

UNDERSTANDING MARGINALIZED QUEER VOICES:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF LGBTQ SPACES

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A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of Communication Studies
in the Graduate School of
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2015

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ABSTRACT

Spectrum, the official LGBTQ student organization of the University of Alabama, provides an ideal environment for exploring traditionally muted voices in unsupportive political and social environments. An ethnographic study was undertaken to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of marginalized queer voices in the South. The guiding research questions address interactions between LGBTQ community members, their articulations of acceptance and comfort, and identity performance in queer community spaces.

DEDICATION

To the members of Spectrum who were kind enough to share their stories with me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Completing this project appeared an insurmountable challenge at times. Seemingly constant deadlines, long days of interviewing, and late nights of participant observations bled together during weeks of research. It is only through the support of committed faculty mentors and understanding family members that I have produced this thesis. Most importantly, I must acknowledge my faculty mentor and the chair of my thesis committee, Dr. Robin Boylorn. You have served as a constant source of encouragement and enlightenment over the past two years and are the single most important influence on my academic career. Thank you, Dr. Boylorn, for keeping me on schedule and motivated throughout this journey.

I have also relied on the tremendous support of my other committee members, Dr. Jane Baker and Dr. Merinda Simmons. Dr. Baker, thank you for your guidance and for sharing your wisdom and knowledge with me. Merinda, thank you for pushing me to think critically – often more critically than I thought possible. I am honored to consider you both friends. Also, a special “thank you” to Dr. Alexa Chilcutt who never kicked me out of her office when I needed to sit and complain. Finally, a big thanks to the faculty of the Department of Communication Studies for providing me an academic home over the past two years

On a personal level, thank you to my partner, Kirby, for putting up with my late nights of writing and the long weekends apart. I appreciate you always believing in my and supporting my dreams. To my biological family, thank you for the text check-ins and support from afar. To my chosen family, you’re the greatest friends imaginable.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Individuals of non-heterosexual sexual orientations and non-conforming gender identities constitute a marginalized group in the United States and have long experienced a history of underrepresentation and stigma in popular American discourse (Hackford-Peer, 2010; Simon & Brooks, 2009). Though opinions about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people have improved, the LGBTQ community has yet to receive complete legal support and social acceptance. This thesis documents the ways members of an LGBTQ student organization create community spaces in climates and contexts that are geographically and socially unsupportive, as well as the communicative interactions that occur between organization members in such spaces. Through my study, I developed an expanded understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ college-aged individuals by focusing on the lived realities¹ of members of Spectrum, an LGBTQ student organization at the University of Alabama. Specifically, I share narratives demonstrating the interactions of LGBTQ individuals in queer-friendly spaces.

It is important to explore and research the voices of LGBTQ individuals in academia to further our understanding of the intersectional experiences of LGBTQ community members and how they communicate about their experiences. Wilkins (2012) encourages storytelling as a

¹ The term “lived realities” is used to identify experiences that have been coupled with intentional self-reflection. The term also denotes ownership over personal experiences.

² The other LGBTQ organizations include Capstone Alliance, OUTLaw, and MIS LGBT++. Capstone Alliance is open to faculty, staff, and graduate students, OUTLaw is available for all students in the University of Alabama School of Law, and MIS LGBT++ is intended for

primary form of self-definition and attributes the action with the ability to construct knowledge specific to a group of individuals. She says, “Stories are means by which cultural meanings are accessed, reproduced, and challenged, [sic] they are important resources for intersectional identity work” (p. 175). Through both participant observations and individual interviews, I gathered stories and developed a greater understanding of how LGBTQ community members negotiate queer identities and voices in an unsupportive cultural context.

Beyond specifically adding to our understanding of LGBTQ identity, this study contributes to knowledge in the fields of interpersonal, intercultural, and organizational communication. My participant observations focused on the relationships between individuals within the group and consisted of comments about topics such as identity performance, interpersonal cooperation, and small group interaction. I also commented on the communicative impact of cultural differences between group members. Finally, this study was situated within a student organization, thus inviting a discussion based on concepts inherent to organizational communication. I have used a bona fide group perspective to analyze interactions within the organization and their influence on and from the surrounding context.

This chapter introduces the project, provides Spectrum’s background information, describes the organization’s cultural context, and explains my personal positioning in relationship to the organization.

Spectrum’s Background

This study centers on the experiences of members of an LGBTQ student organization known as Spectrum. Spectrum is one of four officially recognized LGBTQ organizations at the

University of Alabama² and the only such organization for undergraduate students. Graduate students are also invited to attend Spectrum events; however, most chose to join Capstone Alliance, an organization for LGBTQ faculty and graduate students. As a result, Spectrum's membership is almost entirely comprised of undergraduate students. A queer-straight alliance, Spectrum organizes community-wide events, performs educational outreach, and advocates for LGBTQ students at the university. On the organization's website homepage, Spectrum communicates its mission, saying, "Our mission is to promote community for LGBTQA people, advocate for their equality on campus, state, and national levels, and make a positive impact on the Tuscaloosa community" (2014). Spectrum is not the only organization on campus in which LGBTQ students can find queer community or safe environments; however, their formal structure and explicit mission statement make it uniquely positioned to serve students who identify on the LGBTQ spectrum.

Spectrum's membership is open to all undergraduate and graduate students at the university, though voting rights are reserved for full members – those who have attended half of the organization's meetings held that semester. In addition to general membership, Spectrum offers identity specific subgroups, such as Freshman Spectrum and the Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC) Group. The QTPOC subgroup celebrates the intersectional identities of its members and provides a safe space for LGBTQ people of color to gather, celebrate, and support one another (Spectrum, 2014). Subgroups function as semi-autonomous student organizations, maintain their own membership records, and are lead by student coordinators who function

² The other LGBTQ organizations include Capstone Alliance, OUTLaw, and MIS LGBT++. Capstone Alliance is open to faculty, staff, and graduate students, OUTLaw is available for all students in the University of Alabama School of Law, and MIS LGBT++ is intended for undergraduates in College of Commerce and Business Administration's Management Information Systems program.

similar to officers of the larger organization. Subgroup members are not required to participate in corporate events, though most are also active in Spectrum-wide meetings, social events, and activist initiatives.

Spectrum's student leaders serve on the Dean of Students' Student Leaders Council, meet monthly with the university's President, and are often relied upon to represent the university's LGBTQ student population. The organization meets in person, in some form, at least one time each week and communicates primarily through their website and Facebook page. To ensure a safe environment for self-expression, organization officers moderate both physical and electronic communication channels at regular intervals.

I selected Spectrum's community spaces as the focal point of this study for several reasons. First, the group is extremely active on campus and in the community, thus providing me ample opportunity to participate in Spectrum functions and to observe interactions between organization members. The diversity of ideas, experiences, and identities found within the organization was also appealing. Additionally, the student group is structured as a formal organization, enabling a critique of member interactions using theories inherent to organizational communication. Analysis from an organizational communication perspective layers the narratives of LGBTQ identity shared in the findings and results in a more impactful, applicable study. Simply, Spectrum is a hub for LGBTQ community at the university and provides a rich opportunity to gain greater understanding of queer individuals' experiences in Spectrum's cultural context.

Cultural Context

The Human Rights Campaign’s Municipal Equality Index (MEI) is one of the most useful tools for evaluating the cultural climate LGBTQ people experience based on geographic location. The MEI evaluates a city’s “laws, policies, and services” based on their protection and inclusion of LGBTQ individuals who live and work in the community. Cities are graded based on six categories – non-discrimination laws, relationship recognition, municipality as employer, municipal services, law enforcement, and relationship with the LGBT community. The MEI evaluated five Alabama cities in 2014 – Huntsville, Birmingham, Tuscaloosa, Montgomery, and Mobile – with all five cities scoring between three and nine points on a one hundred-point scale. Tuscaloosa, home to the University of Alabama, scored the worst in the state with only three points. According to the 2014 MEI scorecard for Tuscaloosa, the city only garnered points in one sub-section of grading – “enumerated anti-bullying policies” at the county level. The city has no non-discrimination laws based on sexual orientation or gender identity built into their statutes, there is no evidence of government officials making efforts to include the voices of LGBTQ community members in their decision making processes, and the city does nothing formally to support LGBTQ youth. These statistics are important to highlight because they illustrate the government-constructed context in which Spectrum is situated and demonstrate the lack of support provided by Tuscaloosa’s government for members of its LGBTQ community.³

Regardless of the local government’s lack of support for LGBTQ community members, several advocacy organizations are actively conducting campaigns in the region. In 2014, the aforementioned Human Rights Campaign (HRC), the nation’s largest lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender advocacy organization, announced a \$8.5 million campaign called “Project One

³ Alabama’s MEI scores are likely to improve in 2015, reflecting the legalization of same-sex marriage in the state, but these figures have not yet been released.

America,” aimed at addressing employment and housing nondiscrimination protections in the South (Barnes, 2014). *Project One America* opened permanent offices in Mississippi, Alabama, and Arkansas to establish a presence in the region (Human Right’s Campaign, 2014). While the HRC’s central leadership is based outside of the South, Southerners on New Ground (SONG) is an LGBTQ activist organization comprised of Southern-based LGBTQ individuals working for equity across race, class, culture, gender, and sexual orientations (Southerners on New Ground, 2014). SONG’s efforts are born out of an appreciation for the diversity of the Southern LGBTQ community and focus on advocacy for wide-reaching segments of the LGBTQ population. The organization’s work is guided by an effort to legitimate the queer population in the South and features projects designed to support these individuals. The activities of advocacy and community organizations are promising, but their necessity highlights the ongoing inequality LGBTQ people presently experience in the region.

Exploring the MEI’s statistics and the work of activist organizations in the region is helpful for understanding the social and political climates in which the university exists, but it is also necessary to consider the microclimate created by the university and its impact on the ways students experience campus life. While the University of Alabama does not offer an official office for LGBTQ students or an on-campus diversity center, a partially funded LGBTQ resource center opened a small office in the student union building in the fall of 2014. In addition to a physical office, the resource center also maintains an extensive online presence, highlighting resources such as the following: information about LGBTQ+ campus organizations, a list of allied campus departments and offices, and an interactive map of single-stall restrooms on campus. The University also extends health benefits to same-sex partners (Brown, 2012) and offers an extensive non-discrimination policy for faculty inclusion in their class syllabi (The

University of Alabama, 2014). LGBTQ students are provided some support through University policies and the resource center; however, they are not entirely protected on campus, thus necessitating Spectrum's efforts to construct safe community spaces for LGBTQ identified individuals.

Finally, Spectrum's cultural context is undoubtedly influenced by the deep importance placed on religion in the region. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), eight-six percent of Alabama residents identify as Christian, almost all attending churches that do not accept or promote LGBTQ equality. Notably, forty-nine percent of the population identifies as white Evangelical Christian and sixteen percent as Historically Black Protestant. The two groups represent the lowest supporters of same-sex marriage in America, with forty-one percent of Historically Black Protestants and twenty-one percent of white Evangelical Christians supporting marriage equality (Pew Research, 2014). It is reasonable to assume the percent of supporters would be lower in Alabama considering the state's extremely conservative voting record and social policies. Religiosity in the South should be considered in the framing of this research.

Research Framing

Although some literature commenting on the experiences of LGBTQ individuals has been produced (Simon & Brooks, 2009; Hackford-Peer, 2010; Sunwolf & Leets, 2003, 2004), very little stems beyond traditional scholarship to share the voices of LGBTQ individuals, especially college-aged individuals, and to offer their narratives of identity. This thesis shifts the focus of LGBTQ centered research from more typical campus climate opinion surveys and coded textual analyses to an interactive and co-created discussion of the experiences of LGBTQ community members. Through this study, I have explored the attempts of marginalized groups to

create community in climates and contexts that are socially hostile and I have gained an expanded understanding of how LGBTQ college-aged individuals communicate and perform their queer identities and queer voices in a cultural context that offers limited institutionalized support.

Three research questions guided this study, informing my method choice and specific participant population. The overarching questions are: a) How do LGBTQ individuals interact with one another in LGBTQ community spaces? b) How do LGBTQ community members articulate feelings of acceptance and comfort in LGBTQ safe spaces? and c) How are sexual orientation and gender identity performed in queer community spaces?

Before proceeding, it is important to define the term “safe spaces.” The term is used colloquially within queer communities to signify spaces, places, and groups in which individuals are comfortable authentically performing their self-identified queer sexual orientation and gender identity. These spaces are typically intentionally created and occupy a dual identity as both independent from and integrated within the larger environment.

Personal Positioning and Intersectionality

My experiences exist in communication with the lived realities of other members of the LGBTQ community; however, they are uniquely shaped by my intersectional identity – the unique combination of privileged and marginalized aspects of my identity (Combahee River Collective, 1982; Crenshaw, 1991). The interpersonal nature of ethnographic work necessitates a discussion of my intersectional identity because the questions guiding the study and my choices while writing the final ethnographic narrative were both informed by my identity and personal experiences. As a white, educated, cis-gender man living in the South, certain aspects of my

identity privilege me and shape the way I interact with members outside the queer community. Concurrently, my queer sexual orientation and non-majority political and religious beliefs marginalize my identity based upon the cultural climate in which I live. Though marginalized in society, my sexual orientation allows access to participation in the LGBTQ community and entrée to solicit the University of Alabama's LGBTQ student organization's involvement in my study.

It is worth noting that Spectrum, as an organization, also has an intersectional identity composed of marginalized and privileged characteristics. Despite being marginalized based upon LGBTQ identity, the student organization is comprised entirely of college students, privileging the group based upon its level of education and access to institutions of socio-political influence. Additionally, Spectrum members' access to education and proximity to academic discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity encourages more critical and frequent analysis of personal identity. This differentiates Spectrum from other sections of the broader LGBTQ community who have less access to critical academic discourse.

My intersectional identity not only shapes my interactions with those outside the queer community, but also with fellow LGBTQ individuals. The LGBTQ community maintains tremendous diversity among its members, representing various demographic groups, as well as a wide range of sexual orientations and gender representations (Pew Research, 2013; Community Marketing, 2014). This diversity can be attributed with spurring identity specific subgroups and sublanguages within general community spaces, thus creating access issues for ethnographers conducting fieldwork (Brown-Saracino, 2014). For instance, members of the QTPOC group experience Tuscaloosa's conservative socio-political climate differently than I do, as a white person, because of their marginalized racial identity. In essence, race contributes another layer of

oppression (Combahee River Collective, 1982) impacting queer people of color's experiences. It was imperative that I remain mindful of these differences and their potential impact upon other's lived realities while conducting fieldwork connected to this thesis. My intersectional identity undoubtedly impacted the research I conducted within a "value laden"⁴ (Frey, 1994, p.564) naturalistic paradigm and was reflected upon accordingly throughout the study. Remaining reflexive throughout the fieldwork and mirroring individual's chosen language were two of the tools available as I attempted to build relationships with Spectrum's members and bridge intersectional differences.

It is important to note the theory of intersectionality should not be used simply to describe multiple identities, but should rather be viewed as a tool to understand "interlocking, socially constructed systems of oppression" (Mitchell, 2014). In this way, intersectionality moves beyond a one-dimensional discussion of identity to consider cultural inequalities and the ways they act upon raced, gendered, classed, and otherly identified bodies. Jones (2014) addresses the misuse of intersectionality, saying,

To only see intersectionality as being about identity is to ignore its historical and disciplinary origins and intent and thereby miss the mark of its full analytic power...Intersectionality is only about identity when structures of inequality are foregrounded and identities considered in light of social issues and power dynamics. (p. xii)

Many in the post-intersectionality camp echo Jones' concerns and argue intersectionality has unintentionally contributed to the reification of identity categories, rather than succeed in its promise of tearing them down (Nash, 2013; Wiegman, 2012). Post-intersectionality does not dismiss the potential usefulness of intersectionality, but attempts to challenge cultural studies scholars' infatuation with the concept's complexity (Nash, 2013) and encourages its more critical

⁴ This term comments on the influence of the researcher's values and theoretic choices in the study of naturally occurring groups.

employment. Structures of power and their relationships to individual experiences are reflected upon extensively in this study to ensure a critical, intentional application of intersectionality theory.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the thesis project, reviewed Spectrum's purpose and the cultural context in which it operates, and explained my identity in relationship to the organization. As mentioned previously, literature exploring the lived realities of LGBTQ individuals exists in academia, but there are few ethnographic narratives sharing the voices of LGBTQ college-aged individuals and the stories of their identities. Through this study, I have come to better understand the communicative interactions and experiences of LGBTQ individuals at the University of Alabama, which I have used to create such narratives.

The following chapters present relevant literature situating this study in context with previous work in the fields of identity studies and organizational, interpersonal, and intercultural communication (Chapter 2), and the method guiding the study (Chapter 3). A layered ethnographic narrative with an autoethnographic frame fills the next chapter (Chapter 4), and the final chapter summarizes the study's findings and emphasizing the study's relevance inside and outside of academia (Chapter 5).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents literature from five areas relevant to this study: marginalized voices, queer theory, the importance of LGBTQ safe spaces, performance theory, and bona fide group perspective. The first three sections comment specifically on the interactions of queer community members and the importance of LGBTQ community spaces, conveying an obvious relationship to the study's focus population. Information about bona fide groups is included to contextualize the study of Spectrum, a formal student organization, within the broader field of small group communication and as a tool for decoding observations made during ethnographic fieldwork. This project benefits from the interdisciplinary mixture of concepts, theories, and backgrounds represented in the following literature.

Marginalized Voices

It is important to consider two theories of marginalized voice that frame the study. First, this work is informed by muted group theory (Ardener, 1975; Houston & Kramarae, 1991). In its development, muted group theory focused on the traditionally muted voices of women in research, a result of men conducting the majority of social scientific studies and not intentionally seeking out women's voices when gathering information. Today, muted group theory has been expanded to focus on other marginalized identities, such as race, class, and sexual orientation (Houston & Kramarae, 1991). Standpoint theory is also useful for framing the study. Born

through Marxist critiques of class structure, standpoint theory considers groups of people who occupy the same geographical spaces yet develop different perspectives based on social positioning. Hartsock (1983) argues these distinct points of view are influenced by an individual's cultural history, their relationship to material goods, and the experiences unique to their identity. This research does not further the analysis nor critique of either theory, but employs them to situate the study of Spectrum's members. An understanding of both theories is fundamental to research of traditionally marginalized communities.

Queer Theory

Queer theory provides a critical framework through which cultural institutions can be evaluated from an outsider perspective. Queer theory builds upon Michel Foucault's ideas of cultural control, exclusion, and selection and complicates the sexual and gender binaries often used as tools of cultural oppression. Scholars are encouraged to look beyond these binaries to see sexuality and gender as spectrums or continuums of identity (Sedgwick, 1990), resulting in a more empowered understanding of gender and sexuality. Queer theory is not limited to the study of these topics, though they are often the focus, but also comments on the act of challenging and questioning societal expectations and identities through a postmodernist paradigm (Marinucci, 2010).

Turner (2000) points out the term queer, when used generally, is not an individual title for one category of identity, but instead a term used to describe something failing to meet established societal expectations. He goes on to state the curiosity which inspired queer theory, "That the predominant modes of intellectual and political activity in western culture during the late twentieth century do not serve the needs and interests of queers and that perhaps they cannot

be made to do so” (p. 10). In this framing, queer theory is necessarily oppositional and intended to center queer identity as the normalized identity. For this research, the centering and normalization of queer identity is the most useful aspect of queer theory. Spectrum can be understood as a manifestation of queer theory, serving as an LGBTQ safe space in which queer identities are normalized.

Teresa de Lauretis originally coined the title “queer theory” as a joke for the title of a conference she held at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her use of the term “queer” was risky in 1990, as youth activists and urban LGB communities had just begun reclaiming the term (Halperin, 2003). Lauretis intentionally chose the term to signify attempts to make theory queer – to challenge the assumptions inherent to traditional theory – and to highlight the problematic nature of the previously termed “lesbian and gay studies.” Queer theory pioneers found the equation of lesbian and gay identity in the field’s title disingenuous, as it gives the appearance of equity between lesbian women and gay men in the LGBT community (Halperin, 2003). In reality, men occupy a privileged position in the LGBTQ community, just as they do in heteronormative contexts.

Much of modern queer theory has developed into a more critical area of study, calling into question the actuality of the self and critiquing the desire for academically described authentic personhood. For the purpose of this study, however, queer theory is employed with less critical intention and provides the base from which identity performance and interpersonal interactions are evaluated. Queer theory is used to explain how non-heterosexual identities and non-conforming gender identities are normalized in LGBTQ community spaces, queering traditional frameworks for understanding interpersonal and intercultural communication. In addition, the concept of “queer spaces” (Halberstam, 2005) provides us a new framework for

understanding space and the ways in which they are queered to serve the LGBTQ community. Aesthetic selections, proposed spatial use, and the cooptation of non-intentionally queer places should be considered when evaluating queer spaces and are reflected upon in the subsequent section.

LGBTQ Safe Spaces

The study of LGBTQ safe spaces is informed by queer theory, but specifically applies the framework to community spaces designed to allow queer identified individuals to interact without muting their authentic identities⁵. Analysis of queer spaces takes queer theory and combines it with postcolonial and critical race theories to introduce concepts of race, colonialism, ethnicity, nationalism, and regionality as important factors impacting the formation and continuation of queer community spaces (Oswin, 2008). Prior to discussing LGBTQ safe spaces and their importance to queer communities, we must first explore the more generalized concept of “safe spaces” and its evolution within academic discourse.

Safe spaces are discussed extensively within the study of classroom environment and are often viewed as a pedagogical best practice for creating spaces welcoming to candid discussions of social justice issues (Holley & Steiner, 2005; The Roestone Collective, 2014; Sparks, 2002; Boostrom, 1998). There are no formal criteria used to qualify a place as safe, though scholars have attempted to identify commonalities between such spaces (Boostrom, 1998; Polletta, 1999).

⁵ Consistent with queer theory’s critique of normative social structures and cultural institutions, scholars in the field also challenge the notion of authentic selfhood and essentialized identities. Queer theory’s criticism is important; however, this thesis uses the concepts of authenticity and essentialized identity to discuss the lived realities of Spectrum’s members and to communicate experiences linked to their sexual orientations and genders. In order to fully share and appreciate the research participants’ narratives, the “self” is discussed as a valid concept reflective of the participants’ lived realities.

Among these common descriptions, we learn safe spaces can be literal or figurative, serve as havens from physical, psychic, or emotional harm, and exist outside of direct control of the dominant culture. In the simplest of terms, safe spaces allow marginalized individuals to enjoy one another's company in a setting where they can be open about their identities and honest about their experiences without fear of retaliation (Sparks, 2002).

When stressing the importance of safe spaces, which Evans and Boyte (1986) refer to as "free spaces," the authors describe such spaces as "settings between private lives and large scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence and vision" (p. 17). These spaces stand in stark contrast to heteronormative spaces and provide an otherwise non-existent place from which interactions between LGBTQ individuals can be observed. We can think about LGBTQ safe spaces as rival geographies – places established by muted communities through resistance to privileged and marginalizing control (Said, 1993). Rival geographies "provide space for private and public creative expression, rest and recreation, alternative communication, and importantly, resistance" (Camp, 2004, p. 7); they are safe spaces carved out of unsupportive or hostile environments. This view of safe spaces is appealing because it grants agency to the marginalized community and signifies their ability to push back against dominant society (Polletta, 1999).

As members of the LGBTQ community identify places safe for authentic self-expression, they also develop an understanding of those unsafe for the same level of self-disclosure and security. Queer individuals essentially develop a mental map of safe and unsafe spaces based upon their personal experiences and individual identities. Because identity is societally produced and context specific, "a single physical space can be considered safe by and/or for some people, but unsafe for others of a different gender, race, sexuality, class, age, or other identity"

(Roestone, 2014, p. 1349). Organizers and administrators of queer community spaces must be mindful of intersectional identities to ensure safe spaces for all LGBTQ individuals.

It is important to note queer spaces are not synonymous with gay or lesbian spaces. Gay and lesbian spaces do not necessarily transgress social norms, as traditional gender roles and attitudes about sexual orientation and performance are often reified through these non-heterosexual spaces. In contrast, community spaces referred to as queer or LGBTQ – when the acronym is used intentionally to demonstrate the diversity of a group – make space for those who do not conform to societally accepted formations of gender identity and performance or sexual orientation (Oswin, 2008). These spaces are essential for healthy LGBTQ community formation, as they provide a space for individuals to voice their anger and frustration resulting from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Hackford-Peer, 2010). They are especially important on college campuses because they provide a safe space for those in the LGBTQ community most recently removed from the American high school context. Unks (2003) claims the high school setting is potentially the most homophobic American institution. Beyond the homophobia, heterosexism, and discrimination many students face, LGBTQ identified people are also absent from most schools' health, literature, and social science curriculums. Knowing this, we can understand how queer spaces serve a dual function, both as safe locations for individual expressions of LGBTQ identity and as a source for knowledge of LGBTQ history and health information.

Beginning in the 1980s, popular construction of the LGBTQ community and the HIV/AIDS epidemic were inseparable (Fraser, 2008). It was not until more recently that studies began focusing on LGBTQ communities with more diverse, non-health related purposes. Hackford-Peer (2010) reports on one such group, the Gay Straight Spectrum (GSA) she sponsors

at the small college in Colorado where she works. She talks about the college's GSA as a useful tool for "seeing images of ourselves reflected back at us" (p. 541) in non-supportive cultural contexts. LGBTQ community spaces work as mirrors to show members others who look like themselves. Fraser (2008) also provides thoughts about modern LGBTQ communities and cites research pointing to the idea of "family" as a recurring trope in LGBTQ discourse. The "chosen family" is an important idea within LGBTQ communities and speaks to feelings of acceptance and support inherent to such spaces. Finally, Weems (2010) refers to LGBTQ safe spaces using the metaphor of "camp" – interpreted both as a type of carnival, grotesque performance and as geographic space designed as a shelter. The former metaphor relies heavily on performance theory and other ideas inherent to communication theory. The latter invites a review using theories of organizational communication, such as bona fide group theory, which is presented later in this chapter.

Proxemics

It is necessary to introduce the concept of proxemic behavior to the discussion of LGBTQ safe spaces. Proxemics is a subcategory of nonverbal communication and can be defined as, "the use and perception of one's social and personal space, such as in seating and spatial arrangements, territoriality and conversational distance and orientation" (Prabhu, 2010, p. 8). More simply, it is "the spatial dimension of nonverbal behavior" (Hall, 1963, p. 122). Proxemics play a significant role in my analysis of participant observation, as my field notes consider the spatial makeup of community spaces, the way participants move through community spaces, and the way participants interact with one another in community spaces.

There are various applications of proxemics within ethnographic research; however, an understanding of public, social, personal, and intimate spaces and the transgressions of culturally specific spatial norms in queer safe spaces are most relevant to this study. Ethnographic studies of marginalized and non-mainstream community spaces have employed proxemics to understand how spaces form and retain their appeal to community members. For instance, in her study of live music sessions at Irish pubs, Morton (2005) explores the way proxemics of a space is influenced by the specific bodies present and how they utilize the space.⁶ Similarly, Schwartz (2013) considers the proxemics inherent to an urban GED program's classroom space when young men of color populate it.⁷ Proxemics of queer spaces are integral to their continued attractiveness to community members.

The Closet

LGBTQ community spaces are intended to serve as safe spaces for authentic expression of sexual orientation and gender identity. However, away from these spaces, LGBTQ identified individuals are often less comfortable performing their true identities and become intimately familiar with the concept of the closet. Sedgwick (1990) informs our understanding of the closet with her seminal work on the topic, in which she defines the closet and explains its impact upon individuals who experience same-sex attraction. The closet is presented as a commonly experienced structure in the lives of same-sex attracted individuals, in addition to gender non-

⁶ Morton finds the presence of physical elements – smoke, alcohol, musical instruments, and an overcrowding of bodies – changes the way bar space is typically utilized. Specific expectations of those using the space alter normative spatial interactions and subvert the space's intended purpose.

⁷ GED classrooms are understood as counterspaces, oppositional to high school classrooms, and presented as useful in the pursuit of spatial/social justice. GED programs provide the opportunity to redefine the rules, layouts, and interpersonal expectations of classrooms to better serve predominantly minority communities.

conforming persons. Sedgwick goes as far as to claim the closet functions as a “fundamental feature of social life” (p. 68) for same-sex attracted individuals. Regardless of its omnipresence, the closet is hurtful for individuals, and the queer community as a whole, because of its reliance upon constant denial of authentic selfhood (Signorile, 1993).

Adams (2011) discusses the closet as the origin of queer identity and establishes several conditions for the closet’s existence. These conditions, or characteristics, include the following: the capacity to recognize and name one’s true identity, the willingness to accept it, and the ability to perform another less-stigmatized identity instead. Someone who is “in the closet” performs, or attempts to perform, an inauthentic identity in order to conceal their true sexual orientation or gender identity. Individuals who are “in the closet” are often accused of lying about their true identity or deceiving those to whom they are not out; however, this construction unfairly places blame upon queer individuals attempting to navigate personal identity and cultural expectation. Researchers should understand and frame the closet as a tactic of self-preservation, not deception.

Sedgwick (1990) says, “Even at an individual level, there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not in the closet with someone personally or economically or socially important to them” (p. 67-68). In this way the closet is not a one-time metaphorical tether from which to break free, but instead a constantly relevant, constantly negotiated decision to reveal one’s identity (Adams, 2014). Some claim increasingly progressive attitudes toward LGBTQ issues may render the concept of the closet obsolete in the not so distant future (Seidman, Meeks, & Traschen, 1999); however, Sedgwick’s emphasis on the constantly negotiated and performative aspects of the construct illustrates its lasting importance.

Performance Theory

Identities performed in relation to the closet and selective outness can be understood through the concept of performance theory. Performance theory moves beyond traditional scripted theater performance, the most familiar application of the term, to comment on the embodied performance of gender, race, sexual orientation, class and other elements of identity in daily life. In essence, all actions and interactions can be understood as efforts to perform a socially scripted identity. Butler (2007) explains the way in which gender becomes performativity recreated in society, saying, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 139). Simply, identities have meaning because they are repeated over time and become accepted through that repetition. This quote from Butler introduces the difference between performativity and performance. Performativity implies a series of effects leading to the production and reproduction of an identity based upon societal scripting. It is ongoing and contextually specific. Performance, on the other hand, implies some aspect of choice and speaks to acting out a specific identity.

Gender – or any other aspect of identity – only remains a reality “to the extent that it is performed” (Butler, 1988, p. 527). Identity can be understood as a series of identifications (Bayart, 2005), guided by societal expectation and encouraged through social control. For instance, we have the ability to choose what clothes to wear every day; however, our options, the wardrobe from which we select, are already limited by social structure and gendered expectations. In this way, gender and sexual orientation are normatively scripted by context specific societal expectations, which have proven to be extremely pervasive and to extend considerable control over identity performance. Queer identities do not adhere to normative

scripting; however, they are still guided by non-normative scripts and behavioral expectations. It can be argued queer scripting provides greater opportunity to non-normative individuals with regards to performance choice. There is greater agency afforded to queer individuals as they select which scripts they're pulling from, but their behavior is still performativity reified.

Central to the study of performance is the desire to deconstruct traditional notions of language as the cornerstone of communication and instead to “stress the cultural organization of communicative processes” (Bauman & Briggs, 1990, p. 61). Linguistics is replaced by enacted performance and specific context as the more important tools for analyzing communicative encounters. In essence, performance is grounded in the context in which it occurs. Building from this deconstructive paradigm, feminist thinkers in the 1980s infused performance studies with more critical methodologies (Case, 2009). Queer theory's influence similarly moves performance studies in a critical direction and centers the critiques of gender and sexual orientation as evolving, context and actor specific endeavors. Hünninghausen's (2006) review of the film *Brokeback Mountain* discusses the dual performances of sexual orientation and gender through a critical queer performance lens and points out the many context specific contradictions between sexual orientation and traditional gender featured in the film; he uses these moments to illustrate the performative production of identity in our culture and to decentralize spoken language as the core method of identity formation.

Beauvoir (1974) claims gender is not a natural fact, but rather an historically situated construct. This division highlights the important difference between biological sex and gender, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of gender and its re/production within cultures. Butler (1988) comments on Beauvoir's thoughts, saying, “When Beauvoir claims that ‘woman’ is a historical idea and not a natural fact, she clearly underscores the distinction between

sex...and gender...Hence, as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (p. 522). Trans identified individuals within the LGBTQ community are especially familiar with the consequences of non-conforming gender performance, introducing the concept of “passing” to the discussion of performance theory. The same is true for individuals with marginalized sexual orientations who pass as straight and enact a normative identity, but identify as queer. Goffman’s (1965) comments about identity performance can be used to understand passing in relation to performance theory. He says,

When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be (p. 17).

Queer individuals pass based on others’ expectations, introducing the concept of backstage/frontstage performance. This concept, reliant upon some element of personal agency, challenges Butler’s (1988) notion of constant, unavoidable performance regulated by cultural scripts.

Identity performance can be viewed as an intentional choice situated in both an historic moment and a unique cultural environment. Because of this, feminist theory encourages us to understand the personal lived reality as a political experience (Dolan, 1993; Butler, 1988). An individual’s gender and sexual orientation performance is not only influenced by their context, but it concurrently communicates about and contributes to perceptions of their identity within broader society. This performance can serve to reify or deconstruct notions of identity, highlighting its political nature.

Bona Fide Group Perspective

In the early 1990's, researchers in the field of small group communication shifted focus to studying groups as they occurred in the field, outside of experimental settings and away from the constraints of researcher-designed study parameters. Stohl and Putnam (2003) call for a renewed commitment to appreciating the “dynamic and interdependent boundaries of groups” (p. 399) when doing group communication work, and stress the importance of the group's context (Galanes, 2003). The authors use the term “bona fide group” (Putnam & Stohl, 1990, p. 248) to describe such naturally occurring, intact groups and develop two essential characteristics of bona fide groups – stable but permeable boundaries and interdependence with immediate context. Lammers and Krikorian (1997) contributed two additional criteria for bona fide groups, including membership characterized by good faith participation and groups actually occurring in real life. These later ideas are less complex than the former and implied through the work of Putnam and Stohl; however, it is important they be specifically enumerated as they represent important aspects of member interactions in bona fide groups. The study of bona fide groups does not highlight differences between naturally occurring groups, but rather specifically differentiates naturally occurring groups from these created by researchers for experimental purposes.

Boundaries, both inside and outside of the group, are reified through the communicative actions of group members. An appropriate balance of stability and permeability must be reached to ensure barriers work to define the group without preventing it from growing and adapting to its environment (Putnam & Stohl, 1990). A bona fide group's permeable boundaries refer to the fluidity of its members and membership. These boundaries occur through

(1) communication between groups (i.e., connectivity), (2) overlapping group membership (i.e., embeddedness enacted through multiple formal roles), (3) relationships

among group members in other contexts (i.e., embeddedness enacted through multiple informal roles), and (4) fluctuations in membership within groups (i.e., rotation of members, absenteeism, or turnover). (Putnam & Stohl, 1990, p. 257)

The socialization of newcomers is an important culturally based communicative task that signifies a transition across the organization's permeable boundary and into the organization's membership. The second criterion, interdependence with immediate context, refers to the interplay between the group and its environment. In essence, this focuses the ways in which the organization impacts its environment and how the culture or environment impacts the organization in return. The link connecting concepts of boundary and context is particularly clear when members of the bona fide group experience internal conflict based on disagreements or divisions originating outside of the group. Bona fide group members bring these connections with them across porous boundaries and can cause internal conflict as a result.

The two criteria presented by Lammers and Krikorian (2009) effectively act as clarifications of characteristics implied by the original work on bona fide groups. Their first point, membership characterized by good faith participation, translates the original Latin of "bona fide" and applies the phrase to member's positive and realistic intentions when joining a group. Their second point, bona fide groups are "actual groups that occur in human society" (p. 18), reaffirms the naturalistic origins of such groups. Perhaps these criteria are better described as translations of terminology; however, the points they raise are important and this study benefits from their being highlighted.

Use of the bona fide group perspective has increased tremendously since Putnam and Stohl introduced the concept twenty-four years ago. Frey (1994, 2002, 2003) edited multiple collections of journal articles centered on case studies of bona fide groups. Beyond Frey, countless others have written using the framework (Galanes, 2003). Recent work has diversified

the types of organizations considered by organizational communication scholars using the bona fide group perspective, broadening the perspective's application and relevance. Lammers and Krikorian (2009) apply the construct to the study of a cross-functional team in the health care industry, a surgical team, in order to better understand how specific tasks are communicated among group members, and the impact of interpersonal relationships beyond the borders of the group. Focusing on a significantly different field, Sunwolf and Leets (2003, 2004) published two articles focused on experiences of rejection and exclusion among childhood and adolescent peer groups. Their work analyzes the methods in which group boundaries are communicated among and between group insiders and outsiders. Specifically, they consider how youth "communicate peer group boundaries to unwanted children who attempt to join their groups" (p. 203). The criteria of permeable barriers, interdependence with immediate social context, and good faith intentions for joining a group can be used to critique the interactions of youth peer groups and presents a solid grounding from which emotional topics such as exclusion and bullying can be explored.

Chapter Summary

Queer theory is foundational to this work and provides a firm foundation from which to understand the importance of queer community spaces. Stemming from literature relevant to LGBTQ safe spaces, concepts of proxemics and the closet have been introduced. Interactions in LGBTQ community spaces and decisions regarding one's identity presentation can be studied and understood through performance theory. Finally, a bona fide group perspective frames our understanding of the organization and provides an underexplored avenue to evaluate Spectrum within their cultural context. This study follows an ethnographic methodology in an attempt to

gather the space-specific narratives of LGBTQ community members at the University of Alabama. Such stories reflect the lived experiences of the study participants and are intended to highlight the intersection of queer and performance theories with a bona fide group perspective.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

As previously discussed, this study explored the ways marginalized groups create community in climates and contexts that are geographically and socially hostile. Specifically, I pursued an expanded understanding of how LGBTQ college-aged individuals negotiate queer identities and voices in a conservative social/political context with limited institutionalized support. This chapter outlines the study's research methods and design and discusses ethical considerations inherent to such work.

Appropriateness of the Research Design

The study employed a qualitative methodology, specifically relying on ethnographic observations and individual interviews. This design was most appropriate for the study, as my goal was to gather narratives based on the lived experiences of individuals who are already members of a full-fledged organization in its natural setting. A full-fledged organization is one in which organization members have a history prior to the study and plan to remain active with one another after the study has completed (Putnam & Stohl, 1990). Because the group is naturally occurring, it was unnecessary to construct an experimental or controlled environment to observe interactions. In fact, such a design would eliminate the opportunity to observe communication and interactions between community members as they organically occur and would bias results based on intentional experimental choices (Frey, 1994; Putnam & Stohl, 1990). A quantitative

design, such as a survey, may have provided insight into the larger LGBTQ community's feelings of acceptance or safety in conservative social/political contexts, or the impact of queer community spaces on the performance of sexual orientation; however, such information was beyond the scope and intention of this study. A qualitative, ethnographic design was necessary to truly understand the communicative realities for LGBTQ community members.

Participants and Setting

Roughly twenty individuals were involved in the ethnographic observation portion of this study, though the number of individuals present during each meeting varied. Small interest group meetings featured as few as three members and large social events saw upwards of fifteen individuals in attendance. Focusing on a group of this size allowed me to successfully observe interactions within the organization, while ensuring diversity of experiences and identities among group members. All participants were undergraduate students at the University of Alabama and members of Spectrum. Though there was some variation in age, all participants were between nineteen and twenty-two years of age. The subject population was inclusive of a variety of races, genders, and ethnicities, and participants claimed sexual orientations and gender identities across the LGBTQ spectrum.

Ethnographic fieldwork took place during official organization meetings and social events. I define "official organization meetings and social events" to include the following: regularly scheduled organization-wide meetings, committee or interest group meetings, events communicated about through the organization's Facebook page, and social events to which all organization members were invited to attend. Limiting my observations through this set of criteria ensured the study would take place in intentionally designated queer community spaces.

I conducted individual interviews with fourteen members of the organization. A limited number of individuals were invited to participate in individual interviews due to the study's restrictive timeline; however, the sample was large enough to allow for a variety of narratives and experiences to be shared. These interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the interviewee, though almost all took place in the student union building, and provided me the opportunity to learn more detailed information about members of the organization. I asked questions based on observations made during fieldwork and the interviewee's past experiences as an LGBTQ person living in an unsupportive cultural context. My goal was to elicit personal stories from the interviewees, which proved important as I constructed final ethnographic narratives based upon my interactions with Spectrum's members.

The fourteen interviewees represented a broad range of sexual orientations and gender identities, in addition to racial, class, and religious diversity. Three participants identified as cis men, six as cis⁸ women, two as agender⁹, and three as trans. Of the trans participants, one identified himself as a trans man, one as gender fluid, and the other as genderqueer¹⁰. In relation to sexual orientation/ identity, one participant noted they were "more or less straight," four labeled themselves as bisexual, six as queer¹¹, and three as gay men. Several participants noted they were unhappy with the societal expectation of labeling identity, though all willingly provided the terms they were most comfortable using.

⁸ A cisgender person is someone who "feels comfortable with the gender identity and gender identity expectations assigned to them based on their physical sex" (UCLA, 2015, p. 2).

⁹ An agendered person is not internally gendered (UCLA, 2015).

¹⁰ A genderqueer person's "gender identity is neither male nor female, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders" (UCLA, 2015, p. 4).

¹¹ Each participant defined queer differently than their peers, alluding to the broad usefulness of the term. Visit the UCLA LGBTQI Terminology (2015) page to learn more about the term "queer".

Entrance to the Field

Prior to beginning fieldwork, I contacted Spectrum's president and adviser by email to express my interest in focusing on the group. Successfully gaining access to work with organizations, especially those made up of individuals of marginalized identity, is a necessary first step in ethnographic research and is often the most difficult aspect of the research (Brown-Saracino, 2014; Kramer, 2004). As a former member of Spectrum, my knowledge of the organization and its advisors was helpful in gaining access to the group. I provided the organization's gatekeepers with written information about the study and sought their informed approval to address the entire organization at a group-wide meeting. At this meeting, I presented information about my study to organization members and sought the consent of voluntary participants willing to take part in the ethnographic observation portion of my study. During subsequent meetings I spoke with organization members who were not present during the initial introduction and sought their consent to participate.

Ethical Considerations

Conducting ethnographic research centered on a group of people with marginalized identities in an unsupportive social/political context carries certain unavoidable, culturally situated risks. The most serious ethical consideration evaluated throughout this research was the potential to out Spectrum members who are not open about their sexual orientation or gender identity away from Spectrum's community spaces. In the final ethnographic narrative, I used pseudonyms and conflated characters to minimize such risk.¹² In addition to outing Spectrum

¹² The organization and university's names were not changed because of the context specific nature of this research. It was necessary to share place specific details to explain the socio-political environment in which the organization's members live.

members, this study necessitated sharing my sexual orientation through my writing, thus outing myself to anyone who chooses to read this paper. Relinquishing control over the communication of my identity leaves me uneasy; however, the potential to share previously unknown narratives of LGBTQ identity encourages me to write honestly about my intersectional identity.

Because this study intentionally focused on individuals of marginalized identity, participant consent and confidentiality were extremely important throughout the study. Written consent was acquired from all who participated in group observations and individual interviews. Though many participants are active members of the LGBTQ community and some outspoken advocates for LGBTQ equity, thus alluding to their relative comfort disclosing sexual and gender identities, all identifying information has been kept confidential and pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. During individual interviews, every effort was made to construct a safe and supportive research environment; however, I remained mindful of the possibility for questions dealing with sexual orientation or gender identity to make some participants uncomfortable, triggering negative feelings or painful memories. Participants were reminded they could skip questions or stop the interview at any time prior to the beginning of each interview.

It was important to me that Spectrum continued to function as a safe space for the queer community during and after my study. In this pursuit, I attempted to remain unobtrusive throughout the course of the study, only taking formal field notes during meetings and social events when appropriate. In addition, I did not conduct observations during closed interest group meetings intended for demographic groups in which I am not a member, such as Spectrum's Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC) group. QTPOC spaces provide an opportunity for LGBTQ people of color to express the unique challenges they face and to develop community with other similarly raced queer people. My involvement in QTPOC spaces would obstruct

normal group interactions and jeopardize the space's safety.

Data Collection

Ethnographic fieldwork necessitates involved, genuine interactions between the researcher and those participating in the study. Ellis (2004) outlines ethnographic fieldwork to include, “everything you do to gather information in a setting, especially hanging around, making conversation, and asking questions, but also formal interviewing and other information gathering” (p.26). As stated previously, I followed a traditional ethnographic methodology and collected data primarily thorough participant observation, field notes, and semi-structured interviews. Spending time and making conversation with Spectrum members was not only a methodological skill, but it was also essential to developing a trusting relationship with study participants.

Photographs of physical spaces were also collected, when appropriate, to record the places in which interactions were held. These photographs construct a photographic inventory (Collier & Collier, 1986) that contextualizes the interactions between and communication of Spectrum members within the spaces. A photographic inventory, as described by Collier & Collier, is a photographic record of research site characteristics, including aesthetics, activities, and sense of order. Visualizing the spaces allowed me to better understand the permeable barriers of the LGBTQ community's safe spaces and Spectrum's bona fide group characteristics. Unfortunately, photographs of community member interactions within these spaces were not documented due to ethical considerations.

Field Notes

During organization meetings and organized social events, I gathered field notes about members' interactions with one another and their performances of sexual orientation and gender identity. I handwrote field notes during meetings when I could do so unobtrusively – a method most relevant during business meetings and organization planning sessions. When it was impossible to record my thoughts as I made observations, such as during social events, I typed notes as soon as possible following the meeting or event. A copy of the Participant Observation Protocol, which will be used to guide participant observation fieldwork, can be found in Appendix B. The protocol contains an area to record basic orienting information and an open-ended section for relevant notes and observations. The orienting information is meant to contextualize the notated interactions and includes information such as: location, time of meeting, and size of group. This information can be coupled with photographs of the space to form a complete understanding of the environmental context of the interactions being observed.

Semi-Structured Interview

In addition to field notes, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather supplemental personal narratives. Semi-structured interviewing combines the elements of more formal, traditional interviewing with free flowing, discussion-based knowledge creation. This style of research allowed the LGBTQ community members with whom I interacted greater agency to guide our discussion based upon their lived experiences, while ensuring a base level of consistency between interviews.

Participants for individual interviews were identified based on consistent participation in organization events during the participant observation portion of my research and most were

invited via email to participate in an interview. The interview protocol was relatively open-ended, containing general or orienting questions and questions specifically related to experiences as members of the organization, with time included for participant comments. Specific questions were informed by the opinions expressed and actions taken by participants during observations, however, guiding interview questions were used to initiate conversation (see Appendix A).

Ethnographic Narrative

Once research was completed, ethnographic notes and interview transcripts were used to construct narratives of LGBTQ identity specific to the community spaces created through Spectrum. These narratives share the stories of Spectrum's members, as told during interviews and recorded in organization-based interactions, and provided thick description of the community's culture (Fetterman, 1989), a tool for understanding the community's influence on individual identities. The stories were informed by interactions with and observations of group members, but their names and identifying information have been coded and characters and stories have been conflated, when necessary, to preserve participant confidentiality. Analyzing field notes and interview transcripts for consistent themes and ideas is a necessary process for ethnographers and provides a clear opportunity to conflate and combine individual stories (Kramer, 2004). These ethnographic narratives are intended to serve as vignettes of the daily, lived experiences of the individuals who inform them and to enhance the understanding of the way members of the identity group interact with one another (Phillipsen, 1975).

The validity and importance of ethnographic narratives relies on the expectation that individuals be regarded as credible tellers of their own stories and that these stories be viewed as theories about marginalized lived experiences (Boylorn, 2013). The narratives featured in the

final ethnographic writing are layered with discussion of their theoretical, cultural implications; however, they have been constructed as self-supporting narratives and can be understood as independent commentaries on LGBTQ identity.

Autoethnographic Frame

The ethnographic narrative is framed by autoethnographic narratives, which are intended to position my experiences as a queer identified individual in the same cultural context as Spectrum's members. As stated by Boylorn & Orbe (2014), I used autoethnography to "make sense of who [I am] in the context of [my] cultural communities" (p. 17). My experiences are unique to my intersectional identity and reflect my communicative interactions with others inside and outside of the LGBTQ community. For the purpose of this study, the narratives serve as a storytelling device, allowing me to write about the experiences I have gained and events I witness while interacting with the study's participants. More directly, autoethnography allowed me to make sense of my experiences alongside Spectrum's members. Autoethnographic sections layer the ethnographic narratives and the discussion of the narratives to construct a fuller understanding of the lived realities of members of the LGBTQ community at the University of Alabama.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the study's research methods and design and discussed ethical concerns considered prior to fieldwork. The study's autoethnographic frame used to position the work within my own experience and the final ethnographic write-up were described to clarify the intention of the paper's narrative stories. The following section features these narratives of

identity, the final product of my ethnographic emersion into UA's LGBTQ student organization, Spectrum.

CHAPTER 4

AUTO/ ETHNOGRAPHIC NARRATIVES

This chapter presents narratives of LGBTQ identity specific to Spectrum's members and their experiences at the University of Alabama. Individual stories are presented as brief vignettes and make up the majority of the final ethnographic narrative. Research participants' stories have been collapsed and combined to protect anonymity and to allow for a clearer and more concise articulation of the themes that emerged during individual interviews. Narratives are presented as the characters' internal monologues, in response to a question asked of the group during an organization meeting, and are experienced by the audience as direct addresses. Each narrative focuses on one character and represents their unique experiences, most often from a first person point of view. The opening ethnographic vignette, Jacob's story, is presented as a third person account. Jacob's character is the conflation of three participants who were exceptionally reserved during my interactions with them and observably shy in group settings. A removed, third person account of their experiences as members of the community proved to be a more accurate representation of their thoughts and personalities. Bold quotation marks are used before and after first person accounts to note the switch in narrator from myself to the relevant character.

The short stories are bookended by autoethnographic reflections and tied together by an autoethnographic thread running throughout the piece. Autoethnographic pieces frame the collection of ethnographic narratives in order to demonstrate my experiences as a queer

identified person in the same cultural context and their impact upon my answer to the student's question. I use my voice as an observer, researcher, and participant to transition between individual ethnographic vignettes and to create a sense of narrative clarity. Autoethnographic sections are written in italics and asterisks are used to separate sections from one another.

Situating the Story

During an organization-wide business meeting, held in the rooms pictured in Figures 1 and 2, one member asked a question of the group which resonated with me throughout this research. As everyone in the room stood to leave for the night, he called to the group and quickly asked, "Who here is out and who isn't? Just so that I'll know what to say if I see you on campus." The young, male identified student was a freshman at the University and new to the organization. His nervousness throughout the event was obvious and the outburst served equally as a question offered out of respect for the group and as a statement intended to convey personal uneasiness with being open about his identity on campus. There was an obvious, extended silence as each individual in the room considered their reply. The narratives shared here represent the characters' internal monologues as they attempt to talk back to the inquiry.

While writing this ethnography, I reflected upon stories shared during individual interviews to develop narratives highlighting the unique experiences each person brings to their response. I have imagined them as responses to this question – "Who here is out and who isn't?" Though members may not have offered the full narratives in their answers to the question, their short responses are surely informed by the longer stories. Sharing the narratives also allows for a convenient discussion of each of the research questions.

An Uneasy Negotiation of Identity: The Ethnographic Narrative

His words caught me off guard and stopped me from moving out of my chair. After 30 minutes of watching cat videos on YouTube as a group, the hour-long meeting had finally come to an end. Members began standing and moving toward the doors, obviously excited to leave the meeting and grab dinner with smaller groups of friends. I was prepared to follow them, having already placed my notepad and stack of informed consent documents in my overloaded bag. I appreciated the opportunity to put down my researcher accessories and slip back into the role of fellow student and friend. I'm unsure if the students sitting on the same row as me, several of whom I have been friends with for two or three years, experienced the same wave of relief – perhaps I projected my anxieties about the project on them – but I cherished the change in outwardly presented identity.

Before I could escape for the night, a quiet freshman sitting in the front row jumped out of his chair and yelled to the group, "Wait! One more thing! Who here is out and who isn't? ... Just so I'll know what to say if I see you on campus." Eric's question kept me in my chair waiting for others to respond. He asked the question with abrupt, disruptive haste, but paused a bit before explaining his reason for the inquiry. It was as though he had realized the awkwardness of his request and was unsure if he should even explain his intent. Eric stood, waiting for a response, with eyes wide open and an anxious look smeared across his face.

To my surprise, no one in the room offered an immediate answer. Some glanced from one person to another, as if pleading for a sacrificial lamb to offer an initial response ... but others turned inward in search of an appropriate reply. The small lecture hall was blanketed in a thick

fog of silence for several seconds. Several seconds longer than was comfortable or typical for the chatty group.

Charlie fidgeted in their chair next to me. It appeared as though they were attempting to pull their body from the cushioned seat of the chair beneath their legs – the place where they had been glued by Eric’s words. Usually the first to fill awkward silences and field unusual questions, their silence pushed me further into my own thoughts. Similarly, Joe pulled his hand from the door at the rear of the lecture hall and stood in his place considering an answer. Even Spectrum’s officers faltered in reply. Why the leaders of the openly LGBTQ organization didn’t offer an immediate chant of, “We’re here! We’re queer!” seemed unusual and was disappointing, considering the group’s politically active history of advocacy work.

I waited for the current members of Spectrum to reply before offering my own thoughts.

I waited... but began to wonder why I was waiting... I began to wonder if my age and status as an alum of the group meant that I should be the first one to answer...

I told myself I delayed my response to maintain my position as observer first, participant second... But, as time drew on, I realized my hesitation resulted more from my own lack of clarity than respect for conventions of ethnographic research. Was I out on campus as a graduate student? Sure. Of course! My research comments on queer identities on campus and queer safe spaces... how could I not be open about my queerness? Answering the question seemed simple – straightforward... But would it have been as clear if I was asked the same

question as an undergraduate? My mind began to wander among memories of times I would have answered with an emphatic “Absolutely!” and times, perhaps more frequent, I may have been more comfortable not discussing my sexual identity.

Memories began to flood my mind and complicate my understanding of the situation. Perhaps I was hesitant to embrace Spectrum friends while in the business library working on a group project with four fraternity guys who I didn’t know outside of the Business Management course we had together senior year. Surely it was easier, less controversial, to give a polite wave and maintain my sex-less identity. In the same way, did I unintentionally place myself in the closet when arguing for greater LGBTQ representation through a theoretical lens, instead of speaking from personal experience as a queer person, when discussing the topic with college administrators? How often as an undergraduate would I have been content with Eric not approaching me outside of Spectrum’s meetings?

Sitting in my comfortable, cushioned chair on the second row of stadium-style lecture seating, my attention initially focused on Spectrum’s President, Jacob, who stood at the head of the room.

Jacob leaned back slowly against the white board at the front of the newly renovated lecture hall and briefly closed his eyes. His slight frame was never imposing, but now, more than ever, he seemed to be removed from the group spread before him. As his eyes opened, he pulled his mouth taut and rocked slightly from front to back, slowly lifting his toes and silently placing them down in the place from which they had originated. Jacob was removed from the group not only by location in the room, but also in thoughtful reflection. He had been asked this question

many times over the past three years, especially since joining Spectrum's officer team last fall. Queer high school students often approached him at conferences and during college visits and inquired what it was like being queer at the University. Their question always carried the implicit desire to know if it was safe, or maybe acceptable, to be out on campus.

Jacob grew up in a small town an hour north of Tuscaloosa. The sort of town you pass through without knowing you're in a town. Two stop lights, a Dollar General, and a Save-A-Lot grocery store. His county high school typically graduated around one hundred students a year and was small enough for everyone to be in everyone else's business. It wasn't safe to be gay or lesbian at the school – especially risky to identify as trans... He had a deeply personal understanding of the anxiety embedded in Eric's question. Despite this familiarity and practice responding to the question, he remained quiet. Silently, with lips barely moving as he practiced a response, Jacob recalled his usual talking points. The tone and directness of Jacob's reply always changed based on his familiarity with the person asking and his desire to answer follow up questions.

"I'd definitely say it's safe to be out on campus... Most of the time, at least. The University is really big, especially compared to where I grew up, so there is room to do anything and possibility to be whomever you want to be. That's my favorite thing about the school – the size. There is plenty of room to create your own pocket and...to be comfortable."

"I've never been personally attacked or felt unsafe on campus... Sometimes I feel a little uncomfortable though... Like, I sometimes feel like I have an awkward visibility because I assume I'm the only trans person in the classroom or in the dining hall... I guess that probably

has more to do with how I feel I'm passing at the time... but it still makes me uncomfortable.

That's why Spectrum is so great. It's a place where I can really let my queer flag fly and relax!"

"Sure, it's safe to be out... But I don't go near frat row at night. You just have to be smart and know how you're acting depending on who is around."

After a few seconds of standing apart from the group and carefully considering potential responses, Jacob's eyes snapped open as he realized no one in the room had replied. The sudden awareness of quietness twisted his body into action. He took one large step away from the wall, toward Eric, and began to address the question; however, he caught himself just before speaking and slipped back into silence. Jacob rarely spoke first during Spectrum events, despite being an officer of the group, which likely impacted his unwillingness to fill the verbal void. In fact, Spectrum itself had become quieter and more introverted since he was elected to lead the organization. It wasn't that meetings and socials had been improved or diminished under his leadership... but they had changed. Jacob often explained the differences in Spectrum's atmosphere over the past three years as a natural evolution of the organization based on the personalities of those active in the group. Oppositely, other upperclassmen frequently expressed their desire for him to do more to energize the organization and to improve group interactions. Jacob now considered if it was his responsibility, in this moment, to speak up and remind everyone present they weren't supposed to ask one another to label themselves in front of the group.

Instead of speaking, Jacob pulled his thick-framed glasses from his face and held them in his left hand while rubbing his eyes with the right. He was prepared to answer Eric, but would wait for another officer to speak initially.

Caroline, whose frame was smaller than Jacob's but personality considerably larger, stood adjacent to him following his jerky movement away from the white board. She had a memorably concerned look etched into her face. Eyebrows pressed downward toward her eyes and lips tightened into a puckered snarl. Her discontent was obvious from ten feet away. Caroline held my attention for a moment.

“ Oh no...

Oh shoot...

No one is answering...

Should I jump in and tell people they don't have to answer the question if it makes them uncomfortable? That's something we pride ourselves on as a group – not making people identify themselves... Eric doesn't know he's asking people to out themselves as queer, ally, gay... whatever. But he is. Look around the room! No one knows what they should say or how they should handle this... Because it's never happened before. I'm the Vice-President... Is it my job to answer or say something?

Whenever someone asks me if I'm queer or how I identify, anything like that, I'm always like, "You probably shouldn't ask people's identities randomly like that, but yes, yes I am... Thank you for asking? ... I guess?" It's so... I don't know, it's just so uncomfortable for everyone. I can't help but answer with an awkward tone... It's totally fine with me if people

know that I'm queer. I have a rainbow Safe Zone¹³ sticker on my Jansport backpack and a "boy" hair cut, so I don't necessarily hide my queerness. I also don't mind having conversations with people about my experience as a queer student, as long as they're respectful and asking because they genuinely want to know about my identity.

On one hand, I totally understand Eric's nervousness. I get why he asked who was out on campus. Freshman year I lived with three girls from back home and didn't come out to them because I knew they'd tell my family in Montgomery... So I understand having separate worlds. Freshman year I lived in a tiny, one-person queer cocoon because I was worried high school friends and family members would find out if I started going to Spectrum events. I definitely get it. On the other hand, no one should ever have to identify themselves at a Spectrum event. We don't pass out information cards and have people check boxes – "Are you an L, G, B, or T?" We don't do anything like that.

I think it was David who told me during my first Spectrum meeting, "Look, we won't ask you to identify yourself. You can just come out if you want to." He could tell I was beyond anxious to be there. Like, nearly about to pass out or throw up because I was nervous I'd be asked to label myself during the meeting. People shouldn't have to explain their identity to the group... They shouldn't even have to acknowledge whether or not they're "out" on campus... It's just important we have a place where queer kids can go and hold their partner's hand or dance with someone or even make out or do whatever... A place where they know people won't freak out at them... This doesn't feel comfortable or safe... ”

¹³ According to their website, the Safe Zone program at UA “provides a visible network of allies for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and asexual (LGBTQA+) individuals. Safe Zone Allies distribute information regarding sexuality, gender identity, campus and community resources, and methods for reporting harassment and/or discrimination.” Rainbow stickers are used to identify those who have been Safe Zone trained.

Courtney, a freshman majoring in political science, appeared most willing to offer a response. Perhaps she felt compelled to say something because she was standing directly to the left of Eric, entirely in each person's field of vision. Or maybe it was because she, too, was a freshman and could relate to the stress of being situationally out, both on campus and at home. It had become clear during our new friendship that Courtney's natural instinct in a situation like this was to make a joke or say something clever to draw the negative attention away from Eric. She smiled, as if thinking about joy-filled memories, but didn't shatter the tension with her humor.

“ Am I out on campus?

I guess that I'm out... At least if someone asks me if I'm queer or if it seems like an appropriate time to talk about my identity. Outside of Spectrum, queerness is mostly invisible on campus. It's not really something that I ever really see or hear about... So I don't really expect anyone to ever think that I am queer or to ask me about it. Maybe it's because I can pass pretty easily as straight? ... I don't know.

It's so different than what I'm used to from my high school where everyone... or almost everyone was queer. At least the girls were. Girls and guys were separated in the dorms... I guess to keep us from having sex... So I don't know what the guys were up to.

Ha! To keep us from having sex! The school had no idea!

But really, I was so used to having queer people everywhere in our dorm that it started to become normal. It was what I expected. Some of my favorite memories take place in McGill

Hall, the dorm where we lived for the last two years of school. We all lived together on what was essentially a college campus and took care of each other. We had to support one another because we were basically family for two years. Everyone on the girl's side was queer. Or at least everyone but a few token "straight" friends... Maybe they're even queer now! I'm used to having that kind of acceptance bubble where it doesn't matter that you're queer and if people are talking about, like, LGBTQ issues they know you're queer and they know what's up. They know how to talk about these issues in a productive and supportive way.

I guess that's why I joined Spectrum when I came to college. I wasn't sure where else I could find that same sort of acceptance bubble on campus, except in Spectrum. And Spectrum does a great job of giving that space to me. Shit, that's where I've made most of my really good friends! My main squad – Mitchell, Maddie, and Cam – as well as a bunch of other awesome people all came into my life because of Spectrum. It's safe to say my favorite memories of college all revolve around those crazy kids! We don't ever do anything outrageously exciting or adventurous together, but we can be our true selves around one another. That's what I love the most about Spectrum folk.

Like, one of my favorite nights of college was last fall when we had a movie marathon night in Mitchell's dorm room. The leaves had just started to turn amazing shades of red and orange outside and it was finally cold enough to wear jeans and a sweater during the day. It was the sort of weather that makes you want to open the windows in the afternoon so you can smell the fall air. I remember the four of us piled onto Mitchell's couch and cuddled together under one giant fleece blanket to watch terrible horror movies all night long. The blanket was crimson with an Alabama "A" in the center and provided just enough coverage to block the cold air coming through the windows. The movies we watched were that sort of slasher film from the 80s that are

filled with blood and gore, but terrible acting and almost no discernable plot. I didn't mind the terrible movies, though, because the people – my Spectrum squad – made the night memorable. We were just one big puddle of queer cuddles!

When I think about it, my queerness isn't magnified when I'm with Spectrum people, like movie night in Mitchell's dorm, but it's almost normalized and expected. It isn't something I have to think about and be mindful of... It just is. Spectrum is probably the only space on campus where I've seen visible queerness... Well, at least intentionally visible queerness. I don't have to glance over my shoulder to see who's walking past before talking about liking girls or about past relationships, like I do sometimes while I'm having lunch in the dining hall or walking on the Quad. I like being with Spectrum folk because I know most of us are queer or queerish and are cool with me... At least, I assume everyone is because it makes me happy thinking I can be in a place where queer is the norm. ”

Kylie sat just beyond Courtney shaking her head, glaring from one person to the next. Kylie was a senior and had been involved in the organization since her first semester on campus. She wasn't afraid to impose her presence and her opinions on the people around her. In fact, I had seen her aggressively insert her thoughts into a friend's conversation earlier that day, offering advice which was unsolicited and, ultimately, unheeded by the friends. Kylie wore her purple-tipped braids in a loose bun atop her head, which jingled as she determinedly shook them from side to side in decent.

“ Fuck these stupid assholes. All of um are gunna say things, like, “Yeah! We're out. You can be out, too!” Bunch of bull shit, that's what it is. We don't do anything on campus as a group

to let people know that we're out. Or that we even exist. There's basically no point to Spectrum any more. I remember when I was a freshman and Spectrum actually did shit. We were always active fighting for gay representation and doing service for the community. Not even just the queer community. The literal fucking community. In Tuscaloosa. That's why I ran for Service Chair. I wanted us to finally do things again. Like we used to. Yeah, sure, we rally behind certain groups and gay causes sometimes, but we don't do anything for real. Not really.

So, hell yes I'm out on campus. Which is more than can be said for most of these people who barely show up on campus. Even if they're "out," like that freshman asked, they aren't actually out there doing anything. For real, last Christmas I wanted us to do this project that was basically an Angel Tree gift giving thing, but for families with queer kids. It's a crazy amazing project where the parents tell you what gift the kid wants, regardless of what the normal gender of the gift is. I thought it would be the perfect thing to bring all of Spectrum together, since so many of us weren't allowed to have the toys we actually wanted when we were little. Like, for real, boys couldn't have dolls and girls couldn't have trucks. It was so damn stupid. This was the perfect way for us to break that. The perfect fucking way. But when it came time to buy the gifts, I was the only one who did shit.

I mean, I guess the reason I'm even in Spectrum has changed over the past three years, too. I joined when I was a freshman so I could make queer friends. All three of my roommates my first year were older and straight, so I didn't expect them to care about helping me find queer friends, but the second week of school they sat me down in the living room and told me about Spectrum. Jasmine called me out of my room and told me to sit down on the couch. She said they wanted to "talk to me about something." I sat down between Rachel and Lauren with my heart pounding so hard and my palms all sweaty, unsure what they could want. After what felt

like five minutes of waiting with a stupid look on my stupid face, Jasmine started the conversation.

She looked me in the eyes and said super nicely, “We think that you should come with us to a meeting this Wednesday night. It’s for Spectrum, the gay and lesbian group. I don’t know if you’re a lesbian or, like, out, or anything like that... But I think you’d feel comfortable there.” I was so surprised that I couldn’t come up with a response right away. I thought they were gunna fuckin teach me about Jesus and my “sinful ways.” Instead, they were just cool. I couldn’t think of what to say! It was the exact opposite of my high school.

I think Rachel knew I was surprised, so she interjected, “We aren’t gay, but we’re super cool and a lot of our friends are. It’s totally chill with us.” I don’t think they know how much that stupid conversation meant to me. So on Wednesday we went to the meeting together and I met some really awesome people who became my best friends. That’s how Spectrum started for me, but now it’s completely different. Like, I stay involved because I feel like so many of the older queer people are always gettin on to the younger people for not knowing their queer facts or not knowing certain truths or not knowing fuckin queer history. But they never teach that shit at meetings and it isn’t common knowledge, so how are the younger people supposed to learn it? If you get mad at a freshman for not knowing something and you don’t explain it to them they aren’t going to come back to meetings and get involved. They’re just going to quit because you’re abrasive and obnoxious. So how about they stop being abrasive and obnoxious? Now my job is mostly to tell the assholes when they can handle shit better. I’m just tryin to keep this stupid shit alive, that’s really all I’m doing. It’s pretty stupid that freshman – what’s his name? Eric? – asked everyone about whether or not they’re out. But I’m not gunna call him out like some people are gunna. He didn’t mean to fuck up, so why would I shoot him down? I’m just

like, “Hey assholes, answer his question and move on. Don’t ruin someone else’s experience in Spectrum just because they made a mistake.” ”

Charlie squirmed more in their¹⁴ chair, growing increasingly uncomfortable. I felt their eyes focus my direction and turned my head to return a glance. Our eyes met for a moment and Charlie’s widened, doubling in size to communicate their discomfort. I wondered what they were thinking. How would they answer? Out as trans? Out as queer? Could someone be out regarding their sexuality, but not their gender identity?

“ I’m a very queer presenting person. It’s just in my nature. I don’t really expect to pass as straight, because I’m genderqueer. It just isn’t going to happen – especially not when I’m wearing my classic rainbow striped suspenders! It usually isn’t a problem on campus, but there are some places I can’t comfortably go without fear of being targeted by jerks looking to pick on someone different from themselves. Someone who looks like they could be queer or who isn’t acting “correctly.”

One of my best friends lives on the street behind the Publix grocery store just off campus in an old Spanish style house. The house was renovated about twenty years ago and separated into four different apartments. She lives in the top left unit and has a beautiful back deck overlooking a ravine that runs parallel to the street for a few hundred yards before turning toward the river. I love spending time at the apartment, especially sitting on the back deck with friends on fall afternoons... but, I dread the walk home. The grocery store is only a half-mile – a fifteen-

¹⁴ Gender-neutral pronouns are used when talking about Charlie because they identify as genderqueer and prefer the pronouns they/them/theirs. All characters presented in this chapter reflect the pronoun use appropriate to the corresponding research participant(s).

minute walk – from my dorm. The distance isn't a problem, but the road you have to walk along to reach the destination is the absolute worst. On the way to the grocery store, the road bends sharply to the left and is shielded by dense trees on each side. For some reason, it provides the ideal environment for guys in jacked-up trucks to yell at queer kids as they drive past. I guess it gives them the cover they need to impress one another and make us feel terrible... I've never been physically attacked, but I've had every insult you can imagine volleyed at me from the cabs of pickup trucks... The same thing has happened to almost every one of my friends. Some of them let the hateful things roll off their backs like water off a duck... but I know others who have a really hard time bouncing back.

At a Spectrum meeting last year, our conversation turned to the infamous "Publix walk" and we all shared stories of times we had been harassed on the way to buy groceries. For my guy friends, it seemed like just having too much swoosh in their step was risky behavior, resulting in endless harassment. I'll never forget one of the older trans girls expressing her frustration, saying, "On this campus, if a trans person were being harassed and you called the police to report it, would they step in and stop the torment? Or would they join in?" I had never thought about that... but now it's all I think about when I'm walking to buy cereal and mac-n-cheese.

As terrible as it is having slurs yelled at you out of passing trucks, knowing there will be no consequences for it, nothing compares to gameday nights. Football gamedays are terrifying for me. Absolutely terrifying. Imagine taking all of the people who have ever yelled at me during my walks back from Publix and then give them liquor to drink all day and a football game to get them all pumped up and energized. When everyone is drunk and rowdy they're way more likely to say something to me and definitely more likely to try and assault me. It's terrifying. And the more alumni in town or community members on campus the worse it is, because they're less

likely to be accepting and open minded. Like Homecoming. That's the worst time to be queer at Alabama. After the Homecoming Bonfire two seasons ago, Mattie and I were sitting together on the quad under a huge, white, twenty-foot tall gameday tent, just talking about life and spending time together. We had been dating for about a year and I had finally met her family for the first time earlier that day. It was incredibly stressful, so we were just enjoying some quiet time together. It was dark out and most people had dispersed from the bonfire. It was just really nice. We weren't all over each other – nothing like that – just sitting close together on the grass. Like any couple would have done.

At some point I looked up and saw a group of four or five older men walking on the sidewalk toward our tent. Each guy was pulling a wagon filled with tailgate supplies and had a beer in their other hand. Mattie and I didn't think much of it and kept talking, but as they passed us this older man held up his flashlight and shined it directly on us. He pulled the light away and kept walking a few more steps before stopping in his tracks and focusing back on us. He shook it up and down, from my face to Mattie's, and then up and down our bodies. I literally said out loud, "Can you please stop that?"... Instead of apologizing, his response was, "Well aren't you two just having fun."

What does that even mean? Like, how were we supposed to respond?!

I don't think it even matters if I'm out when any old man walking past feels like he can clock¹⁵ me and invade my personal space. ”

¹⁵ Clocking refers to pointing out a perceived flaw in someone's gender expression or sexual orientation. The term is typically used in reference to individuals of trans identity and can be extremely disrespectful to and damaging for the individual being clocked.

I reached out with my right hand and grasped Charlie's left arm, giving them a quick squeeze to let them know I understood their nonverbal signal. The gesture seemed to reassure Charlie they weren't alone in their discomfort. As Charlie's eyes relaxed and they readjusted their body in order to look ahead, I noticed Johnny had observed our interaction. Johnny, who stood directly behind Charlie, was a Junior but had only been involved with Spectrum for a year. Quiet and non-confrontational, I wondered if Johnny was impacted by Eric's inquiry or if he would simply chose not to engage in the potential discussion.

“ It depends. How am I dressed on the particular day we are talking about? It's all very context specific for me, which is different from a lot of other people in my community. I don't have conversations with people very often about my identity – usually they know that I'm different by looking at me and making a judgment about me. I consider myself more or less straight, but bi-gender... or maybe gender fluid. One of my friends just mentioned gender fluid the other day, which I had never heard of before, but it's like back and forth between male and female. Most days I feel more male, but some days I feel more female, so I think I like the term gender fluid. I guess if we got real technical, I'd say that bi-gender stresses the duality of the two gender expressions and gender fluid would, I guess, stress more of the actuality of it – of feeling both male and female at the same time. I've actually just started cross-dressing, so I still identify under the transgender umbrella, just like a less talked about part.

I only own two skirts and a couple blouses, so I don't wear them very often, but when I do it's like, “Yeah! You know, this feels right, too!” A couple weeks ago I was home visiting my family for Thanksgiving and I came out of my room with bright, florescent pink nail polish on my fingernails. My older sister had let me pick from her polish collection, which was really

awesome of her. It felt so empowering to paint my nails for the first time and I loved how colorful they were. I just love bright colors! But anyways, I came out of my room and my dad said, “Um, why is there stuff on your nails?” and my response was, “Because I like it. Because it’s so colorful.” I could tell he didn’t really understand, his Mexican Catholic background hadn’t prepared him for this conversation, but he loves me and was happy to know that I was doing what made me happy. I haven’t directly addressed it with my family... There hasn’t been a “hey, I’m transgender” conversation... but they’re all supportive of me expressing myself in whatever way is right for me and believing what I want to believe.

I guess it isn’t really necessary to verbally come out to people or make my identity like Facebook official... People can just see what I’m wearing and know that I’m different. I guess they may not know I’m transgender or gender fluid or whatever, but they know I’m queer. Probably the only time people on campus have looked at me and known I’m queer is when I’ve had on a skirt and stockings... which I’ve only done once or twice. I’m super lazy and hate doing laundry, so I can’t cross dress very often! Last week I was wearing a skirt and I received so many confused looks when I came out of my dorm from people waiting at the bus stop. No one said anything, but they were definitely thrown for a loop!

That’s what’s nice about spending time with people in Spectrum or with my gamer friends – no one is thrown off when I do things that aren’t considered “normal.” I guess some times I have anxiety issues and stress issues... Because of that, I usually don’t vocalize my feelings when I’m uncomfortable. Like, I felt so uncomfortable when everyone at the bus stop stared at me because I was wearing a skirt... but I would never be bold enough to say something to them. When I’m with my friends, they’re just cool with whatever I have going on. I can really

show my colors. I don't have to mute my authentic self or be worried about the looks I'll receive for coming out in women's clothes.

I heard a small giggle rolling from the back corner of the room and whipped my head around to see who was laughing – to see whose laugh had been the first noise to cut through the room. Josh stood leaning against the back of a chair with both of his hands cupped over his mouth, suppressing future outbursts. His small chuckle was accompanied by a collective exhale from the group as everyone realized they wouldn't be the first to speak... or at least to make a noise.

“ Ha! Ha ha ha ha ha!

I don't know how I could possibly *not* be out. I'm obviously gay, so it's fine with me if people assume I am. I wasn't out in high school... But it was one of those situations where everyone “*knew*” I was gay. I didn't figure it out until junior year... But apparently I was late to that party. Even though it was *my* party. I like to say that I lived in a glass closet. I might not have been out, but everyone could damn sure see in!

I can probably pass as straight when I'm just walking around campus and hanging out. I'm pretty tall – around six feet– and I have a masculine haircut. I mean, I don't dress particularly flamboyant. Most days I just wear shorts and a polo... But, I guess when I'm talking – especially if I have to give a presentation or am doing something that makes me nervous – I guess I sound *really* gay. Like, hella super gay. In my mind I always think, “Come on! How does anyone not know I'm gay? Did they just hear me say that?”

To be honest with you, sometimes I am self-conscious about my voice. I know I have to get over that, because it's just what I sound like... I'm working on that. I mean, it isn't like I'm some stereotypical sassy queen who walks around saying, "Yas queen! Ya! Slay!" We all know that one gay who is always snapping and showing out. I don't put on a show like that! I mean, don't get me wrong, I like a bitchy kiki¹⁶ at the Pride Parade as much as the next queen... I just wish I didn't sound as squeaky while I dish! ”

Sophie offered a direct, candid response following Josh's laugh from the back of the room. "I'm outish. Just not to my roommates." She made the statement without looking away from the spot between her feet where she had stared since Eric asked the question. I noticed Sophie had been relatively quiet during the past few Spectrum meetings, making her brave honesty all the more appealing and exciting. Sophie's plain appearance – pale skin, freckles, and straight brown hair – was contrasted by her strong Midwestern accent and created a dynamic and conflicting presence in the space. I appreciated her company at the meeting and wondered why she was closeted in her own dorm room.

“ I came into school kinda knowing I wasn't gonna be out in my room. Uh, yah, out with my roommates. I'm prolly not gonna be out to them until I know we aren't' gonna live together anymore. I knew going in it was gonna be a problem because they're all Evangelicals¹⁷ and all from the South. I knew it was gonna be a problem... Just didn't know how bad their intolerance would be. Yah know? The biggest problem is with one of um's boyfriend who is always in the

¹⁶ Refers to a gathering between gay men to gossip and casually chat about shallow topics.

¹⁷ According to the Pew Research Center (2014), only 21% of white Evangelicals support same-sex marriage and other issues of LGBTQ equality.

living room. Especially with his friends in there all the time. They just say really problematic things that make me uncomfortable.

And what if I come out to them and it's a bad experience... like I expect it to be. What happens when I'm stuck in there? I'll prolly end the semester, like, "By the way – I'm queer. By the way – that wasn't cool. Have fun with your lives." Then just walk away and never see um again!

I know I need to find a place to live where I can be openly queer for next year... I've heard too many stories of friends havin a real hard time because they can't really be themselves. Before Mike came out at the end of his sophomore year, he went through a real intense depression and basically removed himself from everything. He never went to class and he lost his scholarships and his job and he was gunna have to quit school cause he couldn't pay for it. After he came out a lot of that junk went away. I wanna skip to the good part real fast. Yah know? ”

Sophie smashed a gaping hole in the ice that had frozen over the room, allowing others to relax and offer their quick responses. A few people only managed half, mumbled statements, but from the back of the room, Joe gave a proud, "For sure," before opening the door and heading into the hallway. A couple of people shared simple responses, such as, "Yeah, I am," or an affirmative, "Definitely." There were also some voices in the group who weren't out, such as Trey, a stocky freshman from Georgia. He mentioned, with less enthusiasm, that he wasn't out, but that Eric should still say hi when they see each other on campus. I couldn't help but smile after hearing Trey's response. His willingness to face questions about his identity from both onlookers and friends was refreshing.

Side conversations began to pick back up and the room was abuzz, once again, with laughter and lighthearted talking. It was clear the meeting had come to an end.

After five minutes of casual dispersion, there were only a few of us left standing in a circle at the front of the room – a group made up mostly of organization officers and seniors. Mike, a fellow upperclassman, collected the sign-in sheets and left over handouts and joined the group. Mike was a large guy, tall and rotund, who always wore wrinkled khaki pants with tennis shoes and messy, curly brown hair. He presented himself as a bit of a mess, but was extremely intelligent and always insightful. Mike inserted himself into our discussion of the events that had just unfolded and vocalized his response to Eric.

“ Y’all know I’m out. That’s not a big deal. But I guess the way I act kind of depends on where I’m at on campus. I know it’s weird, but being in the business school I’m kind of hyperaware of the fact I have a Safe Zone pin on my backpack. Y’all know what I mean? Like, when I hear the word “gay” I tune into it more when I’m near the business buildings. Just because that area is typically concentrated with more Greek people, which I know sounds bad, but I’m just aware of the things they say.

I guess when I say I’m aware of the way I act – I don’t mean I change the way I present myself or anything like that. I just know my surroundings. I’m just very aware of what’s happening around me and adjust my posture, my disposition, my reactions. But there is strength in numbers, too. Like, if I’m in the business school by myself then I’m more on my guard. If I’m with one of y’all, I’d be less worried and act way more boldly.

Shoot, I’ve already been in so many awkward situations this year because I’m pushing for the co-ed business frat to change their bylaws to be more gender inclusive. Right now the

official constitution says they're open to membership of "men and women," but we want it to say "all genders." I didn't expect it to be so difficult to get the leaders of an organization that's been gay friendly for as long as I've been involved to understand why this change is important. I think that's what I mean when I say strength in numbers. I wish there were more of us there so we could be out together and push for change with more voices – not just mine. Y'all know what I mean? ”

As voices in the large room transitioned from mumbling broken responses to offering confident replies, the honest grayness of my answer came into focus. I realized I would have never denied my queerness if asked about it on campus, but I would often avoid the topic or assume a mutual understanding of my identity instead of directly addressing it, depending on my surroundings and social context. I had often chosen to exist in a fluid space between closetedness and radical honesty, suspended between who I was and how it was easiest to be perceived.

The extended, uncomfortable silence in the room must be – at least partially – influenced by others considering their own contradictory, complicated responses. I can only image the thoughts of the undergrads sitting and standing around me, blindsided by the aggressively honest question. Their negotiations of identity literally brought into focus by a fellow Spectrum member. Perhaps they considered similar scenarios as me... or maybe their reactions were much more clearly defined. Regardless of their answers to the question, the silence that accompanied it impacted us all.

The silence reminded me of times I had felt unsafe on campus because of my identity, but decided not to vocalize my honest thoughts and feelings out of fear I'd be marked as other and seen as different. I thought about sitting with my partner in the student section at a football game

and hearing a drunken fan two rows above us yelling at the referee and calling him, among other things, a “damn queer.” Though the fan’s words slurred together to form one nearly incoherent compound expression, the hate was distinguishable to those who cared to listen. I didn’t recognize the skinny, red faced twenty year old, who had clearly been drinking for several hours and had part of an illegal beer spilt down the front of his shirt, and will never know his name, but he was dressed in the same colors as me and cheered for the same team on the football field. Perhaps this familiarity, when combined with proximity, made me feel the most unsafe and unwelcome.

The silence made me think about instances in which I felt different – othered – because of my identity. Times I had been asked to bring a date to an awards dinner and forced to negotiate the gender of my guest based on who would be in attendance. Other times in high school and college I had been worried about a friend’s personality out of fear they lead others to assume I was gay. Eric’s question and the lack of immediate response to it caused me to think about an aspect of life I had grown comfortable not considering.

The silence altered our interactions with one another in the lecture hall and stunted an otherwise lively night of discussion and community building. Perhaps the time for reflection allowed others the same space to consider the complexity of their responses. Regardless, it led to an experience everyone in the group will be slow to forget.

Chapter Summary

The ethnographic narrative shared in this chapter explores the stories of many people in the University of Alabama’s LGBTQ community. Through the shorter vignettes, as well as the larger piece’s narrative framing and creative selections, the voices of specific characters in the

community are brought into focus and framed as valid tools for understanding the experiences of queer individuals (Wilkins, 2012). The stories are constructed in such a way that they can be read as autonomous commentaries on LGBTQ lived experiences, further explanation not requisite; however, a deeper analysis of the themes addressed by the stories is beneficial. Such analysis takes place in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS

This chapter provides deeper analysis of the themes discussed within the auto/ethnographic narratives in the previous chapter. The analysis is intended to unpack the narratives and explore their significance in relation to existing literature. A discussion of LGBTQ safe spaces will open the chapter, followed by an explanation of the usefulness of a bona fide group perspective for organization-based research. The analysis concludes with a review of the character's actions through the lens of performance theory. Elements of queer theory and proxemics are included throughout the discussion. This chapter will include specific comments related to the literature, but generalized thoughts will be shared in the "Implications for Future Research" section of Chapter 6.

LGBTQ Safe Spaces

The idea of "safe spaces" proved to be a useful lens for understanding the importance of LGBTQ specific environments for Spectrum members. Courtney, Caroline, Mike, and Sophie's stories represent examples of this in the previous chapter's ethnographic narrative. The student organization develops a sense of safety for its members through a supportive interpersonal environment, understood as "figurative spaces constructed through social relations, not from plasterboard, two-by-fours, and metal detectors (Boostrom, 1998, p. 399). The group meets in

physical locations and communicates with one another through social media, but the supportive relationships between its members are responsible for fostering a sense of safety within the organization. Because of the organization's membership, queer identities are normalized and celebrated during Spectrum meetings. Each of the fourteen participants with whom I conducted an individual interview talked about the importance of spending time in a queer-normative environment for their happiness at the University of Alabama and development as a member of the organization.

Spectrum officers work to ensure an environment in which all participants feel comfortable expressing themselves and participating fully without the threat of ridicule or minimization, a foundational requirement of safe spaces (Boostrom, 1998; Arao & Clemens, 2013). In addition, Spectrum relies on several ground rules to ensure members respect one another and maintain a safe environment for individual expression of self. Several Spectrum members with whom I spoke talked about the fact no one who attends a Spectrum event is expected to identify themselves. An organization officer, Mike, addressed the well-known rule, saying, "Anyone's welcome. We don't ask you to identify yourself. That's never a requirement. We don't judge. It's just kind of a place for you to go where, unlike other places on campus, you can just be yourself." Not only does Mike address the previously discussed rule, he also alludes to several other basic expectations of group interaction. Safe space scholarship identifies establishing guidelines and expectations as key actions for ensuring welcoming, comfortable spaces (Arao & Clemens, 2013; Boostrom, 1998).

Despite the usefulness of safe spaces literature, it is worth addressing several important limitations to the concept. Most simply, the term "safe spaces" engenders imagery inherent to physical spaces, not the complex social and psychological relationships necessary to make a

space truly safe for self-expression and self-disclosure. In fact, a majority of safe space literature directly discusses attributes of physical locations and their importance for ensuring participant comfort (Kerr, 1996; Polletta, 1999; Evans & Boyte, 1986). Not only is it misleading to place the focus of activists and pedagogical scholars in this area, but it also leads to considerable time being spent – perhaps wasted – in efforts to define the required elements of a physical safe space.

The term “safe” is often used too casually, as no one is able to guarantee the comfort or safety of participants during social interactions (Arao & Clemens, 2013; The Roestone, 2014; Wise, 2004). We see several examples of this breakdown in the ethnographic narrative. Eric’s initial inquiry as to who in the group was out and who was not represented a major breach of the organizational expectation that “no one will be asked to identify themselves during Spectrum meetings.” Caroline reflects upon the transgression and says,

Should I jump in and tell people they don’t have to answer the question if it makes them uncomfortable? That’s something we pride ourselves on as a group – not making people identify themselves... Eric doesn’t know he’s asking people to out themselves as queer, ally, gay... whatever. But he is.

While Eric’s question represents a newcomer’s violation of organizational expectations, Kylie’s narrative highlights the potential for organization officers and established members to overstep their ideal limits as moderators and, consequently, disenfranchise younger participants who have limited institutional knowledge.

A review of the physical space in which Spectrum meets demonstrates the potential for outsiders to violate the safety and supportive environment inherent to Spectrum meetings. Figure 4 shows a lounge in which Spectrum often holds social events. The room is appropriately sized for the group, accessible to members, and the furniture can be reconfigured depending on event-specific needs; however, the room affords little privacy to its occupants due to its location within the main lobby of a large dorm on campus (Figure 3). Spatial configurations and privacy should

be considered when evaluating the validity of the term “safe” in relation to marginalized populations. Beyond these challenges, those in the dominant group often misconstrue the definition of safety to mean all opinions can be shared without repercussion, despite the potential negative impact such statements may have on marginalized individuals (Wise, 2004).

The term “brave spaces” seems more appropriate to use when describing LGBTQ specific spaces. This shift in terminology is relatively new, circulated initially through a book chapter written by Arao and Clemens in 2013. They point out many of the tenets of safe spaces are still useful, such as “setting expectations” and “ground rules” (p. 139), but that safety may not be reasonable nor desirable depending on the situation. Focusing on bravery, instead of safety, redirects our expectations for those in the group and frames them as actors in their own stories, not victims in need of safety and protection. Brave space is also “more congruent with our understandings of power, privilege, and oppression” (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 149).

Finally, the move from “safe” to “brave” spaces represents a shift from passivity to activity. It represents a shift from the description of a place to the description of participants’ actions. In this light, we can understand and commend Sophie’s bravery in the ethnographic narrative when she is the first to answer Eric’s question and breaks the room-wide silence. This change is not merely a rhetorical difference. It grants marginalized individuals agency to fight back against their oppression and to seek improved social conditions. Kenny (2001) addresses the importance of agency saying that it gives individuals “a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance” (p. 24). This action-oriented definition appropriately describes Spectrum’s brave spaces considering their history of activist work at the University of Alabama and in the Tuscaloosa community.

Bona Fide Group Perspective

A bona fide group perspective provides the necessary lens to understand the structure and function of Spectrum as an official organization. As mentioned in the literature review, the term “bona fide group” (Putnam & Stohl, 1990, p. 248) is used to describe naturally occurring, intact groups. Putnam and Stohl develop two essential characteristics of bona fide groups, both of which were useful for understanding Spectrum as an organization and the actions of its members. The two criteria are 1) stable but permeable boundaries and 2) interdependence with immediate context. Lammers and Krikorian (2009) give us two additional criteria, including membership characterized by honest participation and groups occurring in real life. Spectrum members meet both of the latter requirements. It is worth pointing out that honest, or good faith, participation is exceptionally important for Spectrum considering the need to provide a brave space, free from outsiders who might stigmatize or anthologize LGBTQ identities, for queer students at the University.

Bona fide groups are characterized by stable yet permeable boundaries, about which four characteristics were listed in Putnam and Stohl’s seminal work (1990) and shared in this paper’s literature review. The four criteria are analyzed here as a way of exploring Spectrum’s organizational identity. The first characteristic of bona fide group boundaries is connectivity, commenting on the link or communication between groups. Spectrum exhibits this connectivity due to their position as the official voice of and advocate for LGBTQ experiences at the University, leading to their officers’ involvement in many University-wide meetings. Also, during my month of participant observations I joined weekly small group meetings used to plan the annual Southeastern LGBTQA Conference. This conference was coordinated between

Spectrum's officers and many other LGBTQ student organization's throughout the state and region.

The second and third criteria are similar. One comments on group members being involved in groups outside of Spectrum and the other focuses on the relationships between members inside the organization. I am reminded of Mike's narrative in Chapter 5, when he describes working toward more inclusive gender language in his business fraternity's bylaws. I also think about talking with Mattie and learning she felt too busy with other organizations to stay involved with Spectrum. The finite nature of time presents a challenge for many of Spectrum's more involved members who must decide whether or not they should prioritize the organization and their relationships within it over other work on campus. These two characteristics of bona fide groups work in tandem and require us to consider the outside experiences members bring with them to Spectrum's events and the ways these experiences impact their interactions with one another inside of the organization. The link connecting the two criteria is particularly clear when members of the bona fide group experience internal conflict based on disagreements or divisions originating outside of the group.

The fourth criterion of bona fide group boundaries is the rotation of group membership. Mike commented on this during our interview and linked it to the unavoidable change in group dynamics as people enter and leave the organization. Mike said, "Yes, the atmosphere has definitely changed, and I think that's natural for every organization, especially in college. You have four years basically with a group of students, and then it's gonna change with the personalities of the people who are involved." Students who remain involved with Spectrum throughout their college careers are able to be with the organization for four years, while others

participate for fewer. Regardless of the frequency, both the rotation of members and absenteeism can have a serious impact on group dynamics.

A bona fide group perspective is especially useful for evaluating a group's means of socialization. The process of crossing group boundaries reflects the importance an organization places on including new members in their activities and their desire to ease or bolster the barriers to entrance. Much can be learned about organizational culture from a review of this process. Each Spectrum member I interviewed mentioned specific events and activities as important aspects of group socialization. These socialization markers represent movement across the organization's boundaries toward full membership. Spectrum's process is relatively open ended and reliant upon an individual's desire to become involved and comfort attending an LGBTQ event.

Many participants described first learning about Spectrum when seeing the organization's table at Week of Welcome events or during the campus-wide Get On Board Day¹⁸. These table-advertising events often served as a form of initial contact between the organization and interested potential members. Sophie recalled seeing a Spectrum table during one such event, but was unsure if she should approach the members behind the table, ultimately electing to add the organization on Facebook before talking with them in person. The second stage in socialization, which each person commented on, was the beginning of semester social –the Fall Mixer and Spring Social. Attending this low key, welcoming pizza party served as the entry point into the

¹⁸ Week of Welcome events are programmed by the University of Alabama Office of First Year Experience and are intended to acclimate first year students to campus life. Get on Board Day is programmed by the Office of Student Involvement and Leadership and attempts to connect students with student organizations, academic departments, and community groups. Both are held within the first two weeks of the fall semester.

organization for most individuals. Paying dues and filling out a membership form are the final steps required for full membership in the organization.

The second criterion, interdependence with immediate context, refers to the connectedness between the group, its members, and the social environment. The group impacts its environment by creating LGBTQ specific spaces for group member interactions. Carving rival geographies (Camp, 2004; Said, 1993) out of unsupportive social contexts has a direct effect on the broader social environment. The surrounding social and political context, however, likely exhibits more pressure onto the group than it receives in return. The characters of Sophie and Caroline directly address this criterion in the ethnographic narrative as they discuss selective outness based upon the beliefs of their roommates. In this way, the social environment has the agency to encroach upon personal living spaces and impact the well being of organization members.

Religion in the South also shapes the cultural context for Spectrum's members. Sophie speaks to this when explaining her concern about coming out, specifically citing her roommates' Evangelical Christian beliefs. Johnny's narrative also calls upon the influence of Christian belief, saying, "He didn't really understand, his Mexican Catholic background hadn't prepared him for this conversation." In a more drastic example, Charlie alludes to religious belief as a factor keeping administrators and police from stepping in to stop the harassment experienced by trans and queer students on campus. If individuals in positions with the opportunity to end the harassment of LGBTQ identified people do not value LGBTQ identity as an authentic, valuable, and desirable identity, they will likely not act to protect them from harassment.

Performance Theory

Central to Butler's (1988) argument of gender performance is the idea of social punishment for incorrectly performed gender. In the ethnographic narrative, Charlie described the societal reprimand they received, manifest as public taunting and harassment, saying, "There are some places I can't comfortably go without fear of being targeted by jerks looking to pick on someone different from themselves. Someone who looks like they could be queer or who isn't acting 'correctly.'" Several interviewees described the same situation, termed the "Publix walk," in which they were walking along a secluded campus street and targeted by individuals in passing cars because of their gender performance or perceived gender performance. Johnny discussed the consequences of his cross-dressing in a similar way, saying, "Last week I was wearing a skirt and I received so many confused looks when I came out of my dorm from people waiting at the bus stop. No one said anything, but they were definitely thrown for a loop!" The consequences differed, but both Charlie and Johnny violated their socially intended gender performance. This ethnographic study demonstrates the validity of Butler's claim and its useful application within the discussion of performativity in the LGBTQ community.

Social scripts for heteronormative sexual orientations are directly tied to notions of appropriate gender performance. Oppositely, non-heterosexual orientations have been repeatedly stylized in American culture as oppositional to accepted gender performance (Butler, 2007). Examples of this can be seen in Mike worrying people will be able to identify him as gay because of his feminine walk, and Josh expressing self-doubt about his feminine, high-pitched voice. Both men express desire to perform gender according to the specific cultural context in which they live. Passing is thus introduced as a tactic for self-preservative performance.

Some individuals in the trans community demonstrate the ability to perform gender contrary to societal expectations. While it may be true transgender and transsexual individuals reify gender through their performative choices, acting within the rules for their gender identity, genderqueer and agender people challenge this notion of normalcy. Agender individuals, such as Caroline, claim not to be internally gendered (UCLA, 2015). This identity challenges Beauvoir (1974) and Butler's (1988) comments about the re/production of gender. Gender can't be reproduced if it doesn't exist. In the same way, genderqueer people call into question the stable nature of gender.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored the contributions of this research project to our understanding in a variety of theoretical and pedagogical areas. It is recommended that educators, researchers, and activists switch their focus, both rhetorically and in practice, from creating safe spaces to fostering brave spaces in their classrooms and organizations. Additionally, the usefulness of the Bona Fide Group Perspective was explained. Finally, elements of performance theory were used to understand the consequences of enacted identity in strictly regulated social environments.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This chapter provides an overview of the research, reflects upon the research process, and indicates potential future work born out of the study and its findings. As stated in this paper's introduction, three research questions guided this study. The overarching questions were: a) How do LGBTQ individuals interact with one another in LGBTQ community spaces? b) How do LGBTQ community members articulate feelings of acceptance and comfort in LGBTQ safe spaces? and c) How are sexual orientation and gender identity performed in queer community spaces? Each of these questions were reflected upon through my research and analyzed within the "Ethnographic Narrative" and "Analysis" chapters. Although I have made extensive comments in each of the areas of this study, there is still need for future research of LGBTQ experience and room to share the voices of members of the queer community.

Methodological Reflection

The most substantial challenge of ethnographic research is gaining access to the group being studied and consent for their participation in the project. I was fortunate to be a former member of the group with whom I conducted research and to gain the support of the student organization's advisers, both of which decreased the usual barriers limiting access to student organizations. Once granted access to complete my research, I did experience trouble discerning

the group's meeting times and locations, though these difficulties did not prevent me from adequately observing group interactions and participating in organization functions. I believe these challenges stemmed from the members' frequent use of informal communication channels, such as text and Facebook messaging, to organize social interactions. Also, I noticed some hesitation from members of the organization, specifically those who were not open about their identities outside of Spectrum, to embrace full involvement in my research. Fortunately, all chose to participate once privacy measures had been explained and ethical considerations discussed.

I remained mindful of the ethical considerations inherent to this research throughout my time with Spectrum and during the construction of the final ethnographic narrative. For instance, it was challenging to reconcile both the friendships established prior to this work and those developed during it with my desire to record, in detail, all the conversations and interactions I observed during the month of research. My experience as an ethnographer encouraged me to make note of every story I was told, each micro expression I noticed, and all organizational failures that occurred; however, it was important I restrict the scope of my final paper in order to preserve personal and professional relationships with research participants. I made the decision to remove some organizational criticisms and deeply personal stories, even those shared willingly by participants, when I felt they would be damaging to the individual who shared them or the organization as a whole. Perhaps the most pressing ethical consideration resulted from the project's hurried timeline and the necessity to maintain accurate informed consent records, adequate audio file storage, and complete participant confidentiality despite rapid paced interviews and observations.

This project's relatively short timeframe did not provide the most desirable circumstances to gather data related to the broad research questions guiding the study. I would be interested in conducting a similar study over the course of a year, allowing additional time to develop relationships with organization members and to observe all types of events and meetings hosted by Spectrum. This would not only allow for greater data collection, but also a more diverse and extensive offering of ethnographic narratives. More time would inevitably result in a larger number of stories of LGBTQ lived experience being shared with those outside of the queer community. I was impressed that the members of Spectrum were willing to participate in individual interviews and participant observations despite the restricted timeline, often citing the value they placed in such research when explaining their decision to become involved with the project.

Conducting ethnographic research required I be constantly aware of my personal intersectional positioning while interacting with my research participants. Not only was it necessary for me to consider my identity while conducting research, but also as I wrote the final ethnographic narrative. Each first-person vignette and all of the details included within them were intentionally selected based on what I considered to be the most important contributions to the overall narrative. I am aware this decision is largely impacted by my values, experiences, and research goals; however, I attempted to select a broad range of stories representing a spectrum of student experiences.

Organizational Implications

As mentioned multiple times during the organizational overview and the ethnographic narrative sections, Spectrum members and those who participate in Spectrum events are never

expected nor required to share their identities with the larger group. It is unclear if this tacit policy is in place to create an LGBTQ-normative space in which everyone is assumed queer or if it is intended to give space to queer individuals exploring their evolving identities. Perhaps the two goals coexist in Spectrum spaces. However, because individuals often do not identify their sexual orientation or gender identity to the group, there is no way of determining the presence of non-LGBTQ – straight – individuals at meetings and events. It can be assumed straight allies frequent LGBTQ brave spaces, requiring scholars to consider their impact in such spaces. Future research should attempt to understand the ways in which queer community members interpret the presence of and interact with straight allies and straight presenting individuals in LGBTQ spaces.

Bona Fide Group Perspective

Also commenting on organizational structure and cultural positioning, this research demonstrates the usefulness of a bona fide group perspective for ethnographic, organizationally based research. Using the criteria of bona fide groups as a lens, researchers can better understand the significance of organizational interactions and group member dynamics. A bona fide group perspective takes into account the impact of an organization's cultural environment and social context when conducting organizational communication research. By reframing our approach to this research with a more critical cultural paradigm, as required by bona fide group theory, we can more authentically analyze and understand the organizations we study.

This research contributes to the theoretical development of Bona Fide Group Theory in two ways – highlighting the role of boundary spanners as influential group members and demonstrating the link between Putnam and Stohl's (1990) two criteria of bona fide groups. The term boundary spanner is introduced in the second sub-criteria of Putnam and Stohl's first

criteria and describes members of the organization who are also involved in other groups, organizations, or social clubs. Boundary spanners bring their experiences born outside of the group into organizational spaces and undoubtedly impact inner-group climate and interactions. Boundary spanners who are involved in political or religious organizations often carry those secondary group's policy agendas or religious beliefs with them into primary group settings. When applied to groups with high member turnover, such as Spectrum and other student organizations, we see the potential for boundary spanner influence of group climate to grow. In the same way, boundary spanners are able to act as agents of the organization, taking the group's messages and priorities with them across organization boundaries. Mike's story in the ethnographic narrative, in which he relays attempts to revise his business fraternity's constitution to reflect trans inclusive language, demonstrates the potential influence of Spectrum members across campus. Boundary spanners have the ability to act as bridges between groups and as agents on behalf of their group.

This research also demonstrates the importance of considering the two main bona fide group criteria in conversation with one another. Encouraging researchers to consider an organization's cultural context is an important development of bona fide group, but we should do more to reflect upon the impact of a group's context on the elements of Bona Fide Group Theory's first criterion – stable but permeable boundaries. A bona fide group perspective provides the framework for understanding an organization's socialization process and the barriers to group entrance; however, critically considering the group's social context contributes to a more complete, holistic understanding of the group's stable, yet permeable boundaries. For instance, we can more clearly understand elaborate socialization processes when the organization is contextualized within an unsupportive social climate because we better understand the

challenges group members may experience. In the same way, the influence of boundary spanners is clarified when layered with an analysis of the group's immediate context. The climate in which an organization is contextualized should be more central to Bona Fide Group Theory.

Implications for Future Research

Diverse narratives of LGBTQ identity are under-shared throughout modern academic discussions, public discourses, and mainstream media representations. This research made efforts to produce and distribute many narratives of queer experience, but there is space for future research to produce considerably more self-determined queer narratives. I consider this the most important implication of my research – the need for additional queer voices and stories to circulate in academic literature. The presence of additional narratives impacts the access of both queer and non-queer individuals to examples of queer lived experience. This is specifically important for queer individuals who may see their experiences reflected in the narratives of other queer identified people and who are given tools for self-reflexivity in the stories. Two other implications are outlined below.

During an interview with a gay male identified student, referred to as Josh in the ethnography, we spoke extensively about the rapidly evolving culture and political climate at the University of Alabama. After listing several explanations for the trend toward more progressive and accepting attitudes on campus, Josh openly wondered if LGBTQ specific organizations might be rendered less necessary in response to the changes. He said:

And maybe another reason is because the queer climate in general, just all over, is getting better. And so people might not need specifically queer places anymore to find other queer people. And they can just be more out in general. And it might not be as big a part of their identity as it used to be.

Josh did not intend his statement as a profound comment on the stability of LGBTQ community spaces, but his casual side comment does highlight an area of interest for those studying LGBTQ identities. It is not my intention to comment on the positive or negative effects such a change may have on queer individuals or the LGBTQ community – if such a construct persists – though future work should seek to understand the impact of gay and lesbian normalization in our society and on college campuses.

It is unquestionable that the majority of LGBTQ identified individuals at the University of Alabama are not actively involved with Spectrum. The organization is too small to make such a statement possible. With this in mind, and because this study successfully shed light on the interactions of queer individuals within Spectrum, I would be interested in replicating the study outside of the organization. It would be interesting to know why LGBTQ individuals chose not to join Spectrum and if there are any explicitly queer communities in which they do participate. Similar research could be conducted within queer or queer friendly spaces to determine the impact a formal organizational structure has or does not have on feelings of acceptance, interactions with other LGBTQ individuals, and the performance of queer identity.

Brave Spaces

This research echoes Arao and Clemens (2013) call for a shift from the study of and striving for safe spaces to that of brave spaces. As outlined in the previous chapter, the term “safe space” is misleading and inappropriate when applied to marginalized community spaces. It is impossible for organizers and moderators to guarantee a space free from physical, psychological, or emotional harm, which is demonstrated by Eric’s breach of Spectrum’s organizational protocol in the ethnographic narrative. In addition, safe space rhetoric

inappropriately focuses attention on the physical spaces in which groups interact, rather than the interactions between community members. The latter of these has proven to be more important to community formation.

The term “brave space” is preferred for several reasons. First, focusing on bravery allows a more person-centered understanding LGBTQ community spaces and encourages individuals to be seen as empowered actors in these spaces. Building upon this idea, the discussion of bravery is more congruent with ongoing academic discussions of power and oppression in our society, providing context for brave space literature and organizational analysis. Finally, brave spaces rhetorically shift our attention from describing the physical spaces to celebrating an individual or community’s actions despite adversity.

It is important to point out some of the potential downfalls of reframing our discussion of space through the lens of bravery. As with the problem of articulating requirements for a space to be considered “safe,” there is potential for researchers to misapply the concept in an attempt to limit or over-define the parameters of “brave” space. We must also consider the implications of labeling certain behaviors, environments, or performances as “brave” and be mindful of the social capital certain groups may employ in an effort to define “bravery.” Requiring individuals to act bravely also calls into question the social pressures, personal anxieties, and group punishments experienced when someone fails to live up to the standard of “bravery.” The problems introduced through the rhetorical shift are fewer, but still worth considering.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research and my experience with the research methodology, and highlighted implications for future research. The findings included in this paper encourage future work in the area and demonstrate the potential for using ethnographic research to expand understanding of marginalized communities located in unsupportive social and political contexts. Specific implications include the continued use of a bona fide group perspective for organizational communication research and the adoption of brave space terminology for social justice work and marginalized community spaces.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

The interview protocol is relatively open-ended, containing general or orienting questions and questions related to participants' experiences as members of Spectrum. Specific questions relating to observations made during prior participant observations and time for interviewee comment will also be included.

Orienting Questions

1. Will you state and spell your name for me?
2. How do you describe your sexual orientation and gender identity? Which pronouns do you prefer?
3. What year are you at UA? How long have you been an active member of Spectrum?

University of Alabama

4. What is your favorite part about being a student at UA?
 - a. Tell me a story about your time here – maybe a favorite memory or thing you do on campus.
5. What is it like being queer on campus? In Tuscaloosa?
 - a. Are you out on campus?

Spectrum

6. What made you decide to join Spectrum?
 - a. What makes Spectrum important to you?
7. Will you describe the atmosphere at Spectrum meetings/events, as you perceive it?
8. How would you describe your interactions with other Spectrum members?
 - a. Can you tell me a story to further illustrate those interactions? Maybe a favorite memory or thing you've done with Spectrum...
9. Have you experienced Spectrum meetings/events to be places of acceptance and comfort?
 - a. Can you tell me a story to further illustrate this?

Gender Identity/ Sexual Orientation Performance

10. How conscious are you of your queer identity at Spectrum meetings/events?
 - a. Do you think your identity is magnified or minimized when you're with other Spectrumers?
11. Do you express your identity differently within Spectrum spaces than you would outside of such spaces?
 - a. If so, do you think this is a conscious choice or a subconscious occurrence?

Appendix B: Participant Observation Protocol

Information

Date:

Location:

Type of Meeting/Event:

Size of Group:

Method of Recording/Notes:

Notes

Space Diagram

Appendix C: Meeting Location Photographs

Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Appendix D: IRB Approval Letter



November 17, 2014

Michael Forst
Dept. of Communication Studies
College of Communication and Information Sciences
Box 870172

Re: IRB#: 14-OR-377 "Understanding Marginalized Queer Voices: An
Ethnography of Place"

Dear Michael Forst:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your
proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46.
Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not
limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language,
communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research
employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human
factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies


Your application will expire on November 16, 2015. If your research will continue
beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If
you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved
Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval,
except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants.
When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for
Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to obtain
consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal,
please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,


Carpantato, J. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP
Director & Research Compliance Officer
Office of Research Compliance



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