of me when you brush your teeth tonight.

Blackout.

ACT I, Scene 12

Music. Four ACTORS now have ACTOR ONE by each limb. Pulling, tug of war. Real Struggle. ACTOR ONE is being pulled in all four directions. Desperate. Music crescendos.

Blackout.

INTERMISSION MAY BE TAKEN HERE.

ACT II

ACT II, Scene 1

ALL:

The High School Years.

ACTOR FOUR:

You should never rely on your feelings.

ACTOR THREE:

Feelings are your emotions. And we never follow our emotions.

ACTOR TWO:

Head, not heart.

ACTOR ONE:

I don't understand, it was my feelings that brought me to God. I mean that He loves me. I *felt* His love. And I love Him. He's my wonderful Creator.

ACTOR FIVE:

We should never let our feelings guide us.

ACTOR ONE:

But that doesn't make sense. We are creatures of both thought and feeling.

ACTOR FOUR:

You must use your head to follow God.

ACTOR ONE:

That makes us like robots, doesn't it? God doesn't want us to feel human emotions?

ACTOR THREE:

More studying, less questioning.

ACTOR FIVE:

More doing, less feeling.

ACTOR ONE:

You're asking me to leave all feelings aside? That's worse than a robot. That's like…hell.

Blackout.

ACT II, Scene 2

ACTOR THREE is at center. The other ACTORS are around him, drying off with white towels.

ACTOR THREE:

It was in the high school locker room after gym class when I got my first glimpse of a real live, all-nude, full-frontal young man. I caught myself creepily staring, I just couldn't help myself. Staring not just once, but many times. Staring not just at one, but glancing around at all of them. I saw all kinds, shapes, sizes, bush-lengths, and even…the occasional hard-on. These memories later provided many years of jack-off material. There was my good friend, Kyle, previously only seen in street clothes: big balls! (*ACTOR TWO as Kyle quickly pulls up his towel to hide the jewels*.) There was the Latin jock, Adrian, spunky, and into every sport: dark and curvy! (*ACTOR FOUR as Adrian quickly hangs up a towel, blocking ACTOR THREE's view*.) But mostly, there was the

revelation named Jason Stratford. Tall, tight curly blond hair, swimmer's build, and the longest pink penis I have ever seen in my life! To this day! Soft and hard! Why would he regularly get a hard-on in the locker room? I could only imagine. *(All Actors turn away from ACTOR THREE now.)* Were all these guys onto me now? Could they see right through me? Could any of these guys blow my cover at any moment? Kyle went to my church…would he tell my parents? Adrian was in my Health class…would he expose me to the other kids? And Jason…Jason was in my History class right after Gym class…well, I think I would have let him done anything to me. (*ACTOR FIVE smiles, winds up towel and snaps ACTOR THREE in the ass.*) I had to snap myself back into reality real fast and continue pretending to be straight. It was not time to come out of the closet – I was not brave enough yet.

Blackout.

ACT II, Scene 3

ACTOR ONE:

I don't know, we're taught in high school to be one thing or the other. We always choose sides, like in Debate, like in Gym Class.

ACTOR FIVE *(as if at lunch counter)*:

What's it going to be?

ACTOR THREE:

Eggs or ham?

ACTOR FOUR:

Emerson or Thoreau?

ACTOR TWO:

Alfredo or marinara?

ACTOR FIVE:

Men or Women?

ACTOR THREE:

Dodgeball or Stickball?

ACTOR ONE *(in spotlight, to audience)*:

Now I think this is why I've never been good at making decisions. I mean, college is a time to make up your mind, right? But navigating your choices can be a complex process.

Lights change again.

ACTOR TWO:

Catholic or Protestant?

ACTOR FOUR:

Baptist or Pentecostal?

ACTOR FIVE:

Rum or vodka?

ACTOR FOUR:

Light or dark?

ACTOR THREE:

Walk or run?

ALL ACTORS:

Well?!

ACTOR ONE *(back to lunch counter)*:

I'd like to try both! Alfredo and marinara, please.

Lights change again. ACTOR ONE is at center now, the ACTORS in various sultry positions around him.

ACTOR ONE *(to audience)*:

So I tried my best to *try*.

ACTOR THREE:

To taste.

ACTOR FOUR:

Both.

ACTOR FIVE:

Everything.

ACTOR ONE:

To change.

ACTOR FOUR:

Everything.

ACTOR TWO *(as flirty girl)*:

So you wanna go out on Friday?

ACTOR ONE:

Yeah.

Blackout.

ACT II, Scene 4

ACTOR FOUR:

One of my first clandestine experiences happened when I was 17 years old in high school. After class one day, I went to the grocery store and I could not help but notice a very handsome, muscle-y man. An Adonis like I had never seen before. He went to use the men's room and I followed him. I took up the stall beside him. In the only way I knew how (at the time) to connect with someone I was interested in, I wrote (with trembling hands) a sexual proposition to him on a little piece of paper and handed it to him underneath the divider. In an instant he jumped up and started banging on my door, shouting, "Come out of there and I'll give you something!" Shocked, I immediately thought, "Oh my God, what have I done? This guy is probably going to kill me, and at the very least he'll make sure that I am publicly humiliated!" He then left the restroom. Relieved, but too terrified to exit the stall, I stayed in there, hyperventilating, and starting to cry. Soon the man returned with two of the store's managers and they insisted I come out and come talk with them in the office. I learned a great lesson there in that office: that acting boldly out of desperation and insecurity can bring about all kinds of unwanted consequences. The man mentioned pressing charges, but did not, and the managers actually turned out to be very sensitive to the situation. They each commented on how young I looked. They advised me never to attempt something like that again. My inner thoughts were: "Yes, I know, you're right. And I need someone to come fix me, correct

me, cure me." I timidly headed home alone, realizing I had put myself in danger. *(Beat.)* The realization that I had no idea how to navigate romantic / intimate relationships left me dumbfounded. Here I was, blossoming into a young adult, not having even mentioned the fact that I might be gay to anyone. I had no clue how to approach the idea of same-sex dating because I had never been taught that it was a possibility. I had implicitly been taught that I should be ashamed of what I was feeling and that I must conform to a hetero world. Throughout my junior high and high school years, I had yet to experience the use of confirming, positive, or affective language regarding homosexuality. From myself, or anyone else.

Blackout.

ACT II, Scene 5

ACTOR TWO:

The summer after graduating high school, I decided to come out to a good friend. I suspected he also was gay. I wrote my coming out story to him in a letter and mailed it to him. When he wrote me back, I was so thrilled – elated! Because he confirmed to me that he too was gay! Finally, there was someone who knew how I felt. He understood all that I was feeling and going through. And he was loving towards me. And I could sense he really supported me. In that moment, the darkness had parted and a sense of joy like I never had before welled up in me. I literally began running and dancing around my bedroom. Tears of joy. I started to kiss the dresser, the mirror *(smack, you're beautiful!),* the walls, the doors, my clothes, my shoes. I had never felt such happiness. It was like the world was hugging me, and I was hugging it right back.

Blackout.

ACT II, Scene 6

Music. The four ACTORS continue to pull ACTOR ONE by each limb. ACTOR ONE's arms and legs are now being elongated like a gumby, each limb magically extending to a corner of the stage. Excruciating pain. Music crescendos dramatically.

Blackout.

ACT III

ACT III, Scene 1

ALL:

The Elementary Years.

ACTOR TWO:

Even in kindergarten, I understood there was something different about me. At five years old, I remember liking a boy in my class. His name was Samuel. He had curly, dirty-blonde hair. I wanted to be friends with him, to be close to him. He seemed to be outspoken and confident. *(Beat.)* I couldn't explain it, but something attracted me to him. I felt a warm, fuzzy feeling when I saw him. I felt drawn to his energy. His smile. *(Beat.)* When it was my birthday, my mom said I could invite any of my classmates to my party. The person I was most excited about inviting was Samuel. I made hand-written invitations and handed them out. When I extended the invitation to Samuel, he was not impressed. He didn't even open it and handed it right back to me. I don't know why he did that. And he never came to my party. *(Beat.)* I understood from that moment on that I was different from the other boys. I did not have the privilege of being straight and naturally falling into a straight world…a world that was made for them. My world was different, and my kind of difference seemed like a bad and scary thing.

Blackout.

ACT III, Scene 2

ACTOR FIVE:

In Sunday School, I remember we had high school boys come in and help the teacher with the lesson. This guy named Bobby would often read us stories from the Bible. I would always want to sit right beside him. He had big, athletic legs. He wore tight-fitting corduroys. One time I decided to run my fingers up and down his thigh. He just took my hand and put it back in my lap. I don't know why I was drawn to touch him. But, yeah, in Sunday School…I couldn't have been more than five or six years old…

Blackout.

ACT III, Scene 3

ACTOR ONE:

By fifth grade, I discovered I *loved* looking at *Gentleman's Quarterly* magazine. You know…the latest men's fashions on the hottest men? The sensual, hipster men in the cologne ads. The brooding brunettes in leather. The bleached blondes in bathing suits. All showing more male skin than I'd ever seen at the time. Anyway…*(smiling:)* I ordered a personal subscription. I would hide them under the cabinet sink in the bathroom …at the very back, behind a box of tampons, and underneath the bathroom scale…so no one would find them. They were there for only my private pleasure, if you will, when needed. Growing up in a family of ten, the bathroom was pretty much the only place you could be alone…so, I'd occasionally lock myself in there and escape into a world of fleshly fantasies. *(Beat.)* The fascination with the male body only increased when my gay older brother showed me his copy of a *Playgirl* magazine. I was shocked! Enthralled!

Stimulated! My face immediately turned red, blood gushing to every extremity. I brushed the whole thing off, and pretended like I wasn't even interested, all the while dying for time to be alone in the bathroom with that *Playgirl*. Men in every kind of sexual pose, exposing every inch of their bodies. *(Beat.)* Looking back now, there was no doubt I was a full-fledged gay by the fifth grade. But, again, I kept all my thoughts hidden and buried, just like those magazines under the sink.

Blackout.

ACT III, Scene 4

ACTOR THREE:

A really embarrassing thing happened when I was in sixth grade. *(He sits as in a car, ACTOR FIVE joins as his mother.)* My mother was driving me back to school in the evening for marching band practice. I played the alto sax. As we came to a stop at a red light at an intersection, I recognized two upper classmen, better described as "two upper class-douchebags," zooming up beside us in a truck. As they pulled up, they must have recognized me too, and they suddenly yelled out, "Justin Granger is a faggot!" Oh my God, they knew my name. Immediately I became frozen with shame, fear, and guilt. I could see in the side view mirror that my face had blushed to the color of beet red. I did my best to just ignore their voices and pretended to be blissfully unaware of their outburst. I had been publicly made fun of, in front of my mother, about something that I thought no one even knew about. I had been "outed" in a sense, about something I was not ready to confront. Was that their intention, I wondered? I was not ready to have any kind of a conversation about being gay at that point in life, especially not with my mother. Apparently neither was she: not a word was spoken about what happened, and

we continued in silence to the band hall. *(The car stops, they get out. Mother exits. ACTOR THREE alone on stage.)* In fact, we continued in silence about the event *forever*. Again, I recognized that in fact I was different from the majority of my peers and that my personal journey would also be very different.

Blackout.

ACT III, Scene 5

ACTOR TWO:

I started doing it in the sixth grade. *(Surprised face.)* Oh! I mean, not *it*! I mean making prank phone calls! When I was attracted to a guy in my class, I was often too shy to talk to them in person. So…I would find their number in the phonebook and call them…not as myself though…as a prankster with a different voice saying dirty or flirtatious things. Okay, I admit this was creepy of me. Thank God this was before caller I.D! I would have been arrested! But somehow, this made me feel closer to them. All I really wanted was to connect with them.

Blackout.

ACT III, Scene 6

ACTOR FOUR:

For me, sixth grade was when I think I fell in love for the first time. His name was Jack Seward. It was the best and most terrifying thing. I was overwhelmed with his friendship and beauty. So I would write down my feelings for him in this journal I had. It helped me deal with everything I felt for him. The way he looked me in the eye and smiled at me. The way we would wrestle on the carpet at his house. The curves of his legs. The many sleepovers.

Until one day when I accidentally left my journal in the pocket of mom's lean-back chair. My brother said my mom had read my stupid book and she was crying.

(Lights change.) Flushed red. Heart beats rapidly. Crawl into hole. Hate myself. My mean brother. My poor mother. How could he? How could she? How do I explain? Is this love or death? Run away. Hide myself. Hide my feelings. Lie. *(Lights change back to before.)*

My mother and I never talked about that journal.

Blackout.

ACT III, Scene 7

ACTOR ONE:

But the summer before 7th Grade, a terrible thing happened. *(Suddenly angry:)* How can I forget? It happened at night, as most insidious things seem to. I had a brother – I *have* a brother. No one in the entire world was watching when he slipped into my bed. He would sneak out to drink with his friends at night and creep back in through a window so mom and dad would not find out. Many times. He touched me. I hated him for it. I hated myself for it. I would spend most 30 years hating myself for it and *dealing* with the memories of those incidents…oh, yes, and there were *multiple* incidents. No one knew. Neither of us told anyone. I hated myself for not telling someone. And worse, I hated myself for liking some of it. (Beat.) It was then I started to lose a lot of weight. Friends would comment…look at you, you look so cute, those new clothes look great on you. My 4.0 grade average slipped to nearly failing. And when school started back in the fall, people commented "What happened to you?? You lost weight, but now your grades suck." If they only knew what I was dealing with. If they only knew how fucking fucked-up my life had become…

Blackout.

ACT III, Scene 8

Music. The four ACTORS continue to pull ACTOR ONE by each limb. ACTOR ONE's arms and legs are still being extended beyond the corners of the stage, perhaps into the audience. ACTOR ONE screams in terror and excruciating pain. Music crescendos. All the limbs break off. Snap! Then silence.

Blackout.

Actors exit with the extended, now detached, body parts.

EPILOGUE

ACTOR ONE *(waking up in bed, to audience)*:

I had a dream last night that I was literally being pulled apart. *(He rubs his joints as if sore. He laughs. Longer beat. He remembers:)* Then suddenly I was at the golden threshold. *(Beat. Lights begin to brighten. ACTOR ONE moves to the edge of the bed, as we see the other ACTORS appear as angels behind him.)* I could feel the presence of God. God said to me, you are safe now…I love you just as you are…you are mine…I've got you. I had a giant lump in my throat, and I couldn't speak. *(Beat.)* My heart was racing, I had tears – and the lights were so bright I couldn't see anything. *(Beat. Lights change back to normal.)* When I stood up from the bed *(he stands*), I had such a strange peace. I thought to myself "I'm okay." Straight privilege or no straight privilege, I have the *privilege* of being exactly who I am. *(The ACTORS gather around him, as his friends this time. He gradually steps downstage.)* I can *be* anything.

ACTORS:

Yes, you can.

ACTOR ONE:

I can *do* anything.

ACTORS:

Yes, you can.

ACTOR ONE:

Others cannot break me.

ACTORS:

That's right!

ACTOR ONE *(steps forward)*:

And others cannot make me feel inferior.

ACTORS:

Don't let them.

ACTOR ONE *(steps forward)*:

I won't. *(ACTOR ONE smiles.)* I am not a victim.

Slow fade to black.

CURTAIN.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Richard Edmonson earned his *Educational Doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction* from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in December of 2023. Richard has been employed at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley as a Lecturer III in Theatre since 2015 and previously worked in various capacities at The University of Texas Pan American since 2009. He received his *Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Performance* from West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas and his *Master of Arts in Theatre* from the University of Texas Pan American in Edinburg, Texas. He has directed productions of *Red*, *Tomas and the Library Lady, The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, *The Imposter*, *Venus in Fur*, *Antigone, The Miracle Worker*, *Evita*, *Real Women Have Curves*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* for the university main stage. In addition to writing, teaching, and directing, Richard enjoys performing and was most recently seen as Herr Schultz in *Cabaret* and as Beadle Bamford in *Sweeney Todd*. Growing up as the youngest of eight children in Poulsbo, Washington, he hopes to return to the Pacific Northwest when he retires. Richard Edmonson can be reached at richieedmonson@yahoo.com.