ABSTRACT

PRAY THE GAY AWAY:
RHETORICAL DILEMMAS OF THE AMERICAN EX-GAY MOVEMENT

by Travis Allan Webster

The Ex-Gay Movement marks a contemporary, traditionally North American emergence of “reparative” therapies and ministries that attempt to convert gay men and lesbians into “straight” identities. *Pray the Gay Away* theorizes these reparative rhetoric(s) as arenas that create discursive spaces of tension—what I call “second closets”—for “ex-gays” in virtual and material contexts. Through digital, rhetorical analyses, this thesis investigates the performative and linguistic reactions of ex-gays exhibited in online testimonies on pro-ex-gay websites, while examining rhetoric(s) of counter-hegemonic, online communities that seek to work against the Ex-Gay Movement.
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A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
by
Travis Allan Webster
Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2008

Advisor________________________
LuMing Mao

Reader_________________________
W. Michele Simmons

Reader_________________________
Madelyn Detloff
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This thesis is dedicated to Chuck Collins
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I am indebted to my thesis committee, LuMing Mao, Michele Simmons, and Madelyn Detloff. This project would not have been possible without the support of these three teacher-scholars, whom I admire, respect, and model my pedagogy and scholarship after. As my thesis director, Lu provided unflagging support for my work. He and I spent many hours together in his office, as he listened patiently while I bounced around ideas for this project. From him, I have learned some of the most valuable lessons—about writing, about professionalism, about the field, about yin-yang, about life. During the final, hectic months of thesis-writing, I would walk into Michele’s office and feel an immediate sense of relief. Her calm encouragement kept me focused and motivated. It was from Michele that I began to understand this thesis as not only part of academic conversations, but as a project with a real audience and context—she has taught me what it truly means to “do” rhetoric. Finally, Madelyn’s Queer Theories course opened my eyes not only to this project, but also to the world around me. Even while applying for tenure and planning an international conference, Madelyn was always there for me—to listen, to give thoughtful feedback, and to keep me focused.

Kate Ronald, the unofficial member of my committee, deserves special thanks. I would like to thank Kate for the countless afternoons I spent in the Howe talking with her about this project, the field, my PhD applications, and life in general.

I would like to thank Mike Martin, my undergraduate mentor. When three rejection letters from graduate schools arrived in my mailbox in the spring of 2005, he let me be mad at the world, but encouraged me to try again. Without his support, I would have given up and never looked back, but I reapplied to graduate school: It is because of him that I am here today working on this project and studying in this amazing graduate program.

Colleagues and friends to whom I owe many thanks—for listening, for asking me the difficult questions, for helping me through this process with smiles and laughter: Phill Alexander, Shawna Rushford-Spence, Wioleta Fedezcko, Karen Mitchell, Kristen Moore, Lynn Hall, Karstin Painter, Denise Landrum, Jason Palmeri, Abby Dubisar, Adam Burkey, Lisa Suter, Cristy Beemer, and Katy McKinnon.
Thank you to Devin Rodgers, co-president of Miami University’s GLTBQ student organization, *Spectrum*, for encouraging me to conceptualize my local audiences: Miami students right here on campus who struggle with their sexuality.

Thank you to Will Banks for mentoring me, for pushing me to think about the further implications of this project, and for showing me the importance of contributing to the study of queer rhetoric in our field.

Thank you to Gina Patterson, my dear friend and officemate, for always making me laugh when times were tough and for teaching me what it is to bring activism into the classroom. I have learned more from her than she knows.

Thank you to Bre Garrett for being a constant, “touching” support system, for believing in me, and for always bringing positive, beautiful energy into my life.

Thank you to Caroline Dadas for always being my friend, for spending countless hours at the Smokin’ Ox while we took breaks from grad school, and for being a role model from whom I have learned—and continue to learn—so much about scholarship, teaching, and friendship.

I do not know what I would do without my best friend, Michele Polak. Our Friday movie nights, our “grading Saturdays” at Kofenya, our “theorizing” of popular culture, our laughter to the point of tears, and our long talks about life made my years here wonderful. With her, I have found a true life friend, one whom I will always love and cherish.

Special recognition goes to my parents: my mom is the most brilliant person I have ever met. She taught me to read and write, but she also taught me to laugh, to empathize, to believe, and to love. My dad never blinked eye when I told him I needed to move away and spend another seven years in school—he just loved and encouraged me. From him, I learned the importance of challenging myself. I will spend my life trying to be even half the human beings my parents are.
CHAPTER I:
AN INTRODUCTION

I used to be an ex-gay, so I’m an ex-ex-gay, if you will. Yes, one of those people you see on Dateline NBC who claims that they’ve prayed themselves straight. From the ages of seventeen to twenty-one, I was convinced I could heal myself of my homosexuality. I prayed, I begged, and I bargained with God. I tried to masturbate to pictures of women (no luck). I even got engaged to a woman. My sarcastic tone suggests that I’m comfortable with my own history—enough to reflect upon it with humor. I’m working on this project as a way of theorizing my story’s rhetorical, linguistic, and discursive implications. While this project is not about my story, per se, it is about what happens when stories become the focus of political, morality debates in public discourses. My story begins like many others in the current culture of homophobic discourses—the stories where people try to “save” others under the guise of religious or moral obligation. As a result of these impositions, as a teen, I came out of the closet, I went back in, and I came back out again—a trajectory that I will theorize in this project. Holistically, this thesis unveils, investigates, and grapples with ex-gay rhetoric, but does not seek to blame ex-gay ministries, nor does it work to condemn those who involve themselves in this movement—rather it is a space where I will consider how rhetorical awareness and “listening rhetoric” could render this movement untenable.

My story begins in the fall of 1999—a few weeks shy of seventeenth birthday—and takes place in Houston, Texas. Like most gay teenagers, I kept my sexuality to myself for years. As a high school junior, however, I’d grown tired of the closet: I revealed my sexuality to my parents, my female friends, and my team. My parents cried, my female friends were elated to have a new “gay best friend,” and my team was stand-offish. At school, I caught flack, but no one called me a faggot, spat in my face, or tried to beat me up, like in the stories I had heard. Ultimately, I was happy. After a year of being out, life changed. I began dating a man who would change my life—a gay Christian fundamentalist who “taught” me about my “abominable lifestyle” and struggled with his sexuality. Growing up, I did not come from a particularly religious family, so when I came out, the religious aspect was not something I’d considered. I was who I was, and

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1 I will explicitly define and engage with ex-gay rhetoric in Chapter Two. A brief definition appears at the end of this chapter.
no religiously-sanctioned guilt was going to change that. However, as time passed, my boyfriend’s internalized homophobia became mine. It was not until I conflated religious dogma with my sexual identity that I began to desire change. What happened next in this untraditional teenage trajectory is simply a matter of performance—of embodied discourse. I attempted to shed the sin—pray the gay away—by entering a new closet. I recall the moment I transitioned into desiring “change.” My boyfriend and I sat together in his bedroom talking and watching television. As the night progressed, he asked if I wanted to have sex. I did, so I began kissing him. After a moment of kissing, something in him snapped, and he broke down crying. I tried to comfort him, but he was inconsolable, screaming that our relationship was an abomination—that he and I were going to hell never to be “forgiven” by a higher power. “We have to find help,” he said. I was devastated, and in a moment of panic, I agreed that we should, indeed, change. Damnation was not something I had considered, and the thought of going to hell terrified me. He said that there was a solution to our problem. In previous years, he had been active in the local, Houston chapter of Exodus International, an international ministry oriented toward conversion therapies for gay men and lesbians, so he knew the administrators and leaders in the organization. The next afternoon, we met a pastor for Houston’s branch of Exodus International, The Christian Coalition for Reconciliation. Upon meeting with this pastor, he asked about my past. As I spoke, he provided “answers” as to why I was the way I was, through which he drew upon the oft-referenced “distant-father-and-overbearing-mother” dichotomy. In actuality, my home-life did not fit into this equation, but as a naïve teenager, I bought it: I believed what he said about damnation and sin.

A self-proclaimed “ex-gay” himself, the pastor instructed me to halt my lifestyle: stop going to Houston’s traditionally and historically gay locales, break off my relationship with my boyfriend (we were to treat each other as “brothers in Christ” and “accountability partners”), and

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2 In Chapter Two, I theorize this concept of a “new closet”—what I call the “Second Closet.”

3 I reflect on this moment because I think it sheds light on an important tenet of the ideologies I will discuss in this project. Often, the sexual act itself is deemed more abominable than a sexual identity. In this case, it was for him the act that aroused his fear.

4 This dichotomy originates in Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud asserts that sexuality, specifically in gay men, is marked by a distant relationship with the father and an overbearing one with the mother. This theory, while outdated, undergirds current ex-gay ministry practices, past and present.
“imagine” myself as a straight male. Andrew Comiskey’s *Pursuing Sexual Wholeness: How Jesus Heals the Homosexual*⁵ became my bible (This book still sits on my bookshelf as a reminder of the power of rhetoric). While there was not an exact time-table under which I could expect to change, I had to believe. I had to invest myself in Jesus—in truly desiring the transition and finding the beauty of the woman—in order to become a “straight” male. While I know of “ex-gay” camps, like the ones in the 1999 *But I’m a Cheerleader*⁶, I did not have to go away to a remote location and throw around a football with other “ex-gays.” I did, however, come into contact with similar rhetorical constructions through one-on-one discussions with a Christian counselor, through long talks with my “accountability partner,”⁷ and through a myriad of ex-gay conferences.

In my early years of college, I sought refuge in an engagement to a woman with whom I remain close today; such relationships were encouraged. After a year of engagement, I finally called it off. I then spent a year of my life avoiding both women and men. One of my thesis advisors once asked me when I knew the “pray the gay away” methodologies were not working for me. To be honest, I cannot pinpoint a particular moment, but I know that when I met an out, gay man, Jared⁸, my perception of sexuality changed. During my life, I had always been athletic—I had “passed”—and thus I felt that I could change because I was so close to being fully “straight.” I mean, I acted like a “real guy” and I felt like one, so it was just a matter of getting my attractions under control; that’s how I saw it anyway. Jared and I lived in the dorms together and became fast friends, playing together on the dorm softball and volleyball teams. What I learned from Jared that I had to “unlearn” from my experiences with ex-gay ministries was that sexuality and gender are separate entities—vastly different animals. When I understood this, my life changed, and I began to reclaim my identity as a gay man, now twenty-one years of

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⁵ Comiskey leads Desert Stream Ministries, a ministry for the “sexually and relationally broken,” has authored a number of books on homosexual healing, and speaks at national and international ex-gay conferences. *Pursuing Sexual Wholeness* marks a prominent book in the study of homosexual healing.

⁶ *But I’m a Cheerleader* is a 1999 independent film that satirizes reparative therapies.

⁷ An “accountability partner” is one’s ex-gay comrade, typically also an ex-gay, who is meant to provide support and companionship through the process of sexual healing.

⁸ Name changed for the purposes of privacy.
age: I could be a guy and gay. This statement sounds simple, even as I read it, but at the time, this marked an epiphany—one that lifted a heavy burden. In my junior year of college, I started the process of re-coming out, a theoretical transformation I will address later in this project. I was gay, again.

In the fall of 2006, I spoke about these experiences with my colleagues in my graduate linguistics course at Miami University, noting this experience as an example of institutional rhetoric and discourse. It was at that moment that I understood my past as an experience with not bad luck but with rhetoric. My colleague, Bre Garrett, and I met uptown for dinner to get to know each other. While getting to know each other, my sexuality came up, as did my experiences with my prior experiences with sexual reparation. Having just read J.L. Austin’s How to Do Things with Words, we talked about the ways that speech acts function as discursive realities. As I spoke to Bre about my experiences, I understand that my experiences were grounded in a number of topics from class: speech acts, discourse, and rhetoric, namely. This conversation influenced my perspectives on the real-life aspect of linguistics. Due largely to this conversation, for my course project, I identified the rhetorical spaces where language actually does something—in this case, controls individuals—and understood the driving force of the ex-gay movement as rhetorically-orchestrated fear.

Two years after my linguistics seminar, current rhetoric and composition research has not yet covered ex-gay rhetoric, and I hope this project will help to expand ex-gay rhetorical literacy in the field. This perspective of literacy draws upon the work of James Berlin who asserts in his book, Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies, that discursive awareness influences one’s active citizenship, through which understanding everyday, rhetorical constructions impacts individual initiative in the negotiation of civic responsibility. It is this claim that draws me to this project. My goal is to create a space of rhetorical awareness with regard to ex-gay ideology, a space that Krista Ratcliffe in her book Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness or that Wayne Booth in his book The Rhetoric of Rhetoric might call “rhetorical listening” or “listening rhetoric.” These concepts involve the consideration of all “sides” before addressing an audience as an interlocutor. Through the lens of institutional critique, this project functions within Louis Althusser’s concept of ideological infrastructures and superstructures, which exist as the framework that undergirds
reparative therapy. The existence of an ideology depends entirely on institutional repression and physical oppression, both of which exist concomitantly within a superstructure. As a function of an ideological apparatus, the ex-gay movement functions within a structure that privileges what Althusser might call the ruling class. Because of the ex-gay’s dependence on declaration—on utterances—the work of language philosopher J.L. Austin informs my project. When a gay man declares ex-gay identity, he must do so through a linguistic utterance, which reasserts his place within an ideological and societal hierarchy that privileges heterosexuality as the dominant, Western sexual identity. These utterances interpellate the individual into a superstructure that not only “repudiates the body” and one’s sexual self, as Michael Warner purports in his book *The Trouble with Normal*, but also creates ideological closet much like the closet Sedgwick addresses in *The Epistemology of the Closet*. For Sedgwick, the closet marks a materiality that supersedes language and identity, a concept that I develop in Chapter Two. Foucauldian maxims are embedded in this project, as well as the concept of micro- and macro-level surveillance, as ex-gay men must not only attempt to be “real men” for the sake of their own Christianity, but also for the sake of productive, masculine citizenship.

A Historical Perspective of Exodus International

The American Ex-Gay Movement marks the emergence of reparative therapies and ministries that seek to transform gay men and lesbians into “straight” identities. Nationally and internationally, this movement embarks on a campaign that deems homosexuality as a social, moral, and religious abomination and thus worthy of change and “reparation.” “Ex-gays,” a title utilized by ministries, describe gay men and lesbians who seek these transformative processes. In many cases, these individuals pursue reparative therapies at their own will; however, in extreme cases, parents of adolescents have enacted forced entries for their gay teens. According to ex-gay leaders, the term “ex-gay” implies a transitional space the individual inhabits as he or she seeks religious redemption and atonement for the perceived sin of homosexuality. “Therapies” typically involve gender-oriented activities which “teach” individuals how to perform as “straight” men and women. Such therapies include Christian counseling, group therapy, and behavior-modification strategies. “Ministries” include the outreach to individuals through prayer, biblical study, and the emphasis on fundamentalist, Christian ideologies.
In the mid-1970s, in response to a growing gay sexual revolution springing from the 1969 Stonewall Riots, a number of ministries oriented toward sexual reparation for gay men surfaced in Los Angeles, Montreal, Minneapolis, and Tulsa. 1970s ex-gay ministries framed discussions around homophobic discourses sanctioned by the pioneering efforts of leaders Gary Cooper and Michael Bussee of Anaheim, California. In September of 1976, Bussee and Cooper coordinated the first ex-gay conference, which gave rise to Exodus International, the mother-branch of ex-gay ministries. Cooper and Bussee heralded Exodus International as an organization that could nurture and broaden ex-gay theories while extending ministries nationwide. The genesis of this organization can be traced back to internalized homophobia, as Bussee’s own sexual identity crisis gave rise to his own ideas about “helping” others through reparative ministries. His experiences with becoming a Christian counselor exhibit many of the same ideologies that transpire in ex-gay ministries. As a young counselor, Bussee “learned” that one could not exhibit both a Christian and a homosexual body. In a recent interview for Wayne Besen’s book *Anything but Straight: Unmasking the Scandal and Lies Behind the Ex-Gay Myth*, Bussee spoke of how many modern ex-gay perspectives came to light: “They believe in what came to be known as a kind of ‘name and claim theology’ that you may not be healed now, but by claiming you’re healed and continuing to claim that you’re healed God will eventually reward the faithfulness and cause the actual healing” (Besen 83). “What he told was that I needed to start considering myself as former homosexual even if I didn’t feel that way, and I said, ‘but I’m not heterosexual, and I don’t have any feelings toward women.’ To which the man replied, ‘That doesn’t matter. The Bible says you’re a former homosexual; therefore, you are.’” (Besen 84). Bussee’s early exposure to these homophobic discourses impacts much of modern-day ex-gay ideology. The designation of “ex-gay” even drew controversy at the first national meeting, but both Bussee and Cooper advocated the use of the term because of its implication of the healing process within a transitional period. Early ministries tactics situated Christian counseling and Freudian theories of sexuality as a central tenet of transformation. Early ex-gay therapies—and current ones as well—expose a raw reality that supersedes the idea that men and women completely change. The first ministries, like ministries today, address the notion of an omnipresent battle with one’s sexual urges implying that one may never shed one’s homosexuality, but he or she may fight a battle with it under the sanction of “good Christianity.”
Meanwhile, traveling the nation together, Bussee and Cooper spent years preaching at national conferences advocating the reparation of gay men and lesbians. However, on a trip to an Indianapolis conference, the two changed their perspective. Haunted by what unsuccessful ex-gays had done to themselves, including suicides and genital mutilation, the two vowed they would no longer advocate ex-gay therapies. According to an interview with Besen, both suppressed feelings for each other for years, revealing those feelings the night before a major conference presentation (87). Feeling as though they could no longer participate in the ministries, they attended the conference, as scheduled, but actually used the forum as a platform for speaking out against ex-gay ministries—about the lies of changing. Soon after, Bussee and Cooper abandoned Exodus International and began a life together with a ring-exchange ceremony in 1982. Cooper died of AIDS-related complications in 1991. Bussee resides in Riverside, California, and while he regrets his part in the evolution of Exodus International, he volunteers at a local community center, where he counsels gay youth.

Ex-gay therapies continue to thrive in twenty-first century politics. Currently, ex-gay ministries exist in a myriad of possibilities for the conflicted gay men and lesbians. The American Family Association, the Center for Reclaiming America, Concerned Women for America, Evangelicals Concerned, Exodus International, Jews Offering New Alternatives to Homosexuality (JOHAH), Love in Action, the National Association for the Research and Treatment of Homosexuality (NARTH), Sexual Compulsives Anonymous, and the Traditional Values Coalition all advocate reparative therapies for gay men and lesbians. In light of these coalitions to “combat” homosexuality and “reclaim” traditionally “American” value systems, media coverage of Ted Haggard, for instance, evokes a nearly comedic construction of changing one’s sexuality in the public eye. In a sense, then, this movement reflects conservative value system that draws upon sexuality as a conflation of gender, sexuality, and morality.

Chapter Overview
This first chapter introduces ex-gay rhetoric and the movement that undergirds reparative ideologies. In this project, I identify ex-gay rhetoric as a space that creates a “second closet” for ex-gays and as a materiality constructed through language and discourse exhibited in online spaces for both Exodus International and Love in Action. Ex-gay rhetoric takes the form of written, alphabetic text, as well visual texts. Chapter Two establishes a theoretical basis for ex-
gay rhetoric and examines the function of language through an institutional and ideological lens. Chapter Three investigates the online testimonies on websites for Love in Action and Exodus International to consider the ways that advocates of the movement speak about gender, sexuality, and religious obedience. I will discuss in detail the visual, rhetorical implications of these websites. As a researcher, I will ground my method in my observation of words, phrases, and ideas that materially represent textual and non-textually representations of gender. In Chapter Four, I will consider the counter-rhetoric of the ex-ex-gay movement, by examining public weblogs of ex-ex-gays, by also heeding observation of the language of these blogs that counter ex-gay rhetoric. Chapter Four negotiates counter-hegemonic rhetoric through the consideration of a series of public, ex-ex-gay weblogs. In this chapter, I will also address the manner in which ex-gay rhetoric transforms into ex-ex-gay rhetoric through the existence of a linguistic and rhetorical hybrid. Chapter Five projects how rhetorical literacy could impact ex-gay rhetoric and addresses the current and future implications of this project.
CHAPTER II:
THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

In August 1998, *Newsweek* featured an article on gay conversion therapies. On the magazine cover, ex-gays John and Anne Paulk embodied the image of happily-married newlyweds. For the cover photo, John and Anne sat together, his arm around her waist, both conservatively attired: he, in a collared shirt and sports jacket, different attire from his days as a club boy and drag queen; she, in flowered dress with gold cross pendant around her neck. Titled “Gay for Life? Going Straight: The Uproar Over Sexual Conversion,” the cover story chronicled their prior years of “separation from God,” and subsequent fall from “God’s plan for sexuality” (*Newsweek*). The cover-story marked the beginning of a career for John as, after he was featured in the magazine, he came to represent the poster-child for the Ex-Gay Movement. *Exodus International* executives hired Paulk as the Ex-Gay Movement’s prime speaker at ex-gay conventions. In early 2000, however, a mere two years after his didactic interview with *Newsweek*\(^9\), Paulk was discovered at Washington, D.C.’s oldest gay pub (Besen 3-16). Exposed by nationally recognized gay activist and journalist, Wayne Besen, Paulk denied the accusations of being at the pub for the purposes of sexual recreation; he testified that he entered the establishment only to use the restroom (Besen 12). He thought the pub was a “straight club” since he saw both men and women (actually drag queens) (Besen 12). With the demise of his credibility as a “straight,” active ex-gay, *Focus on the Family* denounced Paulk’s actions as “extraordinarily bad judgment” and supported a continued faith in Paulk’s “real transformation through Christ” (Besen 14-15). While the ex-gay organizations initially supported Paulk, he was later relieved of his duties as board chair at *Exodus International* and recorded the following statement in a feeble attempt to re-establish his ex-gay ethos: “But I’m not gay. I’m married. I’m straight and married … it is very difficult to overcome homosexuality. It takes a committed group of Christian supporters to walk along side a man or woman who is … walking through the years it takes to come out of this” (Besen 20)(emphasis original). This testimony, however, could not even convince his superiors to allow him to stay in his position, much less affirm his sexual conversion.

\(^9\) During his interview, Paulk called *all* homosexuals to “convert” to heterosexuality and discussed any “unnatural” sexual identities as apart from a natural, Godly scheme of sexuality (*Newsweek*).
I find Paulk’s situation troubling. I do not say this because I am condemning him; I say this because I understand, first-hand, the power of the movement’s methodology, ideology, and most importantly, rhetoric. The Ex-Gay Movement’s effort to change and restore one’s sexuality floundered, and this man lost everything. While I have not seen public statements discussing Paulk’s life since these incidents, I do wonder what has or will happen to him. Upon entering the ministries, Paulk re-entered a closet, and with his public and professional demise, he will, if he decides to leave the ministries, have to re-assert a sexual identity. These ideological processes call for our immediate action and are the basis for the following chapters. In this chapter, I assert a theoretical lens for ex-gay’s creation of a closet that he or she enters in order to actively seek salvation. I first will situate this language in a context under which ex-gay rhetoric confines individuals and elicits their performative responses.

What is Ex-Gay Rhetoric?

As an ex-gay, I understood conversion into a straight identity as a combination of exigencies: acting the part, speaking the part, and understanding God’s plan for sexuality. As a rhetorician, I see these elements differently, more specifically as rhetorical (“understanding God’s plan”) and linguistic interactions (“speaking the part”) that undergird a performance (“acting the part”). These three elements together—the linguistic, the rhetorical and the performative—unveil the materiality of “ex-gay rhetoric.” Thus, ex-gay rhetoric materializes as a second space—a second closet—that exists within alphabetic and visual texts and within the performances of ex-gays in response to these texts\textsuperscript{10}. In this project, I will address two spaces: the textual space of websites and counter-websites and the performative space where ex-gays react to these textual and ideological spaces through testimonies and blogs I will investigate in this chapter and in Chapter III.

“Reparative,” conversion language imposes an ideological system\textsuperscript{11} upon subjects and thus becomes what I call Ex-Gay Rhetoric. Through an Althusserian lens, I classify ex-gay rhetoric as the foreground of an “Ideological State Apparatus (ISA).” I make this statement

\textsuperscript{10} Here, I am using the word “text” broadly. An individual could read an alphabetic or visual that may initiate a performance, but the same individual may also interpret an entire institution as a text to be read. The institutional Althusserian “superstructure” could act as a material text.

\textsuperscript{11} For this project, I will draw upon Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology: a system of beliefs that function in a particular power structure.
because the ex-gay movement functions under heteronormative ideologies bound to norms of gender, sexuality, and desire. Ex-gays entering the reparative program, either by choice or force, immediately exist as subjects in an Althusserian “superstructure” central to heteronormative value systems. The governing ideology constructs implicit homophobia, often central to internalized homophobia, once “reparative,” “healing” rhetoric exerts material norms and desires upon the vulnerable individual. Through the organization’s language, the individual internalizes the discourse through interpellative and performative reactions. In his essay, “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser sheds light upon a superstructure based upon productive citizenship and subjection. Within the systems of the state and under the means of productive citizenship, Althusser claims that subjects become interpellated through both violence and ideology. This interpellation projects a subjection onto the individual under which he submits to the state as an obedient, productive citizen.

In Judith Butler’s terms, the subject “cites the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject” (232). The idea that one must “cite” one’s self to gender in accordance with one’s sexuality is where interpellative processes unfold. Ex-gay rhetoric functions within heteronormative ideology bound to gendered norms. Ex-gays who desire sexual transformation exhibit characteristics of what Althusser labels “always-already subjects” within the state’s superstructure. Male-centered ex-gay rhetoric privileges homosocial and heteronormative value systems within a governing ideology of implicit homophobia. Under the constraints of controlling rhetorics, the language interpellates the individual creating for him a space of subjection. The individual who seeks “freedom from homosexuality” then internalizes this language. Let us consider an initial example of ex-gay rhetoric through Exodus International’s website, a site we will continue to investigate throughout the next three chapters.

According to Exodus’ Website’s “Policy on Homosexuality,” the organization’s mission is to “[equip] and [unite] agencies and individuals to effectively communicate the message of liberation from homosexuality” (www.exodus-international.org). Central to this policy is the idea that “homosexual tendencies” are “disorders that beset fallen humanity” (www.exodus-international.org). One’s decision to “resolve these tendencies” through any sort of homosexual identity, lifestyle, or activity “distorts God’s intent for the individual and is thus sinful” (www.exodus-international.org). In addition to these statements, Exodus International’s
discussion of the “redemption of the homosexual” is at the forefront of the mission’s principles, so that the individual is “free to know and experience true identity … and to grow into heterosexuality.” Because these words imply a binary of what a greater power, God, affirms and condemns, the language itself forces ex-gays to define their homosexuality—an abomination—in opposition to privileged heterosexuality—a virtue. While the perceived intent of this language may be to “save” an individual from homosexual tendencies and forces, the words act as rhetorical vehicles, ultimately for the control of ex-gays interpellated in institutionally-sanctioned self-hate.

For my discussion of the rhetorics of control, the central ideological construct implies that individuals require liberation from a perceived sin, with heterosexuality as the only atonement. According to Sedgwick, historically, the idea of the binary of sexuality dates back to Foucault’s designation of 1870 as the year when medicalized sexual identity categories initiated a paradigm shift that accounts for “what we know today” (108) about homosexual/heterosexual identity. Thus, to rely on these binaries of homosexual/heterosexual identity is to rely on unsound historical ideologies because, according to Sedgwick, “modern ‘sexuality’ and hence modern homosexuality are so intimately entangled with the historically distinctive contexts and structures that now count as knowledge that such ‘knowledge’ can scarcely be a transparent window onto a separate realm of sexuality, but, rather itself constitutes that sexuality” (44). That is, when organizations claim to “know” the true “nature” of sexuality based on modern-day constructions of ideology and “common sense,” the arguments themselves exhibit unsound claims, posing further representations of ex-gay interpellation.

The Second Closet

“Do I have to play sports? Can I just watch them on TV or do I really have to take part?” an ex-gay participant asks Alan Medinger, a local leader of the New Hope Ministries in San Rafael, California. The New Hope Ex-Gay Ministry, under the supervision of Medinger, sees homosexuality as a disconnection from one’s gender identity. Thus, according to this ministry, to reaffirm one’s sexuality, one must participate in male-centered, homosocial activities, such as football. Based on the model that homosexuality manifests unmet needs from the same-sex parent, the ministry constructs its methodology around the idea that “non-sexual relationships forged through homosocial living are the answer to reclaiming lost masculine potential” (Erzen
These statements posit an ideology dependent on exigencies distant from one’s control. This language implies that the ex-gay must assert control over his life, as if homosexual identity lacks control. This implication poses an unspoken maxim that sexuality and gender are interchangeable and tangible—something to be worked for, something malleable. Utilized for making men and women more “acceptable,” ex-gay rhetoric becomes the prime element of control.

I define the first closet as an ideological space where the invisible marked body exists as a silenced entity within traditionally western discourses. However, from my own experiences and scholarship, a second closet exists that materializes through institutional, ex-gay rhetoric. Earlier in this project, I discussed three elements that materialize to create ex-gay rhetoric: the rhetorical, the linguistic, and the performative. The performative—“acting the part”—manifests itself in the second closet. The second closet represents a performative, fictional “wardrobe” the ex-gay exhibits in reaction to institutional rhetoric of the ministries’ “texts”—whether material or immaterial—and relates to the ministries’ construction of the lesbian and gay body as non-human. The pressure to conform to binary gender performances enforces a “reality” and performance where the ex-gay exhibits “straight” identity by adhering to tropes of sanctioned femininity—a fictional wardrobe of the second closet. The second closet becomes a self-imposed negotiation of the rhetoric of claiming ex-gay, “reformed” status. Though this second space is self-imposed, it does not exist in a vacuum, nor is it completely self-imposed. Subjects of the superstructure internalize the discourse of the ruling ideologies. In this case, the ruling ideologies would encompass heteronormativity, productive citizenship, and the manifestation of a normative sexual identity. These ideologies account for the self-imposed construction of the second closet. The second closet represents an ideological hybrid that depends on the self-imposition of the space as well as the superstructure that undergirds the individual desire for this self-imposition.

For a representation of the second closet, we can revisit Exodus International’s online mission statement, which “upholds heterosexuality as God's creative intent for humanity, and subsequently views homosexual expression as outside of God's will. Exodus cites homosexual

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12 I refer to the closet as a traditionally western space because sexuality as an identity often does not translate cross-culturally.
tendencies as one of many disorders that beset fallen humanity. Choosing to resolve these tendencies through homosexual behavior, taking on a homosexual identity, and involvement in the homosexual lifestyle is considered destructive, as it distorts God's intent for the individual and is thus sinful” (www.exodus-international.org). The end result of such reparative therapies “is not marriage. The goal is obedience, becoming who God created us to be. And as we are obedient, life opens up all around us, and all sorts of wonderful things become possible” (www.exodus-international.org). While these condemnations represent majoritarian right-wing, Christian ideologies, the words presented here inform readers of the organization’s construction of a strict binary that defines, through “love” and “acceptance,” livable and non-livable lives. Essentially, Exodus International’s assertion that certain “behavior” is “destructive” to the “natural” heterosexual mandates of the ex-gay institution poses the question of what is a livable life. Without regard to the historical awareness of the ways livable lives have been crafted and consolidated over time, the ministries’ power to label marginalized groups as subhuman entities marks the ex-lesbian’s—and ex-gays’ in general—transference of self into a new rhetorically-controlled space: the second closet. Judith Butler sheds light on this phenomenon by asserting that marginalized individuals who inhabit “bodily difference” must battle oppressive forces for the “renewal of the value of life” (12). According to Butler, the control over the intersection between sanctioned desire and mobile, socially-“sound” bodies creates an arena that recognizes human life as a process of “indexing a being who is at once human and living […] and that the range of being exceeds the human” (12). For Butler, to be human, one must first conceptualize what is non-human. In this context, ministry statements, such as the one above, connote that traditionally “human” and “non-human” subtexts enforce the individual’s placement in an institutional binary. Those who have exited the first closet and inhabited gay and lesbian identities must then enter a second closet that provides the promise that one will eventually be “straight”—a livable life.

Those whose desires and selfhood stray from normative discourses—ex-gays—inhabit the borderland of the livable and non-livable life. That is, they have come out of one closet and entered an institutional regime that through “love” and “healing” labels them almost human, but not quite non-human. Ex-gays experience the tensions of institutional rhetoric and thus become

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13 For this argument, I draw upon Judith Butler’s conception of the livable/non-livable binary in *Undoing Gender*. 

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accustomed and actively receptive to ideological interpellation. This tension marks the transition of moving from non-human to human under the ministries’ interpellative forces. Through this binary of livable and non-livable lives within the ministries’ control over desire, “the body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, [our] bodies are and are not [ours]” (Butler 21). The realm of this marginalized body’s fragmented ownership of bodily desire marks the ex-gay’s personal construction of the second closet, as we will see in Exodus International’s online ex-lesbian testimonies.

A Theory of Second Closet Utterances

Under the constraints of interpellation and due to the pressures of locating an acceptable body, the ex-gay performs an utterance that re-closets him. Let us move backward for a moment, though, to discuss the essence of the closet itself. Essentially, multiple performances—multiple closets—exist for the ex-gay and for everyone. One who inhabits an ideologically “acceptable” closet, the heterosexual, is able to move about freely, after the formative years, without a ceremonial coming-out process. Essentially, for one deemed ideologically acceptable, the closet dissolves and the individual moves freely into a heterosexual performance14. For those who are ideologically unacceptable, the closet solidifies and elicits a performance of silence or of “coming out” (though, coming out does not typically occur until the individual is capable of taking on and understanding his/her identity). What I purport here is that both of these existences are performances. For those who begin to understand themselves as apart from the ideological norm, the initial silence, while still a performance15, marks the individual to exist in relation to a perceived opposition to the norm. One is immediately placed into a binary, once one discovers that his sexuality is apart from the norm. Additionally, this binary, of course, privileges heterosexual over homosexual existence. What I have discussed, then, is the “first closet.” I do not presume that this first closet is unique. My main concern in discussing these binary closets is to show that all individuals must “come out”; however, it is the marginalized group that must perform this action ceremonially. We are all aware—on some level—of this ideology.

14 This notion relies on Butler’s notion of performing gender and sexuality.

15 In Epistemology of the Closet, Sedgwick purports that “closetness” is its own performance (3).
Through an Austinian lens, “in which to say something is to do something; or in which by saying or in saying something we are doing something” (12) (emphasis original), the ex-gay early in his acceptance of ex-gay ideologies, must provide an utterance—a verbal contract. Essentially, the utterance is a stated one. One of the first steps on reparative therapy is to meet with both a spiritual counselor and an accountability partner. Often, the meeting with the counselor acts as an initiation into ex-gay institution through he verbalizes that the homosexuality is an abomination. Essentially, the very inclination of attending an ex-gay meeting is the first genuine, unstated “utterance” that the ex-gay exerts in order to inhabit a livable life—an acceptable body.

From here, the next utterance locates “the root” of one’s homosexuality, the first utterance of re-entering the closet. “Finding the root” notes the process of the individual’s personal reflection to assert why one became homosexual, usually central to the individual’s relationship with one or both parents or parental figures. The 1999 film, But I’m a Cheerleader, a satirical account of a young lesbian’s experiences at an ex-gay “camp,” highlights this very stage. In the film, in an exchange with the young lesbian, the ex-gay camp leader asks about the protagonist’s “root.” As the protagonist asks for clarification of what exactly a root is, the camp leader asks, “Well, did you ever feel rejected from your parents?.” The protagonist doesn’t have time to answer before the camp leader shouts, “That’s it! You’re a lesbian because of a disconnection from both your mother and father. I’ll bet your mother was emotionally distant and your father was overbearing.” While this exchange represents an exaggerated account of the movement’s focus on finding the root of one’s sexuality, there are instances in which the interrogation of the ex-gay becomes problematic. Essentially, under the interpellative forces and because of the expectations of the ministries, the ex-gay is often forced, ideologically, to make this first utterance, this first step back into a closet.

From here, as a partially re-closeted individual, an ex-gay has decisions to make. The ex-gay ideologies I will focus on actually stress sexual conversion. Ex-gay ministries do exist that do not ask, require, or imply that the individual actually take on heterosexually; these ministries acknowledge that the individual can be homosexual or have homosexual “urges” without embodying the sin (so long as the individual does not act upon sexual desires or impulses). The men who face the next step of re-closeting are bound by the dominant forces of the movement
itself. Once an individual verbally or non-verbally commits himself to the ex-gay discourse community, he is then asked to embody the masculine \(^{16}\) “straight” male. As I stated earlier, with the discussion of the ex-gay men’s compulsory football activities, the ex-gay men must then attempt to “become real men.” By participating in sports, wearing masculine clothes, and engaging in homosocial discourse communities \(^{17}\), the ministries perceive these discursive elements to assist the individual in actually embodying the straight male. Essentially, this element of re-closeting is central to Gee’s notion of the “real Indian” (23-27). Gee asserts that discourse itself is broken into two parts: discourse and Discourse. For the purposes of my argument, I’ll focus on his notion of Discourse (with a big D). Through a discussion of discursive phenomenon, Gee asserts that this type of Discourse is first constituted by a “who” and “what” (22): “the socially situated identity and the socially situated activity” (22). It is, perhaps, the “activity” that contributes to the individual’s failure to convert and subsequent, continuous attempts at re-closeting. For a moment, though, I will discuss re-closeting in the context of “real Indians.” In his discussion of a “real Indian,” Gee states that “a real Indian is not something one can simply be” (24); it is an identity that one must also inhabit, the “doing it” part. One, however, must have “certain kinship to get into the game” (24). Essentially, one must actually exist as a part of this discourse community. While it can be argued that we all perform our roles in particular discourse communities, I do feel that this is why the re-closeting process is the most problematic. Essentially, the discursive act isn’t real, isn’t one of “recognition” (Gee 27). While the discursive act may be validated in the context of the ex-gay ministries and its discourses, the lack of external recognition of the Discourse is where the problem lies: ex-gay men can partake in a particular discourse community that is presumably straight; however, this is where the re-closeting process fails: when the individual’s attempts at mastering a social identity deems them not “in” the Discourse (27). According to Gee, one’s non-membership in a Discourse is astutely recognizable, eventually to one’s self but to those whose social pressures

\(^{16}\) For this project, I will solely discuss the phenomenon facing ex-gay males; though, there are practices for females that ask lesbians to partake in ultimately feminine practices.

\(^{17}\) Ex-gay men under the control of conversion ministries are sometimes encouraged to date and have sexual relations with women as part of a true entry into masculine identity.
exist outside of the Discourse. Essentially, one’s attempt to convert fails. Upon this failure, the second closet, the institutionalized closet, often dissolves.

While I have addressed my conception of the second closet as a problematic space, I do realize, however, that that many ex-lesbians—and ex-gays alike—embrace the performance of this second space. Earlier in the project, I discussed the organization’s policy statements available on Exodus International.org.

“Exodus affirms reorientation of same sex attraction is possible. This is a process, which begins with motivation to, and self-determination to change based upon a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We facilitate resources for this process through our member ministries, other established networks and the Church. The key outcome of this is measured by a growing capacity to turn away from temptations, a reconciling of ones identity with Jesus Christ, being transformed into His image. This enables growth towards Godly heterosexuality. Exodus recognizes that a lifelong and healthy marriage as well as a Godly single life are good indicators of this transformation.”

Because sexuality and the reformation of such connotes “motivation” and “self-determination” based on a relationship with an institution’s norms, the element of persuasion imprints itself in this conversation exemplifying homosexuality as a series of “temptations.” In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Kenneth Burke purports that persuasion functions in the context of a self-constructed audience, through which the individual “cultivates certain ideas or images for the effect he hopes they may have upon him” (1335). This conception of a man “[being] his own audience […] as though he were using pleasant imagery to influence an outside audience rather than one within” (1335) reforms the second closet as a space where the individual—the ex-gay—*desires* reformation into an acceptable body—a livable life. Essentially, the second closet institutionalizes ethos18 through the emergence of persuasion. Those who want to be persuaded will be—those who want to change will; thus, reparative organizations can instill agency and ethos through rhetorical design and discursive control. That is, “reorientation” with a rhetorical implication geared toward a space of mobilized change, not stasis, marks the individual immediately. This self-constructed persuasion denotes a transformation through Jesus Christ;

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18 I define *ethos* through an Aristotelian lens—the element of a subject’s credibility.
however, while the transformative space indicates a “relationship” oriented toward reformation, the relationship itself, perhaps, represents a microcosm for the larger picture.

In the context of changing one’s sexuality, a subject surrenders identity to a larger project—in this case, a patriarchal project. The “Him” of the statement does, indeed, represent power through a religious figure, but this notable “Him” also expresses a more extensive metaphor for the renouncement of one’s identity to masculine power structures. To exist and attain a livable life, an ex-gay must assert personhood with this structure. That is, through a problematic conflation of gender and sexuality, men must assert “real” masculinity and women must ascertain “real” femininity. As we have seen through these analyses, the subject must surrender power—selfhood—to patriarchal forces for the ultimate transference into the livable life. The surrender of one’s identity to “Him” instills an ethos that promises human status through the possibility of identity transference into a second closet.

**Re-Coming Out of the Second Closet**

“Throughout two decades, I sought reparative therapy and other ex-gay treatments and methods. Prayer, fasting, inner healing, accountability groups, medication, and 12-step groups. Even a scary exorcism attempt with lots of shouting,” says Rick, a former participant in Exodus International’s reparative therapies. “By Nov. 2002 I couldn't pretend to believe any more that the counseling was helping. I asked too many questions one day and received a lengthy tongue lashing from the counselor for my lack of faith. So I stepped back from a lifetime of effort and committed myself for the first time to pursuing the truth about myself and homosexuality” ([www.beyondexgay.com](http://www.beyondexgay.com)). Like many ex-ex-gays, Rick’s ultimate rejection of the self-imposed second closet informs the “livable” life he leads today. For many ex-gays, now ex-ex-gays, the performance of “straight” identity negates notions of genuine selfhood and leads to dismissal of the ministries’ rhetoric and ideology. Because the ex-gay movement exerts “normative” tropes and claims epistemological control over selfhood and desire, ex-gays often reject the movement and flee the reparative therapies. However, this retreat does not come without its consequences. As I will argue, ex-gays inhabit a second closet institutionalized by the ministries’ language and rhetoric. Thus, these individuals must abandon the second closet in a process of re-asserting selfhood in public and private space—a process of “re-coming out.”
As Butler purports, the lives we lead and the humanity we claim entertain a collective, symbiotic relationship to those with whom we interact, especially through the ways that much of who we are directly correlates to “finding [ourselves] unintelligible” (30). Through a further discussion, Butler claims that “to be fundamentally unintelligible is to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human” (30). In an attempt to ascribe to a human form, the ex-gay’s transformation into an ex-ex-gay then constructs a performative speech act of bodily confession, which “not only passes through our body but constitutes a certain presentation of the body” (Butler 172). That is, ex-ex-gay then must rewrite his body by grieving for his gay body. Concomitantly, this grief comes to represent counter-identificatory and disidentificatory processes, which Munoz calls “a series of negotiations” (163) that often fail but mark the survival strategies of those who embody minoritarian, marginalized status, like the ex-gay and ex-ex-gay alike. Often, the disidentificatory processes equate with one’s rejection of minoritizing discourses and subsequent adoption of universalizing discourses which elicit the reassertion of gay selfhood and the reformation of one’s relationship with a higher being. Together, as we will see through a discussion of online ex-ex-gay testimonies, these processes work to reclaim the body, so that the ex-ex-gay may exist, again, as a gay male or a lesbian female.

The second closet becomes a self-imposed, immaterial space through which ex-gays negotiate the “reality” of claiming material ex-gay status. The realm of this marginalized body’s fragmented ownership of desire marks the ex-gay’s personal construction of the second closet. The closet, however, encompasses not only a space, but also a performative speech act on the part of gay, lesbian, and transgender identities. The closet itself does not require the formal utterance, as Sedgwick notes, since we become aware of other implications—the speech act of silence (3). In the first and second closets, the act of silence implicates the individual. Essentially, beyond performative action, the second closet is embodied through the ex-gay’s claim of confessing the body to what Foucault would call a “forced confession” (59). As Foucault purports, the act of confession represents “one of the West’s most highly valued techniques of producing truth” (Foucault 59); the ministries’ claim to construct a grand narrative of truth “so deeply ingrained in us that we longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us” (60) represents its control over “truth,” desire, and the body itself.
Through an analysis of societal tensions, Judith Butler asserts that marginalized individuals who inhabit “bodily difference” must battle oppressive forces with a movement toward “the renewal of the value of life” (12). According to Butler, the control over the intersection between sanctioned desire and mobile, socially-“sound” bodies creates an arena that recognizes human life as a process of “indexing a being who is at once human and living, and that the range of being exceeds the human” (12). Essentially, Exodus International’s assertion that deems certain “behavior” as “destructive” to the “natural” heterosexual mandates of the ex-gay institution poses the question of what is a livable life. Through this Butlerian inquiry, this institution exerts a gendered performance upon the individual who is deemed to be non-human—living an unlivable life—because “human does not simply qualify ‘life,’ but ‘life’ relates human to what is non-human” (Butler 12). Without regard to the historical awareness of the ways that ways livable lives have been “crafted” and “consolidated” over time, the ministries’ power to label marginalized groups as subhuman entities marks the ex-gay’s transference of self into a new rhetorically-controlled space—the second closet. That is, the ministries ascribe current ideologies without regard to gender and sexuality as “historical [categories]” (Butler 9) that represent cultural lenses. Those whose desires and selfhood stray from normative discourses—ex-gays—inhabit the borderland of the livable and non-livable life. That is, they have come out of one closet and then enter an institutional regime that through “love” and “healing” labels them non-human. For themselves, ex-gays experience the tension of institutional pressure and thus become accustomed and actively receptive to ideological interpellation. Those whose desires and selfhood stray from the control of the ministries represent the focal point of those who need to be helped and “healed.” The ministries’ disregard for historical contexts for gender and sexuality are problematized by the ministries’ quest to control and lay ownership over the body and over desire. Through this binary of livable/non-livable lives within the ministries’ control over desire, “the body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, [our] bodies are and are not [ours]” (Butler 21). The second closet emerges here, at the place where ministries lay claim to bodies and to the body’s desire.

19 Here, I draw upon Louis Althusser’s definition of interpellation.
For many ex-gays, a turning point awaits. Institutional control over desire elicits an eventual transformation in the ex-gay. Often, when the ministries fail\textsuperscript{20}, the ex-gay rejects the static homeplace of the second closet and its survivalist borderland. To reject the ministries is to reject the notion of self-imposed second-closethood. A newly formed, re-asserted individual, the ex-gay must re-come out of the second closet to assert himself as a gay, or an ex-ex-gay. Questions arise as to how the ex-ex-gay negotiates the second closet and the problematic space of the “second coming.”

The ex-gay initially abandons the second closet, I argue, through the grief of assimilation when one’s notion of the unlivable life subsides. Butler asserts that the “ec-static character of our existence is essential to the possibility of persisting as a human” (33). In this ecstatic state, the ex-gay, prior to the dissolution of the second closet, exists both within and outside of the livable life; he or she inhabits a borderland discourse where the second closet creates a temporary space of livability. That is, ex-gays enter the second closet to become livable; however, I argue that this place of ex-gay livability represents a false sense of identity which leads to the act of re-coming out. Through this state of meta-awareness, the ex-gay grieves for his or her own marginalized space as an “unlivable” life and as an institutionally-deemed non-human. This grief, as Butler asserts, creates a space where the human, the ex-gay, does indeed become a “grievable,” human entity. These realizations elicit beginnings of the second closet’s fallibility and demise. With the demise of the second closet, the ex-gay moves from a cultural phantom deemed non-human by institutional forces to a mobilized, culturally-intelligible human. As Butler asserts, “we are not simply struggling for rights that attach to my person, but we are struggling to be conceived as persons” (32); thus, this notion of grievable, intelligible personhood marks the rite of passage into the process of re-coming out. Through the process of grieving, the ex-ex-gay rejects the ministries’ ideologically-construction notion of binary gender performance that I addressed earlier. This rejection elicits the process through which the second closet begins to diminish and dissolve, a notion I will discuss shortly.

A predominantly conservative Christian discourse, the language and rhetoric of the ex-gay movement explicitly constructs an inseparable model of gender and sexuality, where these

\textsuperscript{20} I argue that ministries always fail; however, I realize that “failure” of the ministries is informed by personal experiences and lenses.
elements enmesh to create a “normative” performance. Through the rejection of this “normative” performance and the adoption of grieving for the former gay/lesbian self, the ex-gay then inhabits a space between counter-identificatory and disidentificatory practices. According to Munoz, the act of disidentifying reflects a “survival strategy the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). This process of first counter-identifying with the second closet, then disidentifying creates a space through which the ex-gay, now the ex-ex-gay, begins to “negotiate between the fixed identity disposition and the socially encoded roles that are available for such subjects” (Munoz 6). The counter-identification first sets the ex-gay apart from the movement. At this point, the ex-ex-gay constructs a narrative trajectory through which he sees the ministries as problematic. This counter-identificatory reaction represents the ex-gay’s manifested disgust with the ministries. However, this explicit disdain for the movement transforms into a disidentificatory space within many ex-ex-gay narrative trajectories, when the individual asserts a reformed relationship with a higher being and reclaims his gay identity. That is, through disidentification, the ex-ex-gay now embodies a space that is neither in opposition or in advocacy of the reparative ministries. Upon abandoning the second closet and finding one’s livable life, the ex-gay no longer aligns himself with the minoritizing descriptions of gay and lesbian selfhood; however, the disidentificatory subject, the ex-ex-gay, recycles the gay identity by first reclaiming it and then identifying as both gay and religious.

As Munoz states, disidentificatory practices mark, for the individual, “a series of negotiations” (163). Such negotiations mark the ex-ex-gay’s quest for survival through the recycling process of gay identity. Disidentificatory practices typically ensue when the ex-gay adheres to universalizing discourses; subsequently, an ex-ex-gay narrative trajectory materializes. To say that these processes enact universalizing discourses is to call upon Sedgwick’s notion of minoritizing and universalizing discourses. That is, ex-gay ministries center much discourse on what Sedgwick calls “the homosexual panic,” identifying “a distinct minority of gay people” through the lens of “pathologizing and [enacting] a socially sanctioned prejudice against one stigmatized minority” (20). That is, the ex-gay ministries attempt to minoritize these individuals through the pathological, medicalized label of other; however, the
ex-ex-gay’s first counter-identification and subsequent disidentification highlight the process of recycling identity, reclaiming it apart from institutional definitions of normative practice. The second closet dissolves through universalizing discourses, when the ex-gay rejects the minoritizing discourse and where the ex-ex-gay can claim a disidentificatory space within the movement. To reclaim an identity sanctioned as “shameful” and to reclaim it as a path for turning discourse on itself is to examine the will of the ex-ex-gay to reconstruct his livable life—his human life. The following section of the project will examine how the act of grieving, disidentifying, and universalizing one’s livable life elicits a narrative I will discuss through the lens of online ex-ex-gay testimonies on the website for Beyond Ex-Gay, a group that supports former ex-gays who have survived the turmoil of ex-gay ministries.
CHAPTER III:
THE SECOND CLOSET ONLINE

“Then I found myself having crushes on some of my girlfriends. I was talented at athletics, so I joined the softball team in high school, but continued to avoid most feminine activities. I didn't feel pretty or lovable,” says Anne Paulk, a self-proclaimed ex-lesbian and active motivational speaker for Exodus International. Like many ex-gays, she discusses femininity as ideological checklist of normative attributes a woman exhibits as a born-again, God-fearing “straight” woman. This testimony, a microcosm for public—primarily North American—“morality” debates, highlights the core values of Exodus International and many concurrent ex-gay organizations that stem from this mother organization, as we discussed in Chapter Two. As also discussed in Chapter Two, Exodus International classifies its female and male participants according to binary gender constructions. These constructions inform the ex-gays’ performance as a participant of the movement, but these performances represent a material, “concrete” identity that initiates the Butlerian “drag-like” performance of what I call the second closet. While I agree with Butler that we all inhabit a performance of “drag”—doing one’s gender, not inherently being one’s gender—I purport that the second closet, a non-material arena the ex-gay creates through material existence, informs the born-again “self” ex-gays claim as inherently natural constructions of gender. In the context of this selfhood, this chapter focuses on virtual testimonies from ex-gays who claim to be sexually “healed”—“straight”—on advocacy websites for Exodus International and Love-in-Action. While I will unpack rhetorical, material testimony on both sites later in this project, the language to which I refer can be unveiled through a brief rhetorical analysis of Exodus International’s website. As I addressed in Chapter I, my method for examining the websites will bridge my own understanding of language from Exodus International’s rhetorical and linguistic manifestations of ex-gay rhetoric with my investigation of the ways these sites use this language. My methodology is, in many ways, influenced by an institutional critique, which seeks to consider the ways in which language and power are enmeshed in order to unveil the relationships between those in power and those out of

21 Anne Paulk’s husband, John Paulk, also an ex-gay, took a leadership position as Exodus International’s chairman and prime motivational speaker. In 2000, John descended from power after a prominent photojournalist spotted him at Washington D.C.’s oldest gay pub.
power. In these websites, I will look for language that shows this power structure and that could potentially initiate second closet-hood in an individual. Thus, for this rhetorical analysis, words, phrases, images, ideas, and warrants will play a role in my rhetorical analysis and institutional critique.

Adorned with a soft white and tan background, the site exposes the core values of its foundational ideology with a red-lipped, traditionally-“feminine” female emphasized by the organization’s hotline and a brightly-red insignia that reads: “Start the Journey.” The Journey: “Leaving” homosexuality, as if a human existence can exhibit the same materiality as physical, geographic space. With phrases and clauses that exhibit a deafening, caustic voice disguised in “guidance,” “revolution” and “vitality”—such as “freedom is possible!”—Exodus International, “the largest information and referral ministry in the world addressing homosexual issues” (www.exodus-international.org), exhibits an astute awareness of its audience: those who want to “leave” homosexuality. Beyond fire-and-brimstone politics, the site intersperses additional images of smiling, Caucasian individuals with discussions of how visitors of the site can “help” themselves, friends, or family members through the journey of becoming straight—the rhetorical implications being that those who stray from heteronormativity exhibit “otherness.” A question the site posits—“Thinking About Leaving Homosexuality?”—enforces the organization’s ideological construction of the fallen individual who must be saved by straight, Judeo-Christian America. The site presents five primary links: “Who We Are,” “Communication,” “Information,” “Events,” and “Resources.” The “Information” link posts a series of statements the organization makes on public discourse, including policy statements on “Healing,” “The ‘Gay Gene’ Theory,” “Same-Sex Adoption,” and even “Bullying” (www.exodus-international.org), all of which exhibit right-wing ideologies.

The site encourages active participation through an assembly of hyperlinks through which a visitor can navigate a series of tasks for “helping” gays and lesbians, with a link that exclaims, “Start here!” Perhaps, the most rhetorically distinct construction comes from statements made in the margins: asserted in the passive voice, Exodus’ website claims to save those “affected by homosexuality,” as if to imply that homosexuality does not exist without an active agent that “causes” an identity. With a clause that states, “We believe God wants to heal homosexuals through his church. Our goal is to equip you for that task!,” a patriarchal project
undergirds much of this rhetoric: to be “healed” (by a male god, no less—“Him”), one must be “equipped” (www.exodus-international.org). So, the wardrobe—the “equipment”—materializes.

“Reparative” ex-gay language, such as the discourse of the website, imposes an ideological system upon subjects. Through an Althusserian lens, I classify reparative rhetoric as the foreground of an “Ideological State Apparatus (ISA).” I make this statement because the ex-gay movement functions under heteronormative ideologies bound to norms of gender, sexuality, and desire. Ex-gays entering the reparative program, either by choice or force, immediately exist as subjects in an Althusserian “superstructure” central to heteronormative value systems—concepts we addressed in Chapter Two. The governing ideology constructs implicit homophobia, often central to internalized homophobia, once “reparative,” “healing” rhetoric exerts material norms and desires upon the vulnerable individual—the ex-gay.

Through the organization’s language, the individual internalizes the discourse through interpellative and performative reactions that we will see in online testimonies.

The Second Closet Online

For many who claim ex-female identity, the second closet pervades the material “reality” that these women claim is a rehabilitated, restored womanhood. Let us consider Anne Paulk, whom I mentioned earlier in this project. Paulk identified as a woman for years, dating women, living in an exclusively lesbian community, and initiating feminist activism within her local gay community. After years of self-described turmoil, Paulk heard the voice of God calling her out of the “lifestyle” and into a “joyful intimacy with God” (exodus-international.org). After entering a live-in ex-gay program in 1988, Paulk met her husband, John, and they have been

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22 For this project, I will draw upon Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology: a system of beliefs that function in a particular power structure.

23 Althusser asserts that an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) represents the space where an individual is implicated into a number of implicit ideologies governed by a superstructure. Essentially, if an individual is part of the superstructure and under the sanction of the ISA, she/he exhibits interpellative personhood. ISAs are different than the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA): the RSA represents part of the superstructure that is governed by the element of force.

24 This homophobia is central to Christian, fundamentalist tenets that construct homosexual as an abominable sin.

25 Ministries, such as Love-in-Action and Exodus International, adopt this term to classify its participants. An ex-gay is one who attempts to “repair” her/his sexuality to abide by “straight,” Christian conventions of sexual normativity.
married since 1991. In her online testimony, she makes reference to her notion of being absent from the tropes of acceptable feminity; this disconnection from acceptable feminity, she claims, unveils the root of her former lesbian identity. A former “classic Tomboy,” she discusses the first day that she truly became secure in her feminine identity:

“‘I need to learn how to shop for clothes,’ I told my roommate one day. About a week later, she said, ‘Let's go shopping!’ I broke out in a cold sweat. ‘Uhh, wait,’ I answered. She waited another week, then tried again. ‘I need to go shopping for something to wear on my trip. Do you want to come with me?’ So we went shopping, and she really got into it. I was pushing through all the hangers, casually looking at things. It was a start! Now when we go shopping, we try on all kinds of flamboyant things, just to see what they look like. I've learned a bit about style, what colors look good on me—that sort of thing. I love it; it feels good to enhance who I am” (www.exodus-international.org).

To understand the second closet is to first and foremost understand the language of the ex-gay movement. The language itself embodies these notions of the livable/non-livable binary and especially the movement’s control over notions of acceptable desire. If we consider the final line of this excerpt, we see that Paulk’s notion of “[enhancing] who [she is]” derives itself from her assimilatory practice of appearing and thus feeling more like a woman. Exodus International’s notion of existing “outside of God’s will” seems to inform Paulk’s place as a seemingly rehabilitated ex-lesbian. That is, the immaterial, the movement’s language, initiates within her a material reality, a second closet with a full wardrobe. Much of this wardrobe is not only the aesthetic appearance of the woman, but her place within patriarchal systems. For instance, much of the wardrobe Paulk discusses is just as much about understanding men as non-violent entities as it is about looking and feeling like a woman. Seeking “godly femininity,” she claims that her journey away from lesbian identity came from her new construction of how she views and understands men (www.exodus-international.org). With her wardrobe at the forefront of these discussions, she draws upon the immaterial, the institutionalized ideologies of the ministries, to construct for a feminized self, but also where she exists as an obedient woman to God. Rhetorically, her obedience to herself feels painstakingly like her allegiance and ultimate transference of herself to patriarchal forces—the men who lead the movement and who have the power to name human and non-human lives.
In a similar testimony from Love-In-Action’s online testimonies, an ex-lesbian states: “If I am a woman and I am not comfortable with a certain type of man, that's unfortunate and maybe I need to do something about it, but that doesn't mean I am not fully a woman” (www.loveinaction.org). While this notion of womanhood may be more refreshing, conflicting attitudes appear within this message. In Paulk’s case, feeling like a woman represented the core of finding a “straight” identity; however, within the ministries’ language, the idea of “fully” being a woman seems related with an element of a woman’s need to have control. This idea of control pervades most of the ex-lesbian testimonies on the Exodus International website. In the Exodus mission statement, while allusion to a “need for control” is never mentioned in reference to ex-gay men, statements about a lesbian-identified woman’s attempt to control herself and others is, according to this passage, a direct result of lesbianism: “Our observation has been that at the root of most lesbianism lies a terrible wounding which has taken a fear that most women have, and expanded it to life dominating proportions. Safety is equated with control” (www.exodus-international.org). Rhetorically, a subtext appears—that is, for an abused woman to want to exert any control over her life, she may exhibit a lesbian body. This rhetorical construction is embodied through the notion that women do not naturally exhibit a desire to control themselves, relationships, or situations. Thus, this unlivable existence centers itself upon a women’s dismissal of patriarchal value systems.

Let us consider the intersection of the patriarchy with the unlivable life. “I walked like a boy, talked like a boy, and even played shirtless like a boy. It's no wonder that people often called me ‘son’ or ‘young man.’ I also hated my feminine name, Christine, and went by the more generic ‘Chris,’” says Christine Sneeringer, an ex-lesbian also affiliated with Exodus International. Unlike Anne Paulk, Sneeringer actually attended a femininity conference to assist in her journey out of lesbianism. She says, “I also attended the annual Exodus conference that year in San Antonio. There I participated in a ‘make-over’ session which had a deep impact on me. For the first time since I had been sexually abused, I wanted to be pretty, just like other women at church. As I walked back to my dorm room after the makeover, a thought hit me and stopped me in my tracks […] ‘Do you remember those girls back home at church that you envied because they were beautiful?’ God seemed to be asking me. ‘You're no different. You are beautiful—just like them.’ Stunned, I continued down the path to my dorm as tears stained my
cheeks. All my life I struggled with intense feelings of inadequacy about being a girl and suddenly I saw myself as just like them” (www.exodus-international.org). These femininity conferences are not uncommon. In her book, Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversion in the Ex-Gay Movement, Tanya Erzen locates a similar phenomenon at a conference in Orlando, Florida. Based on the archaic theory that presumes all lesbians exhibit masculine-identifying characteristics and must learn—and study—femininity, the workshop Erzen attended ritualized femininity and feminine drag, where women were asked to practice “applying make-up, growing one’s hair, wearing skirts” (149). Literally, this workshop represents the materiality of the ex-lesbian’s second closet. The workshop leader reflects on her own experiences with finding her femininity when her former advisor took her to a mall and insisted that she buy a purse. From here, the workshop’s leader recalls that she began to “shed her homosexuality” (150). The author discusses another conference affiliated with Exodus where she met Anne Paulk, the woman I have discussed in this project. The workshop began with Lori Leander, the session leader, placing an overhead transparency on the wall that listed feminine characteristics, such as “nurturing, weak, relational, soft, gentle, responsive, sweet, expressive, charming, delicate, sensually receptive, prudish, and quiet” (Erzen 150). If we consider these descriptions rhetorically, we are able to see the patriarchal forces at work. The language itself ensues a rhetoric of control that marginalizes these women, who are assumed to be “butch” by the ministries’ essentialist binary gender constructions, and others them. Again, the rhetorical assumption that these women have a great deal to learn about femininity imposes an “otherness,” while still eliciting the ex-lesbian’s reach for the livable life.

During the same discussion, the same workshop leader praised Anne Paulk for her “[radiating] femininity. She’s like a princess with her Tiffany jewelry and perfect make-up” (150). When an audience member who was “mechanically-inclined” rejected this notion of feminity, the workshop leader answered that she, the ex-lesbian, should stop “tinkering with cars” (151). From these examples, we can begin to see the immaterial that becomes the material identity—that is, first, the ministries impose a rhetorical message that presumes that if these women must learn these practices that they are inherently less than women, non-human, unlivable lives. With these institutionalized rhetorics comes the material identity that brings the ex-lesbian into the second closet with an institutionalized wardrobe sometimes central to a real
wardrobe, pink blouses and all. What this transference from immateriality to materiality creates is a homeplace, where the ex-lesbian can safely reside as a human. We see a rhetorical manifestation of this second closet in Sneeringer’s concluding thoughts on her online testimony: “When I returned to my church in Tampa, I asked all my friends to start calling me ‘Christine.’ Though it felt odd at first because I had always been "Chris," I wanted to embrace my femininity” (exodus-international.org). This homeplace represents the rhetorical subtexts of the ministries’ expectations, a second closet different from the material reality ex-gay men inhabit.

For women, the journey is about mending relationships with men, accepting the inevitability of the patriarchy, coming to understand the rape of the patriarchy, of the common sensical “reality” that men are both rapists and friends (sometimes inhabited within the same body). The idea is that even though these women were sexually abused, they still need to understand that their perceptions of men were wrong. Within this value system, Foucault’s idea of the medicalization of identity comes into play. During the late nineteenth century, sexual identities became medicalized discourses—that is, a system of beliefs that kept the bourgeoisie in power became a lens through which sexual and non-sexual identities were labeled human or non-human, acceptable or unacceptable. These discourses still inform much of the normative practices of public and private spaces. Through this lens, we can see that the “common sense” the ex-lesbian draws upon mirrors the binary gender constructions of the ex-gay movement.

A “typical” male trajectory, the narrative that Randy Thomas provides exerts that gay men desire healthy—not homosexual—relationships with men. According to the ministry essentialism, it is the sexualized, eroticized nature of young male’s longing for a male figure that translates this “longing” into sexual materiality in adulthood. “At age ten, I began to sexualize this desire to be close to males but my same-sex longings only led to further confusion,” says Thomas (www.exodus-international.org). Thomas states: “God showed me the blessing of the feminine.” Rhetorically, this statement reveals that the “feminine” has been bestowed by a higher male figure, God, with such statements representing a microcosm for male ownership over female bodies.

For men, the second closet is merely a transitional space until the ex-gay male joins the ranks of boy’s club discursive politics—a place to call home until he is ready and able to lay claim to the female body to understand what all those straight men have been raving about. For
women, the homeplace is, according to these online testimonies, a space of resistant stasis. That is, the institutionalized essentialisms create for women a tension of negotiation through which women are not only othered through their transition from lesbianism to ex-lesbianism but also are othered within the second closet—a space that centers itself on allegiances to men and patriarchal ideologies. Interestingly, both transformations, for ex-gay men and ex-lesbians, require the reconstruction of male relationships, but one has a boys’ club appeal and the other has a subtext of patriarchal domination.

Post-Second Closet and the Ex-Ex-Gays

“As I type this up, I’m wearing a t-shirt pulled over a workman’s blue shirt, pop-collared, and my favorite pair of ripped blue jeans held up with a tattered cloth belt. Not exactly a model for femininity,” says Peggy, a self-proclaimed ex-ex-gay, whose testimony and narrative trajectory appears on the website for Beyond Ex-Gay. In the mid-1990s, Peggy entered ex-gay reparative ministries in reaction to her own fear of an abominable “lifestyle.” She continues: “I tried to understand ex-gay theology, their views on child developmental psychology, and their behavior modification methodologies. I learned about ‘same sex attachment disorder,’ ‘opposite sex attachment disorder,’ and proper ways for me to act more feminine in celebration of my ‘God given femininity.’ I learned to hate my sin of adopting a gay identity. I prayed and pleaded with God to help me change” (www.beyondexgay.org). What we can see here is Peggy’s initial construction of a second closet bound to the normative constructions of femininity as we discussed earlier. For Peggy, her sexual identity was attributed to her natural dismissal of feminine tropes—the tropes ministries perceive to be paramount in the ex-gay’s quest for “straighthood.” Within this narrative trajectory, Peggy grieves for her life as a former lesbian, as we can see through her initial discussion of the predominantly masculine self she claimed before she aligned herself with ex-gay ministries. While coming to understand herself within a second closet, she negates the experiences through a counter-identificatory processes. For many ex-ex-gays, the counter-identificatory process does not necessarily equate with rage or utter dissatisfaction. However, the individual does not continue to align himself/herself with the ideologies of the movement. Much of the identity the ex-gay reconstructs appropriates a borderland space through which the ex-gay negotiates a predominantly Christian identity with a gay or lesbian identity. The dissolved second closet through which the ex-gay’s reformed
relationship with a higher being exists, representing a universalizing disidentificatory process. That is, through disidentification, the ex-gay exhibits a rejection of minoritizing discourses, while adopting a universalizing discourse to understand one’s space within a new frame of existence that accepts a gay identity.

Ex-gay ministries utilize minoritizing discourses to usurp power from gay and lesbian individuals; however, with the ex-gay’s adoption of universalizing discourses—discourses which imply a “we’re-all-the-same” perspective—the ex-ex-gay prevails. Through the following quote from Peggy, the reformed relationship with a higher being is apparent: “Through that process God was able to get through to me (again for the first time) that he really does love me exactly the way I am, whatever my flaws and regardless of whether I’m ever able to fall in love with a woman. I’d heard the message of God’s unconditional love all of my life, but it had always come with all sorts of disclaimers and exceptions and consequently had never truly sunk in.” The notion of an “unconditional” Godly love represents the pentacle of the ex-gay’s transformation into an ex-ex-gay body through this disidentificatory process.

Another disidentifying subject, Eugene, asserts that by not aligning himself with (or against) the ministries, “God was able to get through to me (again for the first time) that he really does love me exactly the way I am, whatever my flaws and regardless of whether I’m ever able to fall in love with a woman. I’d heard the message of God’s unconditional love all of my life, but it had always come with all sorts of disclaimers and exceptions and consequently had never truly sunk in” (www.beyondexgay.org). Here, through a discussion of his “ability” to fall in love with a woman, Eugene expresses the aforementioned grief of assimilation. Through the grieving process, the ex-gay reclaims his space as a livable life—a grievable human. As another ex-ex-gay survivor, Tom O’Toole discusses his narrative trajectory in a similar fashion to the other testifiers. “And thus began a twenty-four year journey of repression, costly pursuits of healing and repeated disappointment. I never changed. I spent over $3,000 on this therapy over the course of two years. At the age of thirty, I attended my first Exodus affiliate ex-gay ministry program in Boston. I worked through the forty-week program three times, the third time as a leader. I led worship for the program and attended two Exodus conferences. I had some of the biggest names in ex-gay ministry pray over me and even prophesize about my healing. I never changed” (www.beyondexgay.org). Eugene’s and Tom’s journeys mark another trajectory that
highlight the rejection of minoritizing discourses and the adoption of a universalizing perspective through which the individual reclaims selfhood and reaffirms a relationship with a higher being. Through a new identificatory performance (and speech act in these cases), these individuals begin to (re)assert selfhood as gay and lesbian individuals by restructuring a relationship with a higher being. Interestingly enough, the initial fear of condemnation and retribution from this higher being is what lead these individuals to ex-gay ministries initially. Thus, the higher being that once, according to ex-gay ministries represented the form of a minoritizing discourse, comes to represent a space of universalizing discourse through the disidentifactory process.

Through a discussion of identity politics, James Paul Gee asserts that being a “real” member of a discourse community is not something that just happens. In a discussion of what it means to be “real Indian,” he states that “[being a real Indian] is something that one becomes or is in the process of the doing of it, that is, in the performance” (24). In terms of ex-gay constructions of self, when the ex-gay can no longer exist as a “real Indian”—a real ex-gay, a real straight person—the individual recognizes this calamity. This is the point where the second closet truly begins to disappear. Reasserting oneself through the process of recoming out reflects this notion of being a “real Indian”; it is at this point—the point at which the ex-gay rejects the ministries—that the performance becomes a genuine performance. The body is rewritten.

According to the online mission statement for Love In Action (LIA)26, “[w]e [as representatives of the ex-gay movement] understand what it feels like to be a man with a sexual struggle… the frustration and pain of sexual addiction, the confusion and shame of homosexual desires, the secret compulsion of online pornography, the growing sense of hopelessness and despair” (www.loveinaction.org). This statement, like many ex-gay representations of “empathetic” reactions to marginalized, sexual bodies, implies an ideological construction. Essentially, this construction represents a Foucaultian biopower that precludes the institution itself and “informs the law, but also exceeds the law” (Butler 57)—this omnipresent power creates a foundational discourse on which ex-gay ministries, such as Love In Action, claim a sense of institutionalized ownership over desire.

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26 Founded in 1973, Love-In-Action was the first Christian ministry to publicly discuss “conversion therapies.” A number of “conversion” groups, what would be called ex-gay ministries today, spawned from the publicity surrounding this early movement.
Because of this biopower, the ex-gay becomes dehumanized, in Butlerian terms, but not necessarily on the basis of the marginalized body: on the basis of the ministries’ institutionalized, exerted control over desire. Through this exerted, pseudo-top-down construction of power—with ex-gay institution at the top and the “sexually broken” at the bottom—institutions, such as Love In Action, create an epistemological, macro-level discourse that “decides” who inhabits a human body and, most dangerously, who doesn’t inhabit such a body.

So, a central question may be how exactly do the ministries lay claim to epistemological constructions and assert ownership over material notions of desire? Consider the 2005 controversy surrounding Zack Stark, a sixteen-year-old whose Myspace blog declamation earned him national visibility. At the mandate of his parents, Stark’s was enrolled in Refuge, a Love In Action discipleship program for youths aged fifteen to seventeen. According to the website, the governing ideology of the Refuge program is “to minister to young men and women before emotional issues overshadow their ability to make healthy behavioral choices” so that these youths are not exposed to “life-consuming behaviors” (www.loveinaction.org). To understand Stark’s perspectives, an evaluation of the application materials is necessary. Through these application processes, applicants are asked to “check off” “conditions which apply to them. On the list are such “boxes” for “activities” such as “internet pornography,” “meeting strangers for sex,” and “sexually explicit internet communication with legal adults.” Through this self-categorization process, the real dilemma presents itself in the institutionalization of material desire. That is, the movement attempts to create a “knowledge-base” that assigns a sub-human, dehumanizing marginalization to those who “check” these boxes. What is interesting about these “boxes” is that these behaviors, while perhaps not “socially acceptable” in the widest sense, are also working to dehumanize these individuals even from the earlier bureaucratic construction of the application form; these materials are tied to gendered and homophobic notions of gay and lesbian identity and are central to essentialized stereotypes. In reference to Stark’s case (and in other cases as well), through the website, parents are the individuals are targeted—the same

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27 After his parents enrolled him in Refuge, Stark posted a Myspace blog discussing his parents’ decisions, which, of course, elicited uproar from many communities.

28 These comments do not reflect support of these practices; they do note, however, the ways power over groups can be asserted simply by creating a “non-normative” discourse that acts to dehumanize.
presuppositions are made from the website since the rhetoric of the site asks the parent to consider helping a child to align him/herself more astutely with Christian values. Thus, Love In Action asks parents to ascribe to this “knowledge”—this construction of desire.

Essentially, based on the ministries’ attempt to “know” sexual taxonomies, the control and subsequent policing of desire, then, serves an interpellative process. Love In Action acknowledges and vilifies the non-livable, non-human form, but also works to lead ex-gays to “livable.” Under the guise of “empathy,” these attempts seem, perhaps, noble to those within conservative, right-wing discourse communities, especially with Love In Action’s “shift” from public contempt to “love-the-sinner” ideologies in recent years. However, the attempts to “repair” represent a claim to name lives as either “livable” or “non-livable,” human or non-human. That is, the claim to meaning-making practices, the episteme, that Love In Action works to prescribe (or perhaps, describe) what is human and who has the power to be(come) human represents the ex-gay movement’s macro-level control over the cultural intelligibility of particular demographics of people.

Paradoxically, the forces of power within the institution are central to stripping gays and lesbians of cultural intelligibility, but even with regard to this process, the movement works to make these individuals, these ex-gays, culturally visible, recognized, human. Thus, ex-gays inhabit a tension-marked space, an existence that both includes and excludes them, by “knowing” they lived a “lifestyle” marked by abomination, the non-human form, and by knowing they can “become” human in post-“reparative” spaces. So, by making meaning, constructing an epistemological underpinning for the grounds on which the movement stands, Love In Action relies on what Foucault would consider the “medicalized” constructions of sexual identity—the constructions that kept the bourgeoisie in power. Through this process of (re)making and (re)claiming epistemological processes, to control desire becomes an immutable, taxonomized way to concomitantly humanize and dehumanize identities.

Sedgwick asserts that minoritizing taxonomies “[assert] that there is one distinct minority of gay people, and a second minority, equally distinguishable from the population at large, of ‘latent homosexuals’ whose ‘insecurity about their own masculinity’ is so anomalous as to permit a plea based diminution of normal moral responsibility” (20). The ex-gay movement seems to adopt Sedgwick’s notion of “minoritizing” discourses. This notion of an institution’s imposition
of normativity and its subsequent transference to the individual enacts a problematic space. When a movement or an institution lays epistemological claim to the naming of human and non-human lives, the individuals interpellated into the discourse and language of the movement suffer the most. What we can see through these online testimonies is how immateriality becomes written on the body to exert a material state of existence. In this state of existence, the second closet, a self-created second closet of survival, becomes a reality through which marginalized bodies try to find humanity and attempt to find the place through which personal desires become institutionally sanctioned. In the next chapter, we will discuss public weblogs that reveal the materiality of a diminished second closet and subsequent re-coming out process.
CHAPTER IV:
COUNTER-RHETORIC(S) ONLINE AND CONCLUSIONS

“I spent over four years in an attempt to change my orientation, but re-came out to myself in 2003, and have been re-coming out to others ever since,” says Christine Baake, a prominent ex-ex-gay who speaks out peacefully against Exodus International on the website Beyond Ex-Gay.com, affiliated with an organization that advocates the support of former ex-gays. As ex-ex-gays—perhaps “repaired” gays—these individuals must find a space of reclaiming identity, as I did in my discussion in Chapter I. In Chapter II, I discussed the theoretical underpinnings of re-coming out. In this chapter, I will revisit those claims, while undertaking the application of such a theoretical framework to both my experiences and to those on these sites who have undergone reparative or conversion therapies and ministries.

My definition of re-coming out exists within a site of reclamation through contestation. That is, the individual reasserts selfhood and identity through one’s refusal and ultimate “failure” of ex-gay selfhood. I argue that much of this space of re-coming out is a product of one’s inability to perform as an ex-gay—a “failed transformation” as Munoz would call it. However, I want to pay careful attention to the word “fail” for I feel that its implications pose problematic—even dangerous—sites of contestation with my audience. I don’t want my audience to interpret my reference to failure as a negative one, but as one that is inevitable, anticipated, and ultimately positive. What I mean by “fail” is, perhaps, grounded in a biased perspective. However, my rhetorical decision here is to acknowledge my own bias, thereby forfeiting the destruction of my ethos. Because of my reading of ex-gay rhetoric, I argue that ex-gays embody failure upon performing straighthood, simply because I do not interpret ex-gay performance, such as those in Chapter III, as anything but fearful reactions to an ideological superstructure, which utilizes a fear of the unacceptable body as a space of control. Thus, I do believe that all ex-gay performances “fail” in a sense. That is, of course, only meant as a peaceful criticism of the ex-gay movement as a whole.

The rhetorical space of re-coming out is not only a site of resistance to and contestation of ex-gay rhetoric but a space of reclaiming and recycling one’s shame. In “Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James’s The Art of the Novel,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick purports that shame itself acts as a site of empowerment through which individuals may re-
establish selfhood through what she calls “deontological closure” (13). In this context, the shame is actually recycled—reclaimed. To revisit and elaborate upon the theoretical foundations of disidentifying in Chapter II, Munoz claims that “shame shares a particularly dense history with ‘queerness’” (194). Munoz states that by “disidentifying with shame, making it a source of energy as opposed to a source of devaluation,” historically minoritized groups can make “a world through performances that disidentify with shame” (194).

This re-coming out process—this recreation of “a world”—takes the form of performances, including speech acts. For the purposes of this project and for definition, I will call this performance a material performance. I align the idea of “materiality” with exhibiting a genuine nature; I say this because I align my ideas with a Butlerian understanding of desire, sexuality, and performativity—that we’re all in “drag” to certain extent, performing our ethos with regard to the ways that we understand ourselves within an ideological structure. I am also aligning materiality with one’s identification with his desires. The process of reclaiming one’s desire from the constraints of ex-gay rhetoric seems to occur through what I will call “kairotic performance.” Through my own interpretation and experience, the greek form of kairos plays a role in this reclamation. For Greek philosophers—particularly the Sophists—kairos represents the opportune moment or space in time for ascertaining action. The individual at given moment or through a given identification enacts one’s genuine selfhood and desires. A failed transformation, a Munozian term which characterizes an individual’s failure as a necessity for his ultimate act of survival within an ideological structure (162-64), makes it possible to enact this kairotic performance of which I speak. It is worth noting that a failed transformation is one of many possibilities for realizing one’s space of re-coming—re-transforming, but for the purposes of this project, I will focus solely on failed transformations which recycle shame. In this context, the kairotic performance is not merely an epiphany, for an epiphany implies cognitive recognition, perhaps, without a bodily transformative performance of self. It is the kairos of

In this chapter, I will discuss speech acts as performances of reclamation on two websites.

I realize that these two ideas—“selfhood” and “desire”—are somewhat shaky, especially when juxtaposed with the word “genuine.” While I do believe that all constructions of selfhood are performed, I do believe that some constructions of self are more genuine than others. That is, for ex-ex-gays, I see the performance of a GLTBQ identity as a more “genuine” performance of selfhood than an ex-gay, “straight” identity. In a later project, I plan to discuss desire as performance, thanks to a discussion I had with a friend and colleague at the Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) Conference in October 2007.
active and reactive recognition, a concept I will unveil when I reinvestigate Gee’s notion of Discourse. That is, the kairotic moment of this performance is not merely a space of understanding, but an act of doing—reforming, reconfiguring, and re-writing the body for the reclamation of selfhood outside of the constraints of ex-gay rhetoric.

I will consider the theoretical foundations of Chapter II to unpack Gee’s notion of “Discourse.” When attachment to a particular Discourse fails and the performance of institutionalized re-closeting subsides, the next step is to acknowledge one’s self as gay—again. The first performative, unspoken utterance is that of leaving the ex-gay ministries. This process of re-coming out implicates the individual into another discursive arena—that of the ex-ex-gay. Essentially, the individual must welcome a new identity outside of the institutionalized, second closet. The individual is at a crossroads; the definition of one’s identity at this stage is in opposition to the institutionalized role. Since one has come out twice, identifying as a real gay male, a “real Indian,” is central to hardships; however, with these hardships comes a Boothian “listening rhetoric.” To understand the ex-gay ministry itself and its tenets (and subsequently to understand one’s self as a follower of such methodology) is to understand a major part of one’s self—a major part of one’s sense of being a “real Indian.”

According to Gee, Discourses are always defined in opposition to other Discourses (31). While this may seem problematic, I feel that this is a natural occurrence. However, to know the opposing Discourse is invest in an understanding of that opposing Discourse (this is where Boothian perspectives are unveiled). To reference Gee, “Discourses are completely capable of “[melding] together” (30): one can take his experiences before and after the ex-gay ministries and enmesh them into a discursive compound. To know that Discourse is “limitless” is to know that one can inhabit multiple Discourses without “contested boundaries” (Gee 31). It is this central tenet—that Discourse has boundaries—that is central to the rhetorics of control I mentioned earlier in Chapter II. That is, people can inhabit multiple Discourses, such as a gay body and acceptable body without fear of retribution. It is this very space of inhabiting multiple space of existence within a reformed notion of acceptability—livability—that enables the entire myriad of transformations. That is, the ex-gay’s inability to be a “real Indian” informs and more specifically enables the transformation from ex-gay Discourse to kairotic performance—one’s inability to be an “real Indian” and the ultimate cognizance and embodiment of this recognition.
enables both the processes of kairotic performance and hybrid discourse. For a concrete definition of kairotic performance: the kairotic performance is the ex-gay’s seizing of the opportune moment of understanding one’s self as an acceptable body through disidentification with heteronormative sanctions. That is, the opportune moment of disidentifying with an ex-gay institution is realizing one’s self as a subject of hybrid discourse, through which one understands the marriage of a gay body with an acceptable, livable life. It is, in a sense, the disidentificatory practice\(^\text{31}\) that informs not only the discursive hybridity and subsequent kairotic performance, but also the realization that one owns a livable life.

What I purport here is that ex-ex-gay Discourse, where re-coming out is concerned, is central to a hybridity with other former Discourses in which the individual previously partook—perhaps, this Discourse can act as a “borderland Discourse” (31), to employ Gee’s term. Thus, this process of re-coming out is a process of becoming. When these Discourses of ex-gay with ex-ex-gay are at the forefront of one’s identity, one can utilize the hybrid Discourse for the purposes of awareness—my central concern in this project. Those who inhabit hybrid Discourses are able to embrace such an identity and inform, lead, and enlighten others to the questionable nature of ex-gay rhetoric.

Kairotic Performance, Beyond Ex-Gay Testimony, and Rhetorics of Survival

Celebrating its “first birth day” according to the right column of the webpage, the Beyond Ex-Gay website describes itself as “an online community for those who have survived ex-gay experiences” (www.beyondexgay.org)\(^\text{32}\). On the main page, the site poses “so often healing comes through community and through sharing our stories and experiences with others” (www.beyondexgay.org). It goes on to say:

“Our kinship in this journey gives us the opportunity to hear each other deeply, particularly in a world that sometimes scoffs at the many things we have done to change or contain our same-sex attractions and gender differences. Many of us have found healing, wholeness, and understanding through facing our pasts.”

\(^{31}\) I am not arguing that all disidentificatory practices are alike. Many external factors may inform the process of one’s disidentification and subsequent kairotic performance.

\(^{32}\) I employ the method I described at the beginning of this project for analyzing these sites. I plan to rhetorically analyze the words, phrases, concepts, ideas, and testimonies of this site.
Through such words and phrases as “healing,” “wholeness” and “facing our pasts,” the site encourages the recycling of shaming discourses into positive, healthy constructions of self. However, I see these textual references as places of tension I will discuss later in this chapter. What I am most interested in discussing is the ways that these words do for its site visitors.

Returning to previous descriptions of Exodus International’s website in Chapter II, the words “healing,” “healthy,” and “wholeness” are presented often—though differently from the Beyond Ex-Gay site. Ironically, the language of this site itself mirrors the discourses of Exodus International’s site. These counter-rhetorical strategies utilize similar discourses in order to unveil what I will call “survival rhetorics.” That is, the language itself acts as a disidentificatory process, as mentioned in Chapter II. For the purposes of survival, the counter-movement embraces the language of hegemony in order to create a new space of survival and rehabilitation. In a sense, the Beyond Ex-Gay site then turns hegemonic discourse on itself, which mirrors the individual processes that ex-ex-gays initiate within their own genuine refusal of straight selfhood. This peaceful refusal of heteronormativity and subtle embrace of Exodus’ language seems to enact the kairotic performance of the ex-ex-gay I will discuss later in this chapter.

The site’s language continues:

“We believe that ex-gay experiences cause more harm than good. Certain people who currently identify as ex-gay say they are content as such. We don’t seek to invalidate their experience. For us, such a lifestyle was not possible or healthy.”

In the tradition of Wayne Booth and Krista Ratcliffe, both of whom seek the transformation of overt opposition into harmonious listening, these statements seem to seek the ultimate embrace of understanding the movements such as Exodus, by again using similar textual contructions contingent upon understanding that some individuals seek contentment in ex-gay spaces. These constructions can be seen through such words as “healthy” and “lifestyle.” In this case, the word “lifestyle” poses an interesting juxtaposition to the public discourse inherent in ex-gay rhetoric, which seems to align “lifestyle” with a representation of something that immaterially exists apart from normative discourses. The use of the word “lifestyle” mirrors an interesting rhetorical decision from the website, as it again utilizes disidentificatory strategies, survival rhetorics, in order to reclaim rhetorical spaces for its patrons.
Returning to my concept of kairotic performance, I would like to carefully investigate the narratives section of this website. What I first notice is that while both sites encourage participation from its users, the Beyond Ex-Gay site invites testimony from anyone, while the Exodus site does not invite users to share their ex-gay stories. Ex-gay testimonies on the site are reserved for those in position of power, typically white, upper-middleclass males—with few testimonies from women and none of whom hold positions of power within the Exodus organization. In a testimonial on Beyond Ex-Gay, “Marcus” says, “it starts with a desire and ends with conflict. That’s why it’s called the struggle” (www.loveinaction.org). After describing his ex-gay experiences with Love in Action as “The Waiting Room,” under which an ex-gay waits for “Jesus to do surgery,” he goes on: “[in the waiting room], you’re not straight. You’re not gay. You’re in the middle—waiting to see if the surgery by Jesus is going to be successful […] Surrendering my desires to Christ didn’t absolve them, didn’t go away or any less true” (www.loveinaction.org). In this context, Marcus acknowledges what I call the second closet and its full wardrobe, but his thoughts in his closing statements highlight the essential kairotic performance of performing gay ethos as a male through which his desires are aligned. In a reflection to his transformation back into a gay male, he says: “And I started to crack. After getting drunk one night, one of [the men I was part of reparative therapy with] and I had sex. Hung over and ashamed, I confessed to my houseleader the next morning.” This conception of “crack[ing]” connotes his rhetorical transformation through kairotic performance. Once one performance falters, the genuine ethos is reified through the one’s genuine performance—the basis of his ultimate desires.

When his superiors asked why he decided to engage in a sexual act, he responds:

“I couldn’t mouth the words out loud, but I knew what I was thinking while he was inside of me, ‘I don’t care, I just don’t care.’ I was drunk and horny and depressed that I could come all this way and end up on the doorstep of the biggest screw up of my life. So much had happened, but nothing had changed […] I was kicked out a week later” ‘That’s alright,’ I told them. ‘I’m leaving here with integrity. I told you the truth, and I honestly tried’ […] A few weeks later, God was kind to me and sent in an angel who would love all the hurt away. [Travis] showed me that I needed to forgive the one person that I
hadn’t yet—the boy inside of me that I hated and secretly blamed for me gay in the first place” (citation).

Through this testimony, the essence of the kairotic performance prevails. That is, Marcus, through reestablishing his bodily desires and forfeiting stigma, reintroduces himself to his natural orientations, which create bodily ethos through which he reforms and repairs his identity by rejecting hegemony. That is, the bodily desire, never forgotten only repressed, transpires at the opportune moment when the individual no longer inhibits genuine, sexual urges. The kairotic performance is embedded within the moment that he can recycle the shame from his stigmatized body. In The Trouble with Normal, Michael Warner purports that shame and stigma are manifested in a “social identity that befalls one like fate” (28). For Warner, recycling the shame is a necessity, but based on his claims, such an act does not materialize often in public discourses. However, by recycling the shame and finding the kairotic performance, the ex-ex-gay prevails, as Marcus does—the act does, indeed, materialize.

As a self-described young kid “with few choices” growing up in a rural Mormon town, Lester Leavitt, an ex-ex-gay testifier, describes a series of events that lead to his entry to an Exodus-affiliated organization. As a married ex-gay, he says:

“I was able to minimize my thoughts of attraction to other men. I did it by shutting down emotionally. I discovered that I had a switch that could shut down all of my emotional needs. The effect on my marriage was devastating. To this day, Barbara [his wife] has a vivid memory of how I changed on our wedding day. Overnight I changed from being this spontaneous and alive young adult to a dead and lifeless shell of a man. She was devastated. For 24 years, my wife knew that there was a part of me that I was hiding from her. There was a wall that she could not get around or through. In October of 2004 I told her what was behind that wall.”

Lester’s ability to perform as a “man” by “minimizing” his thoughts points to discussions of second closethood and its performative wardrobe. What is striking about this narrative is the impending kairotic moment. In this case, the exigency, while on the brink of surfacing, remains suppressed under the guise of a “shutting down” under which he transforms into a “lifeless shell of a man”—and over the course of twenty-four years. Perhaps, one of the most apt descriptions of performative closethood in this project is his description of his own bodily space as a “shell of
a man,” with implication of the “shell” being a material entity which quite literally covers—shields. In this testimony, a kairotic performance transpires: the kairos of the becoming relieved of ex-gay identity. In these contexts, from both Lester and Marcus, the kairotic performance often subsumes a metaphor. In this case, Lester describes a wall that he created a boundary between him and his wife, which also seems to imply a barrier between him and his genuine body. After a speech act—telling his wife “what was behind that wall”—Lester releases himself from a wardrobe, yet attaches himself to a new, genuine wardrobe through kairotic performance. Only when he is able to speak against the metaphor—speak out, tell a truth—is he able to reach kairos and thus perform his genuine body.

In his closing state, Lester describes the kairotic materiality by stating:

“I asked Barbara if I could allow myself to have men like me as friends without violating my marriage covenants. Slowly, the wall was broken down and the emotional switch came on. My wife noticed the difference immediately. For over a year she saw how alive I could become when allowed to be my authentic self. It came at a very high cost to Barbara. After almost two years since first telling my wife of my struggles, I fell in love with one of my best friends, and I knew in that moment that I could not continue on in that path without being unfaithful to her. I did the only thing that I knew how to do, and that was to follow the Evergreen program and shut off the switch again. After three months of this, Barbara came up to me and asked me what had happened. Slowly, I explained it to her, and we both cried. I didn’t have the courage to divorce, but Barbara, in her concern and love for me, did. Nothing could have been more difficult for either of us.”

By asking for spousal support, he seeks the refuge in a transitional space through which he finds comfort in his “human status”—his acceptable body as a straight male asking for his wife’s blessing—but his movement toward kairotic unveiling becomes visible. His wife takes notice of his restored selfhood, yet the constraints of a superstructure keep them both silent. After falling in love with his best friend, a moral dilemma—his commitment to his wife—actually initiates the beginning of his transformation. Even in light of the way he becomes “alive” when allowed to be his “authentic self” on verge of a second coming, his kairotic performance enacts his re-coming out. From the testimony, the final kairos transpires upon his wife’s file for divorce. For
Lester, the failure of the transformation was a necessity for his ultimate transference out of the second closet. These “failures” enacted by kairotic performances represent the final desecration the second closet. By turning shame onto the institution and thus performing genuine selfhood, the ex-ex-gay transitions into a gay male.

Brock, a self-described ex-ex-gay, recalls his experiences with finally letting go of ex-gay ideology and discourse:

“After college I decided to move to Dallas and go about changing my sexuality. My search led me to a small group in Dallas. We used methods of non-sexual holding and cuddling, smacking a rubber band against our wrists or cracking ammonia pills to inhale every time we had a homosexual thought. We were encouraged to begin masturbating at home using thoughts of women. From the time I started going there I knew there was something wrong with the foundation of this group’s teaching. I never once was introduced to a man who had been cured of his attraction. I never saw any progress in any of the men there with their struggle. A large number of the men were pastors, deacons, university officials, politicians, worship leaders, etc. Sadly, many had been there for five-plus years, paying thousands of dollars for the hope of a change. After about six months of therapy I left the ex-gay group in 2001, began a quest to understand if there really was legitimate reasoning for God to ask any of his creation with a homosexual desire to abstain for the remainder of their life. My search led me through dozens of books written on the subject from both sides of the issue. I found a hetero, retired, Lutheran pastor in Arizona that began showing me the truth behind what the Bible truly says for gays and lesbians. My prayer and questions have not been unanswered, and to this day God is leading me to many other men and women who affirm me for who I am, and the way God made me to be.”

In this context, the initiation of a kairotic performance comes not from a particular instance, but from a reclaiming of the language and ideology of Christian dogma. A commonality among many ex-ex-gays, myself included, is that they—we—are often never introduced to individuals who have claimed to be completely restored—in the flesh, that is. These men exist, perhaps immaterially in websites, brochures, conferences, and books, the rarity of finding a man who has reformed his sexual selfhood to straight is often an abstraction—one that shouldn’t be questioned.
(at least according to those in power positions). Not only do these abstractions point to the power of the institutionalized discourse of patriarchal forces which undergird Exodus International, but these abstractions lead to internalized homophobia and self-hate—the abstractions that eventually lead to the kairotic moment of reclamation—for some.

Through this testimony, the word “progress” seems to be a focal point for reclaiming the genuine body. In a sense, progress is what ex-gays seek—a movement toward a normative body. This traditionally western notion of forward movement, perhaps, collapses the world of ex-gay. Essentially, “results” will never find materiality in terms of sexual conversion. It is a desire for these results that eventually pushes the ex-gay toward reclamation of the genuine body. For Brock, the desires for results led to his dismissal of institutional forces and to his eventual search for a reclamation of truth. By stating that he sought council from a “hetero, retired Lutheran pastor,” he begins his search to reclaim the language of the institution. That is, in order to change his reality, he seeks to understand and alter the language of the intersection between God and sexuality—“to see the truth behind the Bible truly says for gays and lesbians” (www.beyondevgay.com). In order to reclamation himself—re-come out—he takes power away from the institution’s historically inaccurate constructions of piety and sexuality. In this context, the power elite must be relieved of power, for once the control of language is revoked, the institutional claim to naming acceptable and unacceptable bodies diminishes. For Brock, his rewiring of language leads to his reconfiguration of a relationship with a higher being. Thus, his kairotic performance prevails once he is able to dismiss institutional language that ties non-normative sexuality with vilified sin. In his final words, Brock kairotically reclaims his body, but he does so in a way that references his innate nature—his sexuality as a natural occurrence, not as an abomination. That is, by referencing “the way God made him,” he comes to understand his own inception by reasserting his refigured, normative citizenship through a kairotic performance of selfhood.

Conclusions

A few weeks ago, a member of my thesis committee said to me: “Make sure this writing is accessible to an adolescent—like a fifteen-year-old who’s struggling with his sexuality.” This statement made me rethink what I’m doing with this project. At times, I worry that this project isn’t reaching its intended audience because this project isn’t really for the academy. As open-
minded, critical citizens, rhetorical and literary studies scholars are cognizant of the fact that homophobic discourses are grounded in fear and ideology. As scholars, we have the privilege of reading Foucault and Derrida and are able to converse freely about institutional critique; these conversations are second-nature to us. If it were possible, this project wouldn’t use any of the jargon of the field. I’d re-write it and talk about it with students of a gay-straight alliance at a local high school. I’d make a brochure that I could hand out to gay teenagers at counseling centers. This chapter—these final thoughts—are my way of reaching out to my audiences who don’t read *Rhetoric Review*—my audiences who are afraid of being themselves where it’s not safe—my audiences who don’t have access to safe discussions, where languages, ideologies, and institutions are critiqued and reclaimed. I say this because eight years ago, when I didn’t have an entire English Department that encouraged me to be out, when I didn’t understand the words and ideas I had for myself as products of an institution, these are perspectives that could have helped me.

If I could sum up this project in a sentence or two, I’d say the following to young gay men and lesbians: you have a difficult place in high schools and in adolescence. You’re bombarded with “normal,” which is usually synonymous with “straight.” And it’s easy to think that you should try to align yourself with this normalcy. It’s easy to think that you should change. Read texts carefully—all texts—the ones you can pick up and the ones that you can’t pick up. In this project, I said that institutions and language influence a person’s performance of self—the second closet. Texts that support these performances by using language to the benefit of the ex-gay cause are my reference point. But I don’t just want to focus on adolescents: many individuals are influenced by this language—this political movement.

By attempting to reach a myriad of audiences, I’ve considered and negotiated with the intersections of theory and experience. Chapter I examines the foundations of ex-gay organizations, while regarding my experiences as both points of analysis and theory. Chapter II grapples with the theory of the proceeding project, addressing the linguistic and rhetorical performances of second closet-hood and re-coming out, while Chapter III sheds light on these theories by investigating these performative spaces in digital contexts through the Exodus International-affiliated website. To revisit Chapter III’s discussion of John Paulk is to highlight my key interest in this project. While I do not feel that his lies or his hypocrisy are acceptable, I
do feel that he is no different than many individuals who invest trust in the ex-gay ministries.
Paulk entered a second closet and failed, much to his benefit. His failure resulted in being
caught, in a highly public forum, performing authentic selfhood. Quite simply, Paulk is a victim
of the movement’s interpellation. Perhaps, my reading of Wayne Booth’s *The Rhetoric of
Rhetoric* informs my next statement: I am frustrated with the left’s rampant, vehement attack of
the Ex-Gay Movement and individuals like Paulk; while I do not personally support the
movement and do see it as detrimental to marginalized and developing identities, I don’t feel that
an attack on the movement is necessary. Essentially, to address the movement’s deceptive
rhetorical strategies with precise discussion and incisive criticism is to deem the movement
corrupt, homophobic, and harmful, without the use of the violent rhetoric. Since my project is
decentralized from political and ideological attack, its purpose is awareness and use, possibly for
non-profit organizations, for scholars and activists who are doing similar research as I have done
here, and most importantly, for individuals who are deciding whether they should participate in
the ministries.

With an influx of rhetoric and composition programs central to social-activist pedagogies,
such as the programs at Miami University and Michigan State University, the field is calling
many individuals into activism. The intersection of composition, rhetoric, and social practice is
central to discussions of rhetorical discussions of local and global issues. When these
discussions take place and when this sort of writing is done, writing itself becomes a vehicle for
social practice and activism. As an ex-ex-gay, I feel that these discussions need to take place, so
that others can be informed and make sound personal decisions.

As I conclude my writing on this project (for now), I’m thinking of ways that this project
could continue to reach audiences, both within and outside of the academy. Ideas for expanding
this project, by both further theorizing and personalizing it, came from a conference I attended
last fall. In October 2007, I presented an excerpt of this project at the *Feminism(s) and
Rhetoric(s) Conference* in Little Rock, Arkansas. My audience was highly interactive, asking me
interesting questions and engaging with my work. After my session, a colleague and friend
asked me: “So, how would you say your project deals with performing desire? Is desire a
performance?” This is a question I would like to consider as I continue to revise this project for
my dissertation. At this point in time, I see this project not only as my dissertation topic for my
Ph.D. work at Michigan State University, but also as a space of awareness—a space of awareness for my audiences, yes, but also a site of becoming through which I’ve become aware of my own responsibility to tell my story. Interestingly enough, as I write this last page, I’m thinking of how I’ll incorporate these ideas into narrative I plan to submit to Beyond Ex-Gay—a narrative I’d have been too hesitant to write two years ago, when I first began working on this project. Right now, I’m drafting my own story because what good is it to consider all these academic and rhetorical contexts without telling my story publicly to those outside of academia. The most important event that happened during this entire writing process took place last week, as I was revising the final pages of this thesis. Devin Rodgers33, the co-president of Miami University’s GLBTQ student organization Spectrum, asked if I would submit a copy of this thesis to the organization’s main office, so that students could have access to it, if they were struggling with their sexuality. While this project has always been real to me—very real—it was at this point that I started to imagine it as something that could help someone, in some small way. The request to make this manuscript available to local, struggling students is what this project is all about and why I wanted to write this thesis.

33 I have permission from Devin to use his name in this project.
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