

“BY THE WAY I’M GAY”:
A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS
OF CELEBRITY COMING OUT

by

ADAM J. SHARPLES

JASON EDWARD BLACK, COMMITTEE CHAIR

MEREDITH M. BAGLEY
WILSON LOWREY
KIM BISSELL
GREG AUSTIN

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ABSTRACT

Coming out, and the metaphor of the closet, is the principle organizing mechanism in the construction of LGBTQ public identity, as well as a rite of passage for LGBTQ identified individuals. With the host of recent celebrities are going public with their sexuality while simultaneously disavowing the significance of this statement, these new coming out narratives represent a fascinating shift between celebrity discourse and LGBTQ identity. The ‘coming out’ of celebrity raises both questions as to how the media constructs LGBTQ and subjectivity identity, and broader concerns related to the composition of power, hegemony, and ideology through mass-mediated popular culture. This project questions how coming out functions in the context of LGBTQ public discourse, and aims to better understand how patterns of communication in celebrity rhetoric shape what it means to be LGBTQ. Using a variety of critical rhetorical lenses – including media hegemony, critical rhetoric, narrative paradigm, queer theory, performativity hegemonic masculinity, and celebrity studies- this project analyze the coming out discourse of celebrity personae in conversation with subsequent media coverage through case studies of celebrities in both sport and media. The athlete coming out narrative is assessed through rhetorical analysis of Michael Sam, a football player for the University of Missouri in February 2014. The media figure narrative is examined through Anderson Cooper’s discourse in July 2012. Data sample for analysis is cultivated using a search in the PROQUEST Newspaper Database or newspaper articles in the month that follows each celebrity’s announcement. As a result this project argues mediated coming out narratives function as hegemonic texts that absorb and reframe the challenge of queer visibility. By erasing the political

significance of queer visibility, and overcompensating masculine performance, this project offers implications for confessional rhetoric, passing, and the tokenized politics of visibility.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the loving memory of Curt Byars for bringing me to Alabama, and to my husband, Chris Brooks for giving me a reason to stay.

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When I was 13 my English teacher Jackie Kennedy told my mother during a parent teacher conference that I simply would never be “college material,” that I would not be able to handle advanced classes at the higher intellectual levels. I promised myself that, one day, when I earned my doctorate degree I would look back at this moment in triumph. Today I know that this woman was only the first of many to tell me what exactly I was incapable of accomplishing. In contrast, this project, and my graduate work in general, is possible thanks to the many people who told me what I could do, even when I couldn’t believe it myself.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“I would like to see every gay lawyer, every gay architect come out, stand up and let the world know. That would do more to end prejudice overnight than anybody could imagine.” Harvey Milk, 1977 (qtd. in Black & Morris, 2013, p. 248).

Harvey Milk, the first openly gay elected official in the United States, wrote a political will to establish directions for the social movement he had helped lead. One year prior to his own assassination, Milk dreamed of a time in which Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer (LGBTQ) identified individuals would no longer need to live their lives in shame and secrecy. Milk aspired to create new avenues for removing the gulf between LGBTQ identity and public life through a politics concentrated on radical visibility, he kicked open the doors of the heterosexist closet and tried to remove the shroud of invisibility cloaking LGBTQ individuals at every level of society. In the years following his death, the realization of Milk’s dream is evident in the score of people who are willing to come out of the closet; these people come from all professions, including celebrities.

In the summer of 2012 the American popular culture magazine *Entertainment Weekly* chose a fascinating subject for its June cover story. Under the title of “The New Art of Coming Out in Hollywood” the special report described “how gay stars are now carefully...[sic] and surprisingly...going public about their private lives” (Harris, 2012, p. 1). The story originates with the rash of recent celebrities in effect going public with their sexuality while simultaneously disavowing the significance of this statement. For instance, the star of television’s *Big Bang Theory* Jim Parsons buried his sexuality five paragraphs into an in interview about his Broadway

debut. Meanwhile, the star of the *White Collar*, Matt Bomer, acknowledged his sexuality by mentioning a male partner during a public acceptance speech. Film and television star Zachary Quinto came out while using the phrase ‘as a gay man’ in the fourth paragraph of a magazine interview. The special report illustrated how Hollywood celebrities have “created a new, quiet, and incredibly effective way to come out” (Harris, 2012). As Harris writes, “fifteen years ago when the star of a popular TV comedy decided to come out of the closet it was big news” and this new facet of celebrity discourse reflects “a strategic shift for an era in which confessionalism has been replaced by a kind of well-choreographed offhandedness” (Harris, 2012, p. 33). Thus, these new methods of deploying discourse represent a fascinating shift in the relationship between American celebrity discourse and LGBTQ identity.

As visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) identified representations in film and television have increased over the last 60 years (Gross, 2001), so too have the tactics for LGBTQ television personalities, actors, and sports stars to make their sexualities known. *New York Times* journalist Patrick Healy (2012) describes covering the outing of a major celebrity as a formalized process, during which “the publicist or agent might inform a reporter that the A-lister was ready to answer the question of whether or not he or she was gay” (p. 5). However, today’s media figures choose an entirely different tactic, thereby avoiding the traditional fanfare and attempt to make their sexual orientation an increasingly casual event. At its moment of articulation *Entertainment Weekly’s* article comprises a number of critical investments. It is worthy to note that celebrity coming out is a phenomenon such that its alteration is able to warrant public comment. However, the construction of the openly gay celebrity requires a rhetorical exercise, a moment in which an address to a public alters the available means of persuasion for both audience and speaker. In short, this new art of coming out

evokes a phenomenon concerning how LGBTQ rhetors use symbolic expression to make themselves understood by audiences. The ‘coming out’ of celebrities aligns with a broader issue within critical, cultural, and rhetorical (CCR) studies of media: how to understand and account for the handling of public figures’ sexuality. As such, this chapter establishes the research questions, justification for analysis, and overall plan of study for this dissertation about coming out rhetoric.

Justification for Analysis

Celebrity coming out represents an intriguing communication phenomenon worthy of study. In his cover story for *Entertainment Weekly* reporter Mark Harris elaborates, “although the drip-drip steadiness of coming out news seems inconsequential, cumulatively the stories signal the herald of a major tectonic shift” (Harris, 2012, p. 38). As the coming out of major public figures carries implications for how LGBTQ identified individuals come to see themselves and construct their social identity (Ochman, 1996), this shift is far from superficial. Further, media representations of the LGBTQ community are pivotal to the formation of community as, unlike other ethnic minorities, LGBTQ individuals are not born into a heritage that is part of their identity from birth. Rather, the LGBTQ-identified individual, in many cases, is left in a state of silence and invisibility and seeks acknowledgement through mass media (Gross, 2001). While recent announcements may indicate progress through the high visibility of LGBTQ identities, the support received for an out celebrity raises larger questions as to how these events are shaped by, and influence, LGBTQ public discourse in the media.

On the surface, coming out discourses of public figures may appear to be no more than declarations of information the public already knew. Scholars attest that coming out is the principle organizing schema in the formation of LGBTQ identity, as binaries of in and out of the

closet come to signify one's place within the larger structure of queer identity (Sedgwick, 1990; Blasius, 1992). Feminist scholar Shane Phelan (1993) critiques the description of coming out as a "process of discovery or admission rather than one of construction or choice" (p. 773). Instead, Phelan understands coming out, and by extension LGBTQ identity, as a process of "fashioning a self" through interactions with community and social discourses. This process of self-creation conceptualizes coming out as a means of uncovering the self through reclamation. For Mark Blasius (1992), a scholar of gay and lesbian political theory, sexual orientation is a problematic term for LGBTQ identity that denies the role of agency and structuralism in creating LGBTQ discourse. For Blasius (1992) "it is what one *does* [*sic*] with this orientation, how one works on one's sexuality" (p. 645). Blasius' argument allows scholars to focus on the construction of LGBTQ existence and emphasize the institutions of sexuality built to counter oppression and facilitate resistance. In this context, coming out can be understood as a process of becoming, in which an individual becomes a member of a community through a discursive act. Rather than a natural component made public through discourse Blasius finds that LGBTQ identity extends far beyond sexual encounters. Through coming out, LGBTQ individuals are able to meet each other and create enclaves of resistance. Blasius (1992) reveals that this process unfolds over a lifetime of learning "how to become, and inventing the meaning of being a lesbian or gay man in this historical moment" (p. 655). According to Blasius, coming out is an "ontological recognition of the self by the self" (656). Therefore, coming out constructs an identity and does not discover some hidden, fundamental, and essentializing truth.

For the purpose of this project, I will adhere to Tony Adams' (2011) definition of coming out as an act of self-disclosure "predicated on the disclosure of a (self-acknowledged) same-sex attraction and/or LGBQ [*sic*] identity" (p.59). However, coming out is not ever simply a

declaration of fact. Feminist scholar Mimi Marinucci explains, “categories of identity are determined by the ways in which people understand themselves and are understood by others” (p. 6). Gender theorist Judith Butler (2004) calls this practice “intelligibility” in which the terms that make up one’s identity are “from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author” (p. 1). To be properly understood, LGBTQ identity must be rendered intelligible through the constraint of what dominant publics will accept. Butler (2004) calls this practice “intelligibility” or “that which is produced as a consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms” (p.3). Thus, public identities are constrained by pre-existing ideological fields of discourse. When someone declares one’s self, one does so in ways that belie the larger ideological structures and significations that make such discourse receivable. Butler (2004) echoes this dichotomy arguing, “without some recongizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable” (p.4). Therefore, rather than discerning an identity that already exists, coming out must be seen as an act of constructing an identity through discourse; one does not discover LGBTQ identity it is created at the process of disclosure.

The coming out of a major public figure has certainly been an area of inquiry for critical and rhetorical scholars. Scholarly attention largely focuses on singular case studies of celebrities as a means of understanding the media’s treatment of LGBTQ figures (Dyer, 1986; Gross 2001). Media scholars Gomillion & Giuliano (2011) argue that the ability to conceal LGBTQ identity, coupled with a lack of historical representation, creates “a heightened awareness of theatricality and performativity” for LGBTQ individuals “which, in turn, increases their affiliation with film and television stars” (p.333). However given the importance of celebrities in the development of public discourse of sexuality, it is vital to understand how celebrity personae are positioned to

facilitate hegemonic interpretations. For instance, feminist rhetorical scholar Bonnie Dow (2001) interprets the coverage of comedienne Ellen DeGeneres' coming out as a transformative confession. Philosopher and historian Michel Foucault (1978) argues confessional discourses, like coming out, are exchanges of power that fail to facilitate resistance. Foucault (1978) explains, "confession frees but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power but shares an original affinity with freedom" (1978, p.60). Through this affinity, Foucault (1978) insinuates that acts of confession create structural discourses of power designed to limit the resistive acts. Likewise, Dow (2001) suggests that Ellen's coming out discourse was circulated in the mass media as a confessional discourse, thereby marginalizing the viability of resistive LGBTQ identity in favor of a poster child of commercial viability. Similarly, critical media scholar Helene Shugart (2005) examines the lukewarm media representation of talk show host Rosie O'Donnell's public declaration of her sexuality to explain how the news media rationalized O'Donnell's sexuality due to her cultural position as a misfit. While understanding individual case studies elucidates the problematic representation of the LGBTQ community, further analysis is needed concerning the perspectives of culture that enable the representation of LGBTQ identity through coming out.

Some question the necessity of engaging the study of coming out discourses, and the macro questions of sexual identity in the contexts of larger rhetorical questions of agency, activism, and representation. However, as Gayle Rubin (1984) clarifies in her early groundbreaking work in supporting the social and political elements of sexuality:

"To some, sexuality may seem to be an unimportant topic, a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems of poverty, war, disease, racism, famine, or nuclear annihilation. But it is precisely at times such as these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable

destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality” (Rubin, 1984, p. 306).

Rubin’s assessment describes how discourses of sexual identity correlate with larger social discussions and anxieties. Therefore, the negotiation of becoming LGBTQ through coming out is contingent upon social and cultural context. Parks (1999) finds that LGBTQ individual’s ability to develop a public identity is dependent on the social and cultural contexts in which they are located. In short, the discourse surrounding sexual identity reflects the social contexts of power in which they are spoken; they allow insight into the larger structures of who we are, and who we could be. Hence, studying coming out takes up the call of rhetoricians Ralph Smith and Russell Windes (1999), who encourage scholars to look both inward and outward to “interrogate and challenge the field on which identity occurs” (p.39).

Moreover, since Ellen’s coming out in 1997 the discursive framework of sexual identity has dramatically shifted in public practice. Nowhere is this shift of mass mediated public representation easier to observe than in television. With shows like *Glee*, *Skins*, *Shameless*, and *Pretty Little Liars* more than two-dozen characters on network and cable television are identified with the LGBTQ community (Armstrong, 2011). Such a presence seems staggering considering that only 20 years prior a suggestion of same sex intimacy on an episode of *30 Something* ignited a maelstrom of protest, indignation, and threats of a network boycott (Gross, 2001). Fisher, Hill, Grube, and Gruber (2007) report that between 2001 and 2003 15% of programs on broadcast and cable television contained same-sex sexual content. However, contrary to earlier understandings, in the fall of 2005 LGBTQ characters were more likely to be depicted in sexual situations when compared to heterosexual characters (Netzley, 2010).

Aside from television, filmic representations of LGBTQ individuals advance from problematic depictions of LGBTQ individuals as psychopathic killers, or worse helpless victims of interpersonal violence, to more inclusive representations. The Gay and Lesbians Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) offers a content analysis of studio films in 2013 and finds that 17% of films contain representations of LGBTQ characters and storylines (“Where are we on TV report: 2013-2014 season”, 2013). Outside of film and television media coverage has shifted to include more positive statements in support of LGBTQ issues (Pew Research, 2014). Moreover the media channels available to LGBTQ-identified individuals have dramatically improved since 1997 with a variety of niche magazines, websites, and content aggregators specializing in collecting and disseminating LGBTQ related content. Given these stark changes in LGBTQ related content through public channels, it is necessary to return to the question of celebrity coming out narratives and examine how LGBTQ identity is rendered intelligible through discourse.

Today, in the wake of unprecedented LGBTQ visibility, it remains to be questioned whether coming out still matters. Moreover, in the context of destabilized gender binaries, how does coming out function in the context of LGBTQ public discourse? Does coming out affirm a fixed binary of sexual identities with the potential to reify the hegemonic stratifications of society? At this confluence of events and social constructions, a critical scholar finds himself stricken with the possibilities of this discourse. The present project is interested in the rhetorical phenomenon of coming out and the impact it has on LGBTQ discourse and sexual identities. Coming out of the closet functions as the formative rite of passage for LGBTQ individuals, it is the way in which they come into being. Yet, how do patterns of communication ultimately shape the process of identification, as well as what it means to be LGBTQ?

This study will primarily proceed through a rhetorical analysis of celebrity coming out discourse. Specifically, this involves case studies of celebrity coming out events, organized by two spheres of public influence: athletes and media figures. For the purpose of this dissertation, the athlete coming out narrative will be assessed through a reading of the discourse of Michael Sam, a football player for the University of Missouri. Second, media figure analysis will examine the coming out of Anderson Cooper in July of 2012¹. While Tony Adams (2011) defines coming out in terms of an act of self disclosure of same sex attraction, gender scholar Paula Rust (1993) questions the stage model definition of coming out to define coming out as a “process of discovery in which an individual sheds a false heterosexual identity and comes to correctly identify and label our own true essence, which is homosexual” (p. 53). These definitions emphasize the importance of self-disclosure, and of the refutation of a hegemonic identity, for the purpose of the present study these definitions fail to particularize the relationship between coming out and public space. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, I will bridge between Adams and Rust definition to define coming out as a public statement of confirmation of a previously undetermined non-heterosexual identity. This definition frames the study to focus only coming out statements, and subsequent treatment in media, thereby excluding public figures who might reflect back on their own process of coming out.

¹ The selection of the case studies is not intended to argue for a complete representation of the coming out experience for the entire LGBTQ community. Further, while looking at the process of coming out across these spectrums and spheres, the inclusion of both male identified and public figures is not intended to essentialize the LGBTQ experience. Rather, given the theoretical frameworks of this study, these case studies enable my ability to make sense of how these narratives percolate the discourse of coming out. Moreover, I must acknowledge that the limited scope of the present study does not enable the inclusion of the particularities of trans identified coming out experiences within this project. While these narratives are important, they are better positioned in their own future study.

In the past, the rhetors of gay liberation like Harvey Milk viewed coming out as the crucial strategy in ensuring a recognizable and responsible queer politic (Foss, 2007; Black & Morris, 2013). In the identity politics of the 1990s Ellen DeGeneres shook the world with her simple statement on the cover of *Time Magazine*, “Yep, I’m Gay” (Handy, 1997, p.1). Today’s public figures are coming out in new and innovative ways; the discursive landmarks we come to expect from this process appear to have changed drastically. How do the coming out narratives of public figures like NFL prospect Michael Sam, and broadcast journalist Anderson Cooper, differ from previous iterations, and do they function differently from previous media narratives? These new media performances promote a new way of conceptualizing LGBTQ rhetorical forms through the deployment of the “casual coming out,” in which individuals attempt to identify as LGBTQ without the traditional fanfare of figures of DeGeneres’ era. In their respective circumstances both Cooper and Sam are emblematic of a public figure attempting to downplay the significance of their public identity in a culture of increasing LGBTQ visibility. Despite cleverly articulated attempts to avoid making one’s sexuality a subject of media scrutiny, these figures remain thrust into an established media narrative which signifies their declarations as a newsworthy and unknown events in ways that deserve further rhetorical explorations.

Plan of Study

The discursive texts analyzed within this study examine the direct coming out discourse of celebrity personae in conversation with subsequent media coverage. By including how news media covers the coming out events, this dissertation engages with “paratextual” analysis proposed by Gray (2010). Gray (2010) reveals that audiences make sense of mediated representations through their interaction with the circulating images and narratives surrounding those events. Davis and Needham (2009) argues that only interpreting representation within

mediated texts “ignores the complexity of the medium, and the ways in which the program is designed, produced, and distributed” thus encouraging critical scholars to examine the surrounding elements of events in addition to the discourse itself (p. 442). Therefore, paratextual analysis views mediated rhetorical artifacts, like the cultivation of celebrity personae, as part of a parallel discursive formation constructed through media analysis. For example Draper’s (2012) work is particularly instructive to the present study as he encourages the conceptualization of media events as a form of cultural text capable of fomenting how audiences read gender and sexual identity. Through his reading of both text in *American Idol* broadcasts and paratexts of subsequent media coverage Draper sets up a useful pattern for the present study. In this case, I will analyze media coverage of the celebrity coming out event in order to determine the ways in which the media has shaped and formed the larger discursive narrative.

This study builds from the procedures outlined by Hardin et. al. (2009) in order to create a data sample for the analysis of coverage of media figures coming out. As Hardin and colleagues also critique the coming out process of NBA player John Amaechi as mediated through newspaper coverage, their procedures serve as an ideal model for data collection. Data sample for analysis will be cultivated using a search in the PROQUEST Newspaper Database or newspaper articles in the month that follows each celebrity’s announcement. Texts for inclusion are obtained through a search for articles containing each celebrity’s name and any of following terms: coming out, the closet, sexuality, gay, and LGBTQ. Articles that do not directly pertain to the public figure were removed from the sample. Articles included in this study pull from the top-circulation news organizations such as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *The Boston Globe*, *Houston Chronicle*, and *Miami Herald*. In addition to published articles this analysis also incorporated discourse from counterpublic media organizations such as *The Daily*

Beast, *Buzzfeed*, *Outsports*, and *The Advocate* to generate points of comparisons. After the collection of data, close textual analysis encourages an initial close reading of the texts to “observe general macro level themes” (Hardin et. al., 2009). In addition to these print media outlets, major broadcast networks coverage was also included in the analysis.

Ultimately this project seeks to understand the strategies and tactics that constitute a coming out discourse. Specifically, this study questions how celebrity rhetoric plays out in public discourse, and how coming out functions within the LGBTQ social movement. Through critical and narrative analysis of each celebrity’s coming out discourse, and its subsequent coverage in news media, this project argues celebrity coming out narratives function as hegemonic texts that absorb and reframe the challenge of queer visibility. To the extent that critical inquiry is about illuminating the normative constructions of power, identity, and representation, this dissertation hopes to shine a light through the refraction and cast a rainbow spectrum of queer identities. To that effect, this dissertation will attempt to situate potential theoretical frameworks for study, and then connect these frameworks to the extant literature that inform the project, before finally attending to the proposed method of inquiry. Ultimately, this project explores the rhetorical elements of identity, and the implications that come when celebrities come out.

Précis

This dissertation seeks to address how coming out functions in the context of mediated LGBTQ public discourse. Through a review of extant literature, theoretical framework, and proposed methods of analysis this study contributes to larger questions in critical, cultural, and rhetorical theory related to the construction and signification of LGBTQ identity. While Anderson Cooper and Michael Sam may not have conceived their statements as a significant

moment in their lifetimes, it remains the subject of scholarship to consider whether the intersection of celebrity and marginalized identity helps or hinders social progress.

Chapter One of this dissertation articulates the research questions, rationale for the case and artifacts as well as the methodological aims of the study. Chapter two discusses previous research within the field of critical, cultural, and rhetorical scholarship concerning discourses of sex and sexuality, gender performance, queer theory, coming out, celebrity studies, and critical studies of LGBTQ figures in the media. Chapter three outlines the methodological framework of the study building from critical, cultural, and rhetorical fields to develop a complex set of theoretical lenses to guide the analysis.

The proceeding analytical chapters four and five attend to the case studies of public figures and their respective coming out events. Each case will involve situating each figure's rhetorical context, constraints, and exigency before performing an analysis of the actual discourse of the coming out event. Subsequently, the case studies will proceed by examining the media discourse and narratives of these coming out events. The organization of these chapters proceeds as follows. Chapter four analyzes Southeastern Conference (SEC) defensive end of the year Michael Sam and his coming out in the context of the hegemonic gender performance of sport. Chapter five attends to Anderson Cooper's 2012 coming out in the context of his role as a media figure and prominent journalist. In this analysis particular interest is paid to media institutions as a framework for understanding the mediated representation of Cooper's coming out. Finally, chapter six concludes with a return to the research questions and describes the study's findings as well as limitations and directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Gay people are coming out, speaking out and we have no more intention of going back in our closets than black people have of going back into chains and slavery.”
- Harvey Milk (qtd. in Black & Morris, 2013, p. 174)

Harvey Milk uttered these words in a public letter entitled “The Word is Out.” For Milk understanding coming out is a method of agency in the fight for queer liberation; an agency currently undercut by the recent wave of celebrity coming out narratives. Just as Milk looked back into histories of the closet to create a foundation from which to build rhetorical agency, this chapter glances back into the disciplinary, and often disciplining, history of LGBTQ public identity to contribute to the theoretical and analytical framework of this analysis. A rhetorical analysis of coming out discourse is predicated on a complex web of interdisciplinary studies related to the history of sexual identity discourses, gender performance, queer theory, queering rhetorical studies, coming out, and relevant studies of celebrity culture and marginalized public figures. This effort will commence with a review of relevant literature, as well as an estimation of how said literature contributes to the present project.

Theoretical Approaches to Gay Identity

The present study seeks to engage the rhetoric of celebrity coming out and the subsequent media coverage as inquiry into the discourse of public sexual identities. As a rhetorician I am primarily interested in addressing questions of public concern, and engaging how public symbolic expressions construct discourses of LGBTQ identity. Therefore, this dissertation directs its inquiry at the point of macro, public discourses, rather than granular, private

interpersonal discourse. However, in order to rhetorically analyze such discourse, it is first necessary to place this study in the intellectual traditions of public discourse studies and the theories of identity related to sex and sexualities. As such this literature review is organized thematically related to discursive power relations, the binaries of knowledge and identities, and gender performance proposed by postmodern critical theorists.

Discourses of Sex and Sexualities

The study of discourse related to sexuality is a productive site of inquiry for critical cultural scholars. Richardson, Smith, and Werndly (2013) define the study of discourse succinctly as “who gets to say what, how and when, and with what effects,” thus analysis of discourse inherently intersects analyses of power, identity and knowledge (p.21). Therefore, rhetorical inquiry of sexual identity must address the study of sexuality as a “historically and culturally mutable and not dependent on innate attributes” (Richardson et. al, p. 25). Theories of discourse related to sexual identity operate from either a constructionist or essentialist paradigm. Essentialist thinking seeks out biological determinations for sexual orientation and presumes sexual orientation is decided from birth (Sullivan, 1996). Rubin (1984) describes this kind of sexual essentialism as “the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions” (p.313). Conversely, constructivist thinking argues that institutions and social life shape sexual desire. Constructivist thinkers reflect the macro historical, discursive, and sociological development of homosexual identity. While this project is not designed to properly address the various arguments and evidences of these two positions, as a critical cultural scholar interested in rhetorical acts of public sexual identification, it is paramount to explicate the social construction of sexuality paradigm and its value to the present project.

Tracing the construction of LGBTQ identities evokes the theoretical contributions of critical theorist Michel Foucault (1978; 1980). Foucault (1980) contends by way of his genealogical analysis that there are traditionally two forms of power in discourse: juridical and that of war. The juridical power is the relations of social entities through legal structures, policies, etc. (Foucault, 1980). Conversely, war power is the engagement of direct violent contestation and revolution. However, Foucault's contribution to critical theory comes from his argument for a third perspective in power relations: that of social relations. Foucault (1980) attests that power is produced, maintained, and circulated by discourse at all levels of social abstraction. He postulates that one cannot truly escape from the reiterated circuitry of power's influence on social knowledge. Foucault's (1980) notion that discourse is a means of accessing larger relationships of power and knowledge profoundly influences the study of discourse. In their critical studies of representation, Halperin, (1995) echoes the contributions of Foucault's theories to strategically enable the analysis of how discourse functions. Conversely, conservative scholar Andrew Sullivan (1996) does not necessarily buy into the constructionist paradigm offered by Foucault, and instead focuses his attention on individuality. Specifically, Sullivan finds fault with the "flouting of gender norms, the use of language, of dress, of the very conventions that seek to control homosexuality have been the most common forms of homosexual resistance to the power relationships that have controlled them" (Sullivan, 1996, p. 72). While polemical by design, Sullivan's shortsighted emphasis on individual will over the collective discourses of oppression avoids the larger context of how discourse circulates knowledge and development over time. To study sexual identity is to understand a position of historical and cultural mutability that is never "dependent on innate attributes" (Richardson et. al,

2013, p.25). Therefore, I affirm that to study discourse is to directly engage with larger structures of dominance and resistance at work within social structures of communication.

To demonstrate, Foucault's (1978) history of sexuality offers a foundational perspective on the social construction of sexual identity through discourse. Through chronicling the complicated history of sex and public discourse, Foucault engages a method of genealogical analysis to trace the patterns in which "sex is put into discourse" (p.11). Foucault's analysis disputes the assertion that sexuality was repressed from public speech. By seeking to subjugate sex, Foucault argues that the many discourses prohibiting sex and sexuality are equated with encouraging its practice. Ostensibly, sexuality went from silent obscurity to an almost compulsory act as "one had to speak of sex; one had to speak publically and in a manner that was not determined by division between licit and illicit" (Foucault, 1978, p. 36). Thus, in seeking to define the boundaries of sexual acts, and by extension sexuality, an explosion of discursive formations made sex an intelligible, and thus pronounceable, subject.

From a historical perspective, Foucault (1978) recognizes the discourse of sex's correlation with the growth and power base of the nation state, as well as the economy. As human beings become "populations," the trifecta of social, political, and economic interests is transfixed with "taking into account" sexual practices that would cultivate the growth of said nation. As Foucault describes, "there was installed rather an apparatus for producing an ever greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning and taking effect in its very economy" (1978, p. 23). Thus the encouragement of practices deemed beneficial to the survival of the state is facilitated through regulating the discourse of desire. Through discourse, those desires thought to be amenable to the public are exalted, while those that do not comport to dominant ideology are decried. Foucault observes, "between the state and the individual, sex

became an issue, and a public issue no less,” bringing with it a whole web of “discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions” (1978, p. 26). With the necessity of ensuring continued practices found profitable by the state, the discourses of power and knowledge settled on transposing sexual practices into a typology of discourses that could be defined, categorized, and most importantly separated. Through an analysis of medical terminologies and documents Foucault writes, “homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul” (p. 43). With the deployment of scientific and moral discourses, the actions of same-sex desire coalesce and transform into a sort of evolutionary hierarchy moving from homosexual act to pathology to identity; in short “the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault, 1978, p, 43). As a result, the discourse of heteronormativity transformed actions into identities.

The discursive formations of LGBTQ identities are echoed by LGBTQ historian John D’Emilio’s (1993) correlation of homosexual identity with the development and proliferation of capitalist economic systems. D’Emilio (1993) elaborates how industrialization, coupled with the economic systems of capitalism, fundamentally unharnessed sex from procreation. Through the history of transformation from feudal to industrial modes of production, D’Emilio proposes sexual expression became untethered from the logics of agrarian labor. As people move away from the family farm and toward urban industrial spaces, new possibilities for sexual identity became possible (D’Emilio, 1993). Specifically, D’Emilio proposes the “divesting the household of its economic independence and fostering separation of sexuality from procreation, capitalism has created conditions that allow some men and women to organize a personal life around their erotic/emotional attachment to their own sex” (p. 470). As proof, D’Emilio (1993) traces the historical expansion of sexuality and the free market from its roots in the agrarian

society in which labor was largely dependent on the family unit, thus the meaning of sex becomes “harnessed to production” (p. 469). In other words, the rise of modern capitalism requires reproduction to facilitate labor exploitation. As urbanization of human society began to make way for new sexual possibilities, so too did a scientific community feel compelled to begin the process of pathologizing and naming any sexual behavior which was perceived as “troublesome” (Blank, 2012). As a result, D’Emilio suggests capitalist discourse is dependent on heterosexual relations to remain the primary form of relation in society.

With the dawning of new labor, as well as economic and sexual possibilities, dominant social order began to categorize sexual identity as a means of constructing proper and appropriate behavior. Cultural studies scholar Alexandra Chasin’s (2001) study examines the “assumptions about gay and lesbian identity, as well as the marketplace, that are embedded in those claims.” (p. 24). Chasin examines case studies of 1990s advertising and the “explosion” of a gay market, to begin an initial exploration of how LGBTQ movements and the market interact (Chasin, 2001 p. 25). For example, increased accommodation as a market in capitalist society creates “a profound sense of validation and legitimation that is experienced by individual gays and lesbians and gay/lesbian communities” (Chasin, 2001 p.18). Chasin theorizes, “the increasing emphasis on identity would be matched by the growth of possibilities for establishing identity through consumption” hence presence and articulation of gay identity is tied to capitalist consumption (2001, p.13). Thus critical historical scholars attempt to connect concepts of commerce, identity, and community with the development of sexual identities.

Interpreting how sexuality pervaded through cultural discourse requires placing sexuality within the context of gender in socio-historical time periods. Louis-Georges Tin (2012) claims that classical Greek and Roman social life privileged a homosocial culture founded upon manly

love that was not necessarily sexual, and glorified homosocial relations in cultural texts. For instance, myths perpetuated the narrative of a man winning or achieving glory for the sake of his fellow men, thereby reinforcing social adoration of the masculine and denigrating feminine companionship for solely procreative acts (Tin, 2012). Alternatively, tales of heterosexual coupling and companionship, of the man winning the fair maiden's hand, were not popularized until the Middle Ages when bards and minstrels, encouraged by the rising doctrines of the Catholic church, disseminated the idea of courtly and platonic love as a matter of social worth (Tin, 2012). It was not until the Protestant Reformation that marriage transformed into a state of companionship. In sharp contrast to the Catholic proscription against fornication, the veneration of celibacy, and virginity outside of procreative sex, this transformation included a permissible form of marital sexuality that affirms sexuality as socially situated, regulated, and controlled (Blank, 2012).

Amidst critical histories of LGBTQ public discourse, Katz (1995) argues that sexual identity is not an eternally natural formation, but rather a social construction invented through cultural discourse. According to Katz, naming an identity like heterosexuality or homosexuality is elusive because it is conceptualized as inextricably bound to all gendered, sexual, and erotic relations between biological men and women. Katz suggests, "the intimidating notion that heterosexuality refers to everything differently sexed, gendered, and eroticized is as it turns out one of the conceptual dodges that keeps heterosexuality from becoming the focus of sustained, critical analysis" (p. 13). Therefore, understanding sexual identity as culturally situated destabilizes the term from problematic connotations of permanence and stability in ways that offer potential for queer critique.

Gender Performativity

Understanding the rhetorical performances enabled by coming out discourse also requires an interrogation of the literature of gender performance as it pertains to the constructions of sexual identity. As an eminent scholar of gender, Judith Butler's (1990) philosophy is pertinent to this discussion. Butler attests that there is no original concept of sexual identity; instead sexuality is better understood as a process in constant state of construction. Butler (1990) theorizes that gender is a construct of social performance. To the extent that gender exists at all, Butler conditions its existence in the subconscious performance of individuals in a variety of situations. Butler's work investigates "the political stakes in designating as an origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, and discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin" (p. xi). Butler (1988) insists that gender, and by extension sexuality, is not a stable identity but an "identity tenuously constituted in time-an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (p. 519). Butler's later work (2004) proposes that it is in the paradox of gender, recognition, and representation through which society can take action to refute systems of domination and control.

The interpretation of gender as performative offers a particular paradox when evaluating the relationship between performance and the culture in which those performances are read. As Rubin (1984) reminds us, "we never encounter the body unmediated by the meanings that cultures give it" (p.314). While Foucault (1978; 1980) attempts to provide a genealogy for the power of sex in language, Butler (1990) seeks to articulate the power of language in sex. To illustrate, Butler notes the troublesome metaphor of heterosexual/homosexual binary: "gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but rather as copy is to copy" (p. 31). For Butler (1990), sexuality is a series of performances ingratiated within the larger structures of gender and class

relations that requires a specific range of behaviors in particular bodies. Butler (1998) contends that all forms of identity are discursively circulated, and therefore one cannot divorce one identity term, such as “woman,” from the various identity categories of race, sexuality, class, and ability through which the term’s meaning is pronounced. Building from Butler, Richardson (1996) implies that the social and the sexual are inextricably bound in that sexuality “is not something that can be separated from the social but is rather that which is produced by it; it is the social organization of knowledge that establishes the meanings for the sexual” (p. 10). This framework is useful for the present study as it foregrounds that a study of communication, and therefore the social, can uncover hints to the possibilities of the sexual. This study attempts to understand how vernacular discourses of identification, like coming out, contribute to the construction of LGBTQ sexuality as an institution.

Queer Theory

A rhetorical analysis of coming out discourse requires a theoretical framework that engages the issues of identity, sexuality, and the impacts of defining one’s identity. Thus, this dissertation engages the literature and contribution of queer theory as it relates to both discourse in general, and the specific act of coming out. However, defining queer theory is no simple task. Articulating a term that, by definition, resists fixed and stabilized description proves to be a Sisyphean task; it is a project of attempting to contain an ever-shifting target. As the late Jose Esteban Muñoz (2009) prophesizes, “we have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future”(p.1). In contrast to rigid constructions of gender binaries, Muñoz evokes the transitive quality queer theory attempts to situate: a state of fluidity, expression, and above all, potential.

Ultimately, queer theory is not a concrete, operationalized explanatory device. Rather, it is a philosophical shot across the bow to discern a “zone of possibilities” (Edelman, 1994, p. 114). While the scope of the present project is too limited to devote enough attention to a deep theoretical discussion of the history of queer theory, at its most essential, queer theory is a postmodern, interdisciplinary area of study committed to destabilizing the boundaries, and identifications, between gender, sex, sexual orientation, and performance. Queer and cultural studies scholar Alexander Doty (1993) defines queer discourse as the “quality related to any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight (xv). Likewise, David Herkt (1995) notes that gay identity, as opposed to queer, is “a philosophically conservative construct, based upon premises that no longer have any persuasive academic relationship to contemporary theories of identity and gender” (p. 46). Alan McKee (1999) observes the various iterations of queer theory and the retention of its “radically unknowable status,” to argue that queer theory “has been a movement that resists assimilation and insists on resistance” (p. 236-237). McKee argues that much of the trepidation about defining the meaning of queer comes from an overwhelming need to retain it as an act of transgression. Avoiding nominalization of the theory is preferred because “to be named, known, and brought into the ambit of the mainstream will result in assimilation” (McKee, 1999, p. 237). In an attempt to narrate the complex foundations of queer theory Jagose (1996) elaborates “it is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics” (p. 1). As a signifier, queer comes to allude to the “analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire” (Jagose, 1993, p. 3).

Therefore, rather than a wholesale displacement of the identity category of gay or lesbian, queer theory is “a consequence of the constructionist problematizing of any allegedly universal term” (Jagose, 1996, p. 74). In other words, what makes queer theory efficacious is its very ability to remain nimble and unsolidified, and thus committed to a fluidity that is reflective of the identities it seeks to represent.

Queer Epistemology

Blending largely from the fields of philosophy, psychoanalysis, women’s studies, cultural studies, and rhetoric, queer theory locates its paradigm within a critical focus on binary logics. Specifically, queer theory focuses on the ways discourse stabilizes power relations. Queer theory attempts to address the dichotomy between constructivist and essentialist thinking pertaining to LGBTQ identity. Credited with initiating the epistemological basis of queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) chronicles the ways in which the discourse of “homosexuality as we know it today” provides a “rhetorically necessary fulcrum point for the denaturalizing work on the past” (p. 45). According to Sedgwick, homosexual identity is conceived from two divergent theoretical perspectives: the minoritising, or essentialist, and the universalizing, or constructionist view. The minoritising view sees the “homo/hetero definition, on the one hand as an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority” (p.1). This perspective, as evidenced by the desire to locate a biological predetermination of homosexuality (Rahman & Wilson, 2003), offers that homosexuality is an identity of a fixed group of individuals and is not related to the larger social constructions of other identity categories. Conversely, the universalizing view sees identity as an issue of “continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities” (Sedgwick, 1990, p.2). From this perspective the nominal category of homosexual identity is

presented as an abstract extension of heterosexual identity (Jagose, 1996). The universalizing view presents homosexuality on a spectrum of available forms of desire that coincides with the social constructions of gender, hence it places brackets around heterosexual and homosexual definitions. In short, Sedgwick offers queer identity as a choice between identifying as an LGBTQ ethnicity, and a more fluid queer potential; by embracing fluidity one enables a more inclusive option of being.

While queer theory has primarily flourished from the lens of literary criticism, rhetoric, and philosophy this perspective culminates in two trends in queer research: psychoanalytic and historicist. The psychoanalytic framework, according to queer theorist Michael Warner (1993), operates from a space of determining the larger structures of thought from which queer sexuality operates. Warner finds fault in the lack of sociological studies that take into account the structural organizing principles of sexuality; he chides Foucault and Althusser for eliding the distinctions between sexuality and subjectivity. Conversely, historicist thinking tends to localize the constructivist element of sexuality in discourse. Historicist thinking attempts to locate the discursive origins of sexuality and historically trace their significance through time. While these two trends of thought dominate the literature of interdisciplinary queer scholars, Warner's work suggests that queer theory can also be a socio-political tool in which to engage the wider range of institutional discourses and ideologies encountered through daily life. Warner advocates that the "dawning realization that themes of homophobia and heterosexism may be read in almost any document of our culture means that we are only beginning to have any idea of how widespread those institutions and accounts are" (p. xiii). Warner's comment echoes Sedgwick's (1993) assertion that the theories of western culture are inadequate without proper attention and

conceptualization to the ways in which the definition of homo/heterosexual altered the subsequent institutional and political landscape.

Within this line of thought is the question of whether or not sexuality is capable of being separated from identity; can you have a sexual identity without the act of sex? Sullivan (1999) lays out a separation of sex from identity, thereby arguing for some intrinsic gay identity outside of sexual activity. On the other hand, Warner (1999) rightly notes that distinguishing sex from sexual identity is a dangerous game given the cultural conditions of shame experienced within Western thought. In this dichotomy I agree with Blasius (1992) who warns against the equivocation of LGBTQ and straight identities, or the suggestion that “same sex eroticism is merely analogous to one’s preference for a particular flavor of ice cream” (p. 645). Rather, Blasius (1992) points to the power of LGBTQ community and the need “for the institutions of the gay and lesbian community that have been built specifically to counter oppression and create safe spaces...by means of activities that extend far beyond sexual encounters” (p.645). While separating sexuality from identity may be a tempting theoretical position, ultimately we may be concerning ourselves with the wrong questions. After all, I concur with Butler’s (1990) assertion that the distinction between sex, gender, and sexuality is impossible given that gender is always already understood through discursive contexts. Therefore parsing out a dichotomy between sexuality and identity is best remedied by engaging discourses of sexuality and identity as they are discursively displayed, hence this study’s focus on coming out texts

Critical theory has long concerned itself with the vocabulary of essentialism. Fuss (1989) argues that critics seeking to identify whether or not a text operates under essentialism are asking the wrong questions. Instead, Fuss suggests that critics engage the deployment of essentialism to discern “how does the sign essence circulate in various contemporary critical debates?” (p. xi).

While the focus of this project does not allow a proper explication of this history of social constructionism, nor its application to rhetorical studies, there is a need to slate out the role of essentialism in publicizing gay identity. Fuss (1989) defines essentialism as the “belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the ‘whatness of a given entity’” (p. 2). Conversely, constructionists reject the premise offered by essentialism to insist in the historical development and discursive practices of the myth of an essence. The constructivist viewpoint accentuates the “intricate and interlacing processes which work together to produces all seemingly natural or given objects” (Fuss, 1989, p.2). Under this position, differences do not precede social determination. Fuss argues essentialism is a strategic building block in the construction of social identities. Meaning, that despite its usefulness, constructivism still operates under some form of essentialism in order to critique from the position of any collective identity. To illustrate, constructivism maintains stable subject categories to develop continuity across categories. For example “Man” and “Woman” as signs maintain some semblance of coherence even when transposed and transformed along different cultural discourses. Fuss troubles the practice of critical theorists to pluralize elements of identity, stating that these practices still collectivize and graft universality upon the singular subject. Thus terms like “gay men” have a way of essentializing as much as the sign of “the gay man” might. Therefore, “the essentialism at stake is not countered so much as displaced”(Fuss, 1989, p.4). Accordingly, Fuss proposes essentialism operates as a transmutable tool in the hand of both progressive and reactionary discourses, or what she calls strategic essentialism. As such, critics are better advised to investigate “what purpose or function essentialism might play in a particular set of discourses” (p. xii). Therefore, critics are discouraged from naturalizing social categories, and to examine social categories as always already knowable.

At the heart of this dichotomy, Sedgwick reveals that the turn of the 19th century offered a predisposition and obsession with assigning every person with a “binarized identity” of male/female, and homo/hetero through a process of “intensive regulation” (p. 2). Sedgwick elaborates that present knowledge of homosexuality evidences a fixed construction of knowledge indicative of a powerful and permanent binary opposition between heterosexual and homosexual. Sedgwick proposes that the turn of the century offered new definitions that stratified social order. Meaning, in addition to an identifiable, declarative, sex individuals could be described through a hetero/homo binary of sexual orientation. As a term, “heterosexual” draws its origins from medical terminology during the late nineteenth century (Katz, 1995). Historians posit the term originated from medical correspondence between Karl Ulrichs and Karl-Maria Kertbeny, two German based researchers opposed to Prussian laws criminalizing sexual relations among men (Blank, 2012). Ulrich’s approach to the study of sexuality stemmed from his own homosexuality; he attempted to prove a biological predisposition for same-sex relations (Blank, 2012). Conversely, Kertbeny took a more egalitarian approach, citing that homosexuality was not harmful to members of the state (Blank, 2012, p. 17). Psychiatric journals first incorporated the term when Krafft-Ubings published his typology of sexual conditions, and referred to heterosexuality as an “abnormal, or perverted appetite towards the opposite sex” (Katz, 1995, p. 86). At this time, heterosexuality drew sharp distinctions between procreative and nonprocreative sex and was equated with a sexual deviance (Katz, 1995). Likewise, the term “straight” originates from homosexual vernacular “to go straight” and cease homosexual actions and engage solely in heterosexual practice (Katz, 1995, p. 95). Conventional understanding of sexual identity suggests that heterosexuality has always been a form of identity, and that public acknowledgement of homosexuality came through hard fought political struggle to carve out new

ways of being. However, historical understanding of heterosexual discourse suggests heterosexuality as a concept, as a means of identifying oneself in public, is inherently tied with homosexuality; the two terms implicate one another and the connotations of one impact the other.

As a consequence of this binary thinking, the discourse of sexuality is consumed by an ever-present desire to identify and define the contours of who resides in, and out of, the conditions of sexual identity. Diana Fuss (1991) articulates the philosophical concerns related to the binary of in/out and hetero/homosexual as a form of denotative process in which the conceptualization of a term is dependent on the connotations of that which is drawn as exterior to it. Fuss holds that homosexuality “is not opposed to heterosexuality, but lies within it-as its very precondition since all identity is based on exclusion” (Fuss, 1989, p.110). In other words, the cultural meanings of heterosexuality are directly dependent on how we define what is not homosexual and vice versa. Once articulated, this binary became a foundational discourse that facilitated future constructions of knowledge and identity. The dichotomous opposition of homosexual and heterosexual identity places discursive limitations on queer possibility, and regulates the identifications and desires available to individuals. Placing sex into the realm of discourse performs a function of conflating desire and the body with competing discourse of knowledge and power. As Barthes (1981) explains that speaking of homosexuality “permits those who ‘aren’t’ to show how open, liberal, and modern they are, and those who ‘are’ to bear witness, to make demands to militate” (p. xvii). Hence the discourse of homosexual identity becomes a site of continually contested meanings. Sedgwick’s epistemology influences the present study by proposing an axiology of homosexuality that is more concerned with *how we* became who are, than in defining who we are.

Sedgwick claims the fixed certainty between hetero/homosexual reflects modern societies' desire to understand identity through the frames of fixed and naturalized opposites. As Jagose (1996) comments, "much is invested culturally in representing homosexuality and heterosexuality as radically and demonstrably distinct from one another" (p.18) Sedgwick (1990) points out that the identity of homosexual persists throughout history, not due to the resilience of those who claim it, but rather that its presence is more necessary to those who "define themselves against it" (p. 81). The instant codification of sex, gender, and sexuality that crisscross the identity of 'homosexual' is requisite to the definition of those who wish to make their own gender and sexual identities a finite and fixed expression. Thus the social construction of the heterosexual male is discursively dependent on his homosexual, effeminate, opposite. However, homosexuality as an identity is always already confined within the boundaries of binary definitions; it "becomes identified with the very mechanism necessary to define and defend any sexual boarder" (Fuss, 1991, p. 3). While heterosexuality and LGBTQ identity is simultaneously produced, because heterosexuality is rendered as the presumably natural, default status while sexuality is produced in discourses of private shame LGBTQ identity is required to come out as a political and rhetorical moment.

In the context of coming out, queer theory helps explain the compulsory tenor of identification, as well as the social construction of the closet itself, and thereby enables the analysis of declarations of identity by celebrity public figures (Sedgwick, 1990). To come to a queer understanding of the self is to run the discursive gauntlet of gender, family, speech, freedom, liberation, race, class, fantasy, culture and so many other socially based institutions. In essence, being queer means "fighting about these issues all the time, locally, piecemeal but always with consequences" (Warner, 1993, p. xiii). This study is about discerning the rhetorical

impact of these fights, and evaluating their consequences on LGBTQ public discourse and on rhetorical theory more broadly.

Queer Theory & Communication

Thus far this chapter has focused on the theoretical contributions of constructivism, gender performativity, and queer theory in order to establish a foundation for engaging in the rhetorical analysis of coming out discourse. However, these theories influence the study of communication and more specifically the disciplines of rhetoric and cultural studies in ways that is pertinent to the present analysis. By placing sex into the realm of public discourse, cultural performances, and considerations of knowledge and power the study of rhetoric and cultural studies is uniquely positioned to contribute to the complex discussions of LGBTQ identity, as well as coming out.

Initially, the notion of a queer approach to the studying communication is anathema to the institutional logics that governed early scholarship in the field of communication studies. Gust Yep (2003) definitively traces the trajectory of disciplinary silence surrounding homosexuality and its impact on the discipline. According to Yep, queer sexuality was invisible and ignored by much of the early theoretical development of the discipline. As a result, communication studies are troubled by a sense of having ‘discovered’ queerness. To illustrate, it took more than six decades for an essay on homosexuality to appear within the established communication journals (Hayes, 1976). Darsey (1991) encouraged the discipline to “study what no one else is going to study”, and embrace ideographic approaches to LGBTQ studies to emphasize the impact of gay men and lesbians on communication phenomenon (p. 59). Meanwhile, Chesebro’s (1981) pioneering work, *Gayspeak*, posed a question to the communication studies discipline: “what theories, methods, and applied symbol-using patterns

account for homosexuality as a social issue?” (p. xiii). Subsequent studies have explored communication practices of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer (LGBTQ) identities through media representation (Streitmatter, 2006; Streitmatter 2009, Fejes and Petrach, 1993; Gross, 2001; Dow, 2001; Shugart, 2003), social attitudes (Ochman, 1996; Herek, 1988), as well as lived experience (Adams, 2011) under the purview of the discipline. To position the present study within the context of these conversations this literature will focus on the developments of queer theory in public address, social movement politics, and mediated representation.

Queer Rhetorical Theory

In particular, rhetorical studies as a field has spent the better part of the last forty years coming to understand a quickly evolving sense of LGBTQ identity and public discourse. Slagle (1995) argues queer theory troubles the given assumptions of previous rhetorical theories and processes. Slagle observes that queer theory resists rhetorical theory’s silence on the subject of sexuality remarking, “queer theory challenges the assumption that sexuality is not significant in the production of discourse” (p. 99). Charles Morris’s (2007) *Queering Public Address* questions the heteronormative and gender binaries through which rhetoric developed its primary theories and understandings. Morris (2007) argues “to the extent that public address is understood as foundational to the tradition of rhetorical studies as a discipline, queering it enacts the more radical vision of rearticulating that tradition from its very roots: queering our disciplinary history, and thus our discipline, by queering rhetorical history” (p. 5) Morris traces the erasure of queerness within public address in favor of hegemonically centered studies of powerful, white, and heterosexual men.

For Morris (2007), establishing a queer perspective of rhetorical studies enables queer futures through explicating the past. By critiquing the circulation and signs of queerness within

the rhetorical tradition, Morris exhibits the kind of strategic essentialism espoused by Fuss (1989). Similarly, Foss (2007) adapts the frameworks of the rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968) to better position studies of LGBTQ activists like Harvey Milk. The focus of sexuality on Milk constructs multiple interpretations of his rhetorical situation. For example, Foss interprets Milk's audience as "enacting homophobic hegemony of the times" (Foss, 2007, p. 75) In this way, Milk's choices to ally with broader labor coalitions and economic boycotts can be read as limiting his agency to tactics his audience would find accessible, thereby authoring a queer subjectivity through rhetorical discourse. Further, the understanding of one's rhetoric is directly influenced by the confrontation of sexuality and identity offered by the ethos of a queer rhetor (Foss, 2007). Likewise, Cloud (2007) considers theoretical contribution of Eleanor Roosevelt's sexuality to the debate over queer agency in both public and private arenas. These studies highlight the value in applying queer theory to traditional studies of public address to uncover the multiple intersections and interpretations available to rhetorical critics.

Aside from considering the rhetorical complications of individual rhetors, LGBTQ scholarship also attempts to articulate the dichotomies between competing rhetorical arguments and interpretive frameworks through which the public debates sexuality. Similarly, Brummett, (1978) pentadic analysis of those for and against gay rights reveals a respective act centered and agent centered framework that fails to properly engage the opposing discourse. Through revealing the reliance of progay discourse on agent-centered arguments, Brummett (1978) indicates the central value of identity in LGBTQ political discourse. Smith and Windes (1997) comment on the "oppositional discourse" and competing rhetorical realities of pro-gay and anti-gay discourse to propose collective identity is often shaped by the crossfire of competing discursive controversies (p. 30). For example, legal discourses often author an essentialist frame

of LGBTQ identity to achieve political and legislative expediency (Smith & Windes, 1999). In the context of coming out, these studies point to the ways in which public identity is shaped by the larger political discussion of gay rights. At the same time, these discussions reciprocally shape the identity of future individuals.

In his unique study of the rhetorical resources of gay identity, David Grindstaff (2006) suggests previous attempts at uniting queer theory and rhetorical scholarship are too often bound to social movement theory, and thus failed to properly solidify a queer theory based on the conceptualization of power. Grindstaff claims gay male identity is “essentially public, essentially a product of rhetorical invention, and essentially a residue of social-political contests” (p. 3). He points out that the discourse of sexuality is a contested ground of competing knowledges and power structures fighting over potential meanings. Grindstaff attempts to construct a position bridging the problems associated with critical rhetoric, namely the need for critical agency, and cultivate judgment without resorting to relativism. Grindstaff promotes what he terms “performative rhetoric” borrowing from the works of critical rhetoricians and the performative philosophies of Judith Butler. This perspective enables rhetorical critics to “construct a potentially resistive cultural methodology without reinventing a humanist agency that seems implausible (at best) and dangerously naïve (at worst) in the postmodern condition (Grindstaff, 10).

Grindstaff adopts Foucault’s (1978) genealogical method in order to “present a series of textual analyses that examine the public discourse on gay male identity in order to uncover the rhetorical means by which social power and resistance take hold in American society today” (p. 17). The emergence, dissent, and critique of gay male identity in society is dependent on the “conditions of speaking” homosexual identity conveyed through social discourse (Grindstaff,

2006, p. 18). For Grindstaff, homosexual identity serves as an ideograph bridging the symbolic, and material, through rhetorical discourse and materializing “heteronormative ideology through public discourse and the rhetorical means of enacting that ideology” (Grindstaff, 10). In other words homosexual identity, like the empty signifiers of <liberty>, <freedom>, and <equality>, function as containers for the transmission of dominant ideology. Through defining what homosexual identity is, and who may confer this identity upon themselves, discourses of control limit the potentiality of queer bodies. As a framework for understanding coming out discourse, Grindstaff’s perspective of identity as a discursive vessel waiting to be filled by culture. In other words, to come out as gay is to simultaneously establish what it means to be gay in that socio-political moment. Hence it is necessary to not only engage with the discourse of queer individuals, but to also enact an understanding of how the discourses of LGBTQ identity are circulated, reformed, and reshaped through the mass media. Therefore, this project will engage not only a rhetorical analysis of coming out texts, but to juxtapose the coming out discourse with its subsequent coverage in the media.

Queer Politics

In his anthology *Fear of a Queer Planet*, influential queer theorist Michael Warner (1993) indicates that the theoretical sum of queer inquiry amounts to a single question, “what do queers want?” (p. vii). Warner’s assertion conceptualizes queer theory as less of a theoretical approach to explaining a phenomenon, but more of a method of *obtaining* the intelligibility and recognition desired by queer-identified people. While early LGBTQ politics built political movements based upon presumed common experience (Fuss, 1989), Douglas Crimp (1993) questions whether it was the “emerging political movement that enabled the enunciation of a gay-rather than homosexual or homophile identity” (p. 314). Warner and Crimp’s work evokes

the idea that queer theory is more than an academic perspective, but a political and ontological position from which to produce queer agency.

As a framework for explaining a politics of difference, queer theory has contributed to a large body of scholarship related to queer political rhetoric and action. Darsey (1991) offers case studies of the political rhetoric of gay liberation to question the goals and aims of liberationist discourse. The early political actions of the homophile movement and gay liberation largely strove from an assimilationist ethic; fitting into society was more preferable than questioning society itself. Darsey considers, “how much do we become like them in order to enjoy the fruits of what they call success, and how much do we make them acknowledge that there are alternatives” (p. 317). Consequentially, the conditions of early queer organizing were only accessible by those with access to capital and who benefited from class, race, and gender privilege (Seidman, 1993). Lisa Duggan (1992) compares the language of queer theory in engaging a rhetoric emphasis of difference with the “more assimilationist liberal emphasis on similarity to other groups” (p.15). Beginning in the actions of ACT UP, and the more bombastic Queer Nation, queer theory attempts to construct a “reverse discourse” (Foucault, 1990, p.110) or the political process of signifying traditionally offensive terms in politically productive ways. While seemingly fruitful, other queer theorists reject this practice as resistance to power; the regulatory function of the original term remains regardless of its transformed meaning (Butler, 1992). Slagle (1995) describes how queer centered movements of the 1980s rejected assimilationist ideas “based on the assumption that queers are unique and that simply because queers are different does not justify oppression by the dominant, heterosexist, mainstream” (Slagle, 1995, p. 85). Instead, Slagle (1995) argues that queer politics is derived from embracing differences from the mainstream than similarities. This form of self-acceptance is what Slagle

calls is the *politics of difference* (p. 98), and profoundly shaped how queer theory functioned as political perspective.

Representation

Approaches to studies of sexuality begin from the presumption that representation of particular identities circulates hegemonic constructions of identities. Building from the works of Stuart Hall (1997), scholars in this area are primarily interested in how the representation of LGBTQ individuals in popular culture facilitates a common sense understanding of LGBTQ identity that controls and regulates its performance. Critical scholars Catherine Squires and Daniel Brouwer (2002) examine the ways in which passing by queer subjects, or the performance of dominant identity by a nondominant individual, is covered in the media. Squires and Brouwer study the representations of Brandon Teena and two other cases in which a transmale attempted to identify as a male, through their constructions in print journalism. Primarily, Squires and Brouwer describe how dominant media provides representations in contrast to marginalized, queer centered, publications. Through their analysis, they claim that dominant discourses address queer representation through the frames of fear, criminality, and deception. Squires and Brouwer (2002) argues that the potential for queerness to generate gender fluidity is negated by the discourse of dominant and marginalized media institutions. Bennett's (2009) work on banning queer blood also engaged media representations and the textual understanding of the body as a means through which public constructions of queerness are mobilized to facilitate fear and conditioning.

Rhetorical approaches to sexualities also interpret media representation through the politics of visibility. Stuart Hall (1996a) notes that marginalized identities moves from a crisis of representation, in which culture facilitates a symbolic absence of inclusion for a particular group,

to the politics of representation in which nondominant identities are refracted and distorted in their public depiction. As such, Shugart (2003b) explores the role of the new gay man in contemporary media to question the hegemonic constructions of gender relations subsumed in popular constructions of gay visibility. Through her analysis of *Will and Grace*, *My Best Friends Wedding*, and film *The Object of my Affection*, Shugart reveals that while gay men may be visible in modern society, this visibility is heavily conditioned. For example, Shugart (2003b) argues that gay men are desexualized, depoliticized, remasculinized, and are placed with contexts that encourage the audience to see them in heterosexual relations. Thus, characters like Will from *Will and Grace* are absent significant relationships, avoid political organizing or addressing the material consequences of LGBTQ existence, and primarily function to solve the problems of his heterosexual counterparts. Moreover, Shugart (2003b) proclaims that the position of the gay man and straight woman relationship in contemporary culture is a means of appropriating the challenge of homosexuality to patriarchy but including gay males in the performance of gender misogyny. For instance, all gay males in Shugart's (2003b) study are given unconditional access and control to women's bodies, thereby circulating a discourse of patriarchy and appropriating the oppositional ideology of queerness to serve dominant ends. Through an analysis of commercial Hollywood films, Seidman (2005) further chronicles representations of homosexuals and heterosexuals to describe a shift in popular culture from messages of intolerance to the creation of the 'normal gay'. As a result, constructions of "normative heterosexuality" create divisions within the heterosexual institution, as well as reinforcing binaries external to heterosexuality (Seidman, 2005, p. 40). Seidman (2005) elaborates that the normalization of homosexuals in mediated texts displaces the schema of the

gay individual as stand in for the “bad sexual citizen” (p. 54). Instead, relations of sexuality that do not couple sex with institutional forms of intimacy are designated as new sites of scorn.

Rhetorical studies also deals with the ways in which media representations of sexuality inscribe larger rhetorical myths and narratives. For example John Lynch (2007) addresses a three-stage model of public memory through a study of televised depictions of queer figure Matthew Shepard. Lynch questions how media representation could construct a hegemonic public narrative of queerness and wished to understand how queer figures are positioned within public memory. Lynch proposes that public memory is first initiated through journalism and examined the distinct ways in which Shepard is conveyed in print texts. Next, Lynch claims public memories of queer individuals are facilitated through televised drama, or dramatic treatment. Similar to Ott and Aoki’s (2002) pentadic analysis of Shepard’s murder, Lynch found that these TV movies represented Matthew as something other than queer, and positioned him as a tragic martyr that completes a cycle of society’s redemption. Left unaddressed in these representations is the ability for the public representations of Shepard to reveal the homophobic and heterosexist tendencies that enabled his murderers to feel justified in their actions.

Finally, rhetorical approaches to queer representation also address the control and policing of gender binaries through how LGBTQ identity is portrayed in media. Critical rhetorician John Sloop (2004) examines the politics of gender ambiguity circulated through five case studies of media discourse that “encouraged cultural assumptions about human bodies and sexual desire” (p. 2). For Sloop, analysis of celebrity representations, like k.d. lange, offer insight into the cultural capital of LBTQ identity. Likewise, Jeff Bennett (2006) examines the depiction of gaydar in contemporary reality television through a critical analysis of *Boy Meets Boy* and *Playing It Straight* which each presented men who attempted to trick a contestant into believing

they were either gay or straight. Bennett (2006) argues that these series offered initial resistive potential to queer audiences' understanding of gayness by destabilizing the performances of homosexual identity. Bennett asserts that in showing the audience the fluidity of gender performance in all forms of sexual identity promotes a more inclusive discourse for queer representation. However, the potential of each series is undercut by the fact that the show constructed the figures in ways that ultimately rectified gender binaries by having the contestants correctly address the identity of each individual. Further, Bennett incorporates elements of the production choices and unaired moments of the series to critique the control of queer bodies throughout the text. Thus, Bennett's (2006) use of intertextual approaches demystifies the power relations of gender in public symbolic expression.

Coming Out As Phenomenon

Thus far this proposal outlines the broader theories of sexuality and public discourse as a means of setting the foundation for a study of coming out. Central to this analysis has been the notion that public symbolic expressions of sexualities shape and are shaped by the larger social institutions of power, knowledge, and discourse. However, while these studies trace the genealogical development and institutionalization of LGBTQ identity categories, they also fail to properly conceptualize the moments of symbolic expression in which individuals publically identify themselves as LGBTQ. In their early work on coming out, Darsey and Jandt (1981) argue that coming out is a process of re-identification conducted through three stages: self-identification, coming out, and going public. While the pervasive discourses of heteronormativity and silence perpetuate the closet as the principle organizing metaphor of LGBTQ existence (Sedgwick, 1990), it is vital to situate the literature surrounding the utterance when one chooses to come out of the closet. The following literature examines the forms and

functions coming out discourse serve in terms of speech, and questions what linguistic forms contour its performance? How are conditions of the closet, and coming out, mobilized in the service of LGBTQ politics? Finally, how are coming out narratives shaped and treated when circulated by mass media. Therefore, the remainder of this literature review will position the present study within the context of coming out literature related to conditions of the closet, confessional discourses, speech acts, closet politics, passing, and coming out narratives in the mass media.

Conditions of the Closet

To explicate the phenomenon of celebrity coming out, it is imperative to situate how the closet has been constructed within the discourse of silence and heteronormativity over time. Sedgwick (1990) argues that LGBTQ identity within the United States “has been impelled by the distinctively indicative relation of homosexuality to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure” (p. 71). Thus, in order for a celebrity to come out the closet, such a space must be metaphorically and socially constructed for them. Ethnographic researcher Tony Adams (2011) describes interrelated conditions that make the closet possible. Adams (2011) posits, “the closet begins to form when a person recognizes that same-sex attraction possesses a marginalized social status in that it is not practiced or validated by the majority of a population” (pg. 45). Among the available identities along the queer spectrum, the closet is a palpable and stable presence that both explains and resists the experiences of normativity. Queer theorists Berlant and Warner (1998) define heteronormativity as “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent-that is organized as sexuality-but also privileged (p.548). Thus, through circulation and repetition of social discourse certain behaviors and identities are constructed and promoted. Social philosopher Alice MacLauchlan

(2012) notes “the idea of the closet is how the normative force of coming out and being out is most often communicated” (p. 317). Therefore, communication presents an ever-present tension between constructing the heteronormativity that constricts queer existence, and the pathway through which queer identity resists normative restraint.

Initially, the closet is conditioned on a culture of silence facilitated through sexual hierarchy and normativity. Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen (1999) argue that the understanding of the closet, and therefore coming out, is tied to specific historical contexts. They testify that the closet is “a strategy of accommodation and resistance which both reproduces and contests aspects of a society organized around normative heterosexuality” (p.10). Consequentially, coming out is conditioned on the secrecy of homosexuality. Sedgwick’s (1990) theoretical work proposes homosexual identity functioned through a representative contract in which the inability of same sex desire to be spoken “represented the hidden, perhaps dangerous truth about a culture itself” (p. 56-57). Foucault (1978) indicates that the discursive transformation of sex propelled an explosion of scientific knowledge that functioned to regulate and control forms of sexual behavior. Through its scientific and moral discourses, sexuality is placed within the realm of public discourse and establishes the parameters for normal and abnormal sexual behavior. These processes “sought to control the behavior of individuals and groups through *standards of normality* which were assessed by criminologists, medics, psychologists, and psychiatrists” (Richardson, Smith, & Werndly, 2013, p.27). As a result, social discourse of sexual stratification (Rubin, 1984) has the express purpose of saying “no to unproductive activities, to punish casual pleasures, to reduce or exclude practices whose object was not procreation” (Foucault, 1978, p. 36). The placement of sexual behaviors into a “hierarchical system of value”, through religious, psychiatric, and popular communication establishes those practices which affirm the status quo

as the most desirable (Rubin, 1984, p. 316). In this hierarchy, monogamous sexual activity tied exclusively to procreation is paramount, in contrast to all non-procreative and same gender sexual activity. As sexual discourse, and by extension identity, shored up the boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, those forms of sexual identity outside the normative boundaries become shrouded in silence; the walls of the closet were thus formed and reinforced.

Further, the closet perpetuates what Sedgwick (1990) calls the “epistemological privilege of unknowing” in which power colludes with ignorance to affirm the status quo (p. 5). Thus, the conceptualization of the closet is a performance “initiated by the speech act of silence” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 3). Queer theorist David Halperin (1995) addresses the paradox of the closet as an impossible position of never being capable of fully surrounding oneself in the privileges of heterosexuality, while at the same time non-heterosexual identity must be continuously uttered, thus one is never fully capable of being truly out of the closet. Coming out does not end one’s relationship to the closet (Sedgwick, 1990). For instance, through in-depth qualitative interviews with 25 LGBTQ individuals Seidman et. al. (1999) suggests homosexuality may be trending towards a “routinized” experience to such a degree that ‘the closet’ may no longer be a central mechanism to LGBTQ identity (p.11). Conditions of the closet also perpetuate a collectivizing force for LGBTQ identity to share a sense of common oppression. Rather than widening the distance created between those in and out of the closet, Seidman et. al. argues that practices of the closet “create a protected space that permits individuals to fashion a gay self and facilitates the making of gay social worlds” (p. 10). Therefore, the closet intersects on competing motives to both *identify with* and to *identify as* that is frequently “fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 61). Indeed, if the closet is a “nexus rife with political implications” (LeMaster, 2014, p.191),

then narratives of the closet, and the actions of coming out, shape and politicize LGBTQ identity. Therefore, coming out and its implications on the broader discourses of sexuality deserve more extended rhetorical and academic analysis.

The normative discourse of the closet is enabled by larger hegemonic constructions of power. Signorile's (1993) *Queer in America* discusses the closets of power perpetuated by a "brilliantly orchestrated, massive conspiracy to keep all homosexuals in the closet" (p. xiii). Signorile argues this conspiracy is unconsciously perpetuated by a homophobic culture that encourages a preferred performance of heterosexuality, while at the same time conditioning queer acceptance through complicity and silence. The media industry silently facilitates a culture that reduces both the physical and cultural presence of queer identified individuals by filling news cycles with boundless information about heterosexual public figures; from where they eat to their sexual practices. While Signorile (1993) provides a narrative account of the political ramifications of the closet, his work fails to adequately theorize the rhetorical power of coming out, and its contemporary interactions with the media industry. Therefore this study seeks to contextualize modern instances of coming out through a rhetorical framework in order to understand how coming out discourse is shaped through the media.

Coming Out As Compulsory Confession

Theoretical treatment of coming out begins with understanding coming out as an extension of confessional discourse. By design, the transformation of sex into discourse placed sexual practice into the realm of secrecy to encourage a powerful mechanism of control: the confession. Foucault (1978) attests the confession is a primary discourse for western societies to establish rituals for the production of truth. Confession carries with it an assumption of freedom, "but one to silence; truth does not belong to an order of power, but shares an affinity with

freedom” (Foucault, 1978, p.60). In his epochal history of sexuality, Foucault offers that the social discourse of confession required one to speak of sex as a means of obtaining social liberation noting:

One had to speak of it as a thing not to be condemned or tolerated, but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum. Sex was not something one judged, it was a thing one administered.

(Foucault, 1978, p. 24)

Here, Foucault contributes to our understanding of coming as society’s obsession with coming out stories reiterates the devices of control and discursive regulation in which non heterosexual desire is subjugated to the discourse of secrecy and a collective demand for confession. As a discursive act, cultural studies scholar Robert Brookey (2007) studies the evolution of confession in sexual theory and notes the confession is “an inducement to speak, imposed by instrumental interests, and extending its authority” (p. 198). Grindstaff (2006) conceptualizes coming out as form of rhetorical secrecy in which the publicity of the secret does not fundamentally change its nature as a secret. Using the theories of becoming from Deluze and Guattari (1987), Grindstaff argues that secrecy moves from “secret-as-content” through a threshold stage to arrive at immanence (p. 138). For example, through a reading of coming out autobiographies Grindstaff notes that the secrets of closeted homosexuality move from acts, such as getting caught making sexual advances in public areas, to an identity. Public conversations about those acts transforms homosexual behavior into an identity; transforming a *he* to a *them*. As a result, the confessional mode of discourse performs “a ritual in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement” (Foucault, 1978, p. 61); thereby the act of confession is also an act of regulation.

Understanding coming out through the theories of confessional discourse also offers and understanding of coming out as a compulsory device. Queer theorist Cindy Patton (1993) contends the confessional discourse of coming out, while seemingly progressive, is in fact constrictive. Dominant discourse “incites homosexual speech in order to create a simulacrum homosexual movement whose epistemological structure is the speaking out of its inner (if perverse) certainty about its homosexual nature” (Patton, 1993, p. 146). Hence, rather than liberating, the confession commits the speaker to a seemingly universal homosexual identity. The formation of gay identity, then, may be inextricably bound to the closet. Patton notes gay identity “comes from spilling the beans, from coming out of the closet to claim the other’s derogatory speech as one’s inverted reality” (p. 146). MacLachlan (2012) disputes the argument that LGBTQ individuals are under a moral obligation to come out. MacLachlan argues that the connection between coming out and resisting heteronormative oppression is not as interconnected as we would believe. Rather, the practices of coming out “rely on an explanatorily deficient understanding of sexual identity and on an insufficiently subtle account of responsible self-disclosure” (MacLachlan, 2012, p. 304). Confessions, like coming out, require the subscription to a “lump” conceptualization of sexual identity predicated on the enduring relationship of desire and object choice. These studies suggest the expression of identity is always already colored by the dominant interpretations of discourse. Therefore, supposedly liberating acts of self-declaration can be read as confining oneself to another’s form of intelligibility.

Further, the act of coming out, and its dichotomous partner the closet, has trouble encompassing the fluidity of queer identities as it “cannot do so without risking serious damage to the subjects’ authentic experience of these identities” (MacLachlan, 2012, p. 322). In other

words, those who discover themselves at various spaces along the spectrum of desire are perpetually disavowed by the compulsory act of confession; naming oneself is an act of confinement. Further, confessional discourses perpetuates a belief that total exposure of one's self is possible; that an individual, and not their identity, are capable of being fully intelligible to an audience. This assertion led queer theorists like David Halperin (1995) to describe the closet as "an impossibility of a place: you can't be in it, you can't be out of it" (p. 34). Halperin describes how the epistemological conditions of hetero/homo binaries conditions "your sexuality as a secret to which they have special access, a secret which always gives itself away" thus coming out is simultaneously "too soon and too late" (p. 34). Rather than a release of freedom, coming out of the closet is merely to place oneself into new sets of personal and political dynamics (Halperin, 1995).

Coming Out As Speech Act

While critical scholarship understands coming out as an act of confession, others situate coming out as a form of speech act (Chirrey, 2003). Butler's (1997) critical reading of the discourse of "don't ask don't tell" policies extrapolates the fallacy that uttering one's homosexuality is tantamount to an action of homosexuality. Judith Butler (1997) reads coming out as a distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. Illocutionary speech acts are utterances "that in saying do what they say, and do it in the moment of that saying" (Butler, 1997, p. 3). Conversely, Butler draws from linguist J. L. Austin (1962) to define perlocutionary acts as those utterances which produce certain effects as their consequence; by saying something a certain effect follows" (Butler, 1997, p. 3). Using this complex theorization of coming out Butler suggests that declarative speech related to homosexual desire provides slippage between speech and speech acts. Butler (1997) notes the distinction between performance and

representation as it relates to coming out, highlighting that coming out is a performative act central to homosexual representation. Butler (1997) elaborates “the declaration that is coming out is certainly a kind of act, but it does not fully constitute the referent to which it refers; indeed, it renders homosexuality discursive, but it does not render discourse referential” (p. 125).

Whereas Butler’s (1997) insights stem from a critical reading of discourse through the literary tradition, and her study primarily examines the speech acts surrounding don’t ask don’t tell policies, her suggestion warrants further study based in the tradition of rhetorical scholarship. Foucault (1978) argues public declarations sexualize discourse, Butler seems to suggest that coming out offers a reference to desire in a way that leaves homosexuality as an open ended signifier, “if only to guarantee that no name claims finally to exhaust the meaning of what we are and what we do,” (p.125). The signification of gay identity, and by extension coming out, evokes Grindstaff’s (2006) thesis that identity is an ideological force “open to signification” (p. 11). Thus, gay identity is always capable of meaning more than its present offering. While Butler encourages further examination of this topic, few studies have examined the compulsory relationship between coming out discourse and its subsequent circulation as a rhetorical artifact. Further, Fuss (1989) encourages critical scholars to shift from seeking to define what homosexuality is to interrogating how it is produced. Likewise, the present study attempts to fill this paucity in the literature, and interrogate the production, circulation, and reception of LGBTQ identity through mediated discourse.

Out As Rhetorical Device

A study of coming out in public discourse is positioned within the larger contexts of visibility politics, as an act of rhetorical invention. Through secrecy, coming out was originally a method of coalition building and organizing between non-heterosexual audiences (Grindstaff,

2006). For example, the first openly gay elected official Harvey Milk utilized coming out as part of his overall rhetorical strategy. Milk believed that unapologetic visibility was a means of ensuring political stability (Foss, 2007). Rhetorical critic Karen Foss elaborates, “For Milk, coming out became the ultimate enactment of an authentic personal and political response....through enactment, he transformed the constraints of the closet into resources, both personal and political, that he believed could transform the social landscape” (p. 84). Rather than widening the distance created between those in and out of the closet, Seidman et. al. (1999) argues that coming out creates “a protected space that permits individuals to fashion a gay self and facilitates the making of gay social worlds” (p. 10). Whereas early consciousness raising groups examined coming out from an internal method of generating collective identity, Grindstaff (2006) maintains that coming out is a space of invention through which dominant discourse is functionally resisted.

As a rhetorical tactic, coming out operates through the politics of visibility. Clarke (2000) defines the politics of visibility as “a politics that strives for greater access to and presence within different, cultural, economic, and political forms of representation” (p. 29). This political strategy often requires LGBTQ individuals to make public declarations of themselves (Clarke, 2000, p. 29). Coming out became a necessary political practice, and almost required of activists, by the early gay liberationists (Jagose, 1996). Activists promoted the coming out narrative as a tool for societal change under the assumption that homosexuality should not be seen as publically irrelevant and confined to the discourse of the private sphere (Jagose, 1996). Rather than something intended to be silent, sexuality is “potentially a transformative identity that must be avowed publically until it is no longer a shameful secret but a legitimately recognized way of being in the world” (Jagose, 1996, p. 38). Grindstaff (2006) elaborates this visibility politics

transforms the disclosure of sexual identity “to a simple exchange of information...sexuality’s disclosure thus performs the private in public” (p. 126). Similarly, critical rhetorician Kendall Phillips (2002) research into the rhetorical spaces of invention concludes that rhetorical analysis of elements of power should begin in spaces of contradictions. Phillips proclaims contradictions, such as visibility and queerness, operate as “the points where the coherence and enforced regularity of “normal” discourse encounters the incompatibility of changing symbolic and material conditions” (2002, p.335).

Rhetorical approaches to coming out also engage the dichotomy between public and private. Berlant and Warner (1998) recognize that the discourse of sexuality is predicated on a desire to shield heterointimacy while relegating sex and sexuality to private spaces. Likewise, Grindstaff eloquently establishes the various complexities in approaching coming out from a theoretical framework:

Sexuality’s disclosure performs the private in public; Sexuality’s secrecy invents heteronormative claims of ignorance; Sexuality’s enslavement to discourse is mistaken for mastery over that discourse; sexuality’s knowledge requires forgetting. When mapped onto the rhetorical practice of coming out, these performative contradictions blind us to the ways in which coming out produces alliances through the enactment of desire.”

(Grindstaff, 2006, p. 149)

Here, coming out is conceptualized as indicative of the ways in which desire is put into discourse so as to preclude its ability to produce resistance. Rather than a means of firming up the boundaries of who belongs in what sexual category, coming out is an act of queer resistance in which an individual’s agency is claimed in spite of overwhelming hegemonic silence.

Outing & Closet Politics

The rhetorical promise of coming out and the politics of closet are also addressed within studies of outing. As a practice, outing is defined as “the identification of gay and lesbian figures trying to remain in the closet” (Signorile, 1993 p. ix), and functioned through the politics of visibility and compulsory disclosure of one’s sexuality as a means of resisting heteronormative hypocrisy. Signorile’s (1993) *Queer in America* contends three power structures are most egregious in their perpetuation of the closet: the media, the political system, and the entertainment industry. According to Larry Gross (1993) entertainment figures are likely recipients of the politics of the closet. In particular, the media industry “operates on the principle that the American public is suffused with prejudices that must be catered to. The desire to expose the secret sexual exploits of Hollywood stars led to some celebrities to sue those outlets for claiming they were homosexuals (Gross, 1993). Outing, and subsequently the politics of the closet, offers insight into the analysis of coming out. Gross (1993) notes that unlike ethnic or racial communities LGBTQ subculture is largely constituted through, and in opposition of, mass media. This process comes through stages such as an individual initial stage in which “private individual recognition [of same sex attraction] often occurs long before any physical homosexual experience” (Gross, 1993, p. 115). Much of the gay rights rhetoric is established through the trope of community, however visibility is “a precondition for the establishment of any semblance of gay and lesbian community” (Escoffier, 1985, pg. 145).

The practice of outing is motivated by three concerns (Gross, 1993). First the context of AIDS revealed the dramatic costs of homophobia. As a leading gossip columnist and member of ACT UP, Signorile originated the practice of outing as a means of exposing the hypocrisy in dominant media when it comes to sexual practices; straight relationships matter, gay secrets were to be kept (Signorile, 1993). Second, the political ethics of the gay liberation movement

propelled coming out as compulsory political practice. In the hands of LGBTQ activists, outing became a weapon forged in liberationist politics (Sullivan, 1996). Third, motivation for outing forged itself into an ethnic identity through essentializing practices of non-heterosexual individuals. To illustrate, Sullivan (1996) argues the philosophy of outing perpetuates the very binary logics its queer activists attempt to resist. To ensure its chosen effect, outing “has to make the outed person feel terrified and ashamed; it has to make the desired audience titillated, and even appalled. It has to preserve intact that entire metaphor of the closet, in order to destroy it” (Sullivan, 1996, p. 79). While outing derives from a space of desire to publicize hypocrisy the practice tends to reify the shameful and secretive power structures of heteronormativity. Further, it relegates queer subjectivity through circulating queer discourse as a form of confession. Gross (1993) likens the process of coming out to a conversion experience as it is “both a confirmation of and an explanation for one’s distance from the roles society expects everyone to adopt” (p. 120).

Consequently, media coverage of a public figure’s coming out elucidates long-held societal convictions. Gross (1993) argues the outing of public figures is significant because their everyday lives constitute a discourse that affirms a heterosexual assumption. He elaborates, “the pseudo-real lives, endlessly circulated by the gossip media, are cultivating the images and undergirding the ideology that oppress gay people” (pg. 129). The logic of outing portends that celebrities must be held accountable for the images they promote due to the use of their lives to naturalize heterosexuality. Therefore, closeted celebrities are forced out of the closet as political retribution. Defenders of outing signify their tactics as “equalizing”, stating that it was an attempt to treat homosexuality and heterosexuality as equal within early 1990s journalism (Signorile, 1993, 78). While Signorile (1993) and Gross (2003) provide a narrative account of the political

ramifications of the closet, rhetorical literature has yet adequately theorize the rhetorical power of coming out, and its contemporary interactions with the media industry. Therefore this study seeks to contextualize a rhetorical framework in order to understand how coming out discourse is shaped through the media by examining the discourse of celebrity coming out narratives.

Passing

The rhetoric of celebrity coming out is predicated on an understanding of general passing as it relates to the rhetorical performance of LGBTQ identities. While originally conceptualized to explain the performance of visibility in African American contexts, queer scholars (Sloop, 2000; Kroeger, 2003; Shugart, 2003; Lingel, 2009; Borgstrom, 2011) articulate the concept of passing amidst the politics of visibility in a heteronormative culture. In LGBTQ contexts, passing involves adopting a guise of protection in a society presumed to be universally heterosexual (Blackmer, 1995). Writing on the role of passing in sexual identity Harrison (2013) defines it as “a successful presentation in line with a socially favored identity at the expense of an ‘authentic’ one (p.1). Harrison discusses the relationship between queer theory, performativity, and passing, and argues that passing is traditionally conceived as a true/false dichotomy in which one identity is “the true identity” and hidden from view, while the false identity is “placed for consumption and uptake by others” (p. 54). In engaging the scholarship of queer theory passing becomes a force of “instrumentalized mobility” in which an individual is able to choose “the identity categories available so as to achieve whatever other goal is attainable” (p.54). Thus, passing becomes rhetorical, as it seems reminiscent of Aristotle’s notion of rhetoric as “using the available means of persuasion in any given case” (trans. 1994).

Beyond the symbolic elements of passing, scholars engage the rhetoric of passing as an active performance with direct implications for coming out. First, to come out there must be first

be silence. Queer rhetorical theorist Charles Morris III (2005) explores the rhetoric of silence and shame in historical sexual discourses to point to larger tactics related to closet rhetoric, and by extension coming out. Morris argues that heteronormative assumptions condition a closet culture in which “there is no value neutral choice regarding sexuality” (Morris, 2005, p. 265). Thus, discourses that collude to silence LGBTQ identity facilitate a form of “passing by proxy” (Morris, 2005, p. 265). In this space, passing involves “controlling the disclosure of discrediting information about oneself to conceal the stigma entirely” (Blinde & Taub, 2000, p. 286). Therefore, a critic can engage passing through discourses of sexual disclosure and by extension coming out. Morris (2005) theorizes these “enthymematic silences” epitomize the broader discourse of heteronormative assumptions (p.267). As an interventionist rhetorical critic it is necessary to examine coming out texts to examine the performance of passing. Therefore, the second case study examines media coverage of coming out through the performance of passing.

Celebrity Studies

Analysis of celebrity coming out stories requires scholarly interrogation to discern how public discourse of celebrity culture fashions possibilities of being, while at the same time shoring up traditional binaries of desire. Initially, the present study is heavily informed by the work of critical scholars who understand popular culture as a significant factor in the shaping of public discourse. Richard Dyer (1979) chronicles the development of the cultural celebrity, or star, through an interdisciplinary frame of analysis and reading of celebrity as cultural text. According to Dyer (1986), celebrities are categorized cultural workers and are accordingly paid for their labor. However, as they are financial assets who stand to gain from their commercialization, they can also be considered property. Dyer (1979) insists public interest shifts to a lens of conspicuous consumption in which celebrities personal lives became exemplars

of class status. Graeme Turner (2014) claims celebrities are products of the machinery of media producers, agents, and managers. Thus, the economies of celebrity dictate a complex web of competing interests between cultivated personas and mediated interests (Turner, 2014). However, unlike the frameworks of traditional economic production, celebrity offers the economic potential of identifying with the person, rather than the product, thereby promoting future interactions with that entity. According to Dyer, celebrities can be understood as an ideological symptom of the broader sense making of society through popular culture. Stars function “in relation to contradictions within and between ideologies which they seek various to manage or resolve” (Dyer, 1979, p.38). The suggestion that celebrities are merely products of the modern media machine with equal societal weight is negligent of “of the ideological, aesthetic, and cultural currents through which their public profiles flow” (Redmond & Holmes, 2007, p. 6). Thus, to read the discourse of celebrity culture is to understand the representation of people in society; stars move from ways of being ideal, to typical ways of being.

Belying its larger ideologies, celebrity culture is perhaps most insidious for its glossy, popular, mass appeal. Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1997) concurs, suggesting stars and celebrity images are patterns within what he calls the “cultural circuit” in which representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation establish a framework that refracts popular culture images (Hall, 1997 p. 1). In their application of Hall, Redmond and Holmes (2007) read celebrity images and stars as similar patterns of “sign systems” that generate meaning in society through the interchange of production and ideologies. They conclude that incorporating celebrity images to cultural studies is an attempt to “get to the political matters of class, gender, race and sexuality that circulate in and through the public and private personae of the star or celebrity; one is hoping to make the case for arguing that they either support and or undermine the dominant

ideology of society at the time” (Redmond and Holmes, 2007, p. 258). For instance, Beltran (2007) engages semiotic analysis of nondominant identities as they intersect with images of stardom through a critical reading of the discourse related to Latina singer-actress Jennifer Lopez. Beltran argues that Lopez’s crossover appeal connected to the emphasis on her posterior contained or deactivated her threat to hegemonic discourses (Beltran, 2007, p. 283).

In addition, critical scholarship considers the relationship between celebrity representation and marginalized identities. For example, Cloud (1996) engages in the critical rhetoric of tokenism at work in presenting the “personae” of Oprah Winfrey through the circulation of her Oprah’s biographical narrative. Cloud encourages reading celebrity text as a form of terministic screens which “produce conventional ideological narratives out of complex experience” (p. 116). Even when marginalized identities are involved in the production of their own images, secondary texts work to frame those images in hegemonic ways outside the star’s control (Cloud, 1996). Cloud reads Oprah’s biography as a discourse of tokenism, in which “a persona is constructed from the character of a member of a subordinated group, and then celebrated, authorized to speak as proof that society at large does not discriminate against members of that group” (p. 123). Thus, Cloud claims that analysis of celebrities in popular culture must look to how constructions of a persona fit into a variety of cultural narratives used to give the illusion of change. These discourses serve a constitutive function; they articulate ways of discerning who and what we are, how we come to be, and the various methods by which we understand one another.

LGBTQ Celebrities

While critical, cultural, and rhetorical scholars contributed to a body of knowledge related to the analysis and criticism of celebrities, the present study is positioned at the

intersection of celebrity and sexuality. As previously discussed, cultivation of LGBTQ identity largely engaged in the politics of visibility. However, in the context of such increased visibility, it is imperative to consider what rhetorician Bonnie Dow (2001) cautions as constructions that allude to legitimacy without actually attaining it. Peele's (2007) analysis of queer popular culture argues the necessity to articulate acceptance and tolerance in media coverage of LGBTQ people. Additionally, Cultural narratives of gay and lesbian inclusion "seem at first glance to be warranted, they fail to ask how this inclusion is defined and on what terms it is granted" (Clarke, 2000, p. 1). Martha Gever (2003) elaborates that the figure of the lesbian celebrity "involves cultural and political transformations that go beyond more widespread recognition of a constellation of sexual identities and practices defined as lesbian" (Gever, p. 2). For Gever, popular figurations of the lesbian celebrity offer sites of signification through which the issues of politics, commodification, gender, race, class, and the "gendered character of cultural expression" are waged (p.5). Developments in late twentieth century media technologies spurred an evolution in cultural aesthetics that allowed for sexual visibility in context with the rise of the cultural celebrity.

The presence of these LGBTQ figures operates as a remedy against media stereotypes. Gever describes how LGBTQ celebrities in popular culture "refute notions that homosexual desire and identities are caused by psychosexual deficiencies (Gever, 2003). Whereas visibility politics display the queer public figure as emblematic of sanitation and security to dominant culture, the presence of marginalized public figures in popular culture tend to reinscribe the binary tension between presumably opposing categories. In particular, Gever critiques this process of visibility politics:

“Visibility politics neglects how social categories as race, gender, sexuality, and class always posit a relationship between two asymmetrical terms man/woman, white/nonwhite, upperclass/lower class, where the second group is defined as the opposite and inferior to the first” (Gever, 2003, p. 27).

In this passage, Gever warns that LGBTQ visibility may, in essence, construct a discourse of binary opposition that flies in the face of queer theory’s emphasis on sexual fluidity. However, celebrity discourse offers the opportunity to engage in an “understanding of culture as an aggregate of interconnected but not always coordinated institutions and practices that routinely reproduce social identities and relations” (Gever, 2003, p. 24). Gever’s work in interpreting the political and ideological significance of lesbian celebrity discourse is particularly instructive to the present project as her work offers a useful framework in the rhetorical analysis of celebrity coming out.

Celebrity Coming Out

At the intersection of visibility and celebrity is the issue of the performances and public construction of the out gay celebrity. Media has a particularly interesting relationship in creating the conditions of the closet for those it bestows the mantle of celebrity. Draper (2012) argues that the media instigates a “lens of detection” when it comes to the performances of certain individuals whose sexualities are not explicitly or operationally defined (p.202). Likewise, film and television scholar Anita Brady analyzes the politics of *American Idol* season eight runner up Adam Lambert’s coming out and subsequent media performances on magazine covers and television broadcasts. Brady argues that Lambert presented a paradox of “the imperatives of identity” by simultaneously being both out and rebelling against the predetermined behaviors of out public figures (Brady, p. 300). Brady interrogates this discourse as a condition of the

“performance of outness” (p. 293), which functions when the politics of visibility are placed within a requisite form of political behavior. Brady elaborates, “to be an out gay or lesbian celebrity is to encounter the regime of normativity that queer theorists argue is always already attached to coming out as a discursive act” (p. 293). It is not enough for the public figure to simply *be* out, instead they must *perform* out and all the heretofore predetermined political ideologies that come with it.

The concept of outness is more than the condition of public declaration of one’s non-heterosexuality, it is a political engagement through continued avowal and identification (Sedgwick, 1990). However, these political ideologies occur as “a performative reproduction of an already circumscribed subjectivity,” meaning that coming out discourse is refracted through the lens of dominant audiences and placed within the nominal confines of categorization and thus its resistive potential is greatly diminished (Brady, 2012, p 294). Brady observes “while understood as the claiming of an identity, and the authenticating of an otherwise illegitimated position, coming out is always already coming into and as a discursive construction that simultaneously naturalizes those operations of power” (p. 295). In other words, due to the circular logic of having to identify oneself within pre-determined and finite identity categories, the politics of visibility promoted by the ethic of coming out is a fallacy tragically incapable of challenging dominant discourse.

The politics of visibility is an obstacle to the project of challenging gender and sexual binaries as a useful critique through which to situate the discourse and media coverage of celebrity coming out. For example, feminist media scholar Bonnie Dow (2001) reads the coming out discourse of comedian Ellen DeGeneres to speculate that coming out is an act already inscribed within the discourse of normativity, thereby limiting the resistive potential of LGBTQ

public figures. Ellen, and by extension the coming out of major public figures serves to “shed light on the various mechanism through which the ostensible liberation of truth of sexuality-from silence, repression, denial, was not a simple case of setting free the truth” (Dow, 2001, p. 94). Instead Ellen’s confessional discourse promotes theorizing sexuality through its authenticity, form, and politics (Dow, 2001).

Reed (2007) elaborates the conflicting presentations of Ellen DeGeneres as she progressed from closeted individual, to eventual out gay personae, before finally adopting a form of post-gay identity. Ellen’s coming out both in fiction, and reality, served as more than a narrative device but instead ignited a wave of media speculation, frenzy, and curiosity such that some have called it an “intertextual media event” (Reed, 2007, p. 10). Prior to the official declaration of herself as a lesbian, DeGeneres performed a kind of subliminal queer space known as the open secret in which her presumed sexuality became fodder for tongue in cheek responses to media reports. Reed (2007) notes the queer productivity that ensured from a particular conversation about sexuality with Rosie O’Donnell. Rosie and Ellen’s banter hinted at each other’s ambiguously gay sensibilities in a way that blurred the lines of identity; neither individual spoke the word lesbian once, yet the possibilities were there (Reed, 2007). Reed attests this kind of refusal to acknowledge any one singular category Ellen managed to position heterosexuality as a social institution and “was able to do the most queerly productive work of her career” (Reed, 2007, p. 13). However, in later projects, Ellen embraced a postgay aesthetic, abandoning the cultural politics of her original series in favor of a “just happens to be gay” stance (Reed, 2007). Through the example of Ellen’s coming out, Brady’s assessment that “visibility and coming out routinely attached to narratives of celebrity reinscribes rather than changes existing categories of personhood, and that it does so in a way that reasserts heteronormative discourses of

subjectivity” (p. 294) remains particularly useful. Thus, Ellen’s performance of coming out ultimately reduced and reframed her queer potential in ways that affirmed the status quo.

Critical studies of celebrity coming out also engage how public consumption of narratives impacts the reception of identity discourses. For instance, Shugart (2005) compares the celebratory coming out discourse of Ellen with the lackluster response to Rosie O’Donnell to suggest the competing narrative of Rosie as adoptive mother prohibited her from being successfully synthesized into essentialized gay identity. For queer critiques, the act of affirming a predetermined ethnic identity of homosexuality represents a capitulation of queer discourse. LeMaster’s (2014) brief reading of Jodi Foster’s speech revels in her inability to draw from traditionalist identity markers, like gay or lesbian, to define herself. As a result, LeMaster reads Foster as a queer form of coming out, affirming a relational identity as “not heterosexual” which is quite distinct from an identity as purely lesbian (p. 191). It is this ambiguity, the potentiality of blurring sexual and identity lines, that promote a kind of queer ethics the traditional coming out narrative fails to obtain.

The preceding studies provide ideal exemplars of how analysis of celebrity coming out contributes to the larger conversations of identity, discourse, and representation. For example Dow’s (2001) study of Ellen DeGeneres provides an ideal model framework from which to engage the discourse of a cultural persona as it is circulated through the modern media. However, since the publication of these studies the modern media landscape has evolved, while the stigma against sexual identity appears to have lessened. Thus, a review of this literature motivates scholarship to update this conversation to determine if the practice of coming out has changed in the last decade. Further while these studies provide ample justification for the study of coming out, each case study conceptualizes a single discursive event without situating how

these discourses operate within the existing cultural milieu through tracing the fragmentations of coming out discourse across diverse rhetorical situations.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD: CRITICAL, CULTURAL, RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

“There will be no safe closet for any gay person. Break out of yours; tear the damn thing down!” – Harvey Milk (Qtd. in Black & Morris, 2013, p. 217).

In a 1978 ‘Gay Freedom Day’ speech on the steps of San Francisco’s city hall Harvey Milk demanded that the discourse of LGBTQ identity render the closet visible, and hoped all citizens would facilitate its destruction. Just as Milk sought to tear down the structures of the closet and its illusion of safety, this chapter reveals the assumptions and methods of critical engagement through which the closet may be deconstructed and torn down. This dissertation seeks to understand the relationship between coming out and LGBTQ public discourse through an analysis of celebrity coming out narratives. While it may appear that coming out does not require extensive scholarly treatment, in the context of heteronormativity, it is important to acknowledge of a way of being different from the presumed space of dominance. Although chapter two establishes the study of celebrity coming out discourse within the larger theoretical body of knowledge related to queer theory and LGBTQ subjectivities, This chapter addresses how understanding mediated coming out discourse is enhanced by the methods of critical cultural rhetorical (CCR) studies. Therefore, this chapter proceeds by organizing CCR as a method of inquiry, slating out the theoretical frameworks for analysis, and addressing the cultivation of texts analyzed in the case studies.

Critical, Cultural, Rhetorical Analysis (CCR)

CCR provides a unique method of analysis combining the intellectual and textual traditions of rhetorical studies with the ideological underpinnings of cultural studies. A brief summation of the rhetorical tradition provides a methodological framework to the relationship between discourse and power. Whether studying the “available means of persuasion in any given case” (Aristotle, trans. 1994), or according to Francis Bacon, theorizing the art by which discourse is adapted to “enlighten the understanding, to please the imagination, to move the passions, or influence the will” (qtd. in Wallace, 1956), or practicing “effective symbolic expression” (Herrick, 2012, p. 208) the study of rhetoric directly engages questions at the heart of critical inquiry.

As a method of analysis, rhetorical studies traces its intellectual history back to classical antiquity in which ancient scholars like Aristotle and Isocrates sought to develop theories of discursive persuasion that connects with their observation of power in everyday practice. The field of classical rhetoric is heavily influenced by a homogenous socio-political culture, which privileges public speech and oratorical mastery as the primary means to obtain social power. Roman rhetoricians like Cicero and Quintilian theorize rhetorical study as an essential skill for establishing ethical choices in persuasion. Cicero (trans. 1970) promoted five canons of rhetoric he believed were essential to its study: invention, arrangement, style, and delivery. While classical and roman approaches to rhetorical studies primarily situate rhetoric through public speech, as the discipline transitioned through the enlightenment and illocutionary periods, early twentieth century rhetorical studies remained firmly entrenched in the literary tradition of English studies.

Through its relationship with English, early rhetorical theorists like Herbert Wichelns (1925) sought to develop a model of the analysis of discourse distinct from the literary traditions.

As a result, twentieth century patristic thinkers of rhetoric proposed radical applications of what rhetorical analysis could produce. For example, public intellectuals I.A Richards (1928) and John Dewey situate rhetorical analysis as a process of understanding and social amelioration.

Conversely, rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke (1947) breaks from the interpretation of literature to emphasize the ability of rhetorical analysis to interpret the symbolic function of language. For Burke (1966) language is a form of symbolic action, thus humans are the “symbol using animal” capable of applying and abusing symbolic structures to propel persuasion (p. 3). According to Burke (1966) rhetorical analysis becomes a process of uncovering how humans are influenced by the used of symbols. Since Burke, a host of theorists address the definition of rhetoric in distinct and disparate ways, however for the purpose of this project I propose that rhetoric is the critical engagement of symbolic expression that generates meaning for social reality.

Whereas the contemporary development of rhetorical studies breaks from literary traditions, the development of cultural studies as a field of inquiry begins with a desire to break from the epistemological canonization of high culture. Raymond Williams (1961; 1989) seeks to critique the canonization of literature as a means inculcating cultural values. For Williams a cultural studies approach to textual analysis examines how the valorization of literature reflects dominant social values, and by extension, instills latent ideologies. Thus, cultural studies as a method of inquiry questions how common sense meanings are created through cultural forms. For cultural studies scholars this is primarily achieved through a process of textual analysis, thus providing a connection between the development of a hybrid rhetorical and cultural studies field like CCR.

CCR is the appropriate framework from which to explicate rhetorical constructions of celebrity coming out. As an amalgam of intellectual traditions bridging the fields of rhetorical

studies and cultural studies, CCR operates as an interdisciplinary method of inquiry. CCR scholar Thomas Rosteck (1999) argues that rhetoric primarily influences the field of cultural studies, and that incorporating the intellectual history of rhetorical studies furthers the interests of CCR. Rosteck elaborates that rhetoric is increasingly seduced by the discourse of the popular, yet sometimes fails to engage with the larger political and ideological contexts enabled by cultural studies. Therefore, I define CCR analysis as the interdisciplinary engagement with, and theorizing of, cultural practices which seeks to demystify the production and circulation of power and facilitate resistance.

In order to properly analyze celebrity coming out through a CCR method of analysis it is necessary to stipulate the theoretical assumptions from which to operationalize CCR as it applies to the present study. Building from Rosteck (1999) I assert there are four key assumptions to a CCR approach to coming out. First and foremost, CCR presumes an interdisciplinary structure. As a method CCR seeks to use the hermeneutics of textual analysis as a base from which to critique the larger institutions of popular culture. A CCR approach understands all knowledge as capable of illuminating symbolic expression, hence the present study borrows from philosophy, psychoanalysis, sociology, linguistics, critical race and gender studies, and political theory to influence its interpretation of coming out texts in chapters four and five.

Second, CCR assumes fluidity in the relationship among text, theory, and context. Traditional modes of rhetorical criticism begin with observations generated from textual analysis and develop a theory from identifying that pattern across a variety of texts; the theory emerges from the text (Hart & Daughton, 2005). Conversely, by understanding the relationship between theory and text as fragmented and interdependent, CCR embodies the theoretical position of postmodernism/structuralism in its approach to the process of textual construction. Critical

rhetorician Michael McGee (1990) reminds us “the fragmentation of our American culture has resulted in a role reversal, making *interpretation* the primary task of speakers and writers and *text construction* the primary task of audiences, readers, and critics”(McGee, p. 274). For McGee (1990) texts are fragments of previous discursive formations, and the critic pulls together these fragments as a process of invention. In this sense, CCR methods involve the selection of texts that evidence a theoretical pattern and assume a hybridity of theory and text. In practice, CCR critics engage texts through the construction of theoretical lenses to illuminate latent ideologies within culture. Thus, the coming out of public personae’s like Anderson Cooper and Michael Sam will be interpreted as a milieu of fragments that weave together the discourse of gender, race, privilege, and heteronormativity.

The fragmentation of texts also encourages understanding media coverage as part of the discursive framework of coming out. Including how news media depict the coming out events engages “paratextual” analysis proposed by Gray (2010). Gray (2010) reveals that audiences make sense of mediated representations through their interaction with the circulating images and narratives surrounding those events. Davis and Needham (2009) affirm that only interpreting representation within mediated texts “ignores the complexity of the medium, and the ways in which the program is designed, produced, and distributed” thus encouraging critical scholars to examine the surrounding elements of events rather than the discourse itself (p. 442). Therefore, paratextual analysis views mediated rhetorical artifacts, like the cultivation of celebrity personae, as part of a parallel discursive formation constructed through media analysis. For example Draper’s (2012) work is particularly instructive to the present study as he encourages the conceptualization of media events as a form of cultural text capable of fomenting how audiences read gender and sexual identity. Through his reading of both text in *American Idol* broadcasts

and paratexts of subsequent media coverage Draper sets up a useful pattern for the present study. In this project, I will analyze media coverage of the celebrity coming out event in order to determine the ways in which the media has shaped and formed the larger discursive narrative.

A third element of CCR analysis involves a concentration on ideology in discourse. Ideology is understood as the transfer of consciousness of the ruling class onto that of subordinate classes (Cloud & Gunn, 2011). CCR approaches to communication understand that ideology is something that exists in a variety of textual fragments (McGee, 1990), and therefore seek to trace processes of change in culture. Rhetorical theorist Phillip Wander's (1983) ideological turn fundamentally shifts the method of CCR to direct the skills of rhetorical analysis to the larger questions of power, privilege, and political exchange. For Wander (1983) criticism is not a "method of research, but rather indicates the ground on which scholarship and criticism can be conducted" (p. 359). As such the critical rhetorical project that joins ideology with rhetorical theory "is prepared to critique rhetoric legitimizing actions, policies, and silences relevant to the great issues of our time" (p. 359). As such, CCR forces scholars to be mindful of the fact that they are influenced by the ideologies of the world in which they live.

Finally, the fourth element of CCR analysis troubles the dichotomy between study and engagement. A CCR approach to coming out not only describes discursive relations, but also attends to the social conditions beyond the text. An unfortunate consequence of post positivism is the development of objectivist epistemologies that potentially distance the knower from the known (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Put another way, traditional forms of study establish practices that distance the researcher from the object of their scholarship. Within rhetorical studies scholars debate the polemical and symbolic choices made by critics through engagement with various texts. Wander (1983) critiques the discipline for focusing too heavily on the technical

aspects of criticism such as defining acute methods of analysis. Instead, Wander (1983) offers a pragmatic, if somewhat simplified, reduction of the process and operations of rhetorical criticism:

Whether expository or polemical the choice is up to the critic, the critic as a real person who listens, speaks, studies the speaking situation, who mediates on purpose, considers the audiences, examines the issues; who does his or her best to say something worthwhile about matters of importance; and who recognizes that there are times when words are not enough. (Wander, 1983, p. 364)

In this excerpt Wander summarizes the process of rhetorical criticism as an act of embracing the reflexive positionality of humanism. The critic is not a disembodied figure carefully ensconced in the ivory tower of knowledge, and thereby absolved from political engagement. Rather, the critic employs their tools of textual analysis to understand their place in various spaces, to examine the publics to which discourse may serve, and to attempt to theorize the implications of public speech. In terms of the present project Wander's guidance offers direction for understanding the rhetorical dynamics of mediated acts of coming out.

Application of Theoretical Lenses

After situating the present study within the methods of analysis established in the CCR tradition, a CCR analysis of artifacts requires micro level applications of critical lenses. McGee (1990) argues that critics examine the discursive fragments that influence the creation of other discourses. Building from McGee's (1990) fragmentation thesis and the influence of cultural studies scholars have understood that the goal of criticism is not to establish finite epistemic principles from which to draw out larger theoretical laws, but to function as a kind of inventional act through our ability to interpret texts within their larger ideological and historical contexts

(Hall, 1986). CCR critics often interpret texts through a theoretical framework, which like a pair of glasses, enables critics to see new modes of discourse. CCR tasks the critic with the choice and deployment of theoretical frameworks that enhance the process critical analysis. As such, the present study interprets coming out through a complex theoretical framework of hegemony, critical rhetoric, and hegemonic masculinity.

Media Hegemony

Celebrity coming out narratives are best examined through a framework of hegemony as it relates to popular texts. At the heart of CCR approaches to discourse, a theoretical framework of hegemony involve questions of taken for granted beliefs or behaviors as well as the transformation of dominant control into normative common-sense constructions. Hegemony derives from the theoretical writings of Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci (1971). Gramsci proposes in place of the direct role of leaders, power is concretized through a shared collective of naturalized values and dominances. Cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall (1977) applies hegemony to the reading of mediated texts to identify how social groups exert authority without resorting to coercion. Instead, hegemony understands power as the process of “winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appears both legitimate and natural”(Hebdige, 1979, p. 16). Rhetorical theorist Dana Cloud (1996) defines hegemony as “the process by which a social order remains stable by generating consent to its parameters through the production and distribution of ideological texts that define social reality for the majority of the people” (p. 117). Cloud’s (1996) conceptualization provides an ideal frame to the study of celebrity coming out in that it affirms how cultural productions of power can be extracted from popular culture in order to expose systems of ideology for public consumption. Scholars have attested to the power of visibility for cultures that lack the means to direct protests for social

power (Gross, 2001). Rhetorician Bonnie Dow (2001) cautions that “positive visibility is not the same as political awareness” and encourages cultural critics to make the distinction (p. 136). Likewise, Hall (2007) proposes a four-step process through which media messages are conveyed through dominant frames of discourse: production, circulation, use, and reproduction (p. 478). Hall’s assertion that “there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code” provides a gateway through which critical scholars may assess the hegemonic framework of mediated images. By deconstructing a text, such as media coverage of a celebrity’s sexuality, one can analyze codes that make themselves intelligible to an audience (Hall, 481).

At the troublesome intersection of hegemony and representation, media critic Todd Gitlin (1983) suggests that news media enhances hegemonic practice through the “inoculation” of radical ideology (p. 150). Dow (1990) elaborates that this inoculation “protects the dominant ideology from radical change by incorporating small amounts of oppositional ideology” (p. 262). This point is reminiscent of Cloud’s (1996) recognition that there exists a potential for tokenist rhetoric in which ideology “absorbs and re-frames challenges” through the metonymical representations of larger groups in terms permissible to social stability (p. 118). Critical rhetorician Larry Gross writes, “when groups obtain visibility the manner of that presentation will itself reflect the bias and interests that define the public agenda” (2001, p. 21). Considering the threat to dominant discourse of posed by queer celebrity, Michael Sam and Anderson Cooper’s coming out are understood through an articulation of its various codes and hegemonic inoculations.

Critical Rhetoric

In addition to hegemony, a CCR approach to coming out discourse builds a process of analysis from the principles of critical rhetoric (McKerrow, 1989). Primarily, critical rhetoric

presumes that the role of critical analysis is to reveal and demystify constructions of power (McKerrow, 1989). McKerrow (1989) ruptures traditional methods of rhetorical criticism by encouraging scholars to avoid the distanced role of evaluating public address, and instead suggests scholars act as rhetors in the process of text construction; thus he shifts rhetorical criticism to *critical rhetoric*. Under the purview of critical rhetoric CCR scholars do not engage in a kind of epistemic certainty in their criticism. Rather, the means of criticism provoke an engagement with social structures to reveal hidden aspects of discourse in society. Whereas empirical post positivist social science indicates the desire for a method to prove how knowledge comes into being, critical cultural rhetoric embraces a more doxastic approach to understand how symbols come into power. Traditional epistemic approaches to rhetoric imply rhetorical criticism is concerned with delivering finite explanatory system to define measure, and predicting how discourse influences the construction of meaning in society. As opposed to revealing what symbols ‘are’ through epistemic, independent, notions of truth and falsehood, doxastic approaches to rhetoric encourage critics to examine how symbols operate, or function. According to McKerrow (1989), the goals of critical rhetoric transforms “the conditions of domination, or in the possibly of revolt as the consequence of a critique of freedom” (p. 104). As such, critical rhetoric offers an emancipatory purpose through the “process of demystifying the conditions of domination” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91)

To practice a CCR analysis implies a constant and connected engagement with the rhetorical conditions of the world. Principles of critical rhetoric also assume that power is material, meaning that scholars must engage with the material consequences of discourse by positioning their texts within the larger ideological, economic, and social contexts. This means that the context of discourse goes beyond the traditional, immediate, historical contexts and

engages broader conditions of politics, history, and social structures. As such, CCR critics position texts within a cultural milieu, or the complex amalgamation of various social spheres that inform the analysis and interpretation of discourse. In operation this means positioning the analysis of coming out texts within the cultural contexts of sports, heteronormativity, media routines, and confessional discourse.

Further, McKerrow (1989) considers critical rhetoric polysemic, meaning that there are multiple readings for a given interpretation of a text. There are many ways to read a textual body: preferred reading, oppositional reading, reparative reading, and none can be presumed to be monolithic. Under the condition of polysemy, critics are encouraged to examine how various audiences can come to understand the same rhetorical text in radically different ways and approaches. For example, dominant audiences may be encourage to read representations of LGBTQ identity in ways that are divergent from how they are perceived from knowledgably subaltern audiences (Morris, 2005).

As a commitment to analysis, critical rhetoric is best conceptualized as a performance. As Sloop (2004) argues, we study rhetoric by examining it in use. Rather than exploring the “knowledge of objects or philosophical discussion about meanings” Sloop (2004) recognizes critical rhetoric as a fundamental shift in rhetorical methods of analysis. Texts create the production of future texts, and a CCR analysis understands that texts are made possible through particular interpretation. Thus, under the framework of critical rhetoric, scholarship becomes performative and encourages the critic to become an advocate for her/his interpretation of the text. Finally under the framework of critical rhetoric this project understands coming out discourse as doxastic, or the process of how power is concealed through discourse (McKerrow, 1989). Condit and Lucaites (1990) exemplify the doxastic element of analysis by studying the

ideographs of equality to discern how symbolic forms come to cultural expression, consciousness, and circulation. This framework encourage the critic to engage discourse as nominal, meaning to understand how cultural forms are named in discourse and whose interests this naming serves. Consequentially if the naming of cultural forms are machinations of power, then “absences is as important as presence” and critics should examine who is left out of a discourse as a means of uncovering a desired interpretation (McKerrow, 1989, p. 107). This is vital to critical practice as who is negated by a discourse, those publics counted out of discursive consideration, are the key to the unraveling of hegemonic practice. In this sense, negation constitutes the possibility for identification, coalition, and resistance to power. The second case study (chapter 5) examines coming out rhetoric as a performance through an analysis of Anderson Cooper’s performance of identity.

When taken together, the various theoretical principles of critical rhetoric offer a useful framework for engaging the discourse of celebrity coming out. Understanding power as material, and as part of a contextual milieu instructs critics to examine the larger ideological frameworks reveled through initial close textual analysis. Critical rhetoric informs the present project by positing that mediated discourses of coming out cannot be isolated in a historical timeline, instead the critique must excavate the genealogy of a discourse, how its formations and linguistic idioms came into existence and facilitate ideological functions. Therefore each analytical chapter begins by establishing the various cultural, political, and discursive contexts adherent to each case study. Further each analytical chapter employs the doxastic and polysemic conceptions of rhetoric to understand the various ways in which discourse is mobilized to either confirm or confront interpretations of dominant audiences. Through engaging in the critiques of domination and freedom, critical rhetoric offers a reconstructive path toward LGBTQ resistance.

Narrative Analysis

A study of coming out discourse also relies on the established critical conventions of narrative criticism, and more broadly, the narrative paradigm. Fisher (1984) encourages the use of narrative analysis as a “theory of symbolic actions, words and or deeds, that have sequence and meaning for those that live them” (p. 2). Fisher argues that human sense making is primarily filtered through its relation to existing narratives. Hence the characters, settings, action themes, and conflicts of life are ways of “relating a ‘truth’ about the human condition” (p.6). Fisher attempts to unite both persuasive and aesthetic rhetorical traditions through his narrative paradigm. This paradigm postulates that humans are essentially storytellers, and that decision-making is facilitated through “good reasons” that “vary in form among communication situations, genres, and media” (Fisher, 1984, p.7). As individuals we interpret our cultural space and the world around us by “making stories of their lives” (Fisher, 1984, p. 15). This allows rhetorical critics to engage how narrative function in culture as a symbolic process of discourse (Bissell & Butler, 2013). Therefore, narratives are not conscious or rational constructions of discourse, but are culturally conditioned.

As a framework for criticism, narrative analysis deconstructs overlapping structures, to reveal the characters, situations, and repetitions that transmit normative constructions. In critiquing narratives rhetorical critics engage with taken for granted constructions through evaluating narrative probability and fidelity. Narrative probability represents the “formal features of a story conceived as a discrete sequence of thought and/or action” (Fisher, 1985, p. 349). Narrative probability asks the critic to assess the discourse on the basis of whether the story “hangs together”. In her practical framework for engaging in narrative analysis Rowland (2009) approaches narrative probability as a question of whether the narrative creates “a sense of

identifications between the characters or the narrator and the audience” (p.129). Roberts (2004) elaborates that the prevalence and persistence of narratives exists through this form of probability as it conditions “emotional resonance” (p. 134). This form of resonance contributes to narrative’s ability to situate shared cultural experiences as narratives “incorporates and refashion historical knowledge, mythologizing the past as part of a people consciousness of identity” (McClure, 2009, p. 190).

Aside from probability, analysis of narrative examines the discourse for narrative fidelity and identification. According to Fisher (1985) narrative fidelity is the ability of the narrative to ring true; it concerns the “truth qualities” and “values” of the narrative (p.349). This involves a process of comparing a story against pre-existing narratives. Narrative fidelity also encompasses the values and ethos of the storyteller. For example, Rowland (2009) suggests the critic examine the degree to which the discourse “tap(s) into basic values or needs of the audience” (p.129). Roberts (2004) extends the category of fidelity to encompass motif and appropriation as augmentations of fidelity. For Roberts, the analysis of narrative fidelity “reflects, enhances, and achieves identity – both social and personal” (p. 137). As narratives engage in the construction of identity McClure (2009) reads narrative theory alongside the contributions of Kenneth Burke (1966) to encourage critics to examine narrative identification, which is a “process of association with preexistent narratives *via* the process of analogy, allusion, and metaphor and provides a potential theoretical account for the stretching and reshaping done by auditors of polysemic, polyvalent, and multivalent narratives” (p 201). Hence, narrative fidelity is a means of understanding the various fragments of discourse that shape the process of connecting audience to particular narratives. Of course, even in the absence of fidelity and probability narratives still retain suatory ability. Thus narrative identification encourages rhetorical critics to inquire how

narratives evolve and shape an audience's ability to identify with rhetors, therefore making an ideal framework for evaluating how coming out texts shape an audience's ability to identify with LGBTQ figures.

In operation, narrative analysis provides a framework through which to understand the relationship between media constructed celebrity narratives and LGBTQ identity. For instance, analyzing texts through narrative analysis requires comparing stories with pre-existing narratives. Through comparing a celebrity's coming out story with existing media portrayals, Shugart (2005) proposes that dominant audiences filtered Rosie O'Donnell's coming out through pre-existing narratives. Shugart's study of Rosie O'Donnell reads narrative probability and, more explicitly, fidelity through the performances of Rosie O'Donnell on her talk shows and the subsequent media treatment of her coming out discourse. In a similar vein, the two case studies in this dissertation employ narrative analysis to identify and critique the ways in which audiences understand LGBTQ identity through coming out stories. The first case study (Chapter 4) of Michael Sam examines the probability of how Sam's coming out narrative is positioned and relocated through media coverage. The second case study (Chapter 5) examines Anderson Cooper's coming out narrative fidelity through comparing Cooper's rhetorical performances prior to and following coming out. Thus, analyzing coming out through narrative analysis allows critics to trace how the narratives of gay journalists and professional athletes facilitate dominant audiences ability to identify with LGBTQ rhetors.

Hegemonic Masculinity

As outlined in chapter two this dissertation operates from a foundation of gender performativity and critical studies of gender. For scholars like sociologist R.W. Connell (1987), understanding gender marginality cannot be properly theorized by examining performances of

femininity alone. Connell argues that the liberation of marginalized groups must be coupled with revealing the elusive discursive conditions that enable hegemonic discourse of gender roles. As such, Connell helped develop the theory of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity focuses attention on the articulations of proper and correct displays of masculine behavior that are directly tied to the reproduction and circulation of patriarchal gender relations. For Connell (1987) patriarchy is not only damaging to women, but also to men for circulating a range of discourse that requires men to behave in dehumanized and expected ways. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) explicate hegemonic masculinity's usefulness in a variety of disciplines including sociology, pedagogy, communication studies, and media studies. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue the circulating cultural heroes in popular discourse, like the stalwart news anchor and the athletic hero, condition expected masculine behavior such as detaching emotions, and promoting violence as conflict resolution.

While originally conceived in the field of sociology, hegemonic masculinity has proven to be a tantalizing theory for critical scholars. As Connell's (1987) original proposition suggests the structures of gender relations are directly tied to cultural images, media scholars have incubated Connell's theory to create a productive strand of research that expands and advances Connell's theory. Perhaps the most notable contributors to the project of hegemonic masculinity in media is the work of the late Nick Trujillo. Trujillo (1991) is credited for bringing Connell into the realm of critical rhetorical approaches to media. In his work Trujillo (1991) synthesizes hegemonic masculinity into five distinct conditions that are necessary for understanding the media coverage of coming out: power through force, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, frontiersmanship and heterosexuality.

First, Trujillo (1991) proposes a condition that masculinity achieves its power through the exertion of physical force. In this condition hegemonic masculinity is tied to physical dominance, meaning that cultural conditions of proper manhood require superhuman strength, muscle mass, and large size. This framework conditions men to mobilize their physical force through acts of aggression. Trujillo (1991) notes how the media emphasized baseball pitcher Nolan Ryan's fastball through lexicons of danger, and signified his body as a type of weapon ready to do harm to his competitors. Moreover, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) observe that cultural constructs condition men to believe proper masculine behavior involves domestic violence and physical abuse. Thus, tying masculinity to the enactment of physical force has dangerous implications for misogyny.

Second, Trujillo signifies hegemonic masculinity as connected to occupational achievement. Real men flourish in the workplace, according to the theory, as femininity is supposed to flourish in the home. Thus, masculinity draws sustenance from long-standing US mythic ideologies of the cult of domesticity (Campbell, 1973). Trujillo (1991) notes public discourse often frames success as only achieved in traditional masculine spaces, and constructs images of women as a happy homemakers who take care of the domestic duties so that her husband can focus on his work. In this way the relations of feminine subordination are directly tied to the constructions and representations of masculinity. It is in this circuitry of representation that the dominant group reinforces the hegemony of the subordinate group that I feel best informs the case study of Michael Sam in chapter four.

Connell (1987) and Trujillo (1991) suggest that hegemonic masculinity constructs male figures as the primary breadwinners and decision makers within the home. This form of construction has particular implications on male-female gender relations as it exemplifies how

the social imagery of the dominant group facilitates the hegemonic dissonance of the nondominant group. Plainly, hegemonic masculinity provides insight into how representations of men ultimately condition the cultural reception of women and what they are allowed to do. Further, Trujillo suggests that hegemonic masculinity can be found in its emphasis and symbolic ties to frontiersmanship. Building from the cultural discourse of “manly” figures like Theodore Roosevelt, masculinity in the 20th century retains an odd connection to the ability to survive in the outdoors. Trujillo reveals that the circulated images of athletes connect sports figures with the ruggedness of the Wild West.

Trujillo’s (1991) adaptation of hegemonic masculinity includes a requirement that true masculine figures are exclusively heterosexual. This means that hegemonic masculinity scripts the ideal figure of manhood as someone who is not only heterosexual, but is capable of consummating that sexual orientation to produce children. In other words, this condition of hegemonic masculinity requires that masculine figures be capable of reproducing themselves across generations. For instance, Trujillo (1991) notes the ways that the media frames a celebrity’s son as inheritors of greatness. Left out of these construction is the relationship between fathers and daughters, who by nature of her absence is framed as insignificant to the mediated construction of celebrity personae. Aside from the ability to procreate, the exclusive heterosexual condition of hegemonic masculinity paints a troubled relationship for men who identify as homosexual. As gay men are not given discursive access to the hegemonic fields of masculinity, this theory provides an impasse through which to understand the complex constructions and refutations of gender within queer discourse.

Since Trujillo’s adaption of hegemonic masculinity media scholars have taken the theory and research stream to new heights and examine the ways in which media representations, and

popular culture iterations, perform these conditions. For example Hanke (1990) examines the ways in which films reproduce a white heterosexist condition of hegemonic masculinity. Through his analysis of the film *Terminator* and the late 80s obsession with cyborg robots, Hanke proposes that popular culture reproduces hegemonic constructions of masculine figures that not only reinforce women's oppression, but also erase men's humanity and ability to resist being oppressors. Hanke (1998) also explores hegemonic masculinity through the television series *Thirty Something*. Hanke notes that the erasure of difference and the flattened treatment of masculine figures in TV dramas perpetuate a cultural narrative that gives men all the power in society, yet requires no action or development of men in return. Hatfield (2012) also examines the viability of the theory in explaining the cultural reception and construction of masculinity in the series *Two and A Half Men*. Katz (2003) expands the theory's condition of frontiersmanship and its impact on the field of advertising. Katz proposes that the cultural figures like the Marlboro Man were effective advertising strategies due to their ability to capitalize on already present cultural discourses for manhood. In addition, Atkinson and Calafell (2005) magnify Trujillo's 1991 conditions of hegemonic masculinity to account for a sixth condition: the absence of responsibility. As such, the theory of hegemonic masculinity provides a useful frame for engaging mediated representations of male celebrities who come out.

The theoretical lenses offered above are the lenses that revealed themselves after the initial close textual analysis and construction of each artifact. In addition, the selection of texts for this study comes from two agents: the celebrities themselves and the subsequent news media coverage following the coming out events. The celebrity discourse are culled from the initial coming out statements, as well as the subsequent interviews, television talk show appearances, and public performances in the weeks proceeding the coming out event. Next, I examine the

discourse of the mediated texts by looking to the symbolic expression used in the media coverage of each coming out incident. Then, I will begin to frame the reaction to each celebrities coming out in a larger cultural milieu in keeping with the principles of critical rhetorical praxis. In short, this means that I will examine the larger discursive and hegemonic contexts in which celebrity coming out discourse might be received. This includes examining the homophobic assumptions of certain media practices, critiquing the reliance on media routines in enabling hegemonic narratives to proliferate.

In addition to a close reading of each celebrity's discourse, representations of coming out will be understood through the critical reading of media coverage of each celebrity's admission. While other methods, such as content analysis, provide a scope of changes and conventions in media, these type of quantitative analysis fail to distinguish between levels of meaning embedded in the use of words and phrases (Gill, 2006). In sharp contrast, Fairclough (2003) proposes that close textual analysis like that of CCR is based on the assumption that "language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life, so that social analysis and research always has to take account of language (pg. 2). In her use of textual analysis feminist rhetorical scholar Bonnie Dow (1996) affirms this method functions as "an argumentative activity in which the goal is to persuade the audience that our knowledge of the text will be enriched if they choose to see at text as we do" (p. 4). Thus the purpose of this method is to conduct a close reading of textual arguments that evidence the aforementioned theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 4

BREAKING THROUGH: HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY & MICHAEL SAM

“If I had it my way, I never would have done it the way I did, never would have told it the way I did. I would have done the same thing I did at Mizzou, which was to tell my team and my coaches and leave it at that” - Michael Sam (qtd. in Corsello, 2014, December)

With a single announcement Michael Sam, the Southeastern Conference (SEC) defensive player of the year, broke through social barriers off of the field and entered into social consciousness. In a private conference with a trio of carefully selected media outlets, over an exhaustively-managed public relations campaign under the watchful eye of experienced media image makers Sam uttered a single sentence, “I’m Michael Sam, I’m a football player, and I’m gay”(qtd. in Connelly, 2014). Some in the sports media heralded the moment as a metaphoric touchdown after a seemingly endless drive. *The Washington Post* called it a “watershed act” with “enormous destigmatizing significance” (Jenkins, 2014). Others qualified the statement with initial speculation about the effect this might have on his success in the upcoming NFL draft. *The USA Today* led with the headline, “Gay Player Tests NFL Tolerance: Will bold revelation affect draft status” thereby declaring that the verbal act was already harmful to the young player’s career (Bell, 2014, Feb 10). Sam’s announcement made waves not only for his potential to be the first openly gay professional football player drafted to the NFL, but for the larger conversations his presence generated about the presumed insulation of sport from larger conditions of social change. What followed Sam’s statement were waves of reaction, support, speculation, and

further inquiry into how the rupture of America's most hegemonic sport would be resolved.

How, for instance, would football survive the encroachment of gay identities into its landscape?

These moments provide critical scholars with the opportunity to engage how gay identity is understood through contemporary popular culture. While previous chapters established the theoretical and methodological framework, this chapter contributes to that very understanding of the ways gay and lesbian identity is constructed through representation and performances of coming out in sport. Sam's performance of coming out is illustrative of the larger discursive framework through which sexual identity and subjectivity, is publicly produced in a sporting context.

Sam's coming out narrative is characterized primarily by the public mechanisms that made it possible. Three media outlets were granted access to Sam regarding his initial coming out story, however only one was given unfettered access to the various strategic developments that went into making it possible. For the initial statement, Sam elected to forego an open press conference, or a direct method of privileging his own voice. Instead, Sam enlisted the services of a trio of well-honed media architects including sports agents Joe Barkett and Cameron Weiss, and Howard Bragman, a high powered publicist who specializes in celebrity coming out (Ziegler, 2014). Together the agents, publicists, and Sam crafted a three-pronged media strategy of print, broadcast, and internet venues to ensure the widest range of media placements as well as the most potentially friendly outlets. An exclusive *Outsports* article carried a behind the scenes approach to the announcement, laying-out in detail how the media machinations went down, and chronicling the intensive media boot camp Sam went through to prepare for his initial statement (Ziegler, 2014). Sam's team selected *New York Times* reporter John Branch, *ESPN's* Chris Connelly, and *Outsports's* Syd Ziegler, each of whom were selected based upon previous

experience in covering LGBTQ athletes or issues. On the morning of Sunday, February 9, 2014 Sam sat down with both *ESPN's* Connelly, and *The Times'* John Branch and agreed to speak openly about his sexuality.

This chapter is based on a close textual analysis of Sam's initial coming out discourse as facilitated by interviews with *ESPN*, *The New York Times*, as well as the online publication *Outsports*. In addition, this analysis is based on close critical examinations of media coverage in popular print media in the month that followed Sam's disclosure. Articles for inclusion were selected through a targeted search of the *Proquest Newspaper* database using the terms "Michael Sam" and "coming out" between February 1 and March 1, 2014. To best encompass the national newspaper coverage of Sam's event, articles included in the analysis were selected from newspapers with the highest circulation including: *USA Today*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The St. Louis Post Dispatch* and *The Boston Globe*. In addition to print articles, coverage of *ESPN*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *Outsports* were analyzed to reflect additional media narratives. Because Sam's narrative represents a rhetorical work in progress, only those discourses immediately following his initial coming out statement were included for analysis. Through a close critical reading of Sam's coming out discourse and the subsequent media coverage, this chapter argues that his coming out narrative reifies hegemonic social stratifications through an emphasis on confession and hegemonic masculinity. To illustrate this argument, the chapter will proceed by positioning Sam in the context of sport and sexuality, before analyzing the discourse to arrive at several critical implications.

Scholarly Context – Athletes & Sexuality

To understand fully the mediated discourse of Sam's coming out narrative, one must view his act through the contextual framework of athletes and sexuality. As previously discussed in chapter two, popular culture offers unique vantage points into the rhetorical power and discourse of publics. Athletes and the sporting activities they engage in can be read as interpretive texts within a historical and political context (Gruneau, 1999). Critical rhetoricians Rachel Kraft and Barry Brummett (2009) observe that sport functions as a rhetorical performance that "influences how we think about some major social issues" (p. 11). In particular, public discussions of sport and sport figures "symbolizes social and political ideology surrounding race, gender, and citizenship, revealing which cultures and individuals values are important to society" (Kraft & Brummett, 2009, p. 12). As a source of meaning, sport permits the construction of both identity and difference within the civic imaginary. For instance, rhetorician Michael Butterworth (2006) argues that audiences read sport texts through essentialist frameworks to reinforce gender and sex distinctions. Sport's connotation with other social institutions permits a "continuous making and remaking" of cultural norms through a dichotomous process endowed with 'fixing' identity and recognizing how individuals are interpolated through larger national frameworks (Kraft & Brummett, 2009, p. 16). To illustrate, critical sociologist Michael Messner (2007) explores the construction of heterosexuality as a means of interrogating the privileged matrix of domination at play within sport institutions. Messner expresses concern that the over-individualization of identity could lead a to a depoliticized subject of womanhood. Thus, sport generates a cultural narrative onto the field; it is complicit in the construction and repetition of cultural performances, of its heroes and villains, and of framing morality and normality.

Sport & Gender Performance

The performance and discourse of sport facilitates larger structures of sexuality through hegemonic requirements of gender. Sport sociologist Eric Anderson (2005) attests sport functions as a closed loop system, and thereby radically resists alteration of its highly hegemonic behavior. Sport represents a closed loop pipeline of homophobia in which the people who succeed at performing the requisite behaviors become the guardians of the system's dominance over new members. As athletes move up into hierarchies of sport, their behavior becomes increasingly regulated. Thus, the professional athlete functions at the center of masculine production (Messner, 2002). Originally, behavioral psychologists Robert Brannon and Deborah David (1976) examined the hegemonic production of masculinity through sport to construct basic premises of masculinity including: "no sissy stuff, be a big wheel, be a sturdy oak, and give em hell" (p. 12). Anderson (2005) extends Brannon's parameters to include the various ways sport as an institution cultivates the performance of hegemonic masculinity. Anderson attributes the adherence to masculine traits through performance as an element of "masculine capital" (p. 23), or the progression of socially defined traits through intersections of race, class, and gender culminating in hegemonic masculinity. Building from this framework, critical rhetorician Nick Trujillo (1991) provides a framework for examining hegemonic representations of masculinity through the tenets of physical force, frontiersmanship, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, and heterosexuality. As defined in chapter three, this case study builds from previous studies of hegemonic masculinity in mediated discourses to read the media coverage of Sam's coming out.

The potential and specter of an openly gay professional athlete in a major team sport is a subject of increased attention, hope, and speculation within both popular and scholarly literature (Anderson, 2005, Butterworth, 2006; 2011). Anderson's (2005) concept of masculine capital

explains how boys who adhere to the most hegemonic forms of masculine behavior are able to cross the boundaries of acceptability. Through sport, men are taught never to critique the system that oppresses them and others. Instead, individuals must continually distance themselves from the promotion of supposedly feminine behavior (Anderson, 2005). In hegemonic sport culture this manifests in the form of vocal opposition to homosexuality. Anderson notes the maintenance of a supposedly sacred space for masculinity is maintained by social sanctions placed on men's actions and behaviors "because masculine capital is achieved through athleticism, and because masculinity is thought to be incompatible with homosexuality, it follows that athletes must not be homosexual" (Anderson, 2005, p. 26). Sociologists previously believed that the possibility of an openly gay professional athlete was unlikely due to a belief that many gay athletes drop out before advancing to that level within the sport (Anderson, 2005). Anderson (2005) rejects this notion of the monolithically homophobic sport, instead suggesting that gay athletes are more likely to remain complicit to the homophobia of sport culture as an effort to assimilate; by refusing to challenge the dominant system, gay athletes gain access to masculine capital.

Within the constructs of the social imagination, the presence of homosexuality within the hegemonically masculine context of sport functions as a volatile rupture of desired system. Philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (2001) argues that prior to coming out, gay men are uniquely positioned to undermine the hegemony of gender through their ability to puncture social spaces. At the same time, homophobic discourse signifies homosexuality as a virus to be contained, capable of infecting those who do not strictly adhere to proper masculine performances. Anderson (2005) affirms the resistive potential of gay athletes noting, "if gay male athletes can be as *strong* and *competitive* as heterosexual male athletes, they may threaten the perceived distinctions between men and women as whole" (p. 45). In turn, the presence of gay athletes

threatens the highly structured matrix of myth and normalcy of the existing framework of sport. And, of course, we find Sam's narrative ensconced in this framework.

Even prior to Sam's disclosure, scholarship attempted to address the various reasons for the lack of an openly gay professional athlete in a major team sport. Gender scholars theorized that the location of professional athletes at the apex of a masculine hierarchy dissuades closeted athletes from publically outing themselves for fear of giving up their respective privilege (Messner, 2002). The paucity of openly gay football players is also explained through a fear that their identities may lead to reduced success on the field. As Anderson writes, "whereas athletes are willing to sacrifice all types of personal freedom for athletic success, they are not willing to sacrifice athletic success for personal freedom" (Anderson, 2005, p. 145). Thus, the sacrifices required of professional athletes, the threat of losing their gendered and sexual privileges, potentially mutes gay athletes.

Further, athletes are no longer primarily judged by their on-field prowess. Rather, an athlete's success is directly related to their ability to place themselves within existing celebrity culture. The athlete must be capable of being a brand extension, a teammate, a player, a goodwill ambassador, and a likeable persona all at the same time (Smart, 2005). Speaking of the NFL in particular, the shelf life for the average football player runs short, on average about 3.5 years (Staff, 2011). Consequentially, players are painfully aware that their financial viability is directly dependent upon their capacity to function as a representative and spokesperson for brand identities and social causes. The modern media economy requires an athlete to perform within a complex cycle of commodification. Within this performance, the logic follows that when the millions of fans see their favorite player crossing the threshold of the first down, or holding off an all-important offensive drive, audiences heap goodwill towards said player. This coffer of

positive imagery is then refilled through the signification of the player in other contexts, so that when audiences see him or her hawking the newest brand of deodorant they recall the on-field achievements. Thus, the symbolic circle of commodification closes, only to be reopened with each marker of the commodity cycle. The marketability of professional athletes depends on both the player's on-field prowess, and the ability of brands to graft commercial narratives onto their awaiting blank slate. Those athletes with off-field deviance prove incapable of sustaining this kind of narrative transplantation and must either refashion themselves in expensive and prolonged image campaigns, or risk annihilation (Mocarksi & Billings, 2014).

Likewise, the complex economies of the sport media industrial complex also present rhetorical constraints for an openly gay football player. In his qualitative study of 60 gay male professional athletes Anderson (2005) found that gay athletes fear losing support, scholarships, and other monetary benefits. Sports agents admit concern over the marketability of openly gay athletes as bringing "extra social circumstances in terms of how they relate to and gain from their sponsors, agents, and managers and whether they are given access to prime playing positions and time" (Anderson, 2005, p. 149). As a case in point, in 2002 the first track athlete to come out as bisexual is said to have contacted his major sponsors prior to his announcement (Anderson, 2005). Despite the concern of athletic endorsements, Anderson refutes the connection of marketability and gay and lesbian silence in sport, as evidence suggests corporations are likely to have more inclusive practices and procedures than most sports organizations.

In his series of interviews with gay identified male athletes in team sports, Anderson (2005) discusses the transformation of discourse that occurs in the gay athlete's lived experience as it goes from "silence to defiance" (p. 87). Anderson found that athletes who come out to their teams feel a sense of elation and report changes in homophobic discourses directed at them after

coming out. Sport teams that provide stronger inherent support structures for athletes' personal lives report more favorable outcomes concerning the coming out process. Conversely, Anderson's study notes that the overall discourse of homophobia did not change in each of the gay athlete's team. Moreover, Anderson suggests that the initial wave of support received by an openly gay professional athlete may blind him to the simultaneous negative aspects of his space within sport culture. For instance, coaches from both professional and college football programs are quoted in the media attesting to concerns of openly gay players in their clubhouses and locker rooms (Anderson, 2005; Butterworth 2006). Thus, the maintenance of the rigidly policed dominance of masculine hierarchy (and the apparent threat to hegemonic masculinity posed by the occupation of same sex desire in the always already-gendered athletic space) sustains the supremacy of sexual silence in modern athletic discourse.

Mediated Discourse of Sport Sexuality

Within American mediated discourse, sport culture provides its own rhetorical performances related to gay and lesbian identity. For instance, a process of commodification primarily fuels the culture of celebrity athletes. Kraft and Brummett (2009) elaborate that with the ubiquity of modern media, "the athlete has become entertainment, a good and a brand that can be manufactured in a certain way to attain maximum attention and yield" (p. 20). Moreover, athletes perform a vital narrative function within the mediated public discourse. The narratives derived from mediated representation of athletes are commodified and reframed to fit larger hegemonic frameworks of identity and brand management (Mocarski and Billings, 2014). As a result, critical scholars engage the representation of athletes as a means of understanding the roles of these figurations in the larger social constructions of gender (Trujillo, 1991; 1995), race

(Grano, 2010), class (Stoloff, 1995), religion (Butterworth, 2013) and ability (Norman & Moola, 2011).

Similarly, mediated constructions of athletes facilitate similar discourses related to sexuality. Butterworth (2006) explores the rhetorical discourse of former baseball player Mike Piazza in response to the circulated rumors of his homosexuality. Kraft and Brummett (2009) describe Piazza's discourse as an act of "coming out as straight" and as such "reinforced heterosexuality as the norm and homosexuality, along with its associations of passivity and sexual deviancy, as an abnormal identity that has no place in either sport or society" (p. 20). In the case of Piazza, the suspicion of a gay athlete in sport cast a gendered frame on the athletic male body that generates a series of rhetorical performances designed to reaffirm Piazza's supposed challenged masculinity. Butterworth notes Piazza's defense of his sexuality in ways that create space for the potential of an openly gay player, while at the same time conditioning the acceptance of said player on their ability to conform to hegemonically masculine standards. With this theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity, Butterworth's (2006) critical reading of media discourse provides an important precedent to understanding Sam's reception as an openly gay college football player.

Despite its role in producing cultural and political ideologies, American sport discourse maintains an illusion of appearing safely removed from larger social and political controversies. For example, critical gender scholar Suzanne Enck-Wanzer (2009) describes the exoneration of domestic violence by NFL players due to a desire to keep the sport free from social and political implications. Hence, a vicious dichotomy is produced in which sport generates hegemonic cultural narratives while simultaneously policing attempts to criticize or acknowledge sports complicity in social politics. In an effort to protect the illusion of sports as a sacred space for

masculine identity, Enck-Wanzer believes any attempt to publically politicize the sacred space of sport is met with special vitriol. However, recent controversies within the sport industrial complex have shattered the once presumed bastions of sport ranging from ongoing discourse about Native mascots (race), sexual assault (gender), and the ability of players to speak openly about political events (Enck-Wanzer, 2009; Black, 2002; Leonard, 2004). Thus, when placed amid the landscape of the social political context of the time, Sam's coming out became another battle in the symbolic war over the meaning of sport in American society.

Discursive Themes of Coming Out

Through a process of critical invention (McKerrow, 1989) this chapter examines the discursive formations that emerge regarding Sam's coming out event. Bonnie Dow's (1996) *Prime Time Feminism* contends that mediated texts are not separate from off-screen "real life," but rather are firmly entrenched within it. Criticism is not an attempt to account for every possible interpretation of a text, rather criticism is "an argumentative activity in which the goal is to persuade the audience that their knowledge of a text will be enriched if they choose to see a text as the critic does" (Dow, 1996, p. 4). Following the works of Dow (1990; 1990; 2001), Shugart (2003a, 2003b, 2005) and Butterworth (2006; 2013) this analysis was conducted using close critical readings of mediated texts. Given Sam's choice to acknowledge his sexuality in a highly mediated environment, it is vital to distinguish between Michael Sam the person and the rhetorical persona of "Michael Sam". As evidenced in Cloud (1996), celebrity discourse facilitates the construction of a persona through mediated texts that must be seen as parallel to the rhetoric of the individual celebrity. For example, Cloud makes distinctions between "Oprah" represented in mediated texts and the living breathing individual, Oprah Winfrey, present when cameras are not in session. As a rhetorical critic concerned with publically-centered symbolic

expressions, it is more useful to engage the symbols projected onto publics. Likewise, the public image of “Michael Sam” – and other celebrities, such as those covered later in this dissertation – are projections of a curated public image founded on carefully-crafted media strategies.

To grasp the rhetorical constructions of Sam’s coming out, I argue critics must view the rhetoric of the public figure in concert with the circulated media texts to determine how public discourse constructs and contextualizes coming out rhetoric. As such, through a close textual reading of Sam’s coming out discourse the following analysis reveals that his coming out relocates his narrative, reinforces the power of confession, operates through contamination and concealment, and frames his oppression as individual (versus social). In addition, Sam’s coming out is rendered more acceptable to dominant audiences through media’s portrayal of Sam as a hegemonically masculine figure.

Narrative Relocation

Rather than focus on Sam’s public statement in February of 2014, both Sam’s discourse and the subsequent media coverage relocate the timeframe of his coming out back to August 2013. Sam’s coming out discourse does not cast his disclosure as an initial utterance. Rather, both Sam and the subsequent media coverage frame his coming out through the moment he spoke up about his sexuality to his football team at the University of Missouri. As part of a tradition at the University of Missouri, players gather at the home of a member of the coaching staff and share personal information about one another (“Teammates Support”, 2014). As coaches and players share information about their families and pasts, personal disclosure becomes the desired ritual of team bonding, and confessions are not uncommon within these spaces. According to Missouri head coach Gary Pinkle “everyone unloads everything there,

which is sort of remarkable” (qtd. in “Teammates Support”, 2014). It is within the context of this event that Sam’s coming out narrative is located.

In Sam’s case, his coach began the team building activity by posing a single question to his athletes: “Tell us something we don’t know about you” (qtd. in Branch, 2014). *The New York Times* broke the story of Sam’s announcement with a headline that refigured Sam’s narrative through the disclosure to his teammates. The *Times* headlines ran, “N.F.L prospect Michael Sam proudly says what teammates knew” thus placing Sam’s coming out within a narrative of an individual coming out to his team, as opposed to the well-orchestrated media strategy. The subsequent media coverage of Sam’s coming out supports the narrative relocation. For instance, the *Los Angeles Times* ran its follow up story by framing Sam’s disclosure in the context of the Missouri team meeting (“The Day In Sports”, 2014). In its coverage, *LA Times* writer Kevin Baxter reframed Sam’s narrative through the perspective of the University of Missouri defensive line coach Craig Kuligowski. Kuligowski, who in “nearly three decades in college football” had come to view these training meanings as rote exercises “heard the words but at first they did not register” (Baxter, 2014). Additional media coverage emphasizes the narrative relocation as *The Washington Post*, and *The USA Today* all led with Sam’s narrative of telling his teammates (Babb, 2014; Jenkins, 2014).

Moreover, the opening segment of Sam’s conversation with *ESPN* locates the site of Sam’s coming out in his confession to his teammates. In his interview, Sam follows the formal announcement that he is a gay man by recounting the story of how he informed his teammates in August of 2013. *The New York Times* elaborates:

One by one, players were asked to talk about themselves – where they grew up, why they chose Missouri and what others might not know about them. As Michael Sam, defensive

lineman, began to speak, he balled up a piece of paper in his hands. ‘I’m Gay’ he said. With that, Mr. Sam set himself on a path to become the first publicly gay player in the National Football League. (Branch, 2014)

In beginning his coming out narrative with his disclosure to his University of Missouri teammates, as opposed to his announcement to the media, Sam strengthens a hegemonic framework that privileges confessional discourse as liberating. That is, the narrative casts Sam as a figure weighed down by the yoke of secrecy and shame, the imagery of the balled-up paper reinforcing his physical anguish. In interviews with the media, University of Missouri wide receiver L’Damien Washington reinforces Sam’s coming out as a weighted physical act, “I knew something was about to come because of the way he was balling up the paper in his hands. He kept rolling it up....but I didn’t think it was that [coming out]” (qtd. in Branch, 2014). The weight of secrecy is further illustrated through Sam’s statements that proclaiming his sexuality in August of 2013 felt “like a load off my chest” and that he was “scared even though they already knew I was kind of scared of telling them to just to see their reaction” (qtd. in Connelly, 2014).

The relocation of Sam’s coming out back to August of 2013 constructs a juxtaposition between acts and avowal that underlines the confessional frame of Sam’s discourse. Despite the fact that he was engaging in sexual and romantic acts with members of the same sex, in interviews Sam attests he never felt comfortable with his own sexual identity. Sam describes his sexual orientation as a process of discovery in which he knew he experienced same sex attraction at a young age, but was convinced himself of the transitory nature of his identity. For instance in his initial taped interview with *ESPN* Sam affirms, “I didn’t know if it was a phase or something. I wanted to find out who I was and make sure I knew what was comfortable” (qtd. in Connelly, 2014). Following his description that he feared his sexual awareness may be a phase, he

therefore ensured he “didn’t tell anyone growing up” (qtd. in Connelly, 2014). In constructing his sexual actions as disconnected from his public identity Sam’s discourse places gay identity at the moment of confession rather than of action. While this tactic might reduce his sexuality to physical acts alone, it is important to note the separation between sexual act and sexual identity when both are necessary in the formation of gay subjectivity.

As Sam reveals how his teammates were already aware of his sexual orientation, his discourse provides an intriguing juxtaposition between knowledge and confession. *The New York Times* spent a number of paragraphs describing how Sam had previously stated his sexual orientation to Missouri wide receivers L’Damien Washington and Marvin Foster (Branch, 2014). For instance, in its discussion *The Times* wrote, “teammates increasingly suspected as much, and some knew that he dated a man on the university’s swim team” (Branch, 2014). In spite of the unacknowledged romantic relationships teammates Sam did not formally disclose his own identity, but would bring openly gay men around other football players in order to “ask Mr. Washington if that would bother him” (Branch, 2014). Thus, relocating Sam’s coming out through the narrative of his disclosure to his University of Missouri teammates reinforces the subjectivity of Sam through a discourse of confession. Critical philosopher Michel Foucault interprets confession as a powerful discourse in creating gay subjectivity, or as he calls it a “ritual in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement” (Foucault, 1978, p. 61). For Sam, it is not the awareness of sexuality that instigated his fears; certainly members of the Missouri football team were aware of Sam’s sexual identity prior to that moment (Branch, 2014). In his interviews, Sam reflects on the power of transitioning his sexual identity from the level of knowledge to the space of discourse stating “I looked into their eyes and they just started shaking their heads – like he finally came out” (qtd. in Branch, 2014). Hence, it was the act of speaking

to one's identity, of naming oneself in a form of proclamation that carries the greatest threat of expulsion. Through relocating Sam's coming out narrative to the moment he tells his teammates, the mediated discourse of Michael Sam's coming out converts a watershed moment in American Sport to a tried and true trope of confession.

Confession As Transformation

In addition to relocating his narrative, Sam's coming out discourse reiterates a theme of confession as transformational. The coverage establishes a dichotomy between Sam's acts and moving those acts to the realm of speech that implicates the power of confession to transform his discourse. Sam's coming out discourse is steeped in the liberating effects of confessional discourse (Foucault, 1978; Dow, 2001). Even though he was dating a member of the same sex while in college, Sam defended himself saying that "I wasn't hiding it. But I didn't come out neither [*sic*]. It was known knowledge and people [*sic*] just like "ok Michael Sam's gay" and I wasn't hiding my relationship with him but finally coming out to the team made it official" (qtd. in Connelly, 2014). The theme of confession as cementing identity is further reflected in his *New York Times* interview in which he positions his act of disclosure as the site of awareness and ability to claim his sexual identification. Sam insists, "Once I became official to my teammates, I knew who I was. I knew that I was gay. I knew that I was Michael Sam" (qtd. in Branch, 2014). Here Sam not only locates his confession as the site of liberation, but Sam's entire ethos is subsumed at his moment of his sexual proclamation. In essence, the personae of Sam is only rendered intelligible after his confession of sexual identity to the power structure of his Missouri team. While seemingly innocuous, Dow (2001) maintains that the circulation of coming out as a confessional discourse constructs an epistemological framework of authenticity, and reinforces Foucault's (1978) repressive hypothesis. Likewise, Sam's coming out discourse reframes coming

out as not only a revelatory disclosure of a secret, but as a means of constructing and shoring up his total framework of self. Thus, through his act of sexual disclosure Sam emits a process of becoming that signifies gay identity as consummate with one's entire being through and act of confession (Blasius, 2012).

Sam's coming out discourse reveals that liberating effects of confession are not exclusive to Sam, but also extend to those who receive his declaration. Sam's agency of self is ultimately inscribed through his ability to find affirmation with the audience of his teammates. As his narrative takes shape in the media, Sam's coming out is framed as uniting force used to transcend the boundaries of the University of Missouri's 2014 season, ending with a shot at the Southeastern Conference Championship title. In its coverage of Sam, the media frames his disclosure as an activity, which promulgated them to athletic success. *Outsports'* Ziegler went as far as to suggest that the confession was correlated to the team's spectacular season (Ziegler, 2014). The *Los Angeles Times* framed its coverage of Sam's coming out by interviewing Sam's teammates and assistant coaches, Sam's defensive line coach Kuligowski states "[coming out] was one of the things that united them" (qtd. in Baxter, 2014). Likewise, Sam's coming out discourse additionally extends the liberating effect of his confession to his team.

Further, Sam's disclosure is cited as a direct explanation of the on field success. Media coverage frames his senior year as a "singular season" enabled directly by his "open secret" to his team that began with the "nosiest players startling announcement" and ended with "dozens of men standing by their teammate in the national spotlight" (Drape, 2014). This excerpt from the *Los Angeles Times* exemplifies this idea of Sam's confession as creating a source of on field prowess and power:

Instead of turning their backs, his teammates let him know they had his back and a team that had won only two conference games the previous season advanced to the conference championship game, defeated Oklahoma State in the Cotton Bowl and finished 12-2.

(Baxter, 2014)

In this excerpt, Sam's confession not only extends power to the listeners, but also creates a sustaining narrative that confessions liberated the team and endowed them with some miraculous form of sport ability. Dow (2001) finds that confessions of sexual identity in mediated rhetoric create transference of power from the subject to the audience. In the case of Sam, a similar transaction occurs, thus fortifying the power of confessional discourse and affirming the larger hegemonic structure.

Owning One's Story: Contamination & Containment

A third theme from Sam's discourse reveals Sam's repeated desire to maintain ownership of his own story, thereby reinforcing the power of an agent to claim identity through confession. Sam rationalizes the timing of his coming out statement by claiming he felt a desire to "tell his own story" and a consuming need to "own his truth" (*Outsports.com*, 2014). In his initial interviews with *ESPN* Sam justifies his decision to come forward about his sexuality by stating he just wanted "to make sure I can tell my story, I just want to tell my truth" (qtd. in Branch, 2014). In its exclusive long form behind the scenes account of how Sam came out, *Outsports'* Ziegler speaks to Sam's seeming desire to retain ownership of his narrative by stating "the most important element to the entire process has been protecting Sam's ability to tell his story himself first" (Ziegler, 2014). *Outsports* coverage reaffirms that it must be Sam, and not a reporter, who first breaks the story. Consequently, in his *ESPN* interview Sam claims that an individual should be granted supreme authority to claim his own sexual identity because "If someone has

something to say, especially like this, if it's a person's sexuality, I think it's important for that person to tell it and no one else" (qtd. in Connelly, 2014). Sam's desire to tell his own story became a common refrain in the mainstream media coverage that followed his announcement. *The Chicago Tribune* carried direct quotations from his interview with *The New York Times* (Lindner, 2014). At the same time, *The Washington Post* circulated Sam's desire to "tell his own story" claiming that "he didn't back into the revelation or simply hint at it. The Missouri defender and the Associated Press's SEC defensive player of the year said it, owned it, and now stands at the fringe of one of sports' last social frontiers" (Babb, 2014, Feb 10). In this way Sam's coming out statement is framed as discursive form of possession and reinterprets gay identity as a form of object to come into one's possession.

The coming out discourse of Sam represents a dichotomy between concealment and contamination from outside sources. For example, Sam defends the timing of his announcement as means of preventing being outed by others. He claims that he "didn't know how many people actually knew" (qtd. in Wertheim, 2014). He recounts that his original plan was to wait until after the NFL draft, which would then allow him to tell the owner and general manager of whichever team happened to pick him up. However, in his interviews Sam alludes that his secret was properly contaminated by outside forces noting, "knowing two weeks ago how many people actually knew I, we, expected that all the scouts knew" (qtd. in Connelly, 2014). He continues that the media would contaminate his message; consequentially he was "afraid it would leak out without me owning my truth" (qtd. in Connelly, 2014). In his interview with *GQ* Sam explains, "People think the word didn't get out. It did... They kept it confined within our family. But the recruiters knew, and reporters knew, and they talked to each other, and it got out" (qtd. in Corsello, 2014). Sam discursively renders his sexual identity as something that could leak

through the carefully policed boundaries of heteronormativity. Queer theorist David Halperin (1995) recognizes the relationship between spatial metaphors and the language of the closet as “an impossibility of a place: you can’t be in it, you can’t be out of it” (p.34). Likewise, Sam’s language implies the secret of his sexual identity as a contamination of space, thus reinforcing the belief that heterosexuality is a pure, natural, state infected by the external presence of gay identity. Therefore, Sam’s discourse evokes an epistemological privileging of hetero/homo binaries that diminishes coming out as an act of liberation, but of a kind of regulation.

Further, Sam’s reclamation of self is simultaneously tied to a contingent threat from an outside source. Sam’s coming out discourse focuses on the event's timing, both in his choice to make the announcement and in the carefully controlled plan to facilitate the media response. In its exclusive behind the scene coverage of the process leading up to Sam’s announcement *Outsports*’ Ziegler recounts that the “first order of business was the timing” (Ziegler, 2014). Sam originally thought about coming out after Missouri’s Pros Day in late March, but Ziegler felt the timing did not leave enough time between the announcement and the NFL draft. Ziegler argues it was important for Sam to be seen on the field after coming out, and as a result advocated for Sam to make his announcement during the week of February 26 2014 in advance of a Pro Day exhibition game (Ziegler, 2014).

Outsports continued the contamination metaphor of its discourse in describing the desire to stay ahead of the media discussion as “outrunning an avalanche, every day it became apparent that too many people knew what was coming” (Ziegler, 2014). Media coverage of Sam’s coming out focuses on the circulation of rumors found on Columbia, Missouri gay forums alluding to Sam’s sexuality. *GQ* magazine reported that people approached Sam with statements like “I heard you told your team a secret” (Corsello, 2014). During the NCAA’s game for seniors

in college athletics *Outsports* describes how various media outlets performed a kind of knowing wink in repeatedly asking Sam's agents whether his agents had seen lots of women around Sam, or if he had a girlfriend. In the rhetorical performance of passing, and the construction of the closet, queer rhetorical scholar Charles E. Morris III. (2002) reads this kind of subtle acknowledgement of a secret as indicative of the fourth persona. Morris (2002) defines the fourth personae as the "implied auditor of a particular ideological bent" who is capable of acknowledging "the rationale for the closet and possess an intuition that renders a pass transparent" (p. 230). In this case, the media's pointed personal question ruptured Sam's passing, and performed a kind of fourth personae. Sam's publicist is quoted in two separate interviews as saying "It became clear that it wasn't going to hold" and that "too many calls and too many journalists were sniffing around" (qtd. in Ziegler, 2014: Wertheim, 2014a). With Sam's sexuality no longer able to be contained, the announcement was moved up to Monday February 9, 2014.

In castigating Sam's act as something to be contained from external threat, mediated constructions of Sam's coming out reinforce that one's coming out story exists primarily in the act of telling. Rather than feeling motivated to speak out in response to numerous material oppressions faced by members of the LGBTQ community, or bursting through the carefully constructed glass closet of professional football, Sam's coming out is predicated on one main issue: getting ahead of a secret. The *USA Today* rationalizes Sam's coming out as "less about taking a courageous step for gays than it might have been as a necessary preemptive maneuver regarding his NFL prospects, the risk and prospective fallout" (Gegarion, 2014). In this way, Sam's construction of gay identity metonymically reduces his agency to secrecy and shame. In the end, Sam's disclosure subtly reinforces the power of shame and stigma in discourse the discipline the queer subject through speech.

Individual Hardship

In addition to reframing his coming out as a confession, the discourse of Sam also altered the power of his disclosure through repositioning his narrative as a matter of individuals overcoming steep economic odds. Sam's discourse modifies the impact of his narrative as unimportant in the face of previous hardships he previously overcame. For instance, throughout interviews Sam compares coming out with growing up the product of a low-income family, thus coming into social consciousness always wanting and incomplete. The following excerpt from his interview with *ESPN's* speaks to this framework:

I've endured so much in my past, so much tragedy growing up....Seeing my older brother killed from a gunshot wound. Seeing my....Not knowing my older sister died when she was a baby and I never got to meet her. My second brother wen missing in 1998 and me and my little sister was the last one to see him. We pronounced him dead two years later. My other two brothers being in and out of jail since eighth grade, currently both in jail....telling the world I'm gay is nothing compared to that. (qtd. in Connelly, 2014)

Here Sam's discourse shifts his narrative to a rhetorical space dominant audiences find more familiar and more comfortable. Throughout this passage, Sam's ethos as a public figure is directly transposed against the narratives of his brother. This logic seems to suggest that Sam might be gay, but he managed not to fulfill the promise as another criminal black male like his brothers. Critical media scholar John Fiske (1996) interprets the stereotypes of black masculinity as "figured centrally in the dark side of the American dream" and capable of disrupting "the fragility of the white social order and the racial power it exercises" (p.80). Likewise, the focus of his individual endurance through the trials and tribulations brought on by poverty is a story with which sport audiences are likely to be familiar. In later interviews with *The New York Times* Sam

describes his family as “notorious in the town that we lived in. Everyone would say ‘there goes those damn Sam’s” (qtd. in Drape, 2014) His narrative comports to the larger mythic structure perpetuated by sport discourse in framing the sport celebrity as hero in a personalized Greek drama (Smart, 2005). Sam is constructed as the exploited younger sibling struggling among a villainous cast of characters who bring nothing but hardship and despair to Sam and his long suffering mother. In this way, Sam’s ascent is positioned as redemptive.

Media coverage following his statement capitalized on the traumatic backstory and made it a central focus in representing Sam’s coming out narrative to the public. In its telling of Sam’s backstory he is figured as having a “rough childhood” signified through being “raised by a single mother”, added to the fact that “three of his siblings have died, and two brothers are in prison,” in addition to spending years with another family (Branch, 2014). Sam’s family is constructed in media discourse as “known for all the wrong reasons” and that in life Sam never “had it easy” (Drape, 2014). University of Missouri head coach Gay Pinkle is quoted in the *New York Times* as stating, “it doesn’t matter what your background is, we’re all on the same team and we all support each other” (qtd. in Branch, 2014; Pearce, 2014). *GQ*’s cover story diminishes Sam’s coming out in light of his ability to overcome financial difficulties stating, “when you take a good look at the path Michael Sam took to get here – the sleepless nights in the backseat of his mother’s car, the routine beat-downs from his outlaw brothers...coming out seems like the easy part” (Corsello, 2014). During interviews with *The Los Angeles Times* Sam’s former coaches describe his coming out to the University of Missouri football team as ancillary to the discussion of his background and home life (Baxter, 2014). Defensive line coach Kuligowski offers that Sam barely paused after announcing he was gay to discuss his siblings’ death and his brother’s imprisonment. He elaborates, “The part about being gay was all but ignored” (qtd. in Baxter,

2014). Sam's background is positioned as "horrifying" in a "scab of a town" (Corsello, 2014). In Sam's narrative, football, rather than coming out, is positioned as the liberating device and as a "getaway vehicle" in Sam's life (Corsello, 2014). As *The New York Times* put it, "Sam may not yet have known exactly who he was, but he did know what he needed. He needed to play sports" (Drape, 2014). Thus, the media coverage of Sam gives weight to his backstory to fashion a narrative of an individual overcoming adversity and ultimately attaining the height of sport glory.

Aside from positioning Sam in a narrative that dominant audiences will find comfortable, the emphasis on Sam's backstory also paints a portrayal of him as a racialized figure. To illustrate, *GQ* goes to great lengths to describe Sam as a weak and helpless individual:

A boy so afraid of his own home that in summertime, he would walk out his front door before anyone else was awake and then keep walking...and walking, until the light began to fade and it was easier to disappear, unnoticed to his room; a boy so lonely that he would mow the lawn of an elderly neighbor for free just for the sake of the company it brought. (Corsello, 2014)

In this passage Sam is positioned as an isolated figure due to his economic, and thus racial, rather than his sexual circumstances. Sam's coming out story is less a narrative of the closet and its various symbolic oppressions, but a narrative refracted and reframed to comport to a pre-existing racialized salvation narrative (Stoddard & Marcus, 2006). Sam is depicted as a lonely depleted boy given salvation through the almighty doctrine of organized athletics. Media narratives not only paint Sam as helpless, but they reduce his intelligence. For example, *GQ's* coverage tells the story of Sam being unaware of what Division I meant when it was originally suggested to him (Corsello, 2014). In this sense, Sam is depicted through a form of white racial framing which seeks to "rescue weaker people of color" through the mediated depictions of racial figures

as “needy, emotionally troubled, and lacking personal agency” (Feagin, 2010, p. 130). Critical race scholar Joe Feagin (2010) argues that media “select out limited aspects of an issue in order to make it salient for mass communication, a selectivity usually produced in a narrow reading of that issue” (p. 10)., Consequentially, the mediated representation of Sam shifts to reduce his sexual identity in favor of a narrow reading through his race.

The focus of individual hardship over adversity also performs a curious rhetorical function by signifying the rhetoric of choice, thus allowing his gay identity to pass through a carefully constructed web of discourse. For example, *ESPN's* Chris Connelly listens to Sam's tale of his background growing up and responds that his past “could have crushed you” (Connelly, 2014). Sam takes the opening offered to him and elaborates, “I could be in jail, I could be dead, but I made a choice at a young age that I knew I didn't want to follow the path of my brothers” (qtd. in Connelly, 2014). Sam is framed as “taking matters into his own hands” (Bell, 2014, Feb 11). Further, Sam remarks that he “didn't want to paint that ill picture of me. I knew the good in my family. They didn't know our background and the adversity we had to endure. I wanted to succeed” (qtd. in Draper 2014). Sam's discourse circumvents larger structural discourses and presents himself through the frame of an individual making the “choice” to overcome his circumstances and lived experience to attain success. Thus, Sam conditions the acceptability of his gay identity through juxtaposing his narrative with one that American audiences will find more fearful.

Choice is a difficult space in the context of gay and lesbian public discourse. In many cases, homophobic and anti-gay discourse places choice at the center of its rhetorical constructs (Brummett, 1978). As a weapon against gay and lesbian identity, a discourse of choice implies that gay and lesbian individuals are capable of choosing the manifestation of same sex desire;

they can effectively make a choice to be heterosexual. The placement of choice in Sam's discourse evokes an interesting rhetorical strategy in which choice is shifted and signified through a framework that positions choice in light of class oppression, rather than sexual desire. Sam's coming out story does not speak to withhold desire, the shame and stigma of carrying something society tells you is unspeakable. These are seen as secondary to oppressions the sport world is more comfortable engaging, the rags to riches story. Moreover, the frame of choice in the context of class struggle also fortifies the long held structure of the Horatio Alger myth, wherein an individual is able to choose to overcome the economic circumstances around them (Cloud, 1996). Here Sam's narrative is framed as an extension of the bootstrap metaphor and thus is depicted as accessible and permissible by dominant society. Hence, the potentially oppositional discourse of gay identity and gender performance is reshaped, absorbed, and reframed in a context audiences are more willing to accept. Ultimately, Sam's discourse is inoculated from the threat of traditional antigay discourse.

Hegemonic Masculinity & Michael Sam

Finally, Sam's coming out discourse is rendered accessible to dominant audiences through the perpetual framing of Sam through the symbolic representation of hegemonic masculinity. Sam's image as an openly gay NFL prospect threatens to rupture professional football's status as the central space in a carefully composed center of masculine production (Messner, 2002). As such, mediated constructions of Sam's coming out reveal a recasting of his narrative utilizing the tropes of hegemonic masculinity (Trujillo, 1991; Connell, 1987). The hegemony of mediated masculinity depends on an ability to absorb and reframe the challenge presented by Sam in ways audiences are likely to find acceptable. This is primarily achieved

through signifying Sam's physical force and frontiersmanship, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, and symbolic heterosexuality.

Frontiersmanship & Physical Force

First, the mediated discourse of Sam's coming out reinforces the hegemonic masculine trope of rugged frontiersmanship. In this trope, Sam's mediated discourse depicts the football player through carefully crafted frames that shift audiences' perceptions. When asked whether or not coming out has made him fearful Sam refers to himself as a "strong guy" (qtd. in Wertheim, 2014b). He is described as "the toughest guy from the nation's toughest league" ("Sam may be ready", 2014). Media reports frequently mentioned his size and weight clustered around the acknowledgement of his sexuality. In describing his coming out narrative, media emphasize Michael's toughness and the forceful and physical presence of the Southeastern Conference writ large. *The Los Angeles Times* frames Michael's coming out statement as "just like that, one of the toughest players on the toughest team in the nation's toughest conference in college football outed himself to his position coach and teammates" (Baxter, 2014). *The Chicago Tribune* describes Sam in a similar vein in its description that "the 2013 defensive player of the year in the Southeastern Conference, the nation's roughest and best, was a gay man" (Gregorian, 2014). Through its depiction of Sam's rugged and tough exterior the media places him in connection with the symbolism of hegemonic masculinity.

Further, Sam is portrayed through frontiersmanship through mediated portrayals of him as a pioneer. In its coverage of Sam's coming out newspapers continually make reference to Sam as "venturing into uncharted territory" (Ziegler, 2014), "standing on one of the last social frontiers" (Babb, 2014), and entering an "uncharted area of the sports landscape" (Branch, 2014). Sam's ability to dominate uncivilized spaces extended to not only the heteronormative space of

the NFL, but to international borders as well. Sam's coming out occurs just as coverage of the winter Olympics was ramping up. Fittingly, the 2014 Sochi Olympics also became a politicized sporting event as Russia's harsh homophobic legislations and history of human rights violations against LGBTQ people served as a topic of discussion. Thus, Sam's mediated coming out place Sam as conquering the Russian frontier. *The USA Today* heralded Sam's disclosure as a heroic display of U.S. acceptance with "enormous destigmatizing significance" that resonated "all the way to Russia where the government driven antihomosexuality [*sic*] forces gays to be silent at peril or a street beating" (Jenkins, 2014). Here, Sam is positioned in contrast to Putin who insists the winter games are not the time to discuss their human rights. Putin's inability to discuss sexuality signifies his landscape as an uncivilized space, capable of being conquered by the heroic liberalism of Sam's identity declaration. These frames situate Sam's coming out narrative as some kind of western hero, able to boldly go, into the vast wilderness of heteronormativity ahead.

Beyond his tough exterior and pioneer spirit, mediated descriptions of Sam frame his masculinity as permissible due to his ability to activate force onto others. *Sports Illustrated's* feature of Sam refers to the defensive line as "fierce" and "ferocious" (Wertheim, 2014b). When describing his activity on the field, Sam is referred to having "laid ruin" and "terrorizing" his opponents (Bell, 2014, Feb 12; Cohen, 2104). *The Wall Street Journal* refers to Sam as having the kind of senior season that "terrorized opposing quarterbacks" (Clegg, 2014). Likewise, *Sports Illustrated* forewent coverage of the 2014 Sochi Olympics as its cover story, and instead displayed a picture of Michael Sam in his University of Missouri uniform, face construed in a look of intimidation, pointing directly at the camera with the caption "Are you Ready?" (Wertheim, 2014b). This symbolic expression reaches through the two-dimensional

frame of the magazine cover, and fashions Sam's coming out in a pointedly aggressive frame. When reporters questioned why his sexual orientation had not previously become a story during the time in which it was known to his Missouri teammates Michael warns, "I guess they don't want to ask a 6-3, 260 pound defensive lineman if he was gay or not" (qtd. in Branch, 2014). Sam deploys this form of vaguely threatening rhetoric in ways that maintain his ability to access hegemonic masculinity through overcompensation of force.

Not only is Sam's ethos characterized by his ability to activate physical force onto another, he is visually portrayed through symbolic language that supports this interpretation. For example, in his televised interview with *ESPN* the networks supporting footage of Sam is a carefully curated reel of footage featuring the player smashing into other player. On the day it releases the coming out article *The New York Times* features a video attached to the web version of the story in which Sam's interview with reporter is overlaid with B-footage of Sam's various on field sacks. As Sam describes coming out to his teammates the video cuts to Sam smashing into another player, Sam using his body to stop an all important third down drive, and Sam penetrating the offensive line to take down a University of Florida quarterback as a crowd cheers. This footage is tied together with a heavy metal aggressive audio – as if to buttress the forceful frame in which Sam is represented before an audience. As such, the media coverage juxtaposes his disclosure of his sexual identity as external to the framework of physical force; his identity occurs outside the space of his activated body. Through the conditions of active aggression, this discursive frame enables the media to reorganize the perceptual schema of Sam's touch from cultural taboo to something culturally accepted. When taken together, this thematic element presents the coming out of Sam in ways that embeds the discourse of hegemonic masculinity.

Occupational Achievement

Media representations of Sam's coming out also reinforce hegemonic masculinity by shifting the discourse away from his sexuality and towards a framework of occupational achievement. The depiction of Sam's coming out refigures the importance of the event as unremarkable and emphasizes occupational performance as the primary issue at hand. When *ESPN's* Connelly asks Sam how he feels to potentially become the NFL's first openly gay football player, Sam contends that he does not see it that way. He implores, "I'm Michael Sam and I'm a football player. I want to be a football player in the NFL. I understand how big this is...but I want to be a player snapping in the NFL" (qtd. in Connelly, 2014). Michael prefers that his identity remain secondary to the importance of his ability to achieve within the context of his chosen profession. He prefers that his sexuality be seen as something unimportant that "if I work hard if I make plays that all that should matter. Can he help us win games? Is he a team player? That's all that should matter"(qtd. in Babb, 2014). When discussing how NFL teams may see him in the draft he hopes he is not seen as a "gay athlete but that they can see an athlete that knows how to play the game" (Connelly, 2014). Here, Sam discursively creates a pathway towards accepting his gay identity through the conditional discourse of his professional ability.

Likewise, Sam's sexuality is framed as an obstacle to the purity of football culture. Sam inoculates his sexuality through the rhetoric of professionalism and occupational achievement affiliated with hegemonic masculinity. For instance, Sam's interviewers address the long-standing controlling image of the dangerous queer presence in the sacred bonds of a locker room shower (Anderson, 2005). Professional players often express their discomfort with the idea of a gay teammate by deploying the trope of the predatory gay male in the locker room (Messner, 2002). The locker room has long been signified as a purely heterosexual space, and homophobic

discourse seeks to bolster the misogyny of locker room spaces through denying gay identity within its walls (Kian & Anderson, 2009). As such, Sam qualifies his behavior in the following excerpt:

My teammates accepted me, we showered in the locker rooms together. There was no, it was never a problem. As I've said it's a business workplace and we have to act professional. I know I'm not. I've never been attracted to my teammates because I don't want that problem. I mean...ugh..I had a relationship that wasn't with a football player. He was an athlete, but he wasn't a football player because I don't want any problem. (qtd. in Connelly, 2014)

Here, Sam gains passage for his gay identity through the sublimation of his sexuality in favor of his occupational identity. Sam establishes a dichotomy between ensuring audiences that he does not see the gender of his teammates but rather sees them through the frames of their professional status as football players. The passage creates a distinction between his sexual attractions to athletes and the perpetual fear of the predatory gay man in the locker room. Sam performs a kind of disavowal of attraction to football players, thereby maintaining the purity of the heteronormativity of football through occupational achievement. Sam describes the locker-room as first and foremost a “workplace” (Connelly, 2014). Thus, Sam constructs a discursive identity in which one’s occupational desire and professionalism are capable of rendering his homosexuality acceptable.

Likewise, in its depictions of Sam’s coming out, the media is quick to ensure the definition of Sam is less about sexuality and more about his occupational competency. In the days following his announcement the media narrative shifts from celebrating a watershed moment to couching the historical viability of Sam’s achievement when compared to his

professional abilities. *The USA Today* listed Sam's coming out as merely the latest in trend and juxtaposed his statement with other LGBTQ identified athletes like professional basketball players Britney Griner and Jason Collins, as well as soccer's Robbie Rogers ("Football Player Latest in Trend", 2014). *The LA Times* writes that there was "no need to dwell on sexual orientation any more than we need articles on which hand a player shaves with" ("Let Games Complaints Begin"). In interviews with former players about Sam's coming out, media tended to frame Sam as only wanting to talk about football and that his sexuality is ancillary to his ability to stop drives. *The Wall Street Journal* reduces the various complications and questions about homophobia in the NFL down to whether or not Sam can win games with the headline "He's gay but can he play?" (Farmer, 2014, Feb 11). The media reiterates that the question was less about whether or not the NFL was ready to handle its culture of homophobia, and that the issue at hand was primarily about athletics. Sports narratives tend to reinforce the ideologies of colorblindness or the demonstration of the insignificance of social identity categories (Leonard, 2004). These narratives position the discourse of sports figures as part of an inevitable march towards progress in ways that overshadow the realities of systemic oppressions (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Likewise, Sam's discourse displays a type of colorblind logic, a *queerblind* discourse capable of silencing Sam's sexuality and making it invisible and insignificant before dominant audiences.

Accordingly, the NFL released a statement circulated by every major newspaper that supports this idea, remarking that "Michael Sam is a football player. Any player with ability and determination can succeed in the NFL" (qtd. in Plessero, 2014). NFL draft analysts were brought in to comment on Sam's playing ability and hoped that Sam would only be "evaluated as a football player" (Bell, 2014, Feb 12). Beyond shifting the focus of the narrative, media coverage of Sam not only frames his sexuality as unimportant, but also subtly implies that his professional

credentials made him unsuitable to suit up with a major NFL program. Two executives in personnel for NFL teams were quoted in *The USA Today* that Sam was likely a low ranking prospect to begin with (Knapp, 2014). The media frame Sam as unable to attain the status of elite athlete, but was merely a “really good football player” (Clege, 2014). Here Sam’s coming out is repositioned as something that does not matter, and that his athletic or occupational ability should be separated from media hype. To illustrate, the *USA Today* hopes “his stock remains what it would have been without the breaking news” (Bell, 2014, Feb 11). Perhaps most tellingly *The Chicago Tribune* quotes one AFC executive who commented “We’re in a new era of football where stuff like this is becoming part of the fabric of society. The bottom line is, can the guy play” (Gregorian, 2014). Likewise, *The New York Times* situates the debate over Sam to be a “question of ability, not orientation” (Shpigel, 2014). This use of occupational recasting not only downplays Sam’s identity as a seemingly insignificant issue, but also manages to negate any larger social political context from the discussion. Thus, through its emphasis on occupational achievement the mediated construction of Sam’s coming out reinforces the hegemony of his gender performance.

Familial Patriarchy

Fourth, hegemonic masculinity privileges familial patriarchy in ways that reinforce the unquestioned power of masculinity (Connell, 1987; Trujillo, 1991). Similarly, the symbolic representations of Sam’s coming out in the media grounds Sam’s ability to maintain the hegemonic patriarchy at play within sport culture. As Sam’s announcement circulated in media coverage, several articles juxtapose the message with recent controversies of bullying and hazing in the Miami Dolphins locker rooms (Farmer 2014a, Farmer, 2014b; Shpigel, 2014). At the same time, the NFL released a 148-page report detailing homophobic comments and bullying in

its investigation of locker room practices. These reports offer a symbolic representation of coming out as potentially threatening to the presumed patriarchy at play within the NFL. As such, mediated discourse of Sam, and others in support of his presence in the NFL, made pointed references to Sam's ability to remain tacitly complicit to the hegemony of sport. For instance, in his initial *ESPN* interview Sam is asked whether he would be willing to play for teams like the Minnesota Vikings with reportedly homophobic coaching staff. Sam's response that he would "play for whoever drafts me. Whoever picks me up in the draft is the team I will play for" reflects a performance that bolsters his desire to let the dominant power structure of heteronormativity remain intact (Connelly, 2014). In this case, the hegemon is not required to adapt to growing times to attract its best and brightest talent, rather its power and force is directly dependent on its ability to gain consent of those most likely to be oppressed, in this case gay identified athletes.

Media coverage of Sam's coming out substantiates the unquestioned patriarchy of Sam's discourse. In its desire to treat Sam just like any other player, the media rationalize other forms of hegemonically masculine behavior. For instance, the openly gay, and former NFL defensive back, Wade Davis tells *The USA Today* that Sam welcomes any kind of masculine specific hazing related to his sexuality:

He [Michael Sam] understands he not only has to protect himself, but protect his teammates, protect them so when one of them does say something that the world may deem inappropriate, he knows that it's just something a brother would say. There are ultimately things that my sister or my cousin says to me that the rest of the world would be like, 'Wow, that's really awful.' But there's a camaraderie and a fellowship that you have amongst teams, and Michael understands that. (qtd. in Plessero, 2014b)

Davis's remarks, as Sam's self-described mentor, reflect the kind of discursive strategy epitomized revealed by hegemonic masculinity. These remarks circumvent the threat of Sam's sexuality to dominant order by reiterating Sam's ability to be a team player. Here, the need to "protect" his teammates is a synecdochal representation of his ability to maintain the complex structures of masculine patriarchy. In positioning Sam's ability to maintain silence about the oppression he potentially faces in his locker rooms as a desire to preserve the brotherhood, Sam's discourse fulfills the tenets of familial patriarchy found in hegemonic masculinity.

Heterosexuality

Finally, the hegemonic masculinity of Sam's mediated representations is evidenced through the tenet of heterosexuality. Trujillo (1991) argues that hegemonic constructions of masculinity require figures to adhere to a strict set of procreative heterosexual practices. At initial glance, one might presume that Sam's discourse would be unable to fit within this qualification. Through mediated discussion, Sam's sexuality is invisible in ways that facilitates his promotion as a heterosexual figure. This is primarily presented through presenting Sam's performance of his sexuality as atypical. In his initial interviews with *The New York Times* Sam suggests teammates "just couldn't believe I was actually gay" (qtd. in Branch, 2014). In its recounting of Michael's first meeting with his agents Joe Barrett and Cameron Weiss, *Outsports* funnels Sam through a similar depiction. For example, when Sam initially discussed his orientation with his agents, they are quoted as saying "there's no way this guy's gay" (Ziegler, 2014). These utterances help paint the picture of Sam as closer to the dominant norm of heteronormativity due to his inability to be seen through the hegemonic frameworks of typical homosexuality. Therefore, Sam's near-heterosexuality allows him to appear acceptable to a dominant public.

In addition, Sam's homosexuality is further rendered insignificant, and therefore closer to heterosexuality, through his continued isolation from the larger political frameworks of gay identity. *Outsports'* coverage of Sam ensures his depiction as decontextualized from the larger politics of gay identity. Sam's publicist Howard Bragman insisted that "Michael is a football player, not an activist" and detailed how Sam's media team reached out to various LGBTQ organizations to make it clear Sam would be unavailable for comment or commentary after coming out. *Outsports* went as far as to frame Sam as different from other out athletes, explaining that "Jason Collins and Robbie Rogers have been readily available to lend their voices to various LGBTQ organizations, that won't happen with Sam"(Ziegler, 2014). In public interviews Bragman further distances Sam from the perception of political activism stating, "If you start showing up at too many dinners and too many parades you start to send the message to a potential team about his priorities. The community wins when he steps onto an NFL field onto as the grand marshal of a pride parade" (qtd. in Ziegler, 2014). This message from an openly gay publicist during the first public statements about Sam's sexuality belies a larger strategy to ensure he is framed as an apolitical figure.

The most curious element of Sam's coming out discourse is its lack of sex. Sam manages to identify publically with a non-normative sexual desire without signifying the role and force of his desire in his life. His coming out statements speaks only passively about desire, and even then is signified as ephemeral and through the metaphor of a phase. Representations of homosexuality in dominant media are known to reflect a form of depoliticized and desexualized framework (Gross, 2001; Walters, 2001; Shugart, 2003b). These representations present the gay individual as "devoid of gay social and political contexts" and thus are "capable of being wholly grafted onto heterosexual communities and contexts" (Shugart, 2003b). The rhetorical

positioning of Sam as isolated from their larger LGBTQ political community fosters similar capabilities. In its depiction of Sam's coming out the media representations figure Sam alone, and without communal connection of the gay community. As a football player for the NFL his acceptability is directly in proportion to his ability to be seen as isolated from larger material and political struggle, thus constructing a version of gay identity capable of being separated from the larger political community. Overall, through its desexualization and political isolation mediated constructions of Sam's coming out facilitate the heterosexual function of hegemonic masculinity.

Conclusions

Through the emphasis on confession, containment, individual hardship, and framing through hegemonic masculinity, the discursive themes of Sam's narrative proved capable of adapting the presence of an openly gay football player under a strict set of conditions. Sam's repeated desire to tell his own truth reveals important notions about the role of disclosure in the importance of developing gay and lesbian identity. Initially, Sam says that he wants to tell his story, a desire to tell his own truth. However, through his mediated representation his discourse is bifurcated and dissected; his narrative is not presented in any semblance of cohesive narrative structure. He fails to frame his "story" in any form of narrative quality. In essence, while he may desire to tell his own story, the medium through which his story is told ensures his discourse fails to retain a sense of narrative coherence. Thus, Sam's direct statements and subsequent media coverage situate the act of coming out at the moment of the telling rather than the act of being. In perpetuating a theme of ownership to his story Sam swaddles his identity in the discourse of disclosure, as though the utterance somehow encompasses all that is within it. When Sam speaks of telling his story, he is referring to the story of his disclosure, and not providing some insight into the complex lived experience of his life in the closet. His story is nothing more than the

telling of who he is, rather than how he came to be. Audiences are exposed to a representation of gay and lesbian identity that is located solely at the site of identification, and not rooted within any act or expression of desire; as though Sam's coming out expresses all that is and all that could be of gay and lesbian identity.

In sanctifying Sam's coming out as anything but a political act, mediated constructions of his coming out ensure that LGBTQ identity remains disconnected from the power of personal politics. Through its discourse, Sam's coming out suggests that gay identity is capable of separation from gay politics. In his reading of gay men in popular culture Brookey (1996) proclaims that the acceptability of homosexuality is dependent on the support of an "established economic and ethnic hierarchy" (p. 410). Likewise, through his coming out narrative Sam is presented to the public in ways that do not threaten the larger political and economic hegemony of dominant society. Cloud's (1996) understanding of hegemony as it relates to ideology proposes that the appropriation of bits of opposition to domination tokenizes certain identities. Ultimately, Cloud (1996) proposes that this symbolic conditioning of oppositional power weakens the ability for working class publics to collectively identify and form coalitions to resist dominant social order. Despite the symbolic power of LGBTQ identified public figures in shaping political action, their mediated representations displays frightful implications for how the larger LGBTQ public discourse may be separated and segregated from queer activism.

Further, the process of critical rhetoric asks critics to engage not only the presence of discourse revealed through rhetorical criticism, but what is absent from the discourse (McKerrow, 1989). Curiously, what is absent from both Sam's direct discourse and his subsequent representation in mediated coverage is an intersectional perspective that reckons the multiplicative identity as both African American and someone who identifies as gay. First

articulated by the Combahee River Collective (1975) intersectionality elaborates that systems of oppression are incapable of being isolated into mutually exclusive identity categories; one is never simply black *or* male *or* gay. Rather, intersectionality proclaims that identity and system of oppression produce multiple, complex, and layered forms of identity for nondominant groups that are incapable of being singularly defined. It in the framing of Sam through the lens of hegemonic masculinity it is vital to note the absence of Sam's race or racial identity. As the critiques of hegemonic masculinity suggest, gender relations and by extension sexualities are incapable of being disentangled from sociopolitical contexts of race and class (Messerschmidt, 2013). In its media coverage Sam is presented as disconnected from the larger LGBTQ political contexts, but his racial connections and communities are never mentioned. Sam's gay identity is never placed in context of how it impacts his racial identity, nor is he allowed discussing how his racial identity forms a unique experience within the LGBTQ community. Thus, in depicting Sam's racial identity as secondary to his sexual identity this analysis suggests that hegemonic masculinity also requires a tenet of whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995) to construct an ideal masculine figure.

Despite the high profile attention and media coverage brought on by Sam claiming his gay identity, Sam's football career proved to be unsuccessful. While he was eventually drafted as a member of the St. Louis Rams as the overall 249th pick during the seventh round, he failed to make the official roster of any NFL Team². However, his coming out narrative was successful in allowing the hegemony of heteronormativity and gender performance to adapt to the challenge presented by an openly gay NFL prospect. Sam's announcement was long awaited, volumes of

² After failing to make the roster in St. Louis, Sam was later picked up by the Dallas Cowboys to play on their scouting team. Again, prior to the start of the regular season in 2014 Sam found himself left off the roster.

both academic and popular literature are devoted to the mere speculation and possibility of what an openly gay NFL player *might* do. His pronouncement is supposed to illuminate the complex matrix of masculine hegemony that continues to silence and stigmatize those who fail to adhere to the razor thin confines of acceptable gender roles. The declaration of an athlete in a professional team sport as gay is supposed to queer the color line of professional football, and allow the sport its very own Jackie Robinson narrative (Butterworth, 2006). Instead, Sam's coming out allows dominant culture to recast his discourse into predetermined and prescribed narratives. Thus, the threat Sam posed to masculinity, heteronormativity, and dominant structures writ large can be contained, inoculated, and ultimately reduced to nothing more than chatter. Moreover, the public presence of Sam's sexuality in discourse allows the hegemonic frameworks of sport and masculinity to remain intact, enabled by illusion of acceptance without structural support. Through his coming out rhetoric, Michael Sam provides a cautionary tale to ensure the continued complicity of heteronormative discourse in perpetuating the silence and shame of those ensconced in sport's carefully constructed closets.

CHAPTER 5

ANCHORING THE CLOSET

“For years I tried to compartmentalize my life, distance myself from the world I was reporting on. This year, however, I realized that this is not possible. In the midst of tragedy, the memories of moments, forgotten feelings began to feed off of one another.” (Cooper, 2006, p. 5)

In his 2006 *New York Times* best selling memoir, *Dispatches From The Edge*, CNN anchor and daytime talk show host Anderson Cooper describes an inner turmoil, a conflict in which his professional and personal identities wage war. Cooper portrays a battle over his worldview, a prolonged campaign over his perception of the day’s news and events. One wonders, what is this “forgotten feeling”, so sudden and new, that “feeds off” Cooper like some figurative parasite. Even in the midst of Cooper’s overt reference to global tragedies, queer rhetorical critics might raise a collective eyebrow at Cooper’s covert insinuation of tensions. These passages become part of a series of strategic silences uttered by Cooper to erect a carefully conditioned glass closet.

Shortly after the publication of Cooper’s memoir, *Out* magazine (the highest circulated gay monthly magazine) featured a cover story on “The Class Closet” a detailed analysis of why “the stars won’t come out and play” (Musto, 2007). For its cover, *Out* displayed a male and female pair, clad in expensive suits, which place paper masks of Cooper and actress Jodi Foster over their faces. Both Cooper and Foster shared the position as the subjects of intense speculation as to their sexual identities. The implication of the image, and the subsequent article, exposes public figures whose presumably queer private lives are largely off limits from public

discussion by journalists. As long-running rumors speculated Cooper's practice of privately traversing the landscapes of LGBTQ identity but refusing to publically identify as gay, Cooper drew particular ire from LGBTQ media (Musto, 2012; 2005). In discussing the phenomenon, high-powered LGBTQ publicist Howard Bragman offered this colorful bit of commentary:

“There's the openly gay, the gay and everybody knows it but nobody talks about it; the married, closeted gay who doesn't talk about it; and the screaming I'll sue you if you say I'm a gay person. In other words, the no closet, the glass closet, the cast iron closet and the closet you get buried in.” (qtd. in Musto, 2007).

Bragman's categorization, and use of the term glass closet, speaks to a larger phenomenon in the relationship between LGBTQ identity, coming out, and mass mediated discourse. Namely, Bragman evokes the discourse of silence, shame, and heteronormativity that condition rhetorical performances of passing in the way public figures come out.

Cooper's closet would not last for long. In the summer of 2012, the silver haired CNN anchor known for his on the ground coverage of Hurricane Katrina and host of *Anderson Cooper 360* confirmed what others had long suspected. Cooper publishes his coming out letter in the form of an email to an alternative news blog *The Dish* owned and operated by an openly gay journalist. The editor of the blog, Andrew Sullivan, is widely known for mixing journalism with political commentary. Earlier that month an *Entertainment Weekly* cover story shed light on the new methods of coming out espoused by modern actors and actresses, and Sullivan sought out Cooper's commentary on the subject (Harris, 2012). In response, Cooper sends an email to Sullivan announcing: “The fact is I'm gay, always have been, always will be” (qtd. in Sullivan, 2012). Thus, in a simple sentence Cooper silenced years of rumors regarding his sexuality, while concurrently unleashing a media firestorm determined to make Cooper's admission newsworthy.

Cooper's announcement offers a unique rhetorical performance of coming out rhetoric. The suggestion that Cooper has "always" been gay suggests a deeper occluded reading to his discourse; if Cooper has always been gay, than what is to be made of his previous silence on the subject? In this regard Cooper's visibility and public presence prior to his announcement marks the circumstances of his discourse as distinct from that of Michael Sam. As discussed in chapter four, Sam's coming out became the access point into public awareness and celebrity, whereas Cooper's celebrity is well established. Moreover, if his sexuality is indeed a "fact" than does his published letter function as a coming out text at all? Hence, Cooper's so-called coming out discourse invites further inquiry into coming out discourse, and the rhetorical performance of passing related to LGBTQ identity.

While originally conceptualized in the contexts of racial and African American identities, passing is generally defined as "being accepted for something one is not" (Blackmer, 1995, p. 50), however critical cultural scholars engage the term to arrive at a variety of rhetorical and ethical concerns. In critical legal studies, Randall Kennedy (2001) theorizes passing as "a deception that enables a person to adopt certain roles or identities from which he would be barred by prevailing social standards" (p.1). Thus, Kennedy offers an understanding of passing through moral and ethical frameworks. Likewise, gender and philosophy scholar Kelby Harrison (2013) situates the closet and passing as two distinct ethical constructs in which the LGBTQ agent must choose between self-protection and community existence. Critical rhetorician Marcia Dawkins (2012) understands passing as a uniquely rhetorical element as a "series of rhetorical intersections where tropes and identifications meet texts, personalities, social situations, categories, and hierarchies" (xi). Dawkins traces passing within the tradition of a sophistic conceptualization of rhetoric. Dawkins offers that passing is "about using rhetoric to grapple

with crises of meaning produced when images, identities, and categories diverge” (Dawkins, 2012, p.9). To the extent that passing involves the adaptation of speakers and audiences to disparate social and political contexts through the selection of symbolic exchanges, passing necessitates rhetorical analysis. This dissertation explores the discourse of coming out by public figures, an ontological shift in which audiences are asked to revise previously held schemas of how they interpret the personae of a celebrity. Thus, in the case of Cooper’s well-styled glass closet, it is imperative to understand how passing and performance affect the discourse of coming out of the closet.

As discussed in chapter two, critical and scholarly attention largely focuses on case studies of celebrities as a means of understanding mediated representations of LGBTQ identity. While previous case studies analyze the mediated coming out of television celebrities and athletes to elucidate the problematic narratives of LGBTQ identity, Cooper’s ethos as a news anchor and status as a journalist requires further analysis. Given the news industry’s frequent posturing as a protective fourth estate, as well as its continued insistence on pursuing public interests, Cooper’s public identification as an openly gay journalist offers a unique vantage point from which to understand the relationship between LGBTQ identity and the public. Specifically, Cooper’s coming out offers inquiry into how media conventions represented in media content, situate sexuality and institutional practices of journalism. Considering the institutionalized patterns of media, Cooper’s sexual disclosure signals a shift in media conventions. Thus, this chapter seeks to understand how Cooper’s position as a journalist affects his coming out.

This chapter is based on a close textual analysis of Cooper’s coming out discourse as facilitated by his published letter to *The Dish* on July 2, 2012. In addition, this analysis is based on close critical examinations of media coverage in popular print media throughout the month

that followed Cooper's disclosure. To create a data sample for the analysis of media sexualities, articles for inclusion were selected through a targeted search of the *Proquest Newspaper* database using the terms "Anderson Cooper" and "coming out" between July 1 and August 1, 2012. To best encompass the national newspaper coverage of Cooper's event, articles included in the analysis were selected from newspapers with the highest circulation including: *USA Today*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Independent* and *The Boston Globe*. Articles that did not directly pertain to Cooper were removed from the sample to result in a total of 53 newspaper articles and opinion columns related to Cooper's sexual identity. In addition to print articles, coverage of ABC News, *The Dish* and *Out Magazine* were analyzed to reflect additional media narratives. Because Cooper's narrative represents a rhetorical work in progress, only those discourses immediately following his initial coming out statement were included for analysis.

Through a close critical reading of Cooper's coming out discourse and the subsequent media coverage, and the theoretical frameworks of queer theory and passing, this chapter argues that Cooper's coming out is less an articulation of LGBTQ identity and more a performance of passing. Through his carefully constructed glass closet Cooper shrouds himself in a rhetoric of passing to distance himself in popular heteronormative consciousness, thereby enabling his passing performance of the closet. To illustrate this argument, this chapter positions Cooper in the newsroom closet and in the politics of passing, before analyzing the discourse to arrive at several critical implications.

Scholarly Context: News Norms & Identity Politics

The Formation of the News Closet

To explicate the phenomenon of a journalist coming out of the closet, it is imperative to situate how the closet is negotiated within the news business over time, as well as how the closeting of journalists affects LGBTQ coverage. As described in chapter two, the closet is a powerful metaphor for understanding the discourse of shame and secrecy ensconced in LGBTQ identity. Ethnographic researcher Tony Adams (2011) describes the interrelated conditions that make the closet possible stating: “the closet begins to form when a person recognizes that same-sex attraction possesses a marginalized social status in that it is not practiced or validated by the majority of a population” (pg. 45). In the context of the news business, the creation of the closet is abetted through additional layers of normative and hegemonic systems; in order for a journalist to come out of the closet, the space must be metaphorically and socially constructed for them. For example, newsroom practices, routines, and professional standards contribute to the formation of a discursive space that requires journalists to remain silent on their sexual identities.

Initially, news media and news production is predicated on a heteronormative bias which positions heterosexuality as the presumably natural, default, state. In his definitive study of gays and lesbians in the news media, Edward Alwood (1996) claims that “the widespread antigay attitude in news coverage has been rooted in a structural bias of the media, one that causes journalists to favor the established power base and defend the status quo while shunning the perspectives of those who are politically powerless” (pg. 7). This preference for the status quo conditions the sublimation of journalist’s personal and political, identities. Beyond that, media routines reinforce the status quo and discourage difference and change partly because they are means that become ends. In these approaches professional practices encourage journalists to equate objectivity with the version of events offered by officials (Schudson, 2002). For instance, through in-depth interviews, Jensen (1996) analyzes news editor’s decision making in printing

wedding announcements of LGBTQ couples in the 1990s. Editors chose to include LGBTQ issues, and cover LGBTQ people, in the newsroom on the basis of tolerating a perceived deviance in order to simply report on happenings within local communities. Jensen explains, “news decision are always political, framed by a system of power based on unstated assumptions about the social, political, and economic order” (pg. 16). These assumptions are reminiscent of heterosexism, which is defined as “the belief that a particular complex of culturally defined sex and gender roles is natural, and that all other configurations are unnatural” (Gross, 1988, p.193). The lack of parity between the presence of minority journalists and minority coverage is experienced by a variety of subgroups. For instance, newsrooms that have a high percentage of female journalists tend not to report on female issues or use women sources any more than male-dominated newsrooms (Craft & Wanta, 2004). Accordingly, scholars suggest that demographic divergence in the newsroom is not the same as difference “in experience that yield difference in thought and action” (Glasser, 1992, pg. 133). Hence the cosmetic presence of diversity in newsrooms does not always equate to differences in content. Adhering to the heterosexist status quo interpolates gay and lesbian journalists through a nefarious web of symbols that constrain their autonomy to speak publicly about their sexuality without fear of retribution.

Professional Standards

Aside from a heteronormative bias, professional norms and standards also work to keep LGBTQ journalists within tight discursive frameworks. Through institutionalization certain behaviors are subordinated through what Foucault (1972) calls “governing rules” (p.47). In the case of media practices, Alwood (1996) suggests that the myths of neutral observer, objectivity, and autonomy contribute to the prevention of positive LGBTQ coverage in news. Building from Gans’ (1979) sociological perspective, Alwood argues that news proceeds from a “heterosexual

assumption” which creates a set of unwilling ignorance based on the lived experiences of the mostly heterosexual, white, newsroom (pg. 8). Hence, by creating standards of normalcy in which all journalists are presumably heterosexual, governing rules of journalism renders all forms of identity outside the boundary of heteronormativity as a form of political action. As a result, coming out is prevented by a controlling desire to appear politically neutral. As news organizations should be committed to fighting oppression wherever it is found, Jensen (1996) asserts that attempting to avoid the political ramifications of oppressive social systems is counterproductive to journalistic ethics.

Interviews with television journalists have revealed that in the early 1970s LGBTQ journalists faced admonishment, fear, and termination once “their lifestyle” was discovered. For example, journalist Juan Paulo lost his job at the *Houston Post* when he attempted to come out in a story about a local gay bashing (Hicks & Warren, 1998). When the story of Paulo’s firing became a point of contention in the alternative Houston media, the editor of the *Post* rationalizes the act through journalistic discourse stating, “the best interests of *The Post* come before the personal agenda of an individual” (qtd in Gross, 1993, pg. 150). Besides adding personal color to news stories in the 1970s and 1980s journalists were fired for participating in gay pride parades, or other actions editors felt damage the objectivity of the news organization (Alwood, 1996). This form of censure is in accord with the ethics of professionalism, codified in the Professional Journalist Code of ethics that dictate, “journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public’s right to know” (SPJ, 2014). While such codes are voluntary and are rarely invoked in the public discourse of media ethics (Singer, 2003), many journalists are penalized for taking part in political demonstrations and advocating for causes. However, when a

journalist's identity is deemed a political act, does the need for public knowledge outweigh the appearance of obligation to interests?

According to Alwood (1996) news-industry wide efforts to increase diversity led to the hiring of more minority journalists. This encourages the field to explore the conditions necessary to encourage diversity, or at least the perceptions of it, within the newsroom. For example, in 1990 a historic report by the American Society of Newspaper Editors reveals the presence and oppressive treatment encountered by gay and lesbian journalists at the hands of editors and colleagues (Ghiglione, MacLuggage, Aarons, Stinett, 1990). With the publication of the study several news editors and journalists came out of the closet and established the National Lesbian and Gay Journalist Association (NLGJA). In his study of media constructions of the closet Larry Gross writes, "Lesbian and gay journalists all over the country were beginning to open their closet doors by revealing their sexuality in the newsrooms" (Gross, 1993, pg. 150) The NLGJA held its first conference in 1992 with over 300 members from various cities. High profile speakers including *New York Times* publishers and managing editors of *The Washington Post* heralds a sense of legitimacy for the cause (Gross, 1993, pg. 151). This ethos of out gay and lesbian journalists, as well as the epidemic of AIDS, necessitated a seismic shift in coverage during the mid to late 1990s.

The construction of the newsroom closet is further enacted through historical ambivalence as to whether a journalist speaking publicly about their sexual status is a boon or a bane. While gay journalists potentially offer an enhanced perspective on gay issues, editors feel frequent discussion of gay issues may require journalists to disclose themselves to their newsrooms and to their readers (Eddings, 1994). An editor of the *Miami Herald* describes the potential benefit of open sexuality in the newsroom as an openly gay journalist brings "a skill

and an ability at dialogue with the people being covered, and source and knowledge of the community” (qtd. in Eddings, 1994). However, editors also explain that negative reaction to sexual disclosure of a journalist potentially hinders the bottom line and could affect job security (Eddings, 1994). Conversely, out journalists run the risk of having their professional identities trivialized through a process of tokenism in which minority voices are granted the ability to speak through finite and rigid conditions (Cloud, 1996). In a study of diversity in the news room, de Uriarte (1994) remarked that the struggle of building minority perspectives, like gay and lesbians, in the newsroom catches minority journalists in a double bind because “media-decision makers often seek to duplicate themselves” and “minorities are hired for their ability to fit in rather than to provide new or diverse voices” (pg. 173) Media ethicists have considered the problem of coming out as a dichotomy between an individual’s of the need for privacy and the societal requirements of visibility (Hicks & Warren, 1998). Hicks and Warren (1998) interview gay and lesbian journalists on their reasons for coming out and how this act affected their professional lives. Curiously, when asked individually, the journalists frame coming out as an act of responsibility to the LGBTQ community. Conversely, when journalists are asked about coming out in groups they rationalize their actions solely in terms of journalistic ethics. When taken together the convergence of negative representations, material concerns, and journalistic norms create a condition in which journalists, like Cooper, are placed within a closet and thus necessitate the act of coming out.

The issue of how a reporter’s sexual identity affects the ability to function within professional standards is the subject of a small body of scholarly literature. For broadcast journalists, like Cooper, the medium of television does not allow for the same anonymity as print, hence suggesting increased challenges and danger for an out news anchor (Eddings, 1994).

Pierson (1982) argues “gay reporters and editors believe they must stay in the closet to keep their jobs, and that their fear of being perceived as gay inhibits them from making suggestions about covering stories about gays” (pg. 25). For instance, the closeting of journalists created systems of silence in which issues such as discrimination, same sex commitment ceremonies, and gay rights protests were blacked out by *The New York Times* and other major newspapers (Bernt & Greenwald, 1993). Through this perpetuation of the newsroom closet, “gays and lesbians continued to appear abnormal and threatening to the public” (Alwood 1996, pg. 12). As a result, LGBTQ journalists trade on their ability to “pass” (Shugart, 2003a) by maintaining a vacuum of silence on their sexuality and avoiding information on the gay and lesbian community for fear of being outed. This chapter examines the glass closet of Cooper as well as his public statements, to scrutinize how professional standards of media and journalism condition his coming out rhetoric.

The Discursive Passing of Anderson Cooper

Using the theoretical frameworks of queer theory, critical rhetoric, and passing, this analytical chapter engages a critical reading of Anderson Cooper’s discourse to explore his coming out performances. The intersection of coming out and the rhetorical performance of passing by LGBTQ public figures is a fertile site of inquiry for critical scholars. For example, Shugart (2003) reads the performance of Ellen DeGeneres prior to and following her coming out through the strategic rhetoric of Ellen’s aesthetic self-presentation, or what Shugart calls conjecture, deflation, and juxtaposition. Whereas Shugart’s (2003a) reading of Ellen prior to and following her coming out discourse explores the diffusion of sexuality, Cooper’s case of coming out allows the discussion of LGBTQ performances of identity, and passing, at the site of identification. In addition, rhetorical analysis of media texts also encourages an initial close reading of the texts to “observe general macro level themes” (Hardin et. al., 2009). In this,

Meyers' (1996) textual analysis evaluating newspaper coverage of domestic violence serves as a useful guide to uncovering textual devices that iterate a "commonsensical" meaning that "reveals society's predominant assumptions, values, myths, and stereotypes" (p. 13). Specifically, I argue that the rhetorical performance of Cooper's coming out enable him to pass simultaneously as both gay and straight and thus maintaining the hegemonic status quo. This chapter explores Cooper's discourse through Shugart's understanding of conjecture, deflection, and juxtaposition related to LGBTQ passing.

Conjecture

As a means of understanding the rhetorical performance of passing, Shugart (2003) defines conjecture as an enthymematic function within "the premise of heterosexist presumption insofar as it invites an audience familiar with the codes of dominant discourse to reject that conclusion" (p. 36). Thus, in absence of direct statements of one's sexuality, conjecture allows dominant audiences to dismiss conflicting visual representations of Cooper under the safety of heteronormativity. In other words, Cooper's performance allows dominant audiences to reject his identity as an LGBTQ figure in favor of a passing straight identity. This is primarily facilitated through discursive themes of public/private dichotomy, the signification of Cooper as already gay, and the trivialization of coming out.

Public/Private Sex Split

A central theme of Cooper's discourse constructs LGBTQ identity as something relegated to privacy, and therefore not privy to public attention. Queer theorists Laurent Berlant and Michael Warner (1998) argue heteronormativity depends on the policing of boundaries between public and private intimacy, as well as fantasies that shield heterointimacy and effects the "demonization of any represented sex" (p.550). Likewise, Cooper's discourse constructs gay

identity as something consigned to the private sphere. For example, the form and format of the text reinforces the theme of privacy; Cooper's entire coming out letter is literally framed as a private exchange between himself and journalist Andrew Sullivan. In his *Daily Beast* blog post, Sullivan references an *Entertainment Weekly* cover story on the "New Art of Coming Out" (Harris, 2012). In the article, *Entertainment Weekly* discusses the "more restrained and matter-of-fact" methods of disclosing sexual identity than previously thought possible (Sullivan, 2012). As a result of the article, Sullivan asks his longtime friend Cooper to comment on the subject and informs the readers that Sullivan has permission to post Cooper's "email in response" (Sullivan, 2012). It is significant to note that Cooper does not make a formal interview, press release, or publically positioned statement to the media. Rather than arranging the article as an exclusive interview with Cooper, Sullivan publishes his blog post as a frame tale that discursively brackets Cooper's statement. For example, Cooper's letter begins mid-conversation, as though he and Sullivan are in the middle of an exchange that somehow goes public. In light of Berlant and Warner's theory on the need to keep queer identity private this kind of bracketing assigns LGBTQ discourse to the private sphere, something only capable of being "revealed" to the public. Hence, Cooper's discourse is positioned as a private exchange, made public through the role of an intermediary, and therefore ensconced in privacy rhetoric.

The relegation of LGBTQ identity to private discourse is reinforced in Cooper's direct rhetoric. Cooper begins his statement by drawing a tight boundary between his public personae and his private self. In stating "even though my job puts me in the public eye, I have tried to maintain some level of privacy in my life" (qtd. in Sullivan, 2012). Cooper's need for privacy is motivated by "purely personal reasons" that are outlined as oppositional to public discourse. Cooper's desire to retain privacy reinforces the public/private sex split defined by Berlant and

Warner (1998). For someone in the public eye, this dichotomy may appear a natural distinction to make, however, Cooper describes his need for privacy in ways that belie larger ideological commitments. Consider the following passage:

I've always believed who a reporter votes for, what religion they are, who they love, should not be something they have to discuss publicly. As long as a journalist shows fairness and honesty in his or her work, their private life shouldn't matter. (qtd. in Sullivan, 2012)

In this excerpt, Cooper signifies his LGBTQ identity through an occluded reference to who he loves, while concurrently relegating LGBTQ identity to the private sphere in ways that shield heteronormativity and demonize public discussion of human sexuality. Moreover, in framing his sexuality in the same context as political and religious identities Cooper situates LGBTQ identity as something upsetting to public sensibilities. Decorum, or the rules and symbols systems that dictate normative, provide frameworks that induce social cohesion and inscribe power (Hariman, 1992). Systems of decorum often prohibit the discussion of political or religious matters in favor of avoiding heated discussion. However, queer scholars Kimberlee Perez and Daniel Brouwer (2010) situate decorum as an ever-present tension in queer embodied spaces; the desire to speak is silenced by internalized systems of norms and normalities that prohibit speech. By placing his sexuality alongside the categories of religious and political affiliation Cooper constructs discussion of LGBTQ identity in public as unbecoming of appropriate decorum for the public sphere. Hence, Cooper's discourse manages to reinforce the banishment of queer public discourse to the private, closeted, sphere.

In addition, Cooper consigns his LGBTQ identity by emphasizing that his sexuality shouldn't be something of public consideration. Throughout his letter Cooper reiterates this part

of his life “shouldn’t matter” and that in a perfect world “I don’t think it’s anyone else’s business” (qtd. in Sullivan, 2012). Cooper claims that he has “always very open and honest about this part of my life with my friends, my family, and my colleagues” (qtd. in Sullivan, 2012); thereby restating that LGBTQ identity should remain retained to the private sphere. However, in establishing his sexual orientation as something not worth discussing, Cooper’s coming out subtly suggests sexuality is something not pertinent to public discourse. Rhetorical theorist Dana Cloud (2007) argues that the right to speak in public “on matters of importance has long been the prerogative of propertied white males; subaltern subjects have fought for access to these spaces of public, instrumental political agency” (p. 26). In other words, to negotiate political agency the normative elements of public discourse encourages further consideration to the various barriers placed on subaltern identities in achieving access to public discourse. Put bluntly, in the context of reading Cooper’s coming out, queer theory reminds us “that privates are public and political” (Cloud, 2007, p. 26). The sublimation of the personal and the political into a shroud of public silence throughout Cooper’s rhetoric buttresses dominant ideology from potential critique and discussion. In downplaying his sexual identity, Cooper invites audiences to engage in a conjectural performance in which they are allowed to dismiss his sexual orientation as a purely private matter.

Subsequently, media coverage of Cooper circulates the theme of LGBTQ identity as private. In its discussion of Cooper, print media outlets articulate a performance of gay identity that reinforces hegemonic understanding of public and private spaces. For example, *The Wall Street Journal* describes Cooper’s sexual orientation as “neither shameful or secret, just something he preferred not to belabor in public” (Taranto, 2012). This discursive fragment depicts Cooper as a preferred interpretation of how LGBTQ identified people ought to be

properly behave in public discourse; speak subtly if not at all. The use of the term “belabor” positions Cooper in opposition to unnamed figures that willfully force their identities as never ending points of discussion. The logic seems to go that keeping one’s sexuality private is the more acceptable performance. The strongest example of signifying sexuality as a private matter comes in the form of *The USA Today*. The paper writes, “Anderson Cooper has gone public with a private aspect of his life” (Clark, 2012). In this passage, the sublimation of LGBTQ identity to the private sphere is apparent through the transitory metaphor. As Cooper “goes public” with the private aspect of his life, media discourse dissolves the conditions of the closet and heteronormativity that shrouded Cooper’s previous identity. Thus Cooper was never closeted, he was simply private. *The USA Today* fails to call Cooper’s act one of coming out, and instead represses sex to the realm of closed doors. As such, mediated discourse encourages audiences to reject the conflicting codes of Cooper’s identity, and therefore facilitates conjectural passing.

At the same time, headlines asked “Anderson Cooper’s gay, but is it any of our business?” (McAteer, 2012), thereby calling into question the appropriateness of the entire discussion. Newspapers carry quotations from celebrities like, Mia Farrow who explain, “in a perfect world I don’t think it’s anyone’s business” (qtd. in McAteer, 2012). As Cooper’s narrative received scrutiny in the media, *The Wall Street Journal* defends Cooper’s statement asking, “who is the media to tell Cooper how to think about what is, after all, his private life” (Taranto, 2012). In addition, journalists discuss Cooper’s sexuality as a decidedly private matter and rationalize that “reporters, like all over-sharers on Facebook, are increasingly public individuals, tweeting and posting pictures of their private lives” (Houpt, 2012). For example, *The New York Times* printed a letter to the editor expressing “I can fully appreciate why public people maintain their privacy regarding their sexuality” (“Coming out of the closet: Letter”,

2012). At the same time, letters to the editor question “Why would anyone care or need to know the sexual orientation of another person? I remember when personal privacy was respected and not questioned” (“Open Forum”, 2012). Consequently, in absence of direct identification, Cooper engages the performance of conjecture and is allowed to pass as straight by a dominant audience. Furthermore, by framing Cooper’s sexuality as a private matter diametrically opposed to public awareness, mediated narratives of Cooper’s coming out fail to recognize the power of heteronormativity in shaping public image. Through signifying LGBTQ identity as private, the media ensures that queer agency lacks political access to public discourse, and by extension power.

Already Gay

As previously mentioned, Cooper qualifies his coming out statement by claiming that he “always has been” gay, thus raising larger questions as to how an audience is to understand Cooper’s performance of coming out. Cooper’s statement encourages further inquiry; if he was always gay, than how might one interpret his previous silence on the subject. Herein lies a second nuance to Cooper’s discourse as a performance of passing, namely that Cooper’s personae is cultivated through media coverage as an already LGBTQ figure. *The New York Times* describes Cooper’s sexual orientation as an “open secret” known to many in the media for a long time, and that he was concerned with being known as “the gay anchor” (Stelter, 2012; “Cooper Comes Out”, 2012). *The Los Angeles Times* advances this perception, explaining Cooper “never publically confirmed that detail about his private life before, but he’s never denied it either” (Day, 2012). Media coverage of Cooper observe his identity as a complex game of “is he, or isn’t he”, mentioning that Cooper “has been keeping us guessing for years” (McAteer, 2012), or that he is “confirming a rumor that had been circulating about him for

years” (“Anderson Cooper Comes out, 2012). *The Wall Street Journal* exemplifies this rhetorical theme in its pronouncement that Cooper is “also openly gay, although apparently he said so publically for the first time” (Taranto, 2012). In framing Cooper as an already gay identified figure prior to coming out, media discourse negates the performance of Cooper’s coming out statement all together.

The depiction of Cooper as an already gay figure is further evidenced by refusal to acknowledge the media’s role in facilitating Cooper’s performances as a passing heterosexual. A reporter for *The Globe* notes the anchor “has been appearing at public events for years with his long-time boyfriend, finally acknowledging in a mainstream publication a fact about his life that had already been covered extensively elsewhere” (Haupt, 2012). Despite public appearances with partners of the same sex, and non-dominant media coverage to that effect (Musto, 2004), media still refuse to acknowledge Cooper’s identity without an explicit unequivocal statement. The best example of Cooper’s cultivation as an already gay figure comes from *The New York Times* which circulated a quotation from a former CNN executive that claims “our operating assumption was that anybody who cared already knew, and that most people didn’t care” (qtd. in Stelter, 2012). Even LGBTQ organizations like the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) gave interviews with *The Times* indicating that “prior to coming out publically, Anderson’s terrific work has raised awareness” (qtd. in Stelter, 2012). In his analysis of gay Hollywood, David Ehrnstein (1998) describes the dichotomy between gay figures and the press as “whether the private lives of [public figures] should remain veiled by the fourth estate long conditioned to disregard evidence of same-sex orientation, even when it was unfolding before its eyes” (p. 106). Without explicit confirmation, dominant audiences are allowed to reject

the image of Cooper riding his bike through New York City alongside his boyfriend, in favor of his passing heterosexual identity.

Of course Cooper was not already openly gay, but instead engaged in a highly constructed discourse of passing. By virtue of never directly confirming or denying his sexual orientation, and creating a fixed binary between his so-called public and private lives, Cooper benefits from the aesthetic presumption of heteronormativity. In his letter, Cooper describes how he “stuck to those principles” even when directly asked “the gay question” (qtd. in Sullivan, 2012). In spite of this supposed silence about his private matters, Cooper is rather vocal about other aspects of his personal life not pertaining to sexual identity. His 2006 memoir *Dispatches From The Edge*, which Cooper defends as “a book focused on war, disasters, loss, and survival” (qtd. in Sullivan), is in fact a deeply personal account in which his personal tragedies are directly juxtaposed with professional activities. In the memoir Cooper shifts from national disasters to stories of his upbringing, often within the same paragraph (Cooper, 2006). Despite claims of privacy, in the book Cooper is deeply personal in regards to his father’s death, and a detailed account of his Brother’s suicide. Prior to the July 2 letter, Cooper’s public persona silences his sexuality under the auspice of privacy, while turning up the volume in every other arena of his life. Hence, Cooper performs a passing straight identity through conjecture and maintains the hegemony of the closet.

The signification of Cooper as an already gay figure performs a unique function to the understanding of coming out as an act of rhetorical discourse. Through the discourse of identification, coming out involves a kind of ontological shift after which a subject is interpolated to new ways of being. Cooper’s letter, and its subsequent circulation in mainstream media outlets, is his first performance of LGBTQ identification, and thus threaten to shift his

audiences' perceptions. Thus, to mitigate the threat to the heteronormative culture of both audiences and the media industry, Cooper's coming out is interpolated through the conjectural framework of passing. By undermining his coming out statement, and reinforcing the open secret of his identity, Cooper's coming out narrative constructs an LGBTQ identity that allows him to pass as both gay and straight, therefore inviting audiences to reject the image it finds least palpable.

Trivialization

Aside from ascribing sexuality as private, and signifying Cooper as an already gay figure, the media coverage of Cooper's coming out trivialize his statement by insisting it simply was not momentous. For instance, in a report on a growing trend for retailers to "become a lot less closeted" and openly court LGBTQ consumers, *The Wall Street Journal* reports "Americans increasingly are likely to shrug off news that a celebrity is gay, as happened recently regarding Anderson Cooper" (Talley, 2012). Some print media report on social media reaction and describe the public as "unsurprised" (Sanina, 2012). *The New York Times* characterizes this reaction stating, "the TV nation seemed to shrug" (Stelter, 2012), and portrays his announcement as "eliciting more yawn than gasps" (Frank, 2012). *Times* journalist James McKinley concludes, "coming out is just not as controversial as it once was" (McKinley, 2012). Journalists question the relevance on the reporting of any public figure's sexuality asking, "why is that the news" (Timson, 2012). Thus media texts downplay both the significance and the public reaction to Cooper as a means of preserving the performance of passing.

In addition, Cooper is celebrated not only for the lack of controversy caused by his announcement, but also for the manner in which he reveals his sexuality. The media credits Cooper for coming out "gracefully" (Timson, 2012), and for stepping out of the closet

“carefully” (de Moreas, 2012). Media reports describe Cooper’s announcement as “blithe, correct, clear in places, but on the whole uninteresting” (Prickett, 2012). The trope of trivialization performed by the media is best encompassed by *The New York Times*, which maintains “the goal is for talking about homosexuality to be largely unnecessary” (Frank 2012). In a primetime broadcast, ABC News exemplifies this trend arguing “Not too long ago if a celebrity came out as a gay American it meant magazine covers, talk show appearances, but now if CNN anchor Anderson Cooper is any indication, more and more celebrities are choosing a defiantly mellow, matter of fact, understatement” (Moran, 2012). The signification of Cooper’s coming out as “careful”, “matter of fact” and “understated” invites audiences to reject his performance as LGBTQ, therefore trivializing the impact of coming out and encouraging a passing identity.

Further, the media belittles Cooper’s statement through repeated jabs, and comedic frames. For example *The Washington Post* observes, “It’s time for Anderson Cooper to come out...as possibly overpaid” (Collins, 2012). *The Wall Street Journal* illustrates this theme by clowning, “earlier this week, a prominent gay man, Anderson Cooper, revealed a shameful secret: he works for CNN” (Taranto, 2012). Other media outlets found fodder in Cooper’s announcement. *The New York Times* public editor ridicules CNN’s poor fact checking by tweeting, “CNN is reporting that Anderson Cooper is straight” (McAteer, 2012). *New York Daily News* offers, “for those that think this is an issue, they are probably watching Fox News anyway” (Chen, 2012). In contrast, media also point to the audience as a subject of humor and claim “There were actual people who were surprised when Anderson Cooper came out” (Arpe, 2012). In addition, *The Huffington Post* features a cover story on its homepage entitled “14 things more shocking than Anderson Cooper coming out” which compares the newsworthiness of Cooper’s

announcement alongside Chris Brown earning bad publicity (Luippold, 2012). Shugart (2003) understands humor as a passing strategy designed to affirm a desexualized, and thus safe, LGBTQ identity. Thus, these comedic illustrations illuminate a larger attempt by the media to reduce the significance of Cooper's public LGBTQ identity, and by extension, allow dominant audiences to reject the conflicting cues of his passing performance.

The repeated insistence that Cooper's announcement is lacking in shock value, or even newsworthiness, is somewhat undercut by the devotion of valuable news space to covering the issue. If Cooper's coming out is not considered news, let alone newsworthy, it stands to reason it should not have garnered such mainstream media attention. Yet, there is Cooper, splashed across national newspapers and the subject of a three-minute long ABC primetime news broadcast (Moran, 2012). Therefore, the persistence in discourse that Cooper's sexuality is "no more of a big deal" (Taranto, 2012) is perhaps a vehicle for a larger ideological framework. Cooper's coming out discourse represents an ideology of post-sexuality in which one's personal identity is privatized and rendered insignificant, a new kind of queer blindness. To the extent that the media functions as a form of public agency, the importance of putting sex into public discourse provides a unique opportunity to institute social change. Therefore, dominant discourse seeks to reduce the symbolic power of coming out by trivializing its expression in public. Celebrities and media figures are vehicles for the production and negotiation of ideology (Dyer, 1979), hence coming out serves as a threat to dominant social order by undermining the heteronormative assumption through which public figures are interpolated. As a result, the conjectural performance of Cooper's coming out circulated by the media fosters a growing ambivalence towards interpreting public figures as anything other than heterosexual.

Deflection

Shugart (2003) theorizes that LGBTQ passing conditions the performance of deflection in public discourse. Shugart defines deflection as enabling celebrities to “sidestep the issue” of sexuality by dramatizing distance and awkwardness regarding sex and desire (2003, p. 39). This obfuscates the discourse of identity and allows individuals to deny a clear association with either straight or queer identities. In Cooper’s emergence from his glass closet deflection is evident by the rhetorical themes of professionalization and media logics.

Professionalization

The formation of the newsroom closet conditions silence on behalf of LGBTQ journalists under the guise of professionalism (Gross, 1993; Eddings 1994). Throughout Cooper’s discourse he maintains a similar justification for his closeted identity due to his desire to retain his professional principles. He relates his undisclosed sexuality as an attempt to “retain some privacy for professional reasons (qtd. in Sullivan, 2012). He states he prefers to “stick to my job of telling other people’s stories and not my own” (qtd. in Sullivan, 2012). The rationalization of Cooper’s closeted identity through a discourse of professionalism implies that the sexual orientation of a reporter, much less a news anchor, is somehow at odds with their role as a journalist. Cooper states “I found that sometimes the less an interview subject knows about me, the better I can safely and effectively do my job as a journalist” (qtd. in Sullivan, 2012). Here, Cooper deflects from his passing performance by reinforcing the necessity of the closet. In this way, Cooper cultivates a perception of LGBTQ identity at odds with journalistic standards.

As quoted earlier, Cooper augments these statements by advocating he “always believed that who a reporter votes for, what religion they are, who they love, should not be something they have to discuss publically” (qtd. in Sullivan, 2012). This sentiment is ironic, considering he is frank and up-front about other aspects of his life that could potentially damage his career in both

the publication of his 2006 memoir, including the thick descriptions of his brother's suicide and his family history of alcoholism, as well as his foray into the world of daytime talk show. Media sociologist John Soloski (1990) argues professionalism is an instrument of controlling behavior, as well as affecting the reporting process. Soloski suggests professionalism is tied to an ideology of public good motivated primarily by seeming to perform a "service to society" (1990, p. 210). Therefore, Cooper's continual avowal of professional standards as oppositional to his sexual orientation reveals a framework of deflection through which his passing identity is permitted.

In its construction of Cooper's coming out, the media supports his deflection across a continued theme of professionalism. News stories characterize Cooper's statement as keeping "his sexuality private to protect those close to him, and also to blend in as much as possible in dangerous situations" (McAteer, 2012). Amidst this thread, fellow journalists discuss their own sexualities as it pertains to Cooper. A case in point, a *Chicago Tribune* opinion piece entitled "The Myth of Objectivity" allows journalists the opportunity to dispel the notion that sexuality is incompatible with journalism stating "Brian Williams is a straight white man. Barbara Walters is a straight white woman, these facts inform who they are, what sources they seek out, what social circles they travel in and what slant they present in their stories (Baim, 2012). *The New York Times* acknowledges, "for one of America's best known television news anchors to be identified as gay was, until very recently, seen as a potential career-killer" (Stelter, 2012). Absent from this discussion was the acknowledgment of other news anchors like Don Lemon, Thomas Roberts, and Rachel Maddow whose sexuality have long been matters of public confirmation. Thus, in rationalizing Cooper as adhering to professional standards, the media supports the deflection away from Cooper's passing identity.

Media Logics

Despite insistence that he was not ashamed of his LGBTQ identity, the timing of his announcement, plus the conventions of news production reveal additional examples of Cooper's rhetorical passing through deflection. First, the timing of Cooper's announcement deserves speculation. Cooper made his announcement on the Friday before a national holiday, or "TV's take out the trash day" (de Moraes, 2012). Media routines establish conventions for the delivery and dissemination of news content, and journalists understand the convention of publicizing unpopular information at times when the public is least likely to pay attention, i.e. a national holiday. *The Washington Post* justifies Cooper's announcement in the following excerpt:

Cooper's announcement appears to have carefully, cautiously, timed: the day before a national holiday – known in the TV industry as take out the trash day – is when potentially hot-and-maybe-not-in-a-good-way [*sic*] news is unveiled, in hopes that lots of people are on vacation and won't notice." (de Moraes, 2012)

This text deflects attention away from the issue of Cooper's sexuality and towards the logics of how media routines and conventions came to shape his text. Regardless of Cooper's intention, it is likely Cooper is aware of the convention of announcing potentially unpopular news before a major event. In this way, media coverage of Cooper's coming out functions as a kind of fourth personae, an implied audience capable of exposing the performance of passing (Morris, 2002). Morris (2002) argues these implied auditors of passing discourse are capable of rendering a pass visible. The rupture of Cooper's passing by the media only enhances the argument that Cooper's coming out is rather a continued performance of passing.

Media coverage further deflects from addressing the issue of Cooper's identity by promulgating the idea that Cooper's coming out was a ploy to boost ratings. Some outlets note the unique timing of Cooper's announcement just "days after his network posted the lowest

ratings in 21 years” (“Cooper comes out”, 2012). Meanwhile, *The Washington Post* reports Cooper has “nothing left to lose” (de Moraes, 2012). Media analysts question whether the timing is simply an attempt to drum up interest in his personality for his low rated talk show. During a taping of NBC’s *The Today Show* host Natalie Morales asks a panel, including former daytime talk show host Star Jones, to respond to the news of Cooper’s announcement. Jones expresses cynicism about the motives behind the move and questions, “He’s a daytime talk show host and when the ratings slip in daytime, the hosts tend to tell you lots of things about them. I remember Oprah said she smoked crack. Oprah said she was pregnant at 14 and considered suicide. There are times that you generate information for ratings.” (qtd. in Morales, 2012). Jones’ suggestion points to the ways in which Cooper’s discourse is read through a skeptical frame by the larger media. For instance, *The New York Post* describes low ratings as “making Anderson Cooper so desperate for attention, he surprised no one by coming out as gay” (Peysner, 2012) In situating Cooper’s coming out narrative as a ploy, or tactic, from which to profit, the media engages in a deflection that allows Cooper to pass. At question in these discourses is not the presence of a queer identity in a heteronormative space, but instead the circumvention of debate about the motivation for this presence.

Second, Cooper’s coming out is exemplary of passing because he deflects attention away from his identity through his mediated silence. Initially, the media space in which Cooper publically identifies himself as “gay” is significant. At the time of his statement, Cooper not only occupies a prime time chair on one of the top television news networks, he also commands his own personal daytime talk show. These spaces could serve as potential vehicles for Cooper to address lingering questions, as Ellen DeGeneres did in her own television show (Dow, 2001), or create new symbols of queer identity. Instead, Cooper chooses to make his declaration in a space

disconnected from his professional identity. It is significant to note that Cooper's coming out is published as a correspondence with fellow gay journalist, Andrew Sullivan on Sullivan's alternative news blog *The Dish*. Cooper's strategy to avoid using either of his own media platforms relegates his LGBTQ identity to secondary status. Indeed, Cooper's talk show would not go live again until September, creating even fewer opportunities for his sexual identity to be brought up in the context of his professional performance.

In addition, the silencing of Cooper through his lack of accessibility only further implicates Cooper's coming out as exemplary of passing. According to Cooper's representatives, Cooper was on assignment in Botswana after his announcement, and thus was unavailable for interview requests. Whereas other public figures have followed their announcement with cover stories, sit down interviews, and in-depth analysis, Cooper publishes his letter then immediately sequesters himself. *The Washington Post* noted that Cooper was "avoiding all the subsequent interview requests and online debates. CNN said he would not be back on his prime-time program until Thursday" (de Moraes, 2012). Representatives at CNN gave no comments in regard to the story (Chen, 2012), and executives denied further interview requests, thus creating distance between Cooper's announcement and their professional brand (Stelter, 2012). Morris (2005) argues this kind of silencing functions "as a collusion of sorts between the powerful and the marginalized" (p. 266). Morris' (2005) treatment of passing in queer discourse allows renewed focus into the value-neutral positioning offered by Cooper. Likewise, Cooper's silence points to a larger tactic related to closet rhetoric, and by extension coming out. Morris attests silence "amplifies and often stands for the broader currents of discourse such that rhetorical situations are ripe for strategically disingenuous and double-voiced performances" (p.267). As such, following the emergence of his discourse as a self-identifying

gay male, the virtual disappearance of Cooper from mediated space represents a similar collusion to ensure audiences are able to maintain Cooper's passing performance. Through professionalization and media logics Cooper's performance signifies a deflection to create distance between himself and his mediated personae, thus allowing him to continue to pass as heterosexual.

Juxtaposition

A third condition of passing in the discourse of Cooper's coming out involves juxtaposing Cooper with alternative representations to cultivate a normative persona. Shugart (2003) theorizes that the trope of juxtaposition functions "by virtue of establishing a foil" against which LGBTQ figures "emerge as normal" (p. 41). For Shugart (2003), these "foils" come in the forms of juxtaposing a queer figure with the more outrageous characterizations of dominant culture. Cooper's coming out not only requires analysis of his coming out texts, but also encourages critics to engage the paratexts (Gray, 2010) that frame Cooper's juxtaposition. In the case of Cooper visual and textual discourse juxtapose the news anchor against warzone imagery, outing, and the politics of neoliberal visibility.

On the Battlefield

Initially, the passing performance of juxtaposition is manifest through the visual renderings of Cooper amidst dangerous and war-torn backdrops. For instance, the opening image accompanying Cooper's coming out letter to Sullivan features Cooper standing before a large battlefield. The foreground of the image features a large tank traversing a ravaged field, presumably on its way toward battle. With the tank in the foreground, Cooper stands, hands on defiant hips, and angled toward the destination of the tank. With this kind of visual representation the personae of Anderson Cooper is juxtaposed against an extreme form of

heterosexuality, namely, that of international violence. Once established, Cooper repeats this juxtaposition throughout his discourse. The space of his discourse is depicted through his experience with international conflicts. He states “being a journalist, traveling to remote places, trying to understand all walks of life, telling their stories, has been the greatest joy of my professional career. I hope to continue doing it for a long time to come” (qtd. in Sullivan, 2012). Media coverage reiterated this juxtaposition. For example, ABC News portrayed Cooper as “the guy in the war zone, or the hurricane, or in the studio reporting the news with a unique earnestness and passion” while showing background footage of Cooper running down the streets Haiti carrying a wounded child after a devastating earthquake (Moran, 2012). Cooper’s closeted identity is rationalized as something necessary to “protect those close to him, and to blend in as much as possible in dangerous situations” (McAteer, 2012). These performances establish Cooper in the context of extreme markers of heterosexual masculinity, and thus allow him to pass.

In addition to Cooper’s direct discourse, *The Dish* juxtaposes his letter with a tribute to Cooper’s work that further facilitates Cooper’s passing. Davis and Needham (2009) encourage critical scholars to broaden the parameters of textual analysis to include those parallel texts, or paratexts, which surround the understanding and interpretation of discourse. Likewise, the video accompanying Cooper’s letter, titled “Anderson Cooper’s most dramatic moments”, is described as “a collection of his best moments leading up to his announcement today that he is gay” (Sullivan, 2012). These moments range “from dragging a child to safety in Haiti, to being attacked in the streets of Egypt, and telling off a Senator” (“Anderson Cooper’s Most Dramatic Moments”, 2012). Along side these paratextual frameworks, Cooper emerges as “normal” through the juxtaposition of his identity with major international and geopolitical conflicts. For

instance, the video features various situations in which Cooper throws himself into action. After the fallout of an earthquake in Haiti, Cooper finds a child with bloody gashes protruding from his head. Cooper stops, and without pause, lifts the child into his arms and proceeds to run him to a nearby medical tent. The video cuts to a scene from Cooper's coverage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 wherein he verbally attacks politicians for congratulating themselves for their handling of the crisis. The video then shifts to Cooper reporting from a darkened hotel room during the Egyptian revolution of 2011. He faces the camera and explains, "journalists don't like to become part of the story, but they have been made part of the story" ("Anderson Cooper's Most Dramatic Moments", 2012). Gray (2010) reveals audiences make sense of mediated representations through interacting with paratextual images and narratives surrounding those events. As such, audiences are encouraged to understand Cooper through heroic and aggressively masculine contexts to render his sexuality as "normal". This performance ultimately functions to allow Cooper to retain his passing identities.

Further, the depiction of Cooper placing himself in the midst of the action during his stories also juxtaposes Cooper's sexual identity against the backdrop of journalist objectivity in ways that allow him to appear normal. In his coming out letter, Cooper admonishes the idea of reporters becoming part of their own stories; he justifies his closeted identity through similar tropes. However, the framework through which audiences understand Cooper is directly at odds with his proposed personae. Audiences readily witness his actions as he places himself, both literally and figuratively, at the center of his reporting. Thus, a dichotomy is formed in which Cooper's seeming inability to remain neutral in his reporting is juxtaposed with the disclosure of his sexual orientation. As a result Cooper's to passing LGBTQ identity becomes acceptable to dominant audiences.

Neoliberal Visibility

While Cooper's warzone imagery evidences a performance of passing through juxtaposition, this condition is also discernible by the enactment of neoliberal notions of visibility. Neoliberal political philosophy involves a radical shift away from state centered recognition to an internalized, privatized, ways of being. Critical media scholar Katherine Sender (2006) identifies neoliberal politics as a shift "from authoritarian government to individual responsibility" (p.136), and promotes a privatized internalization of surveillance and learned helplessness. Hence, neoliberalism relates to hegemony by helping to govern society at a distance through discourse (McGee, 2005). In the context of gender and sexuality neoliberalism evokes an ethos of authenticity rather than agitation and material struggle against the state (Sender, 2006). As discussed by queer theorist Lisa Duggan (2002), neoliberal politics upholds heteronormative institutions "while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (p.22).

In the case of Cooper, passing is produced by comparing his discourse of neoliberal authenticity with more aggressive forms of material activism so as to depict Cooper's identity as normal. Cooper's discourse frames political change through identity, as opposed to action. For instance, he describes that the "tide of history only advances when people make themselves fully visible" (qtd. in Sullivan, 2012). Cooper claims the timing for his announcement came at the behest of recent high profile cases of LGBTQ bullying and teen suicide. In facing the problem of "too many incidences of bullying of young people, as well as discrimination, and violence against people of all ages", Cooper believes there is "value in standing up and being counted" (qtd. in Sullivan, 2012). In this excerpt, Cooper frames LGBTQ political action through a neoliberal identity politic, one in which the mere pronouncement of identity is conceived as

antidote to the material conditions of heterosexist oppression. Warner (1993) calls this kind of “post-gay rhetoric” that “appeals to those gay men and lesbians who were least happy to be political in the first place” (p.76). Meanwhile, when compared to more radical activism, audiences perceive Cooper’s action of visibility as more palpable and therefore situate a juxtaposition that allows Cooper to pass.

In addition, Cooper’s juxtaposition against activism is perceptible through his continual insistence that he is “not an activist, but a human being and I don’t give that up by being a journalist” (qtd. in Sullivan, 2012). Because the nature of the pass is relevant to sexual identity, Cooper frames himself against an extreme form of queer activism so that his passing gay identity is legitimized. For example, Cooper states that it is not part of his job “to push an agenda, but rather to be relentlessly honest in everything I see, say and do” and that he has no desire to “promote any cause”(qtd. in Sullivan, 2012). Media coverage reiterates this performance calling it a “quiet form of activism” (Moran, 2012). It is significant to note that the foil for acceptable gay identity in this case is a material form of queer politics. Shugart (2003) reasons that these performances are capable of generating resistance through ambiguity, however in the case of Cooper his continued construction of the closet questions this interpretation in an era in which sexuality is a non event in American popular culture. In their analysis of neoliberal visibility rhetoricians Johnson and Perez (2014) understand neoliberal discourse as a conceptual shift in which private, individual, issues become the issue of the public. Thus through the discursive representation of Cooper discourse creates a public in which “private lives are commodified and consumable and a domain that relies on public figures as role models” (Johnson & Perez, 2014, p. 202). Thus, if coming out is to simultaneously establish what it means to be LGBTQ in the

social political moment (Grindstaff, 2006), then Cooper's coming out manages to exchange the political power of queer identity for a ineffectual passing social identity.

Finally, Cooper's passing identity is discernible through the juxtaposition of Cooper against a moral obligation to come out. NBC's *The Today Show* opened its segment on Cooper by asking if "there is a certain obligation now or celebrities to make their sexual preferences known" (Morales, 2012). In a three-part debate in its opinion section *The New York Times* asks whether or not there is a "moral obligation to come out to combat homophobia? Or do gay stars have the same right as anyone else to keep their romantic lives private" (Dubro, 2012). In the forum, *Daily Beast* editor Kate Arthur understands Cooper as part of the problem and desires a more radical answer to "why it's important for gay celebrities to come out of the closet" (qtd. in Dubro, 2012). As depicted in the mass media, LGBTQ identity builds on the model of racial identity. As a result, sexual orientation is situated as essentialist characteristic pervading over every individual choice (Signoreli, 1993, pg.121). Larry Gross's (1993) foundational analysis of outing public figures suggests this practice is realized in celebratory, political, or communal frames. In addition the lack of gay and lesbian role models encourages the media to speculate on the sexuality of queer figures as a means of building public morale. Gross (1993) argues that what is significant about the outing of public figures is that their everyday lives constitute a discourse that affirm a heterosexual assumption. He declares, "the pseudo-real lives, endlessly circulated by the gossip media, are cultivating the images and undergirding the ideology that oppress gay people" (pg. 129). Due to the use of their private lives to shape narrative discourses that naturalizes heterosexuality, celebrities can be held accountable for the images they promote, thus must come out of the closet.

Conversely, publicist Howard Bragman, who ironically makes a living helping public figures come out, frames Cooper's action as a "personal choice, not a moral one" and does not see the obligation of LGBTQ public figures have to be visible in the public eye (Bragman, 2012). More pertinent to the present analysis, Bragman equivocates the obligation to be out in the following passage:

If we suggested that gay celebrities have a moral obligation to come out, then any celebrity would have the same responsibility to acknowledge any hidden situation whose disclosure could theoretically help society. The heartbreak of psoriasis? Do a public service announcement. A victim of sexual abuse? You need to go talk about it on "The View." (Bragman, 2012).

In this excerpt, juxtaposition is apparent by the equivocation of coming out with announcing a physical ailment or sexual trauma. Throughout Bragman's defense coming out is paralleled with such extreme characterizations so as to render the practice normal by comparison. What is missing from Bragman's discussion is the understanding that unlike psoriasis, the hegemony of heteronormativity conditions the power of the closet by stigmatizing LGBTQ identity in shame and symbolic annihilation (Gross, 2001). In light of this juxtaposition, Cooper's passing identity as neither in nor out of the closet is legitimized.

In its discussion of Cooper the media reignited a debate over the moral implications of coming out, and by extension outing others. In its coverage of Cooper, the discourse insinuates Cooper was outed by the media. For example, *The Chicago Tribune* implies, "it took an entertainment weekly cover story about gay celebrities to prompt the newsman to finally come out" (Day, 2012). In discussing his coming out narrative Cooper is represented as "dragged from the closet by the media" (Day, 2012), or seen as a victim of a "coordinated campaign to out him

by users of the Gawker gossip website” (Jones, 2012). The U.S version of *The Guardian* goes as far to suggest Cooper was “bullied into coming out” (Keller, 2012). In response, LGBTQ identified journalists answered these claims. Gawker’s Brian Moylan writes that he “didn’t regret outing Anderson Cooper” (Moylan, 2012) in his 2004 article for *Gawker* “Anderson Cooper is a giant homosexual and everyone knows it” (Moylan, 2004). Michael Musto, the author of the original “Glass Closet” piece in *Out*, defends his depiction as outing Cooper in his village voice column (Musto, 2012).

The symbolic ethical battle of outing is nothing new. News media history is fraught with conflicting practices as to how to handle the process of “outing” or “declaring public figures to be gay” as well as coming out (Signoreli, 1993). Gross (1993) affirms that unlike ethnic or racial communities LGBTQ subculture is largely constituted through, and in opposition of, mass media. This process comes in stages, however visibility remains “a precondition for the establishment of any semblance of gay and lesbian community” (Escoffier, 1985, pg. 145). Gross (1993) likens the process of coming out to a conversion as it is “both a confirmation of and an explanation for one’s distance from the roles society expects everyone to adopt” (p. 120). Consequentially media coverage of a public figure’s coming out elaborates on long-held societal convictions. In the context of reading Cooper’s discourse as an act of rhetorical passing, the debate over outing facilitates yet another juxtaposition. The various ethical issues of coming out serve as foils for Cooper’s passing identity, and thus his passing identity is perceptible as legitimate.

Conclusions

This case study in the mediated constructions of coming out argues that coming out texts are capable of continuing the passing performance of the closet. While it may seem conventional

to consider passing complete at the moment of confirmation, Cooper's use of conjecture, deflection, and juxtaposition allows his public personae to pass as both gay and straight while maintaining a hegemonic status quo.

Anderson Cooper's coming out remains a unique rhetorical performance of coming out. As discussed in chapter two, coming out is primarily understood as a kind of ontological shift that divests the epistemologies of sexual identity (Sedgwick, 1990). Drawing from Butler (1992) & Sedgwick (1990) speech act theory teaches that the utterances of certain discourses signal ontological shifts. For example, the institutional role of minister performs an ontological shift in marriage rituals with the pronouncement of 'mum' and 'wife'. Similarly, a coming out statement should signal a similar ontological shift capable of troubling the epistemology of the closet. However, Cooper's statement that he "always has been, and always will be" functions a unique rhetorical performance of passing in which the ontological shift is delayed by virtue of always having been in place. Blasius (1992) indicates that coming out is a process of becoming, or as Phelan (1993) argues a progression of "fashioning the self" (p. 773), thus implying coming out as a rhetorical performance shaped through passing. Foucault (1978) argues one cannot truly escape from the circuitry of power's influence on social knowledge. Accordingly, this chapter argues that the closet creates a circuitry of discourse capable of conditioning a passing LGBTQ identity. Initiated by the performance of passing, Sedgwick (1990) understands the closet through "the epistemological privilege of unknowing" in which power colludes with ignorance to affirm the status quo. Throughout his coming out discourse, Cooper is able to fashion an LGBTQ identity without abandoning his heterosexual pass. Previous treatments understood coming out as a potential act of political agency, a violation of heteronormativity. This analysis suggests the epistemologies of the closet remain firmly intact, conditioned through silence, as we allow new

celebrities to “pass” as queer without accepting the political frameworks connected to said identities. Thus, this analysis argues that due to the ability of rhetors to construct passing queer identities, the collusion with power may not end when an individual speaks to their sexualities.

The maintenance of hegemony through Cooper’s discourse, and its subsequent reinforcement in media, underscores the theories of rhetorical passing. Shugart (2003) argues passing tropes offer enthymemes in which audiences are invited to reject conclusions based on hegemonic beliefs. Passing requires the complicit acceptance of its performance by members of the in-group, in this case heterosexist audiences. Therefore, passing reinforces, rather than ruptures, dominant systems of hegemony. In reducing the resistive power of publically identifying as LGBTQ, celebrity coming out texts like Cooper’s authorize a performance of passing that does not threaten the center of hegemonic order; straight sensibilities remain intact without fear of having to consider the lived experience of oppression faced by their favorite stars. Robinson (1994) insists “in hegemonic contexts, recognition serves as an accomplice to ontological truth-claims of identity in which claiming to tell who is or is not passing is inextricable from knowing the fixed contours of a pre-passing identity” (Robinson, 1994, p. 722). As such, passing requires the complicit acceptance of its performance by members of the in-group. Passing reinforces the strategic centers of privilege by promoting single-issue identity politics and disrupting collective resistance. Through discourses of silence, same, and normativity passing reinforces, rather than ruptures, dominant systems. In coming out, the rhetoric of the closet is silenced and stigmatized, thus the system never has to account for the realities of its discourse; each statement facilitates the maintenance of the status quo as a means of sanitizing the threat of queer agency. This analysis suggests these moments of *coming out* are better understood as *coming in* to the confines of dominant hegemony.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

“We are coming out! We are coming out to fight the lies, the myths, the distortions! We are coming out to tell the truth about Gays! For I am tired of the conspiracy of silence” (Harvey Milk, qtd. in Black & Morris, 2013, p. 218)

During a 1978 speech on gay rights Harvey Milk, the first openly gay elected official in the United States, cultivated coming out as an exercise of political agency. Milk believed coming out would shatter the secrecy and silence of LGBTQ identity, and understood coming out as a framework of political intervention to disrupt the lies, myths and distortions of gay men’s insidious and ‘perverted’ character; Milk wanted to rattle the closet doors. Milk argued that coming out affected the modes of LGBTQ politics, over the last half a century of LGBTQ public activism, the tactic of media visibility has seen tremendous progress. For instance, when Ellen DeGeneres came out of the closet in 1997 she was praised for her potential as a visible public figure willing to fashion new terminologies of LGBTQ public existence. Ellen communicated a message of LGBTQ identity palpable to audiences unaccustomed to acknowledging subaltern sexual identities. In the nearly twenty years since Ellen’s case, the discursive framework of sexual identity has shifted dramatically. An unprecedented level of visibility of LGBTQ identity is evidenced in film, television, and news media. Given the drastic alteration to LGBTQ public discourse it stands to reason celebrity coming out narratives illuminate and problematize the many discourses of the closet. However, the analysis contained within this dissertation argues that modern celebrity discourse constructs the closet as anything but shattered, and continues to silence LGBTQ individuals long after they walk through its doors.

The stories and lived experiences of LGBTQ identified individuals have been subjected to historical silencing, symbolic annihilation, and institutional trivialization (Gross, 2001; Morris: 2007). In the context of both mediated and material oppressions, the mere survival of LGBTQ identity is a site of refutation. LGBTQ-identified individuals seek out mediated sources to construct their social identities and to constitute community (Ochman, 1996). Just as the lives of LGBTQ people are sites of continued contestation and systematic exploitation, popular culture continually engages in symbolic warfare designed to misinterpret the symbolic presence of LGBTQ identity. The presence of an openly gay celebrity, once the aspiration of early social movements, is now displayed in a variety of mediated contexts. However, during this time of increased depiction, it is important to distinguish visibility from recognition. As LGBTQ lives become subjects for popular consumption, these constructions run the risk of subtly reinforcing long held problematic constructions. Writing about the visibility of another minority, Hall (1993) articulates, “there’s nothing that global postmodernism loves better than a certain kind of difference: a touch of ethnicity, a taste of the exotic” (p. 105). Thus, in a time of increased monetary benefits to the cultural industry of representing LGBTQ identity, critical scholarship ought to elucidate those practices safely couching hegemony in the seemingly innocuous. In short, to come out of the closet we must first clear the rubble of the faulty constructions keeping us in.

This dissertation analyzes the strategies that constitute coming out discourse. This study is unique in that it examines publically positioned statements of coming out in media and their role in the construction of LGBTQ public discourse. Throughout this dissertation I argue that celebrity coming out narratives function as hegemonic texts absorbing and reframing the challenge of queer visibility. Thus, coming out facilitates a rhetorical nexus of sexual identity,

gender performance, queer theory, public address, celebrity culture, and the hegemonic ideologies of heteronormativity. Therefore to conclude this dissertation, this chapter proceeds with a review of the study's arguments and findings within each chapter. Next, I return to the questions guiding this analysis to offer implications for the connection of coming out to LGBTQ public discourse, identity, and the hegemonic constructions of power. Then, I outline the heuristics of this study and provide directions for future research.

Results of Study

Initially, chapter one established the justifications for analysis and the overall questions guiding the project. Chapter two situated coming out within the complex theorization of identity related to sex and sexualities. Through connecting queer theory, communication, and the rhetoric of identity this chapter revealed that the ontologies and epistemologies framing LGBTQ public discourse is directly implicated and impacted by coming out texts. In this way, the public construction of an LGBTQ identity through media is reflective of larger relationships of power and knowledge. The contribution of critical histories of sexuality (Foucault, 1978; D'Emilio, 1993, Blank, 2012) suggests the meaning of sexual identity is constructed, facilitated, and regulated through hegemonic discourses. These texts create performances of proper gendered behavior, thus establishing the need to examine coming out through the theories of gender performance. By placing sex into the realm of public discourse, cultural performances, considerations of knowledge and power, the study of rhetoric and cultural studies is uniquely positioned to contribute to the complex discussions of LGBTQ identity, as well as coming out. Finally, chapter two provided a review of literature applying queer theory to the studies of public discourse to interrogate how critical scholarship interprets and evaluates the epistemology and representation of LGBTQ identities. While bodies of literature trace the genealogical and

historical development of LGBTQ identities, they fail to properly theorize the symbolic moments through which individuals publically identify themselves as LGBTQ. Hence, this dissertation on celebrity coming out narratives contributes to disciplinary discussions of public discourse, mediated representation, and the dichotomous theories of knowledge and power.

While chapter two situated this project within existing scholarly literature chapter three proposed how the rhetoric of celebrity coming out can be successfully read through the methods of critical cultural rhetorical studies (CCR). This chapter combines the elements of rhetorical analysis and the theories of cultural studies to develop a method of inquiry through which to understand public discourses of LGBTQ identity. This method encourages critical scholars to engage in a process of textual construction and to interpret the larger ideological formations encompassed by cultural discourse. This method constructed a theoretical framework of various lenses that allows for more insightful, and ideologically centered, critique than traditional rhetorical studies. As a result, chapter three established the structure in which to apply the analytical case studies.

As the first of the two analytical case studies, chapter four provided a close textual analysis of coming out through the mediated discourse of Michael Sam. This chapter argued Michael Sam's coming out mitigates the counterhegemonic potential of LGBTQ identity by reinforcing the power of confession and hegemonic masculinity. Sam's coming out narrative operated through metaphors of contamination and concealment. In his mediated representation Sam is depicted as fettered by the shame and secrecy of his identity, only to be relieved through confession. Moreover, Sam's narrative is framed as the triumph of individual will, a symbolic extension of the bootstrap metaphor, and is thus accessible and permissible to dominant society. Sam's coming out narrative evokes the hegemony of mediated masculinity through signifying his

physical force, frontiersmanship, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, and symbolic heterosexuality. By erasing the political significance of queer visibility, and overcompensating his masculine performance, mediated coverage of Sam's coming out sought to render his LGBTQ identity palpable to a dominant audience. Thus, the coming out of a public figure is acceptable under a strict set of conditions related to gender and identity.

Likewise, chapter five continued the analysis of celebrity coming out discourse through the unique rhetorical performance of Anderson Cooper. Cooper's shattering of a well-constructed glass closet invited further inquiry into the relationship between coming out and the performative politics of passing. Through close textual analysis of Cooper's initial coming out discourse, and subsequent media coverage, the case study revealed that celebrity coming out operates through the heteronormative performances of passing. In order to maintain a hegemonic status quo, Cooper's mediated discourse facilitated a performance of conjecture, deflection, and juxtaposition that enabled Cooper to simultaneously pass as both gay and straight. Through the trivialization of his coming out and his public/private dichotomy dominant audiences rejected features of his presentation failing to comport to their ideals. Moreover, Cooper's coming out narrative deflected attention away from his LGBTQ narrative to emphasize themes of professionalism and mediated silence. Further, the discourse of Cooper coming out juxtaposed his identity with international conflicts and neoliberal visibility. Hence, this chapter articulated that heteronormative performances of passing are continued through, rather than disrupted by, coming out.

Implications

When a celebrity comes out of the closet it is supposed to make a difference, it is supposed to elicit more than happenstance shrug of the shoulder. When public figures come out

it shapes the forms of identification available to LGBTQ individuals (Gomillion & Giulano, 2011), as celebrities come out they encompass new possibilities for representation. This dissertation, in part, explores the relationship between celebrity coming out and LGBTQ public discourse to reveal that the discourse of celebrity reinforces hegemonic understandings of sexuality, gender, and power relations. Given the aforementioned findings it is imperative to situate the implications offered by this chapter for confessional rhetoric, spaces of privilege, and the tokenized politics of visibility.

Confessional Rhetoric

The findings of this study suggest mediated coming out narratives operate through confessional rhetoric. Celebrity coming out narratives fail to remove hegemonic conditions of the closet through the deconstruction of heteronormativity. Instead, coming out remains an interpersonal process of confession. For example, Michael Sam's discourse locates the construction of LGBTQ identity at the site of confession to others, rather than the action of same sex intimacy. Likewise, Anderson Cooper is not signified as an LGBTQ figure until the precise moment of utterance. In each case, the act of confession is represented as liberating to the LGBTQ identity; they are constructed as able to come to some accord with their own ways of being. Moreover, this act of liberation is endowed with political significance, rendered a watershed moment, and implicated as emblematic of things to come. Despite the seeming importance of these acts, the discursive codes of confession fortify the stigma of homosexuality, and therefore reinforce, rather than rupture, heteronormativity.

The location of LGBTQ within a confessional frame has significant implications for the relationship between coming out, LGBTQ identity, and subjectivity. As a rhetorical activity the confession is rarely understood as capable of liberation. Farrell (1998) argues confessions

operate rhetorically “before an audience at a moment of uncertainty, involving personal diminishment over wrongdoing” (qtd. in Jasinski, 2001, p. 101). In this framework the confession imposes acts of self-criticism and conditioning to facilitate the creation of community standards. Hence, confessions operate as a normalizing function “whereby new members internalize the norms or standards of acceptable behavior promoted by the group, as well as the definition of what is deviant” (Greco, 1999, qtd. in Jasinski, 2001, p.102). Moreover, Foucault (1980) reads confessions as a form of discursive ritual “that produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it; it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him, it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation” (p. 61-62). Confessions impose regulation on those individuals who operate outside the acceptable logics of behavior; they subtly reinforce social mores and values. Put another way, the discourse of celebrity coming out solidifies a sense of non-heterosexuality as wrongdoing. The pervasiveness of heteronormativity ensures those outside the comfortable confines of heterosexuality are compelled to confess. While counterintuitive to its political ramifications, mediated coming out narratives reinforce the abjection of non-normative sexualities through its representation of LGBTQ identity as something worthy of confession. Thus, mediated coming out facilitates a hegemonic discourse by constituting LGBTQ subjectivity, normalizing identity.

Likewise, the discourse of celebrity coming out offers an illusion that transformation of heteronormativity is achieved through confession alone. The case studies reinforce the notion that acts of confession alone are sufficient to instruct social change, thereby preventing discussion and deconstruction of existing ideologies. For example, mediated narratives of Sam circumvent larger structural discourses and present Sam as an individual capable of overcoming hardship to attain success. Sam’s discourse shifts his narrative away from revealing the

heterosexist presumptions and underpinnings of the sporting community and toward a structural narrative dominant audiences find more comfortable. Similarly, Cooper's mediated narrative contrasts his LGBTQ identity with more radical international conflicts that allow his persona to emerge as "normal." The acceptability of LGBTQ identity is therein formed through juxtaposing his narrative against that which American audiences find fearful, a radical queer politic. The significance of Cooper's coming out is painted as insignificant, thus incapable of revealing the heteronormative structures that create media closets.

Through its representation of coming out as confession, media narratives undercut the resistive potential of coming out, and bolster existing discourses of power. Foucault (1978) argues that acts of confession create structural discourses designed to limit resistive acts. In Foucault's (1978) estimation, confessional discourses are rituals designed to reinforce the regulatory authority of the institutional bodies that receive them. Rather than liberating the confessee, confessions transfer power from the speaker to the audience. Foucault describes confession a "ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile" (p. 61-62). In this context, mediated institutions function as the confessor and are capable of regulating the discourse of LGBTQ identity. Thus public discourses construct queer subjectivity through heterosexism. Foucault reminds us that "confession frees, but power reduces one to silence" (p. 60). Likewise, mediated discourses of coming out isolate the liberating effects of LGBTQ identification to affect only the individual doing the confessing, therefore the larger structures of power endowed through heterosexual

presumption are never brought to light. In constructing coming out as a confession, the heterosexist logics of the closet remain silenced and discursively invisible.

Given that the confession of LGBTQ identity reinforces normative binaries and does not facilitate questions of existing structures, coming out narratives are counter to the political and philosophical projects of queer world making. Critical rhetorician Gust Yep (2003) defines critical projects of queer world making as “the opening and creation of spaces without a map, the invention and proliferation of ideas without an unchanging and predetermined goal” (p. 35). Yep (2003) encourages scholarship to engage theoretical analyses, and discern how communication reinforces boundaries of sexual expression. Thus, this project reveals a queer form of LGBTQ identity is bound to the creation of queer forms of public identification. As contemporary popular culture continues to circulate the power of celebrity in creating identities, scholars must continue to search for and theorize the possibility of coming out in ways that queer public speech.

The Privilege of Closets

Second, the findings of this dissertation uncover implications for how coming out and LGBTQ identification operate through spaces of privilege. The linguistic forms contouring the performance of coming out filter public discussion of LGBTQ identity through hegemonic discourses of gender and race. Media coverage of Sam and Cooper rely on hegemonic constructions of masculinity to render LGBTQ identity permissible to mediated audiences. Here the fragile constructs of gendered hegemony are surrounded and protected through a form of symbolic inoculation (Dow, 1990). As a result, the challenge of sexual identities to the performance of gender is subtly inoculated. The coming out narratives of Sam and Cooper employ a gendered construct of professionalism to erect boundaries and limitations to the intelligibility of LGBTQ identity. To illustrate, the political ramifications of Sam’s sexuality is

couched in the continued assertion that he is “just a football player,” while Cooper’s status as a journalist insulates his public personae from the effects of heterosexism. In each case, the presence of an LGBTQ celebrity in the contexts of sport and media is facilitated through deeply troublesome constructs of gender.

Coming out narratives discursively manipulate spaces of privilege. Mediated discourses maintain both figures’ ability to remain complicit in the gendered and raced oppressions of their respective locations. For instance, the coming out of Sam erased the context of his racialized body, and facilitates a single narrative of identity. In emphasizing his physical force, media coded Sam’s gender through historical tropes of violent black masculinity. Moreover, Cooper’s notable class affiliation also constructs his ability to pass and remain credible to the larger dominant public. Hence, the discourse of celebrity coming out narratives conditions a single identity construction that obfuscates the intersectional framework of queer identity. Sedgwick declares the “language of sexuality not only intersects but transforms the other languages and relations by which we know” (p.3). Consequently, the oppression of sexuality is not insulated from the relations of power connected to subaltern identities of race, gender, class, and nationality. The intellectual traditions of black feminist thought (Hill Collins, 2009) elucidates that systems of oppression are incapable of being isolated into mutually exclusive identity categories. Rather, intersectionality proclaims that systems of oppression produce multiple, complex, and layered forms of identity (Combahee River Collective, 1982; Crenshaw, 1989). Considering that identities overlap and intersect one another, then the manifestation of LGBTQ identity comes at the expense of broader intersectional coalitions. Sedgwick (1990) offers that power colludes with ignorance to affirm the status quo through an “epistemological privilege of unknowing” (p.5). Likewise, the narratives of coming out reinforce the unchallenged racial and

gendered privileges of dominant audiences. Performances of LGBTQ identity ought to work to negate the power of patriarchy and white supremacy if it is to attain liberation. As a result, the discourse of identity must be troubled to reveal the ideologies, which prevents broader coalitional identities.

In addition, the case studies suggest that celebrity coming out narratives relegate LGBTQ identity to the private sphere represent LGBTQ identity as relegated to the private sphere, hence removing access to public understanding. A central theme of Cooper's discourse constructs LGBTQ identity as something that should not be privy to public attention, thus retaining it to the private sphere. The coming out discourses of celebrities offer a paradox: in publically identifying as 'gay' they manage to insist that being LGBTQ is something best kept private. Considering that coming out is inherently a "social act" of rhetorical practice, and a "matter of invention," its removal from the public sphere and privatization is worthy of further consideration. Fuss (1989) argues the overextension of the 'personal as political' philosophy contributes to the privatizing of social experience. However, discourses of private and public operate through keeping subaltern voices from public reception. Cloud (2007) notes that the right to speak in public has long been the unquestioned space of propertied white males; consequently "subaltern subjects have fought for access to these spaces of public, instrumental, political agency" (Cloud, 2007, p. 26). Hence, coming out narratives constrain access to LGBTQ intelligibility in public arenas by establishing the sexual orientation of public figures as something unworthy of discussion in public.

Rather than ensconced in structural frameworks, coming out locates LGBTQ identity as outside the locus of heterosexuality, and constructs a rhetorical binary of in/out of the closet. Thus, the rhetoric of the closet is a discursive creation capable of sustaining its hegemony long after one supposedly comes out. This dissertation argues that the epistemologies of the closet are

reinforced by a fixed binary of public and private spaces through mediated representation of LGBTQ identities. While one would infer the presence of an ‘out’ celebrity would shatter the doors of the closet, the closet remains. The closet remains so long as sexuality is rendered as private, a secret to be brought into discourse through logics of confession and control. The closet persists as long as the public sphere remains the primary location for the discourse of the powerful, privileged, few.

Tokenism

Finally this dissertation understands celebrity coming out as a condition of tokenism (Cloud, 1996) and problematizes the relationship between coming out and the macro frameworks of LGBTQ public discourse. Within their respective constructs, both case studies illustrate the inoculation of dominant audiences against the potential rupture of knowledge and power represented by a LGBTQ public identity. Despite the symbolic power of LGBTQ identified public figures in shaping political action, their mediated representations display frightful implications for how the larger LGBTQ public discourse may be separated and segregated from queer activism. For example, the case study of Sam renders his LGBTQ identity as insignificant through his disavowal and isolation from the larger political frameworks of LGBTQ resistance. Likewise, the case study of Anderson Cooper suggests coming out texts compare LGBTQ identity against more aggressive forms of material activism to filter LGBTQ identity through neoliberal frameworks of authenticity. In reducing the political significance of a public figure’s sexuality, celebrity coming out narratives constructs an LGBTQ identity insulated from its larger political capability. In coming out, the rhetoric of the closet is silenced and shrouded in secrecy, thus the system never has to account for the realities of its discourse; each coming out statement facilitates the maintenance of the status quo as a means of sanitizing the threat of queer activism.

The connection between celebrity persona and the reduction of political agency links the discourse of coming out to the rhetoric of tokenism. Cloud (1996) theorizes that threats to social order are permitted through “token voices allowed to speak within a permissible range of disagreement,” thus celebrity discourse functions as tokenistic (p. 119). Cloud explains that tokenism occurs when a persona is “constructed from the character and life of a member of a subordinated group, and then celebrated, authorized to speak as proof that the society at large does not discriminate against members of that group” (p. 123). Celebrity coming out narratives do not evoke larger discussions of homophobia and discrimination, they disavow any and all connection to broader social movement to fight for queer liberation. As such, the framework of hegemony and tokenism is identified through the dislocation of coming out from larger political and resistive contexts.

In each case study the coming out narrative avoids accounting for the systemic realities and structures that make the binaries of the closet possible; each statement facilitates the maintenance of the status quo and thus sanitizes the threat of LGBTQ identity. For example, Sam’s initial navigation of coming out does not reveal the structures of heterosexism in sport. As such the visibility of Sam as a celebrity is conditional. Likewise Cooper’s passing performance ensured that the heterosexist presumption afforded to public figures remains unchallenged. Passing encourages dominant audiences interpolate the discourse of celebrity through pre-established dominant frameworks (Dawkins, 2012). As such, the political efficacy of LGBTQ public figures is reduced by way of allowing audiences to dismiss it entirely. Here coming out is seen as a confluence of larger, mediated, ideological structures which remove agency for actual LGBTQ people in favor of larger monolithic narratives. This dissertation implies mediated

coming out narratives facilitate a tokenist discourse, and thereby extend Cloud's theory to include LGBTQ identity.

The findings of this study also trouble the linkage of visibility with political action. In its earliest incarnation coming out was a means of identity creation, a way of mobilizing a political exigency. Grindstaff (2006) argues the earliest LGBTQ activists conceptualized coming out as a way of coming into "gay collective spaces," a means of politically locating the self and situating one's place within a larger resistive social movement. Celebrity coming out narrative obstructs material political progress in deconstructing the forces of heteronormative oppression, and supplants it with mere visibility. Grindstaff (2006) theorizes that visibility politics erases the social conditions of LGBTQ identity; if visibility is equated with power then the "simple disclosure of lesbian or gay identity becomes synonymous with liberation" (p. 126). In framing personal disclosure as the crux of identification, coming out narratives evoke the dichotomy between personal and political. Fuss (1989) warns that the connection between the personal and the political is degraded to the point of meaninglessness. As represented through media celebrity coming out discourse distills the political significance of LGBTQ identity; it no longer retains its radical functionality and is rendered ineffectual.

Analyzing coming out discourse reveals the problematical politics of identity as a means of resisting heteronormativity. Cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy (1996) contends that while identity may serve as a form of political action, a "means to open up those realms of being and acting in the world which are prior to and somehow more fundamental than political concerns" (p. 37), renewed emphasis on celebrity coming out in LGBTQ public discourse creates conditions in which individual identity takes precedence over collective action. Gilroy reads the signifier of identity as a transformation of identity from *who* to *what* in ways that fetishize and

objectify subjects. Hence, the LGBTQ subject becomes an object. The subject/object distinction is also vital to understanding the latent ideology in representation because “subjects have the right to define their own reality...as objects one’s reality is defined by others” (hooks, 1989, p. 42). Queer activist Sherri Wolf (2009) argues the impact of postmodern identity politics, and by extension coming out narratives, threatens the potential of a united LGBTQ resistance due to an emphasis on identifying *as*, as opposed to identifying *with*. When celebrities like Cooper and Sam identify *as* LGBTQ they root LGBTQ identity in an individualized and politically ineffective ethos. Thus, a single coming out narrative may not be a functional space from which to build LGBTQ public resistance. Instead, future construction of LGBTQ discourse must embrace the ambiguities and binaries disrupting the potential of queer theory. Queer identity and queer discourse offers the personal as a form of political organizing, thus for a celebrity to come out as queer instead of ‘gay’ involves the connection to a historical legacy of resistance and deconstructing systems of privilege and power.

Heuristics & Directions for Future Research

While this dissertation provides a useful framework through which to critique and theorize the construction of LGBTQ identity through the discourse of coming out, the scope of this project required narrowing the point of analysis at the precise location of two individual case studies. As discussed in chapter three, the method of CCR analysis is a matter of rhetorical invention in which the critic engages in the process of textual construction. Just as texts cannot be excised from the ideological contexts in which they are produced, the process of rhetorical criticism must also recognize the ideological frames producing the conclusions of this study. As such, critical scholars must participate in reflexive engagement with the subjectivities that locate

their criticism. For instance, as a cisgendered white male³ with access to state supported funding for my research, my social location is mired in privilege. However, my position as a queer identified scholar also requires me to privilege a knowledge of myself, how I interact with the various hegemonic structures by which I am recognized. Thus, throughout each step of the critical process choices are made; choices in which cases are included for analysis, choices in the type of texts, choices in interpretation, choices in how these interpretations are evaluated. Rather than frame these choices as ‘limitations’ and depict my scholarship in the problematic frameworks of objectivity, the remainder of this chapter identifies the heuristic opportunities and directions for future research offered by this project.

Coming Out Across The Spectrum

The choice of case studies offers a heuristic need for nuanced, critical, treatment of the relationship between coming out and other identities across the spectrum of sexuality and gender. Both case studies dealt with the coming out of cisgendered males and therefore critique a particular performance of masculinity. Thus, future studies can adopt the theoretical frameworks laid out in this project to explore how normative constructions of feminine gender performance triangulate the hegemonic role of coming out narratives. Future scholars can address the threat to dominant ideology posed by a visible lesbian identity and explore how these challenges are absorbed and reframed through mediated discourse. In addition, critics can explore how gender performance impacts coming out narratives related to bisexuality. Scholars could examine case studies of celebrities like Ana Paquin, who defines herself as a bisexual even while engaged in a

³ Cis-gendered is a prefix designed to identify the normative relations between gender, sex, and sexuality. Johnson (2013) defines “cis” as a prefix meaning “on the same side” and refers to cases in which “one’s gender aligns with one’s sex morphology” and emphasize that “sex and gender are most frequently identified in relationship to a stable and socially binding center when, in fact, the categories of sex and gender are constructed and performed” (p. 138).

marriage with a straight identified male. As public and intellectual theories of transgender identity begin to reach critical mass, it may be useful for scholars to examine the many ways in which the material conditions of gender oppression disrupt traditional discourses of coming out through coming out as trans. As discussed throughout this dissertation, coming out renders LGBTQ identity permissible through hegemonic constructions of gender. However it may be interesting to evaluate the performance of gender related to how media depicts trans public figures like actress Laverne Cox. In the context of transgender identities the performance of passing becomes even more complex, and offers a rich site for rhetorical criticism and gender theorization.

While coming out has largely been associated, and one could argue relegated, to the realm of sexuality its force as a narrative is evidenced in its utility to explain the lived experience of other forms of other marginalized identities. This dissertation focused solely on LGBTQ cases of public figures of coming out, but the epistemologies and axioms of the closet can be found wherever hegemonic norms are created and conditioned. For instance, future scholars could build from this study to explore mediated coming out narratives of public figures along national origin, ability, and immigration status. Media discourses have already begun to construct narratives of immigration as a form of “coming out illegal” in ways that deserve critical interrogation (Jones, 2010, p. 36). Future scholars might examine how the binary of abled/disabled might be ruptured through coming out and troubling able-bodied discourses of visibility. Within these extended contexts, the performance of passing outlined in chapter five offers insight to the relationship between normative identities and mediated discourse. Future studies can take up the analysis of coming out narratives and the ways they affix themselves to hegemonic constructions of class, race, and religion.

Implications for Method

Finally, this dissertation applied the methods of CCR uniting cultural studies, critical rhetoric, hegemonic masculinity, passing, and narrative analysis to understand mediated coming out narratives and its relationship to the construction of LGBTQ public identity. Through its analysis of both Cooper and Sam the case studies identified that LGBTQ identity is rationalized and contained through the construction of coming out narratives. McClure (2009) suggests that discursive narratives provide identification through “a process of association” with pre-existing frameworks (p. 201). However, in the context of LGBTQ public discourse these pre-existing frameworks are endowed with hegemonic and heterosexist presumptions that negate a dominant public’s ability to positively associate with LGBTQ identity. As such, narrative identification may not prove capable of constructing social acceptance of subaltern identities. For example, Cooper’s narrative of ambiguity allows his sexual identity to be disregarded and dismissed. Conversely, Sam was without a pre-existing national narrative and thus his coming out is depicted as the salient feature of his public personae to the detriment of his career. Sedgwick (1990) reminds us “so resilient and productive a structure of narrative will not readily surrender its hold on important forms of social meaning” (p. 67). Thus, coming out narratives trouble the conceptualization of narrative identification that pre-conceived understandings of power influence audiences interpretation of a narrative. As a result, future research could explore the relationship between narrative and invisible centers of hegemonic privilege. Scholars could trace how narratives of subaltern identities are trivialized or made salient in contrast to pre-existing social structures, and analyze whether narratives are capable of facilitating resistance to these structures.

Further, the project drew its texts for analysis from a reading of each celebrity's discourse in conversation with their mediated representations in popular print and broadcast media. As such this analysis privileged the perspective and rendering of established media rather than understanding how subaltern and nondominant audiences interpret coming out narratives. While the scope of the present study was unable to attend to every discursive formation, future research could explore the representation of LGBTQ figures through social media and other outlets less inclined to filter their discourse for a presumed audiences. For instance, what facets of communication could be found in studying how twitter responds to a public figures coming out? Further, this dissertation made its arguments through a confined window of analysis in order to generate theory and criticism from a precise location in time. However, future research could explore the coming out narratives of LGBTQ public figures over time to explore how their identities relate to their mediated representation.

Summation

In his 1978 political will written shortly before his assassination, Harvey Milk stated, "I would like to see every gay lawyer, every gay architect come out, stand up and let the world know. That would do more to end prejudice overnight than anybody could imagine" (qtd. in Black & Morris, 2014, p. 248). In contrast, the 2012 *Entertainment Weekly* cover story on "The New Art of Coming Out" framed celebrities coming out as a shrug of the shoulder (Harris, 2012). The magazine quipped, "by the way, we're gay and it's not big deal" (Harris, 2012, p. 31). Despite the insistence that "what was impossible 60 years ago and dangerous 40 years ago and difficult 20 years ago is now becoming no big deal," this dissertation argues that coming out of public figures still matters (Harris, 2012, p.38). When we talk about celebrities, from what they wear, to whom they are romantically linked, they become vessels for what our culture finds

important. Sedgwick (1990) understood that the heterosexist presumption of the closet means that coming out is forever caught in the crossfire of compulsion and taboo. Perhaps what is needed in the understanding of celebrity coming out and the passing performances and token representations it creates, is to disrupt the binary epistemologies at its center, to embrace a fluid world of grey against the reinforced image of black and white. In short, what is needed is to queer it.

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