

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Thomas Edward Dieter for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on
August 11, 2011

Title: Caught in the Act: Casting Myself as a Performing Writer in Rhetoric and
Writing Studies

Abstract approved:

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The following thesis explores the potential for autoethnography to serve as an enabling method for developing a grounded understanding of literacy, performance, gender and sexuality. As autoethnographic writing insists that even the seemingly most personal aspects of a researcher's character are deeply embedded in larger political and sociocultural narratives, this thesis suggests that writers can productively use autoethnography to enrich their understanding of the matrices of self and other. The first chapter examines some of the uses and understandings of this method in rhetoric and writing studies as well as some of its intersections with other scholarly pursuits. The second chapter continues by offering the author's own autoethnography, centering on his literacy development as a performer and gender-marked person. The final chapter concludes by asserting that autoethnography, at its best, catches writers "in the act" in important ways, resisting universalizing and homogenizing claims and bringing to the fore previously marginalized stories about performance and gender.

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Caught in the Act:
Casting Myself as a Performing Writer in Rhetoric and Writing Studies

by
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A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts

Presented August 11, 2011
Commencement June 2012

Master of Arts thesis of Thomas Edward Dieter presented on August 11, 2011.

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Thomas Edward Dieter, Author

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and guidance of a number of people. Dr. Lisa Ede's patience and encouragement gave me both the courage to ask personally significant questions in my writing and the confidence to pursue them in this thesis. Dr. Susan Meyer's careful reading of the introductory chapter pushed my thinking deeper and prompted me to consider the ethics of composing autoethnographies in more detail. And, lastly, words cannot express my gratitude for the many friends and loved ones who have acted as my biggest cheerleaders throughout the process. With apologies to those significant persons who are missing from the following list, there are a certain people I would especially like to thank at this time: Dr. Scott Baird, Ruben Casas, William Delgado, Trev DeTal, Dylan Geil, Benjamin Lansky, Roxana Marin (aka Varza), Thomas and Andrea Miller, Dr. Judith Norman, Becky Olson, Paula Rodriguez, Dr. Willis Salomon, Eva Seligman, Lindsay Stewart, Matthew Switzer, Tamara Tal, my mother Jean Unser and the rest of my family, and Michelle Zellers.

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Caught in the Act:
Casting Myself as a Performing Writer in Rhetoric and Writing Studies

Act I
Learning the Lines: Encounters with Performance, Literacy and Writing

I'd like to begin this thesis by discussing a recent move I made as a teacher. As an instructor of first-year writing composition at Oregon State, one of my goals is to prepare students for the writing they will perform in college, and, in this thesis, I claim that the methodology of autoethnography had the effect of preparing me for my own academic pursuits. This thesis explores the potential for autoethnography to serve as a responsible and generative methodology for examining the matrices of self and other, and, since the following teaching experience helped to situate me as a student of this research, my sense is that it might productively lend itself to introducing this thesis. The process of writing my own autoethnography and engaging with secondary sources has given me a new understanding of how I may perform and represent myself publicly, and I want to start with a brief anecdote from my teaching because, as is often the case, the lessons I shared with my class had the effect of teaching me.

During spring term of this past year, on the first day of class, I shared some of the key insights and arguments presented in "The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year," an essay by Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz, with the students in my first-year writing class. Drawing on research collected from the Harvard Study of Undergraduate Writing, Sommers and Saltz report that first-year students in college

are most poised for success when they acknowledge and embrace their position as novices and see writing as having a purpose that extends beyond fulfilling classroom assignments (125). I wanted to reinforce Sommer's and Saltz's argument that academic writers who are new to discipline-specific forms of writing are often helped rather than harmed by embracing and writing from their status as novices. The first year of college represents a significant academic threshold, and “[t]hresholds,” Sommers and Saltz write, “are dangerous places” (125). In first-year writing classrooms, “[s]tudents are asked to leave something behind [i.e., the sureties of high-school English composition] and to locate themselves in the realm of uncertainty and ambiguity [i.e., within the walls of the academy]” (125). When students allow themselves to adopt the rhetorical stance of the non-expert and use this stance as a writing strategy, they can gain a greater ability to navigate the “liminal state[s] from which they might leap forward—or linger at the door” (125). As a teacher, I want to develop thinking-and-writing strategies that enable my students to produce lucid, effective and authentic compositions, and I find Sommers and Saltz's piece to be a powerful and instructive reminder of how important “first steps” in the learning process are.

On our first day together, my students and I spent the first few minutes of class discussing a handout that included quotes from a number of different sources: “The Novice as Expert”; the introduction to Krista Radcliffe's book *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender and Whiteness*; and the chapter “I Take Your Point’: Entering

Class Discussion” from the second edition of Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, one of the textbooks used in our first-year writing course. I included quotes from these three pieces because I see them as working together to help identify ways for students to situate themselves as learners and writers within the academy. Sommers and Saltz suggest that students can helpfully position themselves as novices during their first couple of years of college, and Radcliffe argues that rhetorical listening can be an effective and fruitful ethical position for working through the differences we're confronted with as people. Graff and Birkenstein's textbook, I find, augments these ideas nicely by emphasizing the need for speaking-and-writing practices that place individuals in direct communication with the thinkers and texts that serve as the exigence to which their writing is a response. Ultimately, in different but related ways, these texts all encourage students to see their writing as an experiment, as an in-process account of their ever-revised thinking.

Starting the class in this way, I hoped to enact my desire both to free students from the pressure of trying to sound like experts when common sense tells them otherwise and to foster an environment that encourages writers to explore the boundaries of their knowledge while recognizing and accounting for their individual interests and biases. Regardless of whether students enter college as strong or weak writers, first-year students describe “the challenge of writing in an unfamiliar genre—the genre of academic writing—in familiar ways,” write Sommers and Saltz (127).

Uncertainty, ambiguity and thinking made visible in writing, I tell my students, can in fact help strengthen the quality of their claims and make their writing, paradoxically enough, less vulnerable to naysayers.

It is in this spirit that I deliver this thesis: a text that works from an awareness of my own initial status as a non-expert in the field of rhetoric and writing and continues by examining how my individual literacy development has both informed my current academic interests in performance and gender and impacted how I see myself as a performing writer within this discipline. In constructing this critical, self-reflective exploration, I chart some of the challenges, shifting awarenesses and individually situated experiences that enable and define (and at times constrain) my involvement within academic spaces. Key to this work are my identities of stage-performer and queer.

In this thesis, I attempt to situate myself as a writer integrating various scholarly conversations that focus not only on rhetorics of performance and theories of queer composition but on the challenges and opportunities of performing autoethnographic research as well. As a student of rhetoric and writing, I have found autoethnography to be an enabling method of developing a grounded understanding of literacy, performance, gender and sexuality and an effective way of thinking about how I might join a similarly-interested academic community. Autoethnography, I believe, can align itself with many of the interests of feminist researchers, queer compositionists and performance studies scholars and serve as an opportunity for

bringing about positive social change. Hence, in this opening act I articulate how research on autoethnography has enabled me to consider how my primary identifications of stage-performer and queer have shaped my personal character as well as how the kind of self-study that autoethnography entails can reform one's rhetorical agency.

To begin, autoethnography as a research method and writing practice came to rhetoric and writing studies by way of anthropology, where it began receiving formal attention in the late 1970s. In “Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects,” anthropologist David Hayano posits 1966 as a potential birth-year for the term, citing a structuralism seminar given by Sir Raymond Firth in which he used the term “auto-ethnography” to reference “Jomo Kenyatta's study (1938) of his native Kikuyu people” (Hayano 99-100). According to Firth's telling of the story, when Kenyatta presented his ethnographic findings to an anthropology seminar, a debate broke out with a Kikuyu-speaking audience member. The exact nature of the debate could not be described in the written accounts of this “heated shouting match” because of the language barrier, but Firth argued that this event raised the important question of “judging the validity of anthropological data by assessing the characteristics, interests, and origin of the person who did the fieldwork” (Hayano 100). Although Hayano does not contextualize Firth's lecture in greater detail, it is clear from this example that the term “auto-ethnography” has roots in critical reflection about whether “the data collected and analyzed by an indigenous insider of a particular group differ

significantly from those of an outsider” (Hayano 100).

In recent years, the scope of autoethnographic writing has extended beyond this original purpose of taking into account an ethnographer's own relationship to her or his subjects of study, although of course contemporary scholars continue to ask important questions about this topic. As a result, over the past four-and-a-half decades, the uses and understandings of the term “auto-ethnography” have grown enormously. Indeed, a quick scan of its applications in different disciplines indicates just how overdetermined this concept is. The mode of self-reflexive writing that autoethnography emphasizes has both influenced and been influenced by a number of different fields beyond anthropology; these days, autoethnographic writing appears in rhetoric and writing studies, literacy studies, performance studies, gender and sexuality studies and communication, just to name a few, and just as naturally as these fields diverge, so too do their respective understandings of and uses for autoethnography.

For instance, in anthologies like *Feminist Empirical Research: Emerging Perspectives on Qualitative and Teacher Research*, a number of articles argue the importance of using self-reflexive critical frameworks. In “The Hard Work of Remembering: Memory Work as Narrative Research,” Margaret S. Ewing, Adrienne E. Hyle, Judith S. Kaufman, Diane M. Montgomery, and Patricia Self ask a number of ethical and performative questions by pursuing a feminist approach to “writing [the] journey into understanding our lives as researchers” (113). Although the co-authors—

who self-identify as “five women academics” (113)—do not explicitly call themselves autoethnographers, they write, “We as researchers served as our own subjects” (121). By conducting what socialist feminist thinker Frigga Haug refers to as “memory-work,” Ewing et. al. attempt to undergo a “process whereby individuals construct themselves into existing social relations” in their article and advocate for the examination of questions about “the 'how' of lived feminine practice” (Haug et. al. 33).

Ewing et. al. do not refer to their self-study as an autoethnography, but, by exploring the “how” of their experiences as women researchers, their work shares features with autoethnographies. In *Personally Speaking: Experience as Evidence in Academic Discourse*, the late rhetoric and composition scholar Candace Spigelman describes autoethnography as a form of extended personal narrative that “appropriate[s] the rich possibilities of detail and multiple perspectives characteristic” of personal writing “for cultural critical purposes” (4). She writes, “By embedding their personal stories into contexts in which race, class, gender, and other constructs are made visible, these writers [autoethnographers] seek to subvert traditional political and cultural associations relating to autonomous subjectivity” (4). In “The Hard Work of Remembering,” Ewing et. al. directly confront how concepts like the “universal human subject’... perpetuate[] dominant discourse” and write, “As we begin to recognize ourselves as occupying multiple identities and multiple locations, self is transformed from a noun to a verb. It becomes something in process, emergent..., and as such, open to change and transformation” (114).

Certainly, not all autoethnographies are composed or informed in the same manner as Ewing et. al.'s essay, and it is not within the scope of this project to attend in any exhaustive way to all of the connections between, say, feminist-teacher research and autoethnography. Instead, I mean to observe how autoethnographic writing practices like those used by Ewing et. al. ask researchers to step back, as it were, and to reflect on their own life experiences and impressions and to consider how those reflections might inform some of the public and gendered roles they play in contemporary society. For many contemporary rhetoric and writing scholars who engage in autoethnography, this “stepping back” refers to a genre of autobiographical personal inquiry that situates writers as interested and complex figures grappling with problems of self-definition and representation.

In rhetoric and writing studies, a number of important texts, such as Min-zhan Lu's “From Silence to Words: Writing as Struggle,” Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, and Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, have demonstrated how experiential writing and academic writing can blend together for the purposes of scripting grounded, critical cultural examinations that connect authors' personal lives to the roles and locations they inhabit in contemporary contexts. In “From Silence to Words,” Lu provides an account of the conflicting social spaces she occupied as a young girl growing up in China during the years of Mao Tse-tung's Marxism in order to articulate her concern for “the way some [contemporary] composition classes focus on turning the classroom into a monological

scene for the students' reading and writing" (82). In similar but different ways, *Lives on the Boundary* includes a number of Rose's memories as a self-described remedial student to examine how "the images that surround us as we grow up—no matter how much we may scorn them later—give shape to our deepest needs and longings," and the book continues by problematizing a university "curriculum ...[that isn't] doing a lot to address... [students'] weaknesses or nurture their strengths" (44, 187). In *Bootstraps*, Villanueva chronicles some of the challenges and shifting thought processes he encounters as "the Hispanic English professor" in order "to provide a problematic based on sets of experiences: an experience which leads to a theory, a theory that recalls an experience; reflections on speculations, speculations to polemics to reflections—all with an aim at affecting what might happen in classrooms, the sites of action" (xiv, xvii).

Of course, these titles have been described in a number of different ways, including autobiographical account, personal essay, life writing, literacy narrative and autoethnography. In *Personally Speaking*, Spigelman helpfully describes the growing number of labels that refer to personal writing in the academy, and she offers a rich discussion of the numerous and overlapping categories that "often replicate form while differing in purpose" (4). As Spigelman points out, one of the central purposes of autoethnographic writing—a purpose that closely relates to the titles mentioned above—refers to the insistence "that the narrative of an individual's life is both the product and process of surrounding social and educational narratives" (4-5).

To help me focus my inquiry in this thesis, I am working in the tradition of compositionist Linda Brodkey, whose collection of essays in *Writing Permitted in Designated Areas Only* has been especially instructive for me. The collection offers a useful theoretical discussion of autoethnography and critical ethnographic narratives and provides examples of her own autoethnographic practices as well as those of some of her students. These examples of autoethnography-in-action make the connection between literacy studies and autoethnography very clear. Although there is a slippage between “autoethnography” and “literacy narrative”—Brodkey’s own narrative “Writing on the Bias” has been referred to as both an autoethnography and a literacy narrative—I am using the term autoethnography to describe the second chapter of this thesis in the same way Brodkey does when she writes: “I am using *autoethnography* as Mary Louise Pratt defines it, as those instances when ‘colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer’s own terms” (“Critical Ethnography” 172-3).

In “Writing on the Bias,” Brodkey charts some of the literacy lessons she received as a working-class girl and uses these experiences to form a critique of social narratives that emphasize academic objectivity. Brodkey’s recollections in this essay largely center on her mother’s sewing skills and on her mother’s insistence that the “hang of it [i.e., of a dress]” depends on cutting “on the bias [i.e., across the grain of the fabric],” and Brodkey uses this early lesson to situate her contemporary outlook as a writer and teacher (48). She writes, “Even more than what I finally produce, that I

do not even attempt to write an essay until I have found a bias would please her, for my practice as a writer is as intricately tied to seeking and following oblique lines that cut across the grain as was my mother's sewing" (48-49). Throughout the essay, Brodkey embodies a number of critical perspectives, and she repeatedly emphasizes that the narrative she provides is only one of a number of possible versions. "Writing on the Bias" frequently acknowledges the subjective and ideological nature of its presentation and asserts that experience is never "authentic" as such but, rather, always caught in the act of representation and interpretation.

As Brodkey puts it, the self-reflective writing practice of autoethnography represents "another quarter heard from," and it is "one of the many that needs to be taken into account" (*Writing* 28). Autoethnographies, she writes, make room for people to "acknowledge their multiple affiliations *and* realize that they are strategically poised to interrupt the negative effects of what passes for common sense" in the various social settings in which they are located (28, emphasis in the original). As Mary Louise Pratt points out in her much-cited essay "Arts of the Contact Zone," writers, teachers and scholars need to see themselves as participants in "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power," if they are to realize their potential as agents for positive social change (173). The personally grounded scholarship that autoethnography helps to make room for—what feminist compositionist Brenda Daly calls "radical introspection" (80)—has been advocated for as a generative and

responsible means of approaching this goal, helping writers “to heal from personal pain while, at the same time, changing their ways of understanding themselves and the world” (Daly 80).

While autoethnographic writing may attend to the personal aspects of a researcher's character and experience, this methodology stresses the importance of not simply reifying the personal but going deeper, as it were, to examine the relationships between the individual and the social. As Brodkey writes, “it is ultimately the potential for social change rather than any psychological benefits that might accrue” that draws some rhetoric and writing scholars toward this mode of research (*Writing* 28). It is not enough merely to record personally significant events from one's life in an effort to cultivate the memory or to reassert some fixed identity. Instead, as literature scholar Françoise Lionnett suggests in her article “Autoethnography: The An-Archic Style of *Dust on a Road*,” this critical genre of autobiography “opens up a space of resistance between the individual (*auto-*) and the collective (*-ethno-*) where the writing (*-graphy*) of singularity cannot be foreclosed” (391). In other words, autoethnography attends to the uncertainty inherent in the relationship between individuals' deeply felt identifications and the sociocultural roles to which they are assigned and against which they are judged. It challenges the imagining of communities and people as part of a “unified and homogenous social world in which language exists as a shared patrimony,” and it complicates the view of “language as code and competence” in which the presumption of “a universally shared literacy is

also part of the picture” (Pratt 180).

Autoethnography, for this reason, serves an important function. Just as writing from the ethos of the non-expert and rhetorical listener can help first-year students become better equipped to meet the challenges of academic writing, autoethnographic research, in unsettling the desire for final resolutions and definitive answers, can become a productive tool for enriching scholars' understanding of the matrices of self and other. When written from the understanding that “whatever [we say is] going to be systematically received in radically heterogeneous ways that we [are] neither able nor entitled to prescribe” (Pratt 183), autoethnographies can help us to reshape the knowledge of our communities by scrutinizing our relationship to them.

However, it would be a mistake to suggest that the methodology inherent to autoethnography necessarily causes progressive social change. Autoethnographers frequently do strive for what they consider to be positive social transformation, but it is important to acknowledge that applying a self-critical apparatus to their work does not in itself guarantee specific results. Moreover, given Pratt's observation that audiences receive information in radically heterogeneous ways, even autoethnographic narratives that appear to evidence subjective transformation cannot predetermine how audiences will interpret them. Nevertheless, autoethnographers believe—as ethnographer Ruth Behar puts it in her book *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*—that “[w]hat happens within the observer must be made known... if the nature of what has been observed is to be understood” (6, emphasis in

the original).

Writers adopt a variety of roles in the process of composing their autoethnographies, most notably the roles of observer and observed, and, as a research methodology, autoethnography itself plays various roles in the academy. For this reason, it seems helpful to consider how recent work in performance studies might productively add to the conversation. Performance studies developed formally during the 1950s and, like rhetoric and writing studies and other disciplines that make room for autoethnographic practices, the field grounds textuality in the body and attends to the specificity and physicality of the reception and delivery of words. Examining the intersections of performance and contemporary rhetoric and writing studies, many scholars are giving more explicit attention to the multiple relationships between language and the body, between individuals and their respective communities, between social norms and effective forms of resistance. As Jenn Fishman, Andrea Lunsford, Beth McGregor, and Mark Otuteye point out in their article “Performing Writing, Performing Literacy,” ethnographic approaches to performance studies have productively emphasized “performance's ability both to reinforce social hierarchies and to resist them by offering alternative ways for imagining and enacting social relationships” (227). In their article, Fishman et. al. argue that by “[u]sing *all* the means of literate persuasion, ...students manipulate not only language, body, and voice, but also gender and racial stereotypes as they seek out ways to become legible within the university” (245). Given the “dazzling, sometimes staggering, array of

literate practices” (Fishman, et. al. 245) that define how individuals relate to and make sense of the world, my sense is that the method of autoethnography could productively respond to the recent call for “a flexible critical vocabulary as well as a catalog of the writing and rhetorical situations that call for amplified, performative, and embodied argumentation of different kinds” (Fishman, et. al. 247).

In terms of how autoethnography might form such a response, one productive starting place could be found in the work of scholars like Meredith Love who explores the intersections of rhetoric and writing, performance studies and autoethnography. In “Composing Through the Performative Screen: Translating Performance Studies into Writing Pedagogy,” Love invokes Kenneth Burke when she recommends that writers think about performance “as a type of terministic screen” or what Love calls “a 'performative screen' that we can use to view the construction of identity in writing” (14). In terms of the goals of autoethnographic research, this identity-in-writing develops from a desire to reflect on the subjective self in the context of others, and it constitutes what performance studies and communication scholar Tami Spry calls “the scholarly sagaciousness offered by autoethnography” (713). “Good autoethnography,” Spry writes, “is not simply a confessional tale of self-renewal; it is a productive weave of story and theory” (713). One productive way to avoid constructing of a purely confessional tale in my own autoethnography might be, in theatrical terms, to “double-cast” myself in the alternating roles of actor and critic.

Following Heewon Chang's advice in *Autoethnography as Method*, I decided

to collect personal memory data by following a “thematically more focused timeline” (73), i.e., by taking a chronologically-unfolding inventory of certain thresholds that shaped my identity as a performer, gender-marked person and student. In the process, I become the subject of my own research and overtly engage in certain productions of character, performing a number of different “selves” and rhetorical stances in order to both provide testimony and to problematize my own narrative, to weave story and theory. Instead of anxiously trying to construct a unified, singular self in these pages, I turn to autoethnography in part as a means of welcoming the differences and incongruities that exist within myself. In the process, I develop a richer understanding of some of the complexities of composition—of how even purpose and style are deeply connected to our personal experiences and deeply-felt identities.

Part of the motivation behind writing the second chapter, entitled “Playing the Part: An Autoethnography of Performance, Writing and Identification,” was to reflect on various personally significant experiences that have helped define who I am as a performer, student and gender-marked person. As a student new to rhetoric and writing studies, it took some time before I encountered an enabling way for me to explore performance and gender in the context of research in the field, and it wasn't until I gave myself permission to engage in the practice of autoethnography that I could examine my relationship to performance and gender—as experiences, as deeply-felt concepts and as rhetorically-charged terms in their own right.

Moreover, in the process, I found it helpful and enabling to think of myself as a

performing non-expert because I believe that this stance allowed me to develop my interests without presuming that they are (or should be) “more informed,” “better” or “original.” I have always believed in the importance of respecting people's right to their own language and experiences; as a result, in my position as an academic “character,” I see a value in writing from a self-reflexive critical ethos because I believe it allows writers to claim ownership of their own experiences while at the same time recognizing both the embodied and hence limited nature of their perspectives and how even their most deeply-felt identifications are wrapped up in highly complex and thoroughly networked systems of meaning making.

Autoethnography thus allows me to accomplish two divergent, non-mutually exclusive goals at once: first, I want to explore autoethnography as a method because I believe it can enable me to contribute to the formation of what sociologist and anthropologist Bruno Latour calls “the *good* common world” by “*not* dividing up at the outset and without due process what is common and what is private, what is objective and what is subjective” (93, emphasis in the original); second, I am drawn to autoethnography because I think it helps satisfy my desire to “command” audiences and to put on a good show, as it were.

Of course, I agree with Brodkey when she writes that autoethnographies need to move beyond the personal to implicate the social; for me, starting with the personal has actually proved to be one of most generative ways of approaching broader political issues. Naturally, there are a number of responsible methodologies for addressing

sociopolitical issues, and it is certainly not my intention to argue that autoethnography is the best one. In my case, I am attracted to autoethnography as a research method in part because of my identities as a performer and queer person. As a performer, I looked forward to writing in the essayistic style that autoethnography makes room for because I sensed that I would be able to deliver a powerful performance. As a queer person, I was drawn to autoethnography as a method for exploring how, as Jonathan Alexander and David Wallace put it, even “the most seemingly personal parts of our lives are densely and intimately wrapped up in larger sociocultural and political narratives that organize desire and condition how we think of ourselves” (W303). In the exploration of some of the most personal parts of my character, I hope that this thesis provides a glimpse into, among other things, “the power of queerness” and helps “composition theorists, teachers, and students... come to a new understanding of identity as well as a new understanding of what it means to take literate agency in a postmodern world” (Alexander and Wallace W301). In speaking from the personal and understanding it in terms of the political, I want to offer work that speaks to the ways in which academic, gendered and sexed characters get positioned in the world.

As an autoethnography, the second act of the thesis enacts my desire to join others in paying attention to queer experiences and to assert the need to create positive rhetorical stances in the civic sphere that enable participation rather than preclude it. As Alexander and Wallace write, “[B]ecause heteronormativity remains invisible to most Americans (even to many LGBT people), simply naming it and illustrating how

it is maintained in specific discursive practices can help students [and, by extension, citizens] begin to understand how language works to construct and reproduce culture as well as the ways that they can change their own discursive practices in the service of unseating heteronormativity” (W316-317). I identify with the possibilities for social transformation that compositionists like Alexander and Wallace describe and sense that “[q]ueerness helps us see important connections between our personal stories and the stories that our culture tells about intimacy, identity, and connection” (W303).

Insofar as autoethnographies offer a space to perform “memory-work” along the lines of gender and sexuality, I believe they enable scholars to better understand some of the complexities of how embodied literacies always work to the benefit of some and to detriment to others. Of course, the observations and insights that develop in the process are necessarily embedded in ideologies of their own, and it is not my intention to assert some inherent or “necessary truth” to the accounts I weave and analyze herein—that would be a fool's goal. Instead, I attempt to reflect on how I developed as a literate person and performing student to see how I have been disciplined by certain ideologies; in the process, I hope to envision a response to Lisa Ede's reminder that “[i]f we are disciplined by ideologies, we all have opportunities to resist these ideologies as well” (170). Autoethnography, I believe, can overlap with many of the goals of feminist research, queer composition and performance studies and ultimately act as an opportunity for positively-focused resistance.

In scripting my own autoethnography, my intention therefore is not to repackage my identities or understandings of performance and gender into a single, unified character. Instead of an autobiographical “story” that, as Brodkey puts it, uncritically and unreflectively “confound[s] narrative and experience,” I seek to amplify a few of the differences between my experiences, identity formations and thought processes in the hopes of understanding “some of the complexity of experience that any story necessarily reduces” (“Writing Critical Ethnographic Narratives” 113, 112). Naturally, while the product of my autoethnography represents its own blend of critique and narrative, as a student and a performing writer I am encouraged by the presence of an academic community “who look[s] to critical theory for a way to transform educational practices,” and I want to follow Brodkey's call to “teach ourselves how to narrate stories of cultural hegemony that make it clear that a negative critique is the process by which each of us confronts our respective inability to comprehend the experience of others even as we recognize the absolute necessity of continuing the effort to do so” (“Writing Critical Ethnographic Narratives” 113).

By conducting an autoethnography of my own literacy development as it relates to various lived and imagined performances, I actively resist the urge to find answers and simple explanations for the complex processes that contribute to the formation of my elusive self. Rather than attempt to allay doubts, I hope to articulate and grapple with some of the emerging uncertainties I experience vis-a-vis the concepts of performance, gender and composition. Instead of attempting to define or

“close the book” on the questions I have raised, I want to complicate my understanding and potentially reveal some of the complexities of meaning and identity that relate to myself and others. Reflecting on the ways in which I articulate a variety of identities and roles—such as student, teacher, performer, researcher and gendered individual—I connect with writing as an act, i.e., as a live performance and complex process of (re)mediation and rhetorical signification.

Writing, after all, is a performance, and autoethnography, I find, catches me in the act—learning my lines, playing the part and, whenever possible, hitting the mark. In drawing connections among the divergent methods, theories, ideologies and interests introduced in this opening act, I have not meant to establish constricting definitions and inflexible relational categories. Instead, I have meant to build an exigence to which my autoethnography is a response. The following act comes from my desire to contribute to ongoing efforts to explore embodied literacy and sexuality. The chapter focuses on my evolving understandings of “performance,” “gender” and “writing,” and it demonstrates how my relationship to these terms has been a far from seamless one.

The final chapter of this thesis more directly considers what the process of writing the autoethnography has taught me and how it has prepared me to perform as an academic in rhetoric and writing studies. One of my personal goals has been to discover how I am sustainable as a voice on the page and as a professional in the field. Through autoethnography, I have found an effective and responsible method for

approaching scholarly conversations that involve performance studies and queer composition. My autoethnography focuses on a number of my experiences, shifting awarenesses and personally felt identifications, and it contributes to a rich, grounded understanding of literacy, gender and sexuality. Hence, in my final chapter, entitled “Hitting the Mark: Making the Page My State,” I consider what some of the implications of my autoethnography might be for me as I move into the next thresholds of my life.

In this thesis, I hope to confront and uncover some of my own biases and shifting subject positions in order to consider how I might responsibly participate in a project of envisioning writing as a live, embodied act, one that can disrupt visions of “proper” and “permissible” ways of writing and being in the world. At its most successful, I hope this project speaks to the interests of feminist teacher-researchers, queer compositionists and performance studies scholars and similarly participates in the search for alternatives to antagonistic, elitist and ultimately masculinist assumptions about “good” and “appropriate” ways of being and performing.

Act II

Playing the Part: An Autoethnography of Performance, Writing and Identification

As noted in the previous chapter, this autoethnography aims to explore how my identifications as a performer and gender-marked individual have shaped my outlook on the world and contributed to my literacy development. When I construct a chronology of my experiences as a performer, as a student and as a queer, I can see how my evolving relationship to the terms “performance,” “gender,” “literacy” and “writing” has been a far from seamless one. In describing the following narrative as “*a* chronology” rather than “*the* chronology,” I hope to suggest an awareness that what follows represents a particular telling of history—i.e., a snapshot of my thinking at this time and within a particular rhetorical situation as opposed to a disinterested facsimile of the events that necessarily brought me to this moment. By conducting an autoethnography, I hope to reevaluate and to problematize the ways in which I think about and use these terms. Rather than attempting to define or “close the book” on the complexities of “performance,” “gender” and “writing,” this chapter aims to reflect how my own relationship to these has changed with time; the goal here is just as much about providing a space for personal discovery as it is about remaining open to new questions. After all, I’m on a journey, and I want to come out of the journey with a new sense of what’s at stake here.

As a child, I knew performance well before I knew reading and writing; my earliest childhood memories capture me in moments of play and putting on. I delivered original performances and adapted stories long before I possessed the technical ability to write the text of my plays and musicals. I can still recall reenacting for my parents a performance of *The Velveteen Rabbit* that I had seen on a class field trip. By then, my mother and father had completed the addition to our cramped house on Marlborough Road in Fayetteville, North Carolina. Standing on our new deck, the boards still white and yellow from the lumberyard, I made my debut. The memory is significant to me for several reasons. That night, on the deck overlooking our backyard, good performance meant cleverly switching back and forth between characters, establishing scenes in a clear way and communicating the story effectively. By differentiating my voice, altering my mannerisms and using different focal points to simulate eye contact, I embodied various roles, acting like the Boy, the Skin Horse and, of course, the Velveteen Rabbit. This early attempt to tell the story of a doll rabbit who wonders what it means to be real represents one of the first times I became aware that performance could create a space for the fulfillment of a number of personally significant desires: making up stories, singing, playing multiple characters, dressing up and garnering the attention and recognition of an audience.

Inciting my parents' laughter made me feel as though a special and enjoyable connection had been made between myself and them, as if, in producing the intended effect from my audience (an audience whose approval I sought intimately), I rose to

their adult level. I felt empowered by correctly predicting their expectations, values and tastes and found performance to be an ideal outlet for engaging with others and realizing my own goals. “Making a scene” became a way of making people pay attention, of etching out a time and space for telling multimodal stories. After the performance that evening, my mother and father agreed that they would need to find a stage for me, so they signed me up to audition at the local theatre. In one form or another, I sense that the stage has been my platform ever since, whether that stage is in the theatre, in the classroom or on the page.

The youngest in a family of six, I had to fight to make my voice heard. The three-bedroom split-level on Marlborough Road did not provide a lot space for a married couple with a girl and three boys. My brothers and I shared a bedroom, and, for a time, I actually slept in the closet on a makeshift cot that my father had constructed when he began working on the addition to our house. For whatever reason—perhaps it was the tight living situation or because I was the youngest—I found a joy and thrill in entertaining. Before I could fully speak, I wanted to challenge and surprise audiences, garner attention and instigate laughter. As “alone time” was something of a myth in our house, I embraced performance as a way to take the spotlight and to make my voice heard, to forge my own personal space, if you will, in the midst of a highly competitive social atmosphere.

When I was eight years old, I was cast in my first play: *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, an annual children's production at The Cape Fear Regional Theatre

(CFRT). My role was a small one, but that did not matter to me. I had been assigned to an actual character, and one with lines at that. I took the role of Ollie, the youngest member of the Herdman family, an infamous troupe of trouble-making children. Needless to say, I dove into the script, reciting my lines incessantly and memorizing everyone's lines with whom I shared the stage. The previous year, my parents had recognized that my reading skills were not the best. I had always preferred making up stories to hearing the stories of others; I preferred singing songs and impersonating characters to the silent act of reading, and as I entered the public school system these preferences began to create problems for me as a student. But as a performer, I read theatre scripts with great excitement. The words on the page represented a palpable kind of potential, a promise of interactivity and enjoyment.

My parents hired a reading tutor when I was in the first grade, and although my abilities improved significantly once I began appearing in community theatre productions, textbooks, novels and other school-related texts continued to present challenges for me as a student. Reading felt lonely outside of the spotlight because reading silently was such a solitary and stationary act. But at the theatre, we read plays aloud and as a group; people exchanged advice about line readings and the meanings behind various inflections or scenes. Whole productions were mounted around this reading process. As a theatre company, our goals always existed beyond the book rather than within it. What's more, the rehearsal process involved exploring a plurality of interpretations in order to explore a variety of possibilities and potential

outcomes.

This early experience in the theatre gave me the opportunity to work with professional actors, directors, choreographers and musicians and made me feel excited and extraordinarily lucky to perform alongside adults, to act on stage and to incite favorable responses from audiences. The CFRT was a professional regional theatre and routinely cast Broadway performers and other professional actors and singers in the shows' principle roles, and in them I found individuals who modeled discipline and took seriously the rehearsal process. Rehearsals themselves proved to be as exciting as performing for the general public because I was constantly amid different levels of professionalism, and the rehearsals themselves involved a great deal of activity. For this reason, my time in the theatre was and has been an energizing, enlivening and enriching experience for me, and, as a child, it represented a reliable and stabilizing force in an otherwise volatile world.

When I was in the second grade, my parents announced to my brothers and sister and me that they would be getting a divorce, and I still remember the day vividly. I had been playing in the tree house when my mother called me inside for a family meeting. Although I could not identify why or how I knew, sitting in the tree house that day, it dawned on me that I was preparing to walk into the scene of my parents' divorce. On the living room floor, I looked on as my parents, sitting uncomfortably on the couch, told us how much they loved us and how this decision represented the best one for the family. I cannot recall how my eldest brother reacted,

but to this day I can still clearly see my sister's face turning red with anger and another brother's eyes filling with deep sadness. Strangely, I do not recall reacting to my parents' news on a personal level, at least not at first. I remember being somewhat stunned, but what I found surprising was not so much that my folks were getting a divorce but that I had accurately predicted the scene.

Looking on as my parents tearfully delivered the news, I didn't feel betrayal, but a strange kind of recognition. By the time my parents announced their divorce, I had already discovered the inappropriateness of being a boy in a dress, in his mother's high heels, in lipstick. Though I was no older than seven, I had already felt the sting of public shame and had come to understand the importance of the closet. Before my parents' divorce, I had sensed that I was fairly alone in failing to live up to the expectations of others, but sitting on the floor that day I saw that others could fail in their roles as well, and I felt myself empathizing with my parents. After the family meeting came to a close, with my sister storming off to her room and my brother leaving in tears, I sat by my mother and consoled her. I could not tell her that it would be all right because as a young child I sensed that I was a "bad" boy, and I felt that I was bad in the same way that my parents now were bad too. Since I had already been struggling with my gender identity for some time, I sensed that I was more experienced in the matter of disappointing others, and I joined her on the couch, consoling her and letting her know that everything would be fine.

The period following the divorce was difficult on the family. My mother

struggled to feed us on her salary as an art teacher, and she and my father, I recall, fought fiercely over issues of custody and child support. Along with my siblings, I found myself caught in their drama, each parent continuously giving us new ways of “reading” the other—the deadbeat dad, the manipulative mom, the flaky father, the malicious mother. I didn't totally know what to make of these new roles and was confused by the conflicting messages my parents sent. On the one hand, they independently aired their frustrations about each other to us kids, and, on the other hand, they emphasized repeatedly how inappropriate it was for an adult to corrupt the image of our parents. I had a difficult time negotiating how I understood my parents' characters, and I struggled to identify who they “really” were.

In the theatre, though, I did not have to concern myself with what was and was not “real,” and performance began playing an increasingly significant role. Performing at the CFRT and in other theatres statewide, as well as singing in church and taking private study, not only allowed me the space to exercise my creativity and to perform for large audiences; it also represented a safe space in which I could metaphorically disrobe from the complications of my home life. As a result, I auditioned for every play, and the CFRT became a second home to me. From eight years old until my mother remarried and we moved to San Antonio when I was fourteen, I felt that my survival depended on performance. I performed in up to five shows a year, and in that time, I formed a specific understanding of performance and developed a very particular view of what it meant to perform well. At that time,

performing well meant precision and technical accuracy; for each show, I focused on diction, pitch, musicality and movement. With seven performances a week, I came to value reproducibility; I wanted to be seen as a professional, and to me that meant giving reliable, carbon-copy performances.

However, I do not mean to suggest that my identity as a performer was a rosy one. When I reflect on some of my less ideal or picture-perfect associations with performance, I must recognize that many of my early feelings of difference and discomfort were in fact filtered through or closely related to performance. In the classroom, for instance, second, fourth and sixth grade teachers tried to reign in and control my behavior. I frequently heard that the classroom was not my stage, and these unwelcome performances were often closely linked to gender. Before I had any sense of what “gender” or “sexuality” meant, I knew that I was doing them wrong. Once, in front of the class, a middle school science teacher joked that I might like to wear a dress to an upcoming school dance, to an eruption of laughter. The theme for the social that year was “Costume Party,” and, after an announcement from a few students on the planning committee in which they encouraged us to “go all out” for the event by wearing outlandish and surprising costumes, the teacher singled me out with her interjection. Surrounded by laughter, I was screaming silently. Unhinged, I let out an emotional “That wasn’t funny” and, that night at home, feigned illness in order to avoid school for a few days.

However, home didn't exactly represent a safety net for my insecurities. Well

before the publicly humiliating scene in the sixth-grade science lab, home had me hiding my gender for fear of exposure. There, I did my best to follow my father's command to “grow out of it”—the “it” being my days of prancing around in bed-sheet capes and dresses, memorizing musicals like *Phantom of the Opera* and *Peter Pan*, and checking out screenplays from the public library like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Go West Young Man*. Once, when my parents, siblings and I were on our way to pick out a Christmas tree, I made the mistake of asking my father for a woman's wig that year. I remember the silence that filled the car. My heart pounded in my chest, and it felt as though an eternity had passed before he finally asked if the wig was for me. Every ounce of my being told me that his low, terse words meant that I had better say no.

“No,” I said. “It's for my friend who I want to be in my play.”

Panic stricken, I looked up into the rearview mirror, and his eyes did not meet mine. They remained fixed on the road, but his eyebrows had changed and the wrinkles on his forehead became more pronounced. I monitored him throughout the day, and I feared that his face would be stuck that way toward me forever. All over, I felt wrong. Naturally, the wig was for me—I knew he saw through my lie. His question seemed to be code for “Do you want to wear it?” and, even though I did not understand why, I knew immediately and deeply that I was wrong to want to.

My gender had been “marked,” and I felt that the only way to deliver a socially appropriate version of myself—the only way to “hit the mark”—was to suppress the differences I felt. Born in Fayetteville, a town located firmly in the Coastal Plains of

North Carolina and adjacent to one of the nation's largest army bases, I was no stranger to twangy accents and loud, limited and limiting perspectives towards difference. And as a boy soprano taking voice lessons and singing in mass, as a flamboyant young thespian, as an elementary and middle schooler drawn toward spoken word activities and occasions for public speaking, as a fledgling writer inventing stories through dialogue, action and music, and as a son, vying for attention and worrying about gender and expectations, “different” was precisely the word to describe me. I certainly felt lucky to find an appropriate outlet for my energies by acting on stage, singing in choir and writing musicals and plays, but in a way I felt as though I was performing more offstage as I attempted to “pass” as a “good” boy.

As I reflect on experiences such as those I have just described, I cannot peel away which parts of me belong to performance and which to gender. Before my debut in *The Velveteen Rabbit* for my parents, back when we still had a carport attached to the kitchen, my mother once stood in the doorway and, as others climbed into the car, bent over at the waist to meet my eyes and asked me if I wished I had been born a girl. The memory is such an early one for me—around four or five—that it is difficult to know what prompted the question. Nevertheless, as a child I fantasized that I was various women from film and television and, when I felt that no one was watching, would make dresses out of bed sheets and use towels for wigs to take on the physical traits of the characters I felt drawn to. I cannot remember if I felt nervous or fearful by mother’s question in the same way that I would a few years later when I failed to

prefigure my father's stony reaction over a wig, but I do recall saying “yes” to her and sensing that I was telling the truth.

But I have to confess here that, as I lay out these early memories and desires, interests, beliefs and values, I see contradictions within my history and self that make it difficult to write. Indeed, my desire to pursue and uphold the truth often renders me tongue-tied. By recalling past memories and early identifications, I am unsettled by the inconsistencies of my own character. Admittedly, when I lay out the evidence in front me like this, I am unsure of the stability of my present gender identity, and I have wondered whether the masculine identity I formed in the years following puberty is in fact a performance, a by-now-normalized fiction I have scripted to efface the socially jagged behavior I exhibited as a younger child.

Personally, this theory makes some sense. After all, I cannot describe the emergence of the performer in me without also noting some of the struggles, assumptions and slowly evolving transitions that I have also defined me as a gendered individual. From my fantastical backyard performances of *Gone With The Wind* and *West Side Story*, co-starring our dog Barkley, I cannot be sure which aspects relate to gender and which to performance. When I return to these scenes from the classroom and kitchen, from the car and from the backyard, I hear myself wondering whether my early childhood experiences belong to a young boy who was most likely transgender. However, for me, the stage had always represented a space in which identities could flop around and play, and I have come to wonder whether my identification with

performance relates somehow to an instinct of self-preservation, as if I constructed the identity of performer as a way of protecting myself in a world hostile toward feminine males.

Performing others' words and music on stage potentially helped me escape early insecurities and fears, and I sense that writing related to these performances may have provided an outlet for making sense of the complicated web of my identifications and experiences. Naturally, identifying strongly as a stage performer, most of my earliest compositions were in the form of plays and musicals. I remember writing my first two plays, *Going to the Fair* and *Extraordinary Plays by Thomas Dieter*, the former written in the second grade and dictated to my older brother as he steadfastly typed my words at the computer, an IBM that ran on MS-DOS, and the latter a singular text with a plural title that I wrote in the third grade for a school project practicing typing at the computer. Naturally, both plays made appearances in my backyard theatre. *Going to the Fair* dramatized a failed business venture that I had attempted that year in school, trying to do yard work around the neighborhood to save up for a trip to the county fair—the market for second-grade lawn mowers, as it turns out, was quite small. *Extraordinary Plays by Thomas Dieter* depicted an epic battle between Mr. Hamburger and Mr. Hotdog, an enactment of classic rivalry that was a thinly veiled retelling of arguments my sister and I used to have.

Not surprisingly, the form of written composition that I have cherished and nurtured most has been writing for performance because I have always sensed that by

writing a piece for the stage I could somehow, in turn, then live it. If I struggled with the question of what I wanted to do for a living when I grew up and who I wanted to become as an embodied individual before college, I only did so unselfconsciously. Throughout high school, I never openly struggled with the question of what I wanted to do; I had always felt secure in my musical and theatrical talents. Performing, singing and creating shows comprised my world and the one I hope to make for myself professionally. I was a rather self-assured student when I entered high school, but, as it turned out, high school both nourished and troubled my understanding of the universal benefits of my identity as a stage performer. I thought of performing as a way to get out of the conservative town of my childhood, and, although I am somewhat embarrassed to admit it now, I wanted to be famous, to perform on Broadway for large, sold-out houses. And when I moved to Texas my motives did not change, at least not at first.

In San Antonio, I attended a very large high school and initially was an anonymous student among thousands of others, but I quickly found the fine arts wing of the campus and spent the majority of the next four years in that space, rehearsing for plays, practicing with the choir and editing pieces and rehearsing for forensics tournaments. As a high school student, I became obsessed with the theatrics and competition in statewide and national speech and debate tournaments. The drive and charge sparked from these competitions helped me to stand out as a student. English, math and science teachers granted me a certain amount of privilege in the classroom

and, whenever appropriate, teachers allowed me to turn in creative responses to class assignments. Mostly, these opportunities came from English classes.

At the time, the creative mode of engagement that I most enjoyed was performing scenes or chapters from plays and books and other texts that we read in class. The practice I had editing scripts and prose pieces to fit within certain time limits for speech and debate, I found, translated well when I adapted *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *A Tale of Two Cities* for my classes. I discovered that as an editor of other authors' words I could actively reshape individual pieces to make them my own, adapting scripts to show off my strengths, and at times even altering the stories somewhat to heighten the impact of particular moments. This practice of reshaping preexisting texts, which I perceived to be necessary for good performance, meant editing others' words deftly and communicating the language with fluidity and clarity. But I can distinctly recall giving little actual interest to the words themselves. I was less driven by the beauty of the written word and more interested in *presenting* myself as such. Not only did I put on the show of the stories themselves, I also felt myself to be a person performing the role of someone in love with the written word.

By the time I started college at Trinity University in San Antonio, though, I began to struggle with what I considered “success” to mean. Graduating from high school, I was consumed with the idea of success, which I understood as entering a profession and earning quite a bit of money. My parents' relationship had dissolved over disputes centering on money, and I worried that as a stage performer my life

would be fraught with the kind of financial instability I experienced as having the power to end relationships. So when I thought about what possibilities and openings were permitted for me, I could not picture a “good,” “successful” or “stable” life in the theatre. As a result, I did not pursue a degree in theatre or music as an undergraduate in college—which surprised quite a few people, notably the fine arts teachers, directors, students and fellow performers with whom I had developed such close bonds. My parents had agreed to support me in college on the condition that I pursue a “practical” degree worth the monetary investment in private school, and my initial academic choices were powerfully motivated by the financial sponsors of my literacy in higher education. Furthermore, as I had conflated “success” with financial abundance—medicine and the law were virtually the only professions I identified as “sure bets”—I fashioned myself as a character interested in medicine.

While I had no clear sense of what my father did for a living—it had something to do with healthcare management—my step-father's position as a medical doctor in the army was somewhat easier to grasp and represented a model for successful and respectable work. I wanted to succeed in the same way. Since my mother's and Stan's marriage I had seen Stan as a positive role model in my life both as a professional and as a person. Living in Texas with my sister, younger half-brother, mother and step-father (my elder brothers were in college by this time), I connected the increasing financial and emotional stability at home to Stan's work and demeanor. My experience was that, to some degree, he brought a degree of rationality

to each scene, and I valued his well-reasoned and enabling contributions to the family.

The summer before my senior year of high school, I participated in a summer internship program in Houston for teens interested in pursuing the field of medicine. The week had been a lot of fun—I thrived during the mock-debates about medical ethics and always volunteered to handle equipment. I enthusiastically peered over a facelift operation, examined cadavers and discussed the profession with various physicians, specialists and professors. Around this time, I began trying to convince myself and others that I wanted to become a doctor. Naturally, I was not prepared for how different this summer camp experience would be from college biology and chemistry classes. At Trinity, I had trouble committing the technical language to memory, and the methodologies and subject material presented in these classrooms proved to be too difficult. While the fantasy of playing the part of a pre-medicine student brought me into biology and chemistry classrooms to begin with, the real-world demanded more than I had prepared for. Miscast as a scientist, I fell into a panic.

When I finally admitted to myself that remaining on my current path would be akin to a slow death, I suddenly saw how my previous choices had cast me over an abyss of “What to do next?” That same year, however, in my first-year writing workshop, my professor encouraged us to think of ourselves not as actors whose free will and personal agency were subordinate to the scripts we followed and lines we memorized as students. Rather, as students and citizens, we were encouraged to

connect with and articulate our reactions to others' arguments and assumptions and to assume an equal footing with the perspectives that appeared on course syllabi—actors with our own unique perspectives to share, we could engage on the level of the essays by relating to and commenting on the arguments and ideas presented therein. Dr. Baird authorized us to think of published articles and books not as superior to ourselves, an insecurity of my own, but as discrete artifacts of particular cultures and conversations that naturally reflect the motives and intentions of writers.

Thinking about others' writing in this way created a charge for me because the writing became suddenly more performance-oriented. Rather than hearing others' voices as authorities to which I was expected to assimilate, I was actually being encouraged to embrace and indeed vocalize my position as a monitor and as a processor of various conversations, arguments and debates. The interpretation of these works were almost always “up for grabs,” and I enjoyed engaging in discussions of purpose and impact. As an individual who knew intimately well how ideas and values had the power to oppress and exclude others, I was turned on to a mode of scholarship and engagement that sought to unearth assumptions, challenge ideologies and otherwise put language and ideas in play. I wanted to change people's minds about important political and social-justice issues, and, by seeing texts as props intended to perform specific functions, I felt myself to be an agent rather than a silent audience to someone else's play.

This kind of critical engagement carried through my progression as an

undergraduate. I double majored in English and Philosophy, and I found that the two disciplines nicely intersected. Important social philosophers that I encountered in the Philosophy Department like Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud correlated to the forms of Marxist and psychoanalytic criticism that I was exposed to in my English classes. My exposure to academic theory, particularly Marxist, psychoanalytic, postmodern and post-structuralist theory, helped me undo and challenge some of the assumptions that had given me such a limited perspective of success and had kept me hidden in the closet well into my undergraduate education. I encountered novels and essays that made deconstructionist arguments about how exclusionary and violent linguistic binaries can both maintain and subvert hierarchical social relationships. By questioning the naturalness of the logic of late capitalism and writing about forms of alienation and ambivalent social relationships, I gave myself intellectual permission to explore and to confront contradictions in my own life. Performance, in college, then took on new meanings for me. Performance practices transitioned from self-conscious rehearsals preparing me for live shows to communication practices that sought to destabilize assumptions and uncover patriarchal norms. These performances were acted out on the page and in class, and my motives were personal ones. Even though I viewed life as a process and on some intellectual level even then was skeptical of narratives of success, my own sense is that I have become far more comfortable with and appreciative of expressions of difference as a result of this education.

At Trinity, I had the good fortune to work closely and intensively with

professors in classes of only a handful of students, and I now recognize the privilege associated with this careful attention and captivated audience. My most successful essays and discussions resulted from writing processes that resembled the rehearsal schedules I was used to from my days as a choir and theatre kid. When I wrote my undergraduate thesis on marketplaces for interpretation on and within Shakespeare's Sonnets, I noticed I was at my most energized and engaged when I stuck to a disciplined routine of writing. It helped me to think about the writing process as a kind of physical stretch that, with regularity, could flex my writing and allow me to communicate more easily on the page; in the process, perhaps I even regained a performance-wise identity, i.e., an on-page stage presence that could not articulate itself in the labs and lecture halls meant for young scientists and future physicians. In the thesis, I situated various histories of the texts, quartos, editions and performances of the *Sonnets* and explored how scholarly conversations delving into the poems paradoxically presented and (re)produced their own cultural and discursive interests, concerns and political vantages, a situation scholars identify in the textual history of the Sonnets and one that arguably exists within the poems themselves. Working within a firm writing schedule, over time, loosened up my ability to articulate myself. And when I was truly “in the moment” of writing, I noticed myself audiating as I went: despite remaining outwardly silent, my mind hummed with a clarity and tone that became, metaphorically, the critically engaged piece of music I aspired to write as an undergrad, an effect I tried to achieve by imitating the lilts and turns that I had

heard Shakespeare scholars use themselves.

Naturally, in the process of delving into the poems and scholarship, I found that narrowing my research to the topic of the Sonnets would not, on its own, represent a limited enough scope to make it possible for me to engage fully with the myriad conversations and motives emerging from the academy. In retrospect, it seems quite obvious, but when I refer to my writing as mimicking the voice and style of “Shakespeare scholars,” I mean something much more specific—my situated literacy development as a student of early-modern British Literature crossed paths with my interests as a philosophy student, particularly with 19th-century Western philosophy. Not surprisingly, I gravitated toward articles that historicized the production of the poems and provided close psychoanalytic and Marxist readings, discussed 17th-century print and reading culture and engaged in the drama of unearthing cultural biases in and around the poems. Articles like Stephen Booth's introduction to his edition of the *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Margreta de Grazia's “The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets,” Joel Fineman's important book *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's chapter “Swan in Love: The Example of Shakespeare's Sonnets” from *Between Men* and Peter Stallybrass' “Editing as Cultural Formation: The Sexing of Shakespeare's Sonnets” were helpful catalysts for my thesis and served as models for composing academic texts.

I recently reread my thesis “‘To make me tongue-tied’: *Shakespeare's Sonnets*

and Marketplaces for Interpretation,” and I must admit to having mixed reactions. In some places, I am surprised and moved by what appears to be a deep understanding of the complexities of interpretation, representation and editing. Still, in other passages from the thesis, I struggle as a reader because many of the sentences are dense and convoluted and no longer seem fully to communicate my original intentions and thoughts. Of course, even though I am nonplussed these days by certain sections of the thesis, I recognize that this failure to communicate does not reflect poorly on the different essays I modeled my writing after so much as it reflects my own labored attempt at sounding intelligent and insightful. In one way, I saw myself as an actor at the time, playing the part of a literary scholar and cultural critic, but from my present location I sense that in “To make me tongue-tied” I am not always hitting the mark as a writer. As an undergraduate, my perception was that all good academic scholarship took the form of writing that literary and cultural historians like Joel Fineman and Terry Eagleton modeled, but as a graduate student I have sensed that effective and “real” academic writing indeed encompasses much more.

Even as I write these words, however, I want to resist the progress narrative that I sense I have begun to script here. In a real way, I hear myself edging toward an assertion that the writing I performed and valued as an undergraduate was somehow “bad” or “wrong” and that this autoethnography therefore represents a “good” or “right” mode of composition. To construct this type of success narrative is ultimately to present myself in writing as a unified singular subject, and, as I have mentioned,

this is neither my personal goal nor the goal of autoethnographic writing as I have understood it. Ironically, one of the most important lines of critique that I borrowed from academics like de Grazia and Stallybrass in drafting my undergraduate thesis was their observation that scholars often make a “problem” of others' work in order to present their claims as more reasonable and sound; to make a “problem” of my past for the sake of locating a neat “resolution” in the present would be to succumb to a rhetorical move I actively wanted to resist even as an undergraduate. If there exists a more nuanced approach to understanding my undergraduate education in the context of the work I am presently conducting, I want to find it. If it is possible to show what was negative about the writing habits I formed as an undergraduate while affirming what was positive, I want to show it. If I can celebrate the mode of composition under which I am currently working while asking questions and pointing out complexity, I want to do it.

My undergraduate experience, after all, felt exhilarating to me. During my senior year of college, I signed up for a seminar on the philosophical movements of Marxism and psychoanalysis. Another classmate and I had asked Judith Norman, a professor of Philosophy at TU, if she would develop a course on the legacies, extensions and intersections of Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist theories of cultural materialism. We had already taken Dr. Norman's course on Marx and Marxism and her seminar on the philosophical movement connected to Freud and psychoanalysis. Those classes had focused most prominently on the primary writings

of Freud and Marx, and, even though the last quarter of each reading schedule included work that referred to the broader philosophical applications of Marxism and psychoanalysis, Dr. Norman was always careful to point out that the information presented in these sections was preliminary at best; for one thing, theories of post-modernism were only roughly sketched out in each course.

But by the time the few of us who were upper-division philosophy majors had taken these first two classes, we were curious about the intersecting interests of what began to sound more and more like overlapping theories and discussions. Eager to find out “how the story ended,” we hoped that an additional seminar might focus on some of the terrain that these theories had forged after Jaques Lacan and the Frankfurt School inherited and departed from Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist cultural materialism, respectively. As a result of our expressed interests and questions, Dr. Norman prepared a syllabus and reading list that included Erich Fromm's essay “The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology: Notes on Psychoanalysis and Historical Materialism” (1932), Walter Benjamin's “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) and Slavoj Žižek's essay “How Did Marx Invent the Symptom?” (1994).

To understate the point, the pieces I encountered astounded me, and I rejoiced in the activity of deciphering what to my ears seemed like fairly dense and, at times, cryptic theoretical language, because I found the process engaging, interesting and

important. Response papers and classroom discussions offered me the chance to try out the new linguistic turns and theoretical lines that comprised the arguments of influential thinkers, and overall my classmates and I were insatiable—we came to class full of questions and eager to try out the language we had encountered in the readings. In class, we discussed the politics of the World Trade Organization and analyzed the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement on domestic markets in Mexico. The process allowed us to rehearse making associations between our reading of Marxist economic theory and our contemporary sociopolitical contexts. And to be sure, the reading selections posed some daunting challenges in the beginning—not only did the essays brim with complex critiques of capitalism, ideology, hegemony and civilization and challenge many of the assumptions I had previously taken for granted, the language used to articulate these positions proved to be a fairly substantial barrier to comprehension itself. Nevertheless, thanks to steady exposure and practice with the language and ideas, the discursive landscape that structured my undergraduate education eventually came together as a picture of theories and methods for challenging the status quo and resisting the appropriative forces that conscript and naturalize problematic hierarchies.

At the time, my perception was that, for academic writing and tenured professors within college walls, good writing and thinking meant constructing elaborate arguments using loaded terminology inherited from renowned scholars and great philosophers. What's more, in order to play the part convincingly, I developed a

sense that I would have to move beyond thinking of scholars and “good writing” in abstract terms. I thought playing the role well meant writing dense prose, and I had convinced myself at some point that good writing was tantamount to linguistic density. I consciously wrote in broad, obfuscating compositional gestures that mimicked the (post-)modern, psychoanalytic and Marxist theories I had investigated as an undergraduate. With time, I became more fluid in this habit of mind, and I began to think I was a successful and enabled academic character.

As an undergraduate, I was used to settings in which readings were “pitted” against each other. I did not sense that these narratives were negative or destructive, and I trusted that the language in these essays offered a key to discussing the injustices and imbalances of power and privilege that I felt kept me from releasing the inhibitions I felt toward the possibility of actualizing my sexual, gendered and performative identities. Moreover, I didn't resist reading or writing about them because I thought it was fun to decode these passages and to try out thinking with this new language. With each class discussion and essay, I stretched my legs and stepped into the language in an attempt to exhibit a degree of literacy proficiency and to rehearse for the off-page conversational performances.

I sensed that texts and writing could contain the possibilities for liberation, and I wanted to be an active participant in the process. Although I did not immediately relate the texts in class to the internal processing that was taking place in terms of my own fraught sense of identity, over time I reconditioned my way of thinking and

reframed my values and beliefs. By attempting to speak from the standpoints of these social philosophies well before I could delude myself into thinking that I had somehow mastered their respective discourses, I was setting the stage for a future scene in which I could reflect on some of the issues and assumptions that contributed to my own troubled self-silencing. However, while my time at Trinity had a significant impact on me as an individual and thinker, I did not fully authorize myself to reflect on how my evolving understanding of concepts like ideology, alienation and trauma related to my own situated experiences. Ironically enough, though, I frequently mentioned how, if people would just read and work to understand cultural critiques like those of Benjamin and Spivak, then the rest would take care of itself—I felt sure that folks would freely welcome a new social order, undo problematic hierarchies and systems of power and make various means of production available to everyone so long as people were exposed to these revolutionary ideas. At the time, though, I did not understand that this position was tantamount to totalizing my own situated reading experiences and limited understanding of how the world operates. Because I identified as a performer, because I struggled with my sexual identity, and because I have almost always approached reading in terms of what I planned to use it for, academic and social theories unlocked my ways of thinking and gave me new material for interacting with the world, material I assumed was not only universally good but undeniably sound.

Looking back, I think of myself as someone preparing for a role: I rehearsed

the lines of thought and repertoire-specific codes and references that signaled I could understand, if not yet fully participate in, the conversations and questions that took center stage in the academic classrooms of my undergraduate education. By rehearsing the lines of an imaginary scholar who I saw as a cross between Walter Benjamin and Slavoj Žižek, I found myself practicing writing techniques and using terms that followed methodologies I naturalized as representations of good writing. Much of the writing I encountered was either in translation or presented as a metacommentary on some other sociocritical discourse, and the thick language and mind-boggling conceits that I waded through gave me a lot of material to decode and rehearse. As a student who had never felt confident with his reading abilities, I was excited to find myself in classes in which we struggled together perceptively to pierce through the difficult language and ideas, doing our best to make sense of the material by writing about and discussing our unfolding perceptions. Before, I had thought that my frustrations with reading related to a personal inadequacy, but, when it came to dense critical theory, I found myself ironically enough on surer footing. Since everyone openly felt uncertain about their individual interpretations of the texts, I found the energy to work to uncover their meanings, and the practice was exciting for me. And although I could not initially perceive it, this excitement began to lay some foundations for reflecting critically on my own evolving understanding of who I was.

However, even though this special attention to the character of the imaginary scholar provided me with a road map to academic success in college, I still struggled

with the role I had cast for myself because it was predicated on the assumption that successful writing meant forming complex chains of thought that unearthed difficult and abstracted ideas. To an extent, I operated on the assumption that “good” meant “irrefutable” and “monolithic.” When I reflect on my undergraduate education, I recognize that writing with an increasingly stringent and “serious” tone stifled my inclination toward storytelling and “putting on.” In my writing, I began to see creative nonfiction and plays as “easier” approaches to writing for the very reason that I enjoyed them and found them to be “fun”—my definition of what was permissible in art was more expansive than it was for my academic writing, and I carefully avoided theatre classes and performance-oriented subjects. Nevertheless, while I attempted to strip away the artifice of language and to unveil unfair and constricting social hierarchies in the classroom, other areas of my life continued to embrace the exercise and pleasure I received from self-consciously “putting on.”

During college, I found a steady gig as an arranger, conductor and pianist at the Josephine, a San Antonio community theatre. When I came onboard, the theatre was managed by a family who had made a name for themselves in the city for producing musical revues. The shows were fairly mainstream entertainment, but it wasn't until I joined the band and agreed to arrange musical charts for the shows that I discovered what a performative and compositional challenge this type of work would be. When new revues were in development and being scripted, I would be sent CDs for which we most often could not locate sheet music, and my task was to write “charts” and

“lead sheets” for the band. The shows often included brass instruments that added to the standard rhythm section, composed of keys, guitar, piano, bass and drums.

And in its own way, my literacy development around learning to write sheet music opens up a conversation about what skills, actions and ways of seeing emerged through this ongoing education. The practice of listening to a recording repeatedly and honing in on individual chord clusters most rehearsed my musical ear. To arrange music that matched the songs on each CD, I had to stretch my ability to listen to a piece of music and to discern individual lines of music, instruments and chord progressions. I gained a lot of pleasure in reproducing the music verbatim. From the other performers and musicians, I loved inciting amazement at how closely I could replicate the music from the CD. And, at the same time, the practice loosened me up on the piano and allowed me to improvise and compose original works myself. At times, the songs on the recording included instruments that we weren't using for that particular show, and I had to recompose the music for the instruments in the band. Even though I found a thrill in “getting it right” and hearing my pages come alive during musical rehearsals and shows, I sensed that what I loved most about the process was making room for my own voice, adding new elements to the music I adapted and increasingly working with singers individually to form our own arrangements of various songs. It was not always possible to discern precisely what the piano was playing on the CDs, particularly in tunes orchestrated for much larger ensembles, so, instead, I would comp on the piano during these sections. With time, learning to

improvise accompaniment among the various chord progressions that composed each song became easier. Eventually I became a capable piano player and musical leader even though the genres of music and level of complexity routinely changed drastically from show to show.

This time in the theatre encouraged growth in other aspects of my identity as well. Toward the end of my sophomore year of college, I took on the identity of gay male when I came out to my friends and family for the first time, and the courage to do so largely extended from the welcoming theatre community I found myself in and the specific education I received at Trinity. The news upset my family, and, while most of my more conservative friends at Trinity accepted me, many of them adopted a somewhat disapproving stance. I frequently heard that I would “grow out of it” from friends, and my mother expressed her wish that I might find a wife someday. Notably, a reaction from my father remained absent. My father lived on the east coast, and he and I had become all but estranged by the time I came out in college. Although no explosive falling out had ever occurred with the man—I still travelled back east for holidays and summer vacations—neither one of us seemed to make much of an effort at a long-distance relationship.

This silence, however, was nothing new. I knew I did not need to tell the man outright that I was a homosexual. I more than sensed that he always had some indication. Once, on a trip to his house in Virginia for Christmas, I made a grievous error: one night on his computer, I searched the web for illicit pictures of men and

forgot to clear the browser history. The next morning, after having coffee with my father, I went downstairs to check my e-mail. Posted to the computer screen was a list my father had written, naming a few of the sites that I had visited the previous night. The only addition to the list was a rudimentary sketch of a small face at the bottom of the note, frowning. I stared blankly at the screen for what seemed like hours, light-headed and unable to crawl out of the basement. We never spoke about my behavior or his. I only remember that at some point later on in the day he asked if I wanted to watch a football game with him. In what now feels like an absurdly masculine scene, we sat in silence looking at the television—each knowing what the other had done and neither uttering a word.

But by the time I got my bachelor's degree, I had found some positive outlets for exploring the tension of that day and its lasting impact on my evolving sexual identity. For one thing, even though my experiences as a reader and performing undergrad formed particular and at times constricting definitions of “good writing,” college was a largely positive time for me; I became an engaged learner, and the embodied practices that allowed me to enrich my perception of the intellectual landscape, and, in turn, I (re)shaped my actions. Plus, my friends and the theatre community I knew helped me to feel increasingly comfortable with expressing myself in ways, oddly enough, that didn't feel so much like a performance. The musical theatre community was largely a welcoming home for my energies. From an early age, I had sensed that the theatre was a permissive and enabling place in which I could

embody various gender and sexual identifications that I sensed were off-limits behind the scenes. It wasn't long after I began performing at the CFRT as a younger person that I discovered that the theatre served not only as a forum for "putting on," that is, for consciously adopting various gendered effects for the sake of creating a separate character, but as a space in which real people could express their personally felt gender and sexual identities in ways that seemed impermissible elsewhere. Many of the performers I knew identified along the spectrum of sexual variance, and when I finally came out in college I relied on the support of the community of artists that I joined to feel more secure in this aspect of myself.

When I graduated from Trinity and joined the Peace Corps, I became exposed to additional forms of sexual identification and enacted alternate understandings and practices of literacy. Without a doubt, the two years I spent abroad complicated much of what I understood in terms of gender and sexuality, nationality and citizenship, race and class and even how I related to performance and writing. After concluding my time at Trinity, a period in which I sensed myself to be writing my way through the learning process, I went to Romania with the Peace Corps (PC) and taught English as a foreign language. In terms of performing as a volunteer, I developed a teaching persona that helped motivate me in the classroom and informed how I approached individual lessons. While my Romanian counterparts incorporated listening, reading, speaking and writing into their lesson plans, they asked that I focus on conversation, and, although I did sneak in some short stories and plays as well as reflective and

creative writing assignments, I largely focused on oral communication and taught through the use of prompts, improvisation activities and situational critical thinking.

This emphasis on embodied communication spilled over into other facets of my life in Romania as well. For one thing, by the time I left college, I felt more comfortable with my sexuality and recognized the need for communities of people who welcomed nonconformist forms of identification and I actively sought them out. Plus, and no less significantly, in the PC I allowed myself to have fun with these people (with dance parties) in addition to working with them on the issues we felt mattered, including feminist, queer and environmental activism and awareness raising. In this space, I felt more assured in pursuing my sexual desires and my wish to form artistic communities with gender non-conforming people, and it did not take much time before I connected with other Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) and Romanians who shared my interests, desires and goals. Admittedly, when I first arrived in-country, I did my best to present as “straight” to volunteers and PC staff. At that time, I worried that I might compromise myself or my ability to participate effectively as a PCV if I were an out gay male. But I gravitated toward liberally-minded people who outwardly celebrated diversity, especially sexual and gender diversity, and before long I came out to PC staff and volunteers. In many ways, I felt more comfortable coming out to my friends and coworkers than I did to my parents or friends at Trinity. In the PC, I felt increasingly assured of the importance of the coming-out process (and of my ability to survive it). I sensed that I had begun an earnest attempt to align my actions

and presentations with my desires and individually situated interests. I wanted to open myself up to reaching my fullest potential, including the sensation that I was being honest with myself and responsibly pursuing my own happiness.

I no longer felt that I was hiding my identity—at least, it was no longer my intent—and I sought friendships with those people who shared my interest in entering conversations on the topic of sexual difference. By the time I joined the Peace Corps, I had come to terms with the fact that I had desires, interests and goals that were not always permissible in larger social contexts. By encountering such geographically, ideologically, sexually and linguistically diverse people, I sensed that the most productive starting point would be to acknowledge our differences to the extent that we were able, and I adopted a position that attempted to allow others speak for themselves. It was in this context that I felt as if I truly owned my sexual identity—perhaps for the first time. Before, coming out meant navigating hostile and defensive waters: identifying openly as a homosexual stateside had involved fielding a barrage of preconceived notions about my behavior and temperament, and I felt that after coming out I spent the majority of my time defending myself and attempting to distance myself from the misbegotten assumptions that others brought to the gay identity. Sexuality and gender had always been hotly contested borders for me, but when I first came out to my PC friends my initial nerves quickly dissipated. My friends seemed less interested in individual coming out struggles and more interested in broader questions of sexual identification.

This subtle difference was hugely important. The question of my so-called “true” sexual identity—and consequently its value—were less important issues than the issues wrapped up in *how* I negotiated that identity. It was in the Peace Corps that I began shifting the story I told about myself from a man with an inherent nature to a man whose identity had been informed by a complex web of feeling, identification, experience and action. From other American volunteers, I learned that people can adopt a number of different labels for their sexual and gender identities that go beyond even the limited categories of gay/bi/straight and woman/man/trans.

This alternative route to self-expression and awareness emerged in concert with other modifications that I was making as an individual and literate person. In Romania I continued to compose and perform creative projects, often incorporating my friends and always finding new ways to enjoy myself. I wrote humorous essays throughout my service as a volunteer and sent them home to my parents and the followers of my updates—in the essays I hear an attempt to impersonate the style of David Sedaris. Moreover, beyond the text-based compositions I crafted, other multimodal forms of writing allowed me to expand my artistic hand. Short videos and films, such as “Eva Buys a Loaf of Bread,” allowed me to think about cinematic storytelling, music, artistic direction and performance in new and exciting ways. These elements were informed further by my increased use of film-, music- and image-editing software.

However, this emerging sense of freedom with identity and composition did

not transfer throughout all social settings, and at times I intentionally misled others around me. With my American friends in Romania as well as a few Peace Corps Romanian language instructors that I had befriended during our training, I was encouraged to explore expressions of my sexuality and to incorporate them into my activism. I attended my first LGBT pride parade while living in Romania; lining the streets, armored tanks created a blockade between us and the protesters, whose numbers at least matched our own. I also saw drag performed for the first time; in a tucked away makeshift dance club in the basement of a man named Feri (pronounced “fairy”), I saw the beautiful performativity of drag, of the expressive act that, in the moment, seemed to create room for performance and social commentary. But, at the same time, I remained in the closet while I lived and worked in the towns to which I was assigned. To this day, I regret this decision. I was worried that my ability to do good work and to help would be compromised if I were out in the small towns of Câmpulung Moldovenesc and Fundu Moldovei, and I'm still convinced that I would not have been so warmly welcomed into homes if I had come out publicly. However, I felt like I was being dishonest all of the time; I fabricated my straightness and attempted to pass. Once, when a female friend from college came to visit me, we even performed as a couple and made up a history to share with people. Today, I'm ashamed by this. I became quite close to a number of people who today would accuse me of betraying their trust, and my sense is that they would be right to do so in this respect.

In a way, then, I cannot pretend to uphold my earlier sentiment that I had no interest in “playing a part” by the time I graduated from college. After all, in the PC I continued to strive to match others' expectations of me; on the topic of my sexuality, I actively let people believe what they wanted to believe. I did lie, but I want to believe that these performances were ultimately for the best. I feared the disapproval and judgment of my Romanian counterparts in Câmpulung Moldovenesc and Fundu Moldovei, and, to an extent, I helped conscript my return to the closet. Peace Corps Volunteers joked that women, religion and George Bush were the primary conversation topics for Americans in Romania, and I was definitely sensitive to the frequent questions I received about women. I was routinely told by Romanians that I would be desired by my students and single female colleagues; they often insisted that I should find a woman who cooks well and makes me very happy. I tried to keep a low-profile, but when my male Romanian counterparts began picking up on my non-engagement on the topic of women, I panicked. I tried to change the subject once and for all by casting a friend who came to visit in the role of my girlfriend.

My instincts tell me that some of my friends, colleagues and even strangers must have been skeptical of this performance, but no one ever mentioned anything to me. The thing that I regret about this experience is that I will never know to what degree did I create my own problems the choices I made. Had I begun with a level of honesty, who knows how things would have turned out? I cannot totally reject my choice to stay in the closet because, although I did have access to a community that

valued and permitted people's individual self-expression and celebrated the expression of difference, I experienced a good deal of conservative attitudes towards gender and sexuality that made this aspect of my identity feel unwelcome. Once again, I primarily hid my gender and sexual identity behind closed doors. However, unlike before, I was increasingly connected to communities whose queer interests and desires overlapped with my own, and I held out for a time when I could feel wholly present in all of the work that I do.

Making the transition to graduate school, I hoped to join academic conversations that explored questions of gender and sexuality, and I hoped that I would be able to realize myself fully within the professional circles I joined, but I still feared discussing my gender and sexual identity in public forums, even in academic disciplines like rhetoric and writing that boast an impressive degree of progressive perspectives. Moreover, despite the personal growth I felt I had achieved in the years following my bachelor's, returning to higher education, I assumed that I would return to a method of writing that involved me "championing" controversies and debates in much the same way that I attempted to "champion" the psychoanalytic and marxist critical discourses I read as an undergrad. However, as a graduate student at Oregon State, I was encouraged to think of my writing in terms of Kenneth Burke's metaphor of "entering the conversation," and it didn't take long before I realized that I could not proceed with business as usual.

"Entering the conversation" in graduate school meant spending some time

listening in on a conversation *in medias res* and entering the discussion in my own way, i.e., with my own situated thoughts and developed assumptions. I understood how commonsensical this metaphor was as a guide, but, in returning to school, I felt I had limited means of entering the conversation as an academic writer. The more polemical style of writing that I was used to was not conducive to the types of conversations I was interested in having, conversations that acknowledged complexity and subverted the desire for easy answers and final resolutions. Moreover, as my undergraduate experience was focused on scholarship and philosophy that looked for and talked about “the real,” I was interested in distancing myself from the artificiality of performance. Hence, as a graduate student, I struggled to force myself into a mould that though previously enabling now directly threatened my ability to write about the plural meanings and ways of being that I had experienced in my own life. This tunnel-vision rendered me tongue-tied and my writing, when it came, was incoherent. Despite any awareness of the inaccuracies and limitations of this view, I felt trapped by this method of writing as if polemics were the only forms of writing and academic research worth engaging with, and at my perceived lowest moments as a graduate student, I gaped for alternatives and found none.

But this incoherence was largely limited to my engagement in academic spaces. After the Peace Corps, I moved to Oregon and successfully asserted who I felt myself to be, even in its ongoing complexity, even in terms of my sexuality which, for me, is still evolving. I took a public position working as the Community Outreach

Coordinator for the Pride Center, Oregon State's LGBTQ student resource center; I wrote a weekly column in the school paper on topics relevant to the queer community; and I often made announcements about LGBT events in class. But there was a disjunction between the life I was living and how I felt I needed to perform as an academic, and this disjunction came across in my writing. One of the most important consequences of writing this autoethnography, in addition to the insights I gained about my past experiences, was the ability to perform academically in writing in a way that made sense to me and got me out of the previous opposition I felt.

Arriving at this point ultimately, I think, depended on recognizing and incorporating into my writing certain lessons I received well before entering the academy, lessons I learned as a gender-marked person and as a performer. In writing this autoethnography, I have been reminded not only of how difficult it is to undertake the task of representing myself but also of the importance and strength in thinking of my evolving performances and identifications as momentary glimpses of a life in-process. The strict mandates I set for myself about what good academic writing looked like were just as related to the reading and writing practices I developed as an undergraduate as they were to how I developed as a stage performer and as a gender-marked person over time. As a performer, I wanted to command the stage and hit the mark from a young age, and, with respect to my gender insecurities, I wanted to overcome my perceived inadequacies, even if that meant suppressing my deeply felt desires. When my home life was at its most volatile and when my relationship to my

own gender identity most wracked with fear and self-derision, I found the stage to be a place where I could feel in control, to feel as though I was overcoming obstacles and metaphorically “nailing it.”

However, just as each new role as an actor comes with a new set of lines to memorize and motivations and characteristics to internalize, so too do the various offstage roles I play. Acting more masculine out of fear of others' judgment did not resolve my gender questions or “put to rest” this trouble. To be sure, these performances informed my difficulties and impacted how I set myself up to respond to them in the future, but, as I instinctually knew would be the case, my personal identifications and unconscious desires could never be “settled” so long as I engaged with them antagonistically. These days, I find it effective to think about how the new contexts I inhabit catch me in new iterations of self, responding to different exigencies, memorizing and rehearsing new lines and striving for new goals.

Throughout the performance of this autoethnography, I cannot help but notice moments in which I appear to be struggling to compose a progress narrative of my development as a gender-marked person and as a student. In these moments, I sense that I alternate between being too hard on myself and too unproblematically positive about my experiences. Starting with my time as an undergraduate student, I generally paint myself as a hard-headed masculinist theory man in school and as a queer man on the stage outside of the walls of the academy. In important ways, these pages resonate with me as true, but it is also the case that they conveniently set me up to describe my

Peace Corps experience as a time in which I came to value a more blended approach to my life, as a time in which I came to believe that bringing my identities together was a powerful and important move. But in ways that I have not articulated here, my life has necessarily been more complex than any narrative I weave could indicate. Of course, this is not to say that this autoethnography has caught me playing a part or “putting on” in the same way I do when I adopt fictional roles for the stage.

Rather, I must finally acknowledge that this autoethnography has been not just an inquiry but a performance as well, and the performative nature of the work does not, I hope, ultimately diminish what I feel has been an intrinsically important process. Writing this chapter has been important in terms of bringing a number of different selves together, and it has had the purpose of engaging the past, looking critically at it and repositioning myself vis-a-vis certain social ideologies, assumptions and practices. And it has been a demonstration as well. In the following chapter, I reflect on what I have learned as a result of writing this autoethnography and consider how this performance prepares me to perform on future stages.

Act III
Hitting the Mark: Making the Page My Stage

As I look back at the first and second chapters and reflect on the overall writing process of this thesis, I am struck by the importance performance has played—as an act, as a theoretical concept, as a memory and as a desire—in this project. In an immediate sense, performance has referred to the active scripting of the thesis itself, a work that begins by advocating for the potential of autoethnography and continues by staging an autoethnography of its own. My initial chapter argued that autoethnography can enrich and complicate our understandings of self and other by examining the self as other, and in my second chapter I attempted to engage in the process directly by considering how my gender and performance identities have contributed to my literacy development and (re)shaped my values. In this concluding chapter, I would like to reflect on what I have learned in the process of writing these opening acts, specifically in terms of what they have taught me about performing academic writing. My autoethnography explored a number of personally significant experiences that shaped how I understand “performance,” “gender” and “writing,” but, rather than attempt to tease out the complexities of these shifting understandings here, I would like to limit my discussion in this closing act to the self-identified “difficulties” I experienced as a graduate student. In the process of describing how

autoethnography helped me let go of some of these troubles, I articulate a number of important lessons I received as a writer. After doing so, I reflect on how this project implicates my work as a teacher and researcher and, in the end, consider how my learning has prepared me for both current and future thresholds.

Before doing so, however, it is important to spend some time reflecting on what I have learned about myself as a writer and academic as a result of composing this thesis. I would like to begin by describing the process that led to my focusing on autoethnography. When Lisa and I began discussing possible topics, it was clear to me that a great deal of research taking place in the field of rhetoric and writing interested me: new media scholarship, work in visual rhetoric, performance studies, community literacy research, ethnography, and theories of gender and identity, just to name a few. We discussed a number of possible topics, but there came a point at which Lisa and I found ourselves in a real dilemma. As a writer, I was having a difficult time negotiating my own “presence” on the page because, as I eventually discovered in my autoethnography, the strict rules about academic writing that I had internalized as an undergraduate (specifically, that academic prose should be dense and written from an ethos of the objective observer) caused a debilitating stalemate. It was from this stalemate that we eventually decided that composing an autoethnography might prove to be the most generative and ultimately beneficial thesis project for me because of autoethnography's emphasis on analyzing the personal.

Compelled by the exigencies of the master's program and prompted by Lisa

Ede's motto to let the writing guide me, I wrote the majority of the second chapter first because it was all I felt that I could manage to articulate. From the start, the process of writing about my experience has felt both more vulnerable and valuable than any other academic composition I have undertaken. I wanted to write from an acknowledgment of my self-identified “difficulties” as a student, and my testimony in the autoethnography expanded beyond my experiences as a student to examine a number of previous challenges I faced as a gender-marked person and performer. When my autoethnography reached the point of describing my undergraduate experience as a time in which I enjoyed scripting hard-headed, semi-masculinist texts, I found a path toward articulating why I struggled with the performative requirement of writing in graduate school.

Before I began writing the autoethnography, I had not given much conscious thought to how thoroughly connected my troubles as a graduate student were to beliefs and values I had internalized about language and being. Writing the autoethnography allowed me to listen metaphorically to my own experiences and evolving perceptions, and in this process, in being caught in the act, I managed to slow down and think about those performances reflexively and critically, not taking them for granted but rather using them as the very material of inquiry. Where the autoethnography succeeds in articulating some of the cognitive dissonances I developed as a result of internalizing certain negative ideologies, I sense that the work captures me overcoming my initial “crisis of doing” in important and revealing ways.

To return to the anecdote with which I opened this thesis, by becoming a metaphorical listener, the likes of which I had already been encouraging in my students for some time, I experienced an easing-up of the critical voices that previously crippled my writing and delimited what I viewed as acceptable. Rather than becoming blocked by previous assumptions, fears and challenges, I allowed my writing to reflect my thinking—even and perhaps especially where that meant giving voice to my internal critics. In other words, I *began* by writing. Giving voice to my troubles helped me distinguish between a number of different subject positions I held, and once I began the task of separating the “now” from the “then” it became easier to identify and, to an extent, let go of some the damaging beliefs and assumptions I carried with me into the present.

Ultimately, my being able to articulate these struggles helped me resolve some of the false choices I had set for myself as a writer. In writing an autoethnography, I consciously took on a number of roles at once, roles that put me in direct conversation with the rules I saw myself as needing to follow. From the witness to the interrogator, the believer to the doubter, the observer to the observed, I was able to admit to myself that my previous assumptions about good and powerful writing were a product of my own situated experiences. In the process of writing an autoethnography that placed some of my struggles in time and space, I was able to discuss how I came to value antagonistic and declamatory writing and to articulate my desire to locate alternatives. In this sense, the autoethnography allowed me to enact two goals at once: to help me

overcome my difficulties as a student writer and to advocate for an academic methodology that values the personal and emphasizes the importance of self-study for bringing about positive social change.

Thanks to the process of writing this thesis, I now think of my writing as an ongoing and agentive process by which I learn and recite the lines of a performance I am in the midst of scripting. Reflecting on the previous pages and acknowledging how much thinking and rethinking I need(ed) to perform in order to feel present on the page, I find myself placing more value on the practice of writing than ever before. By embarking on this exploration, I materialized a number of personally significant memories and thought processes that I had previously suppressed. I also rediscovered a writing process that works for me. I knew that I needed a space where I could feel comfortable trying things out linguistically. After I recollected how much I enjoyed and benefitted from daily rehearsals as a thespian and musician, I realized that my writing could benefit from the same kind of practice. So, somewhat embarrassed that I had not yet made such a seemingly obvious connection in my life, I both gave and received permission to give myself over to the writing process. I attempted to approach my writing from a standpoint of “saying yes” to the process, of allowing it to be motivated by exigencies in my life and thinking.

Not surprisingly, then, in writing this thesis and having the opportunity to act out a number of different roles, I learned a lot about what works and does not work for me as a performing writer. For one thing, I rediscovered how helpful it is for me to

write first drafts by hand. Something about the physical, kinetic nature of writing with a pencil and paper allows me to write without looking back, i.e., without deleting my words before they even make it onto the page. Writing until my hand reached a meditative rhythm and pace, I found it easier to voice multiple points of view as I reflected on my experiences. Once captured on the page, my running narrative opened itself up to communicating with others' voices and writing as well.

In this way, I learned to let my words teach me and guide my textual interactions with others, and an important discovery for me was that I cannot get ahead of the process. Before I could position myself amid research and claim my rights vis-a-vis my sources, I needed to let go of some of my anxieties about whether I was quoting too much or not enough and to trust in myself and in the journey on which I was embarking. This trust meant learning to take certain risks. The more I learned to let go and take risks in my writing, the more prepared I became to ask meaningful, research-oriented questions that, in this case, led to me to an enriched understanding of the generative possibilities of autoethnography as well as of performance studies, feminist teacher-research and queer composition. In other words, the more I wrote from my initial status as a non-expert in this field, the more I sensed that the resulting composition actually acted as the evidence of my budding expertise.

In working on this thesis, I found that autoethnography allowed for a particular kind of consciousness that I had not been able to realize in other forms of academic writing. However, while autoethnography served as a generative methodological stage

for my interests, it also complicated what I knew about performance. Currently, I have a less definable sense of what the word means for me. While my early and long-lived connection to the stage has left a serious imprint on my life, the academic characters I have embodied in higher education continue to challenge and expand my understanding of performance. Whereas before I had discussed performance only in terms of the theatre and artistic expression, when I became exposed to postmodern theories of performance in graduate school and the concept of performativity was introduced to me, I began to deconstruct my belief that performance was necessarily a form of “putting on” and began to think about ways in which performance represents an over-determined word that serves a variety of interests and gets articulated and embodied through a variety of modalities. Recognizing these differences initially overwhelmed me, but in writing the autoethnography I found myself capable of articulating a number of interrelated understandings performance and even of using a number of these understandings myself.

However, it would be false for me to suggest that at this point I have “arrived” or somehow “made it” in becoming an individual capable of fully representing his individual stake in the various scenes and communities of his life. Rather, I feel as if I have followed through on a particular thread of self-scrutiny that results from a writing practice and rehearsal process dedicated to charting and reflecting how I relate to a few of my own in-transition identifications. In the end, I hope that this project has helped me become a receptive and accountable audience member to the communities

in which I find myself, specifically artistic, queer and academic ones. Coming to terms with some of the hang-ups, mischaracterizations and working assumptions I felt as a student, writer and gendered human being, I sense that I have gained confidence in taking these experiences and situated perspectives as legitimate starting places for my engagement with the world and in my writing. This sentiment strikes me now as wonderfully simple in its circularity, as if the argument I most valued in the present moment was to emphasize the potential benefits of the very thing I am already in the midst of doing.

Key to unlocking my resistance as an academic writer, autoethnography has been productive in its ability to hold up a mirror to some of my own experiences and shifting thought processes; indeed, autoethnography laid the foundation for the critically engaged text that fills these pages. That said, I agree with feminist researcher Gesa Kirsch who argues that “experimental forms of writing alone will not address questions of authorship, authority, and voice” (83). She writes, referring here to qualitative research in general and not specifically to autoethnography:

I am concerned that as readers and scholars, we like to believe that simply by explicitly locating ourselves in our writing, we have acted in ethical and responsible ways. Autobiographical, reflective statements, however, no matter how developed, thorough, or insightful, do not change the power dynamics between researchers and participants, between interviewers and interviewees. To be sure, situating ourselves in our writing is an important step in rethinking traditional research procedures, but researchers also need to change the fundamental nature of research processes, making them more reciprocal, non-hierarchical, and beneficial for participants. (83)

Although Kirsch does not explicitly consider how her concerns about author-saturated texts implicate the work of autoethnographers, based on her analysis and on the chapters I've woven together here, my sense is that autoethnography, as with any methodology, has its limitations. Where autoethnographers “situate themselves conspicuously on the page,” they create opportunities, as Kirsch puts it, “to reflect on their research processes and on their lives as researchers” (79), but, in focusing on the personal, it is possible for writers to turn representation, as Brenda Jo Brueggemann puts it, “into a solipsistic, rhetorical position in which the researcher (the self)—once again—usurps the position of the subject (the other)” (qtd. in Kirsch 79).

However, autoethnography strikes me as especially important, particularly when, as Mary Louise Pratt puts it, “people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (175). What makes this engagement so critical is the degree to which it *breaks* with the solipsism inherent in “facile statements about our [one's] identity” (Kirsch 80). Certainly, when written uncritically, autoethnographies risk “confirm[ing] researchers' expertise, knowledge, and authority. Such commentaries can have the rhetorical effect of charming and disarming an otherwise critical readership, of gaining sympathy for an author's unexamined aspirations” (Kirsch 81). However, where writers use self-inquiry as a method for bringing to the fore stories not yet heard in the academy and as a means of understanding the personal as a rhetorical construction—as I hope my autoethnography does at its best—autoethnography can productively “make sure that

theory and research does [sic] not make the universalizing and homogenizing claims so typical of past scholarship in the social sciences” (Kirsch 79).

Reflecting on my own autoethnography, my sense is that the work adds value to my identities, beliefs and experiences as well as demonstrates the importance in shifting academic writing and research away from “a paradigm of supposed objectivity, neutrality, and distance” (Kirsch 77). In the opening chapter, I connected autoethnography's emphasis on analyzing the self as other to a number of overlapping scholarly pursuits, and, in “playing the part” in my autoethnography, I developed a more articulate sense of some of the important affiliations I hold as a person. As a result, more than ever I feel emboldened to claim my affiliations with performance and queerness, to speak from them, and to allow them to inform my work. However, in taking a moment to acknowledge this perceived transformation, I do not mean to “wrap up” or “close the book” on how I understand myself vis-a-vis the sociocultural matrices through which I move. Rather, in taking this moment, I am taking a metaphorical breath, filling my lungs with the energy to move forward into new physical and intellectual spaces. As I bring this thesis to a close, I want to open myself up to the new thresholds in my life and continue my search for ways to resist claims of objectivity, neutrality and distance.

To gesture toward this new beginning, as a direct result of having worked on this thesis, I want to reflect on some of the questions and issues that seem foremost in my mind as a teacher and potential scholar at this time. As I mentioned in the opening

chapter, before I began working on this thesis, I encouraged my students to see themselves as non-experts and to write from their initial status as novices in the genre of academic writing. I hoped they would realize that they could be more successful as writers when they learned to open themselves up to questions and confusion, uncertainty and ambiguity, contention and difference. I sensed that I could be of service to my students by emboldening them to write from their naturally occurring thought-processes rather than from the position of some imaginary “expert” that they had internalized based on preconceived notions about academic writing. Many students come to my class assuming that good writing means being free from bias, and, as I have noted, in my classes I try to unsettle this assumption a bit by suggesting that our initial beliefs, values and growing uncertainties, when made visible in writing, not only make our compositions more communicative and less vulnerable to naysayers, but they make our work more personally significant as well.

In bringing my thesis to a close, I continue to find a great deal of value in this position and, as ever before, I see an importance in thinking of writing as having a purpose that extends beyond fulfilling classroom assignments. However, after exploring some of the complexities of my own experiences and shifting perceptions, I have a deeper sense of how much students are truly taking on and even risking when they fully engage in the practice of writing from their status as non-experts. Before I undertook to represent myself by composing my autoethnography, I sensed that my persona as a teacher was a relatively innocent one. I believed that I had taken on an

ethically responsible stance of openness and respect toward my students and that my ethos of receptivity could be liberating for them. I continue to think that this position can free students from the burden of trying to sound like experts when common sense tells them otherwise, but, after challenging myself to write from my own initial status as a non-expert, I can no longer naively claim an “innocence” or “neutrality” to this stance.

Being able and comfortable to speak from one's status as a non-expert implies, to an extent, that a writer is aware of her or his own biases and affiliations, but, as my autoethnography demonstrates, undergoing the task of locating these primary beliefs and identities is often far from a simple one. All affiliations are not created equally, and encouraging students to speak from their “naturally-felt” identities could serve to embolden those students whose identifications already fit comfortably within larger sociocultural ideologies and to silence those whose perspectives have been historically unwelcome. Some students, including me, learned to define successful academic writing in terms of how much they could use it to distance themselves from their deep-felt identities. When I consider how long I actively tried to suppress the affiliations I hold, I see how problematic and politically charged such seemingly agreeable statements like “Write what comes naturally for you” can be.

For this reason, I have developed a degree of ambivalence toward sentiments like the one articulated by Jay Jordan in “Rereading the Multicultural Reader: Towards More 'Infectious' Practices in Multicultural Composition” when he asserts

that instructors “should encourage students to write to explore their own cultural affiliations, family backgrounds, and experiences... so students may draw on their pre-classroom knowledge and continue to build for themselves the subjectivities that will encounter supposedly foreign texts” (182). On the one hand, writing my autoethnography has given me a renewed appreciation for the desire to encourage students to explore how the “foreign texts” of the academy relate to and challenge their unfolding senses of self. On the other hand, I am increasingly sensitive to Martha Marinara, Jonathan Alexander, William P. Banks and Samantha Blackmon's point in “Cruising Composition Texts: Negotiating Sexual Difference in First-Year Readers” when they write, “[S]ome 'differences' are inherently *safer* than others; some *discomforts* are more comfortable or speakable than others” (273). As their article makes clear to me, even teachers who try to respect their students' right to their own language and to encourage first-year writers to embrace their initial status as non-experts cannot avoid sending powerful rhetorical messages and “licensing” certain conversations when they select the content of their courses. As reflected in my autoethnography, I have experienced the difficult position of “writing about... [my] experiences of difference, where their [my] difference is still taboo and circumscribed by fear and discourses of legality” (Marinara et. al. 273), and, as a teacher, I am worried about making facile statements that invite students to embrace their identities and to speak from their multiple cultural affiliations without appreciating the weight and potential struggle inherent in students' attempt to do so.

What do teachers risk when they invite students to embrace their status as novices and to draw from their pre-classroom knowledge? Aside from verbally encouraging students to relate scholarly material to their lives beyond the walls of the academy, what other “performance choices” do teachers make that either encourage or discourage students from undertaking to represent themselves in writing? How can teachers remain sensitive to the radically heterogeneous student populations that enroll in their classes while simultaneously speaking from their own affiliations and remaining faithful to disciplinary and institutional goals? How can instructors of first-year English composition, among others, respect Marinara et. al.'s assertion that “[r]endering any minority group to a marginal or hidden status is never innocent no matter how unconsciously executed” and, at the same time, work within the demands and limitations of a ten-week writing course such as Oregon State's WR 121, which is designed to prepare students for the cross-disciplinary academic writing they will conduct throughout their time in college (286)?

These are difficult questions, and, in asking them, I confront my inability to provide any firm answers even as I recognize the importance of continuing the effort to do so. As a person, I feel a responsibility toward promoting and fostering the difficult task of coming to terms with one's internal (and at times irrational) feelings. This process, though, is far from a simple one—quite the opposite. I think that giving ourselves permission to feel whatever it is we feel and to think whatever it is we think may well represent one of the greatest challenges we face as sentient

beings. I think what's so difficult about this kind of recognition is the fact that we're always in the middle of some new context or situation. But even though we are always marching into new situations (perhaps, at times, recklessly and overconfidently), we can't help but start from and use the values and assumptions that worked for us in the past. And when I think about those aspects of my character that have always been sensitive public topics (such as my romantic interests in men and my self-conscious relationship to the concept of masculinity), it is difficult to get a handle on what I truly want because I have internalized a number of misconceptions about what is "proper" or "the most desirable way" to conduct my life.

Nevertheless, I think that people can create positive change for themselves and others when they actively try to bring their conscious beliefs and values together with their personally situated experiences and perceptions. Although, as Linda Brodkey suggests, we may only be able to "confront[] our respective inability to comprehend the experiences of others," as a researcher I want to contribute to a critical awareness of "the absolute necessity of continuing the effort to do so" ("Writing Critical Ethnographic Narratives" 113). Writing, teaching, conducting research and engaging in social activism have only given me a greater respect for how serious a business it is to invest oneself fully in writing.

In my autoethnography, I wrote about becoming enabled to invest fully in writing when I finally translated concepts of performance into my work as a student, and now, when I think about all of the competing goals and interests that instructors

face, I wonder what the benefits could be in making similar translations in the classroom. What concepts of performance could help students “resist... [social hierarchies] by offering alternative ways for imaging and enacting social relationships” (Fishman et. al. 227)? What tools might teachers use in the classroom to “double cast” students in the alternating roles of actor and critic so that they might “productive[ly] weave... story and theory” (Spry 713)? How could the classroom be re-envisioned as a rehearsal space, and what would it take to inspire students to engage in writing practices that caught them in the act—learning the lines, playing the part, and hitting the mark?

For myself, in completing this thesis, I am caught in the midst of another threshold. I don't know what the future brings in terms of my commitments as a writer or teacher, and I cannot say for certain how this thesis has situated me as a person or performer. I see how the process of writing this thesis has allowed me to strike some of the pieces of my previous thinking and has helped me to reset the stage, as it were. The methodology of autoethnography has been a profoundly enabling tool for me, and it has allowed me to bring together research in rhetoric and writing on literacy, performance and queer studies. I have a new sense of how my identities of academic, queer and performer can come together in productive ways, and areas that seemed separate to me, maybe even necessarily separate to me, now seem valuably interconnected. As a teacher and researcher, I now see generative areas of overlap between these divergent fields. Ultimately, this thesis helped me find a path that

would require me neither to ventriloquize nor recite the words that someone else has written. I have made a transition from someone who is positioned as a student or receiver of the words and ideas of others to a person who can now enact my own agency while recognizing myself amid textual company. This transition may be neither simple nor painless, but as I look ahead to the future thresholds of my life I am assured of its importance.

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