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ILLUMINATING THE TRAUMA OF THE CLOSET

AMONG SEXUAL MINORITIES:

A CINEMATIC-PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF EXISTENTIAL RIGHTS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Nisha Gupta, M.A.

August 2018

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Nisha Gupta

2018

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AMONG SEXUAL MINORITIES:

A CINEMATIC-PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF EXISTENTIAL RIGHTS

By

Nisha Gupta

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ABSTRACT

ILLUMINATING THE TRAUMA OF THE CLOSET

AMONG SEXUAL MINORITIES:

A CINEMATIC-PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF EXISTENTIAL RIGHTS

By

Nisha Gupta

August 2018

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Will Adams

This dissertation is a phenomenological research study about the lived experience of being in the closet as a sexual minority. This study's research findings are represented in two distinct but overlapping ways: a traditional written hermeneutic interpretation, and a short film called "Illuminate" which cinematically brings to life the closeted lifeworld. To produce this film, I developed an innovative research method called "cinematic-phenomenology." As a researcher, I conducted phenomenological research interviews with five self-identified sexual minorities about their lived experiences of being in the closet. During interviews, I helped participants describe their felt sense of the closet through symbolic imagery, by guiding them to language their feelings using Eugene Gendlin's body-focused psychotherapy technique *Focusing*. I also conducted a thematic interpretation of participants' data using Max Van Manen's approach to hermeneutic phenomenological interpretation. My research findings led to the following key insight: that the phenomenon of the closet entails a traumatic loss of existential rights—the right to truth, freedom,

love, hope, and power. Then, as a filmmaker, I collaborated with cinematographers, actors and musicians to produce a phenomenological short film called "Illuminate" which visually illustrates these existential themes of the closet via poetic cinematography. All imagery in the film is directly inspired by research participants' embodied and metaphoric descriptions of what being in the closet felt like for them personally. The final short film can be viewed at www.illuminatethecloset.com. It seeks to make visible the invisible trauma that the closet inflicts, illuminate how sociopolitical oppression deprives marginalized minorities of their existential rights, and instill empathy, compassion, and hope among viewers. "Illuminate" is the first film to be produced by the Phenomenological Film Collective, a community-engaged filmmaking group I have founded which utilizes my cinematic-phenomenological research method to produce social advocacy films (pfcollective.com)

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my awesome Dad,

whose brilliance continues to shine a light

which always helps me find my way.

And to my Mom, who,

through solidarity, love and friendship,

reminds me to stay true to myself no matter what the world says.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my participants for their generosity in sharing their stories of the closet with me in pursuit of building a more open-hearted society. This project would not be possible without your trust, vulnerability, enthusiasm, courage, and creativity. Our conversations during this process affirmed to me the power of making Vulnerable Art in order to spread truth, compassion, solidarity, love, and hope. I have learned so much from each of you as fellow activists and beautiful human beings.

I want to thank my dissertation director, Dr. Will Adams, for his extraordinary mentorship throughout the past six years, supporting me steadfastly to speak my own truth in multiple ways—as a researcher, therapist, artist, student, and human being. My ability to pursue this dissertation would not be possible without your sensitivity, kindness, wisdom, enthusiasm, and faith in me. My future would not look so bright without the gift of your mentorship, and I feel lucky to have worked so harmoniously with you throughout these many years. I would also like to thank my committee readers, Dr. Jessie Goiochochea and Dr. Suzanne Barnard, for your investment in this project's vision, and your careful feedback to ensure that the final product goes out into the world with utmost ethical sensitivity. I am grateful for my committee's expertise, honesty, and concern in helping me navigate this emancipatory cinematic-research project in the most just manner possible.

I wish to also acknowledge other members of the Duquesne community without whom this dissertation would not be. My many dialogues with Dr. Leswin Laubscher have provided me with sustenance, insight and direction as I attempt to wade through personal and collective trauma. The community work of Dr. Eva Simms, and the risks she takes as a citizen, serve as an example for me as an activist-psychologist. Dr. Susan Goldberg and Dr. Tony Barton have offered heartfelt guidance and encouragement from the beginning. Dr. Elizabeth Fein has been a wonderful support for my career trajectory; thanks for introducing the idea of the "Phenomenological Film Collective!"

Marilyn Henline and Linda Pasqualino, thank you for keeping me and the department sane for the past six years and beyond, and offering endless hugs of support. And finally, my fellow comrades: Arvin, Rita, Camille, Betsy, Seth, Katie, Alexis, Jayme, Daniel, Rebecca, Monica, Luiggi, Gabriel, Kay, Brian, Sugandh, Jeremy, Dorothy, Jen, Christine, Sadie, Autumn, Lucas (and many others that have touched my heart at Duquesne)—you have related to me with such generosity throughout the years and your friendship is the pinnacle of what community means.

I would like to thank Dean Swindal for generously offering a fellowship award to make this dissertation's vision a reality. This gesture of solidarity from Duquesne is quite meaningful.

I would like to thank my colleagues and clients at Persad Center for building such a significant place of refuge and empowerment. You are a breath of fresh air for the Pittsburgh LGBTQ community. Thanks also to my comrades in the trenches of American University, Adam, Ashlee, Abby, and Natalie: I would not have made it through the final homestretch without your loving, funny, loyal presence every day.

I wish to thank the folks at The University of West Georgia's Department of Psychology for supporting not only this cinematic-phenomenological research project, but also many future phenomenological films to come. Thank you for inviting me into your departmental home and welcoming my heart and soul as a psychologist-artist-activist.

I wish to thank Aimee Hartstein and Liz Baring for both creating a holding environment, in your own ways, that allowed me to explore the depths of this subject matter therapeutically and artistically. Liz—learning Focusing was like learning Magic. Thank you.

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My utmost gratitude goes to Joseph Carreno, for crafting a remarkable partnership with me that sustained me in so many ways throughout my doctoral studies, culminating in the birth of this dissertation. This project would not have happened without your love, support, compassion, allyship, and artistic talent. Thank you for the many years you devoted to me and to us, and to the many days you devoted to ensuring that my artistic vision for this film could come to life onscreen through beautiful cinematography. You are not only an exquisite artist but an exquisitely special human being—to the world and to me.

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the **PHENOMENOLOGICAL FILM COLLECTIVE** presents

illuminate

a cinematic poem about being in the closet

based on in-depth phenomenological interviews with research participants about the lived experience of being in the closet as a sexual minority

Chapter 1: Introduction

> If a human life is described with enough particularity, the universal will begin to speak through it. What interests me about my story, and the stories of others, is how similar they are in revealing the bones of our common human endeavor, the yearning for human emancipation that stirs within us all. (Yoshino, 2006, p. xii)

The Political is Psychological

On December 11th, 2013, I awoke to news that the Supreme Court of India had reinstated the Section 377 law to recriminalize homosexuality, condemning gay sex with ten years of jail. This law was derivative of the legacy that British colonialism had left on India. It had been revoked in 2009, allowing millions of India's gay citizens to become liberated from the persecutory closet. Now, four years later, this shocking news threatened to push them back inside.

As a first-generation American citizen with immigrant parents from India, I read this news from Pittsburgh with eyes full of tears and fists balled up in rage. My father identified as a gay man who remained in the closet throughout his life, in order to survive his homophobic sociopolitical environment of India and subsequently our conservative hometown in the United States. My own experience of growing up in my father's closet felt isolating, dissociative, and sometimes hopeless. I can only imagine what it might have felt like for him. My dad passed away from an accident in 2004, before homosexuality was temporarily decriminalized in his home country, and before a single state in the U.S. allowed for gay marriage. As such, he died without the opportunity to express his entirety-of-being to the world in which he lived and loved.

So that morning, upon hearing the news about Section 377, I felt overcome with grief. The reality of my father's sociopolitical oppression came into sharp focus, and it felt too unfair to bear. In the years since then, the sociopolitical climate regarding LGBTQ rights has set me on an emotional rollercoaster. When the United States Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage across all fifty states on June 26th, 2015, I joyfully danced across the streets of Pittsburgh. When a gunman shot more than 100 members of the LGBTQ community at the Orlando Pulse nightclub on June 12th, 2016, I could not get out of bed for days. When Donald Trump was elected as president on November 9th, 2016, forming one of the most anti-LGBTQ and anti-immigrant presidential cabinets in U.S. history, my rage transmuted into despair. I knew I was not alone, as hate crimes began

rising, and marginalized minorities were calling crisis hotlines at a rate unprecedented after election day (Ravitz, 2016). Throughout this fluctuating sociopolitical climate, it has become obvious to me—as a student of clinical psychology, an ethnic minority, and a queer woman myself—that *the political is psychological.* That is, events which take place in the political sphere have a deeply personal and penetrating impact upon the human psyche. Additionally, *the psychological is political*—the psychological functioning of an individual can be traced to the sociopolitical context of which they are a part. Moreover, the psychological functioning of an individual influences their participation in the political sphere—whether by perpetuating the oppressive status quo, or by actively seeking to transform it. As such, I have realized that my ethical responsibility as a clinical psychologist must not solely work at the level of individual healing, but also include efforts towards sociopolitical change.

My doctoral education at Duquesne University's clinical psychology program has made me aware that psychology can do more than help suffering individuals function better in their social environments. Psychologists can also strive to alter the social systems in which individuals are struggling to function in the first place. This is especially true when practicing psychology in conditions of sociopolitical oppression. In the 1970s, Latin American psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró developed the subfield of "Liberation Psychology" after observing the psychological impact of oppression among the El Salvadoran poor at the hands of the state's brutal elite. Adapting the framework of Paulo Freire's "Liberation Theology" for psychology, Martín-Baró (1994) called for psychologists to avoid remaining neutral in the face of injustice, and instead position our work as an explicit form of political resistance and liberation on behalf of the oppressed. This requires us to undergo *conscientização*—a word Freire (1968) uses to mean "critical consciousness" or a transformation of consciousness. *Conscientização* is a process by which we awaken to and critically deconstruct the lived realities of oppressed citizens within a sociopolitical and historical context (Freire, 1968, in Duran, et al., 2008). Freire insisted that transforming consciousness in this manner

can transform oppressive realities. As such, *conscientização* can facilitate healing and justice for marginalized individuals and society as a collective:

> This awareness results in the emergence of a greater level of consciousness, psychological liberation, and soul healing that can transform the health and the lives of individuals victimized by various forms of social injustice as well as those responsible for perpetuating such oppression. (Duran et al., 2008, p. 292)

The field of psychology can facilitate *conscientização* by adopting a new goal: "to illuminate the links between an individual's psychological suffering and the social, economic and political contexts in which he or she lives" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 26). This can be accomplished if psychologists make a special attempt to inquire about, listen to, and share citizens' lived experiences of being psychologically impacted by their sociopolitical contexts. Therefore, liberation psychology also provides psychologists with a new epistemology—to empower the truths about sociopolitical oppression carried by marginalized citizens, which have historically been silenced by dominant power institutions (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Psychologists can help spread these truths across society, therefore raising *conscientização* (critical consciousness) of the traumatic impact of sociopolitical oppression upon the psyches of citizens. By collaborating with marginalized community members to increase public awareness of how the political impacts the psychological, psychologists can help resist social injustice and pursue sociopolitical emancipation. Thus, psychology can become a "force for transformation rather than for conformity to status quo cultural arrangements that contribute to injustice, poverty, violence, and war" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 24).

My dissertation aligns with the aspirations of liberation psychology. The research question guiding this dissertation asks: *what is the lived experience of being "in the closet" as a sexual minority?* (for the purposes of this dissertation, I am defining "in the closet" as a metaphoric phrase used to describe people who conceal their non-heterosexual sexual orientations from public knowledge to survive heterosexist and homophobic sociocultural contexts). A secondary question this dissertation

investigated is: *can the experience of being closeted be considered a kind of trauma, clinically speaking?* I pursued these questions with an emancipatory agenda, seeking to foster *conscientização* regarding the psychological trauma that homophobic sociopolitical norms inflict upon the human psyche. I chose phenomenological research as an emancipatory method of inquiry, with the hope that illuminating lived experience might facilitate political resistance. The objectives of this dissertation are three-fold. First, I aspire to foster critical consciousness among clinical psychologists of how sociopolitical oppression can manifest as a traumatic symptomology (i.e. post-traumatic stress disorder) among sexual minorities. This may encourage psychologists to situate "pathology" in society instead of the individual in these instances, as well as become more active LGBTQ political advocates. Second, I aspire to raise *conscientização* among everyday citizens about the emotional pain caused by LGBTQ sociopolitical oppression, in order to evoke empathy, compassion, solidarity, and advocacy towards LGBTQ people and reduce prejudiced attitudes which sustain oppressive norms and policies. Third, I seek to create a piece of art that serves as an empathic reflection for sexual minorities who have been closeted, through which they might feel seen, understood, and hopeful amidst their experiences of trauma—particularly those for whom it remains unsafe to come out at all. To fulfill these objectives, I have developed an innovative research method called "cinematic-phenomenology," which disseminates phenomenological research findings aesthetically through the format of a short film, in order to make my research findings accessible, meaningful and emotionally resonant for psychologists, scholars, and everyday citizens alike (short film can be viewed at www.illuminatethecloset.com). My deepest yearning for this project is to obliterate the very phenomenon in question here—so that someday the closet need never again exist in our world.

I should acknowledge one additional objective for this project: personal healing and atonement. But perhaps the personal is always entwined with the collective. In his book *The Wounded Researcher*, Jungian phenomenologist Robert Romanyshyn (2013) writes about how a

research topic claims the researcher through her unconscious personal complexes. The researcher's personal complexes become the basis for the "unfinished business in the soul of the work"—the ghosts of our collective unconscious who seek atonement (Romanyshyn, 2013, p. 63). Research with soul in mind becomes an act of remembering, bearing witness to, and mourning these ancestors of the past. Romanyshyn writes,

> In the shadows of history, in earshot of those unfinished tales, we live our lives and think our thoughts in the presence of haunting absence. Research as re-search begins here in the presence of this haunting absence, in service to what claims us. Claimed by a work through his or her complexes, the wounded researcher sees the work through the lens of those ancestors who linger with their still unanswered questions, the ancestors for whom the wounded researcher becomes a witness and a spokesperson. Research, as re-search is… a work of an-amnesis, of un-forgetting. (Romanyshyn, 2013, p. 65)

The soul of this research yearns to un-forget, bear witness to, and mourn our ancestors throughout history whose discriminatory worlds forced them to live and love and eventually die within closets. The soul of this research refuses to remain silent about the millions of LGBTQ people around the globe who feel condemned to spend their lives wrestling with the shame and fear of societally imposed secrecy. The soul of this research wishes to commemorate the spirits of those who have felt unseen for the beauty of who they are in their entirety-of-being. The soul of this research wishes to honor the hearts of those who must forgo their right to love and be loved to avoid ostracism, imprisonment, and violence. The soul of this research beckons me to create a tribute, mourning song, and battle-cry—for *you.*

A New Civil Rights Paradigm

This dissertation is also influenced by legal scholar Kenji Yoshino's (2006) book *Covering: A Hidden Assault on our Civil Rights*. I stumbled upon his book as I was seeking to understand my father's experience of being closeted as an Indian gay man. In *Covering*, Yoshino describes growing up in the United States as a Japanese gay man, and the psychological torment he suffered due to the

societal pressure to "cover" his sexual and ethnic identities. He explains that his own story of being pressured to downplay his intersectional minority identities—to closet these aspects of himself in order to "pass" for the mainstream—is a common story for *all* members of marginalized minority groups living in the U.S. who deviate from the White, heterosexual, upper-middle class, Anglo-Saxon, able-bodied, male norm. This demand to cover difference is a form of "coercive conformity," which Yoshino refers to as a "hidden assault on our civil rights" (Yoshino, 2006, p. xi). Coercive conformity demands that gay people do not "flaunt" their sexuality, pressures people of Color to "act White," tells women to downplay child-care responsibilities at work, and demands others to conceal their disabilities, social class background, religious beliefs and practices, etc (Yoshino, 2006). Members of marginalized minority groups who publicly express their difference are often punished by society, through harassment or discrimination. For instance, in many U.S. states, no formal legislation exists to stop employers from firing LGBTQ employees who "flaunt" their sexuality at work by revealing they are married to someone of the same gender, or who reveal themselves to be transgender—therefore enforcing many queer employees to remain closeted at work (Yoshino, 2006). Moreover, in many U.S. states there is no legal protection to stop racial profiling upon racial and ethnic minorities, whereby Black and Brown citizens fear discrimination and brutality if they do not cover their difference to look "whiter." Due to lack of legal protection against discrimination like this, our sociopolitical system assaults marginalized minorities' freedom of expression by insinuating: *you are not really allowed to be yourself.*

Yoshino's work focuses on the oppression of marginalized minorities. Yet he also states that covering is an assault against all citizens who deviate from the "mainstream norm," including members of culturally dominant groups. In fact, he asserts that the "mainstream" is a myth, for all citizens are unique and diverse simply by being multifaceted human beings. Therefore, as identity politics continue dominating our sociopolitical era, Yoshino asserts that citizens across identity

groups must stop operating in silos and competing for only our specific in-group's rights. Rather, we must recognize a common oppression inflicting us all: the demand to cover as a universal threat to our collective freedom of expression. Diverse citizens across identity groups must unite in solidarity to fight against coercive conformity, enforced assimilation, and covering as a hidden assault on our civil rights. Yoshino writes:

> I worry about our current practice of fracturing into groups, each clamoring for state and social solicitude. For this reason, I do not think we can move forward by focusing on old-fashioned group-based identity politics. We must instead build a new civil rights paradigm on what draws us together rather than on what drives us apart. Because covering applies to us all, it provides an issue around which we can make common cause. This is the desire for authenticity, our common human wish to express ourselves without being impeded by unreasoning demands for conformity. (Yoshino, 2006, p. xii)

In calling for a new civil rights paradigm based on freedom of expression, Yoshino grounds his argument in Donald Winnicott's (1960) psychoanalytic theory of the True Self and False Self. Winnicott wrote that human beings are born with a True Self: our sense of self based on spontaneous, authentic expression—our "experience of aliveness" (Winnicott, 1960, p. 148). However early in life, we construct a False Self, a defensive façade, to protect our True Self from exploitation and comply with environmental demands. According to Winnicott, the True Self and False Self must be healthily balanced in every human being to some capacity, in order to navigate society while remaining true to oneself. Ideally, this would appear as the development a "polite and mannered social attitude" that can adapt to one's environment, while simultaneously being able to express one's spontaneous, authentic selfhood (Winnicott, 1960, p. 143). Yet taken to an unhealthy extreme, for some individuals the False Self becomes the overriding instrument relating to the world, becoming a "False Personality" that leads the person to suffer a devastating loss of vitality as one's True Self remains completely hidden. For Winnicott writes: "only the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel real. Whereas a True Self feels real, the existence of a False Self results in a feeling of unreal or a sense of futility" (Winnicott, 1960, p. 148).

Yoshino applies Winnicott's theory to the oppression caused by covering. He argues that society's coercive conformity enforces the enactment of a False Self among members of marginalized minority groups and other citizens whose True Self deviates from mainstream social norms. Though the False Self is a useful defense against societal discrimination, many diverse citizens may completely obscure their True Self to assimilate to coercive social norms, causing great psychological suffering. As such, Yoshino asserts that the new civil rights paradigm must try to dismantle coercive conformity and emancipate authentic self-expression for all citizens:

> This psychological discourse about authentic selves sound distant from current civil rights discourse. We must close that gap. The new civil rights must harness this universal impulse towards authenticity. That impulse should press us toward thinking of civil rights less in terms of groups than in terms of common humanity. (Yoshino, 2011, "The New Civil Rights," para. 10)

Many postmodern theorists critique rigid distinctions between a "True Self" and "False Self," as well as the notion of "authenticity" altogether—a theoretical skepticism that I appreciate and share. The social discourse in the United States has evolved to utilize the language of "queer" as a response to the critiques of the binary categorization of "true vs false selves," as well as distinct and rigid identity categories such as "gay," "lesbian," and "bisexual." Nevertheless, I agree with Yoshino that all these terms can also serve as useful political arguments to combat the ways in which coercive sociopolitical norms censor the freedom of self-expression among queer people, members of marginalized minority groups, and citizens in general. These psychological and existential constructs can provide strategic language with which to dissent, rally, and transform public policy—similar to the concrete sociopolitical change that the language of identity politics has achieved throughout the decades, though "identity" itself is frequently critiqued as a construct in academia.

Overall, Yoshino's argument for a new civil rights paradigm has influenced my dissertation in several key ways. First, Yoshino writes that in our current climate of identity politics, solidarity can better flourish if citizens recognize that common humanity exists across their identity groups.

Positioned through the framework of liberation psychology, this new civil rights paradigm must foster critical consciousness across identity groups about covering as a universal injustice, so people across groups join together to combat collective oppression. Yoshino chooses to emphasize the existential construct of authenticity as the foundation of common humanity that citizens can rally around. Similar to Yoshino's strategy, I seek to emphasize the existential in this dissertation, in order to foster critical consciousness of universal injustice upon a foundation of common humanity. I did this through my chosen methodology of existential-phenomenology, which allowed me to interpret sexual minorities' lived experiences of the closet against the backdrop of the existential, human condition. Akin to Yoshino's strategy, I emphasized the existential aspects of the closeted experience in hopes that my research findings can apply not only LGBTQ injustice but other forms of societal oppression, such as racial and gender injustice. I hope this existential strategy allows my dissertation to resonate with citizens across identity groups and with intersectional identities, thereby inspiring an intersectional solidarity movement that fights for civil rights across the board.

Second, Yoshino insists that this new civil rights paradigm cannot solely be built in the courtroom. Rather, it must be pursued by everyday citizens as a commitment to free themselves from oppressive norms, and to increase the awareness and tolerance of others around them. Thus the power is in the people—to engage in conversations with friends, acquaintances and strangers across cultural divides, and to assert our basic human right to express our true selves: "conversations should happen outside courtrooms—in workplaces and restaurants, schools and playgrounds, chat rooms and living rooms, public squares and bars. They should occur informally and intimately, where tolerance is made and unmade" (Yoshino, 2011, "The New Civil Rights," para. 30). Yoshino's grassroots approach to civil rights inspires my strategy to expand my research beyond academia and "into the streets." I have done this by disseminating my dissertation's research findings via the media arts. This dissertation offers an LGBT-advocacy short film that can behave as a

conversation-starter, empathy-inducer, and form of cultural therapy. Much like Yoshino asserts that the work of sociopolitical justice must occur not only in the courtroom but in the streets, I assert that the work of psychology must be pursued not only in therapy or academic journals, but in the multimedia world within which citizens connect, share, converse, learn, and co-exist.

Kenji Yoshino calls for active citizenship, and this dissertation is an answer to that call. I am grateful for Yoshino's work for inspiring me to blend psychology, research, filmmaking, and civil rights activism in order to help fulfill, in some small way, that "yearning for human emancipation stirs within us all" (Yoshino, 2006, p. xii).

Synopsis of Chapters

Chapter 1 has conveyed the personal and political motivations of this dissertation, as well as the key theories and thinkers that have influenced this work. The rest of the chapters expand upon these areas as follows:

Chapter 2 provides a literature review of the phenomenon of the closet. I unpack the metaphor of the closet and situate the closet within a sociopolitical history of LGBTQ rights. I also review psychological literature regarding the LGBTQ closet, including literature that supports the notion of the closet as a traumatic experience.

Chapter 3 provides a literature review of arts-based therapeutic and research methodologies, using theories of liberation psychology and depth psychology. I also discuss how film has been used as an aesthetic tool for both liberation and oppression towards the LGBTQ community.

In Chapter 4, I introduce my cinematic-phenomenological research method. I review relevant literature that form the underpinnings of this method, referencing Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Max Van Manen, Les Todres and Kathleen Galvin, Denise Mahone, Claire LeBeau, and Eugene Gendlin.

Chapter 5 details the specific procedures undertaken for this cinematic-phenomenological research project. I describe participant recruitment, data collection, data interpretation, and the filmmaking process.

Chapter 6 offers self-reflexivity about my personal history, assumptions and agenda as a researcher. I discuss how my subjectivity about the closeted phenomenon has influenced data collection and interpretation.

Chapter 7 provides individualized interpretations for each participants' lived experience of the closet. I summarize each participant's written narrative, their Focusing data, and significant themes that arose in written narrative and interviews. I also include each participant's reference to artwork that expresses their experience of being in the closet.

In Chapter 8, I demonstrate how I transformed participants' data into cinematography. I include my filmmaking notes, the film script, and the storyboard for the film. I provide a weblink for the final film to view online. Finally, I provide brief cinematic insights of the lived experience of the closet, based on the film itself.

In Chapter 9, I write an extensive existential-hermeneutic phenomenological description of the closet, using Van Manen's approach to data interpretation. I identify five existential themes that arose across all participants' data—truth, freedom, love, hope, and power—which I have described as "existential rights." I provide an in-depth interpretation of how each of these existential rights appear and disappear amidst the closeted experience, incorporating participants' verbatim descriptions. I end the chapter with a summary of the lived experience of the closet.

In Chapter 10, I utilize the research findings of this dissertation to propose an "existential rights paradigm." Using relevant psychological and political literature, I discuss how psychology can influence the law, and how the law can influence psychology. I recommend ways in which clinical psychologists can integrate a rights-based approach to their psychotherapy, research, and teaching

endeavors. I also elaborate upon the notion of the LGBTQ closet as a form of sociopolitical trauma, using trauma-focused literature to discuss how to work clinically with this trauma. Additionally, I position cinematic-phenomenological research as a tool for healing and justice for sociopolitical traumas: by creating beauty, compassion, and hope. I also discuss limitations for this research method and study. I end this dissertation with the launch of the Phenomenological Film Collective, a filmmaking collective that fuses phenomenological research with social-advocacy filmmaking.

Chapter 2: Literature Review of the Closet

> The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century… for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in their support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence. (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 68)

The Metaphor of the Closet

In a persecutory sociopolitical climate from which sexual minorities have sought protection, the closet emerged as a metaphor to describe people who conceal their sexual orientation from public knowledge. Since the 1960s, social activists have fought for sexual minorities to be acknowledged as members of a marginalized population who are not inherently criminal or sick, but are made sick by oppressive social norms. In its quest for political liberation and equal human rights, the gay identity politics movement has attempted to help people "come out of the closet" and live "authentic lives" as a necessary step towards social justice and liberation for all.

The closet is a powerful metaphor to apply to a situation of sociopolitical persecution; its imagery conjures up darkness, isolation, and walls closing in. In their book *Metaphors We Live By*, linguist scholars George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) posit that our daily living is shaped by metaphorical systems that structure our everyday activity in the world. Metaphors do not merely shape our imaginations or poetic language. Rather, they actually structure our being-in-the-world, influencing our lived experience at the fundamental level of being and doing (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In this section, I will unpack the metaphor of the closet in terms of how its meanings may structure the lived experience of sexual minorities.

In her article "In the Closet: A Close Read of the Metaphor," Hannah Kushnick (2010) cites the basic definition of the closet in English language as "a small private room, such as one for study or prayer." This emphasis on privacy implies a sense of hiding or keeping something secret. The closet automatically conjures a sense of "domestic concealment" which creates a distinction between a person's private self and their public presentation (Kushnick, 2010, p. 678). Kushnick suggests that we conceal things in closets, away from public knowledge, primarily for protection. We wish to protect our social reputation, such as when we hide shameful clutter in the closet when guests visit. We wish to protect the sanctity of the items we conceal, such as storing delicate or highly personal

things inside closets. And we wish to conceal things in closets to protect against persecution, such as sheltering persecuted ethnic or religious refugees inside closets (Kushnick, 2010).

The etymology of the closet comes from the word *close*, which derives from the Latin word *claudere*, to shut. In Latin, *claudere* is also the root for "recluse"—someone who shuts themselves away (Kushnick, 2010). As such, the closet is used in discourse as a metaphorical concept to describe hiding the private parts of oneself or one's family—the "skeletons in the closet" that must be concealed and shut away. In considering what it is like to shut oneself inside a closet, Kushnick emphasizes the spatial dimensions of the metaphor: a closet is a much smaller space than an actual room. As such, being shut away inside a closet enforces isolation; its small dimensions and hidden enclosure can connote reclusion and a lack of sociality (Kushnick, 2010). When shut away inside a closet, one is blocked from participating in the relational world outside the closet door.

Kushnick also turns her attention to the phrase "in the closet," in reference to closeted sexual minorities. The word "in" is used in discourse to situate a subject *in* a particular location, *in* a particular group category, or *in* a particular experience or state of mind. All these uses of "in" confer essential meanings to the experience of being in the closet as a sexual minority. Kushnick writes:

> Being closeted is all of those things—a strategy for living, a status, a self-designation, and an experience. To be *inside something* is to have it surround you, to dictate the terms of your experience and actions. When we say someone is closeted, this is very much what we mean—he or she is locked away in, concealed in, hiding in, and to some degree, defined by that state of being. This is the opposite of being *out*, of being *open*ly gay. (Kushnick, 2010, p. 679).

While unpacking the phrase "in the closet," Kushnick also brings our attention to what exactly we are saying is in the closet when we use this phrase in common discourse. We do not discuss a person's sex life as being in the closet; rather we say that he or she is in the closet as a gay person. By using personal pronouns with this phrase, we intertwine sexual orientation with personal identity. This explains why being "in the closet" incites so much psychological distress—for being in the closet feels like a denial of identity, "a denial of the self" (Kushnick, 2010, p. 680).

Kushnick also emphasizes the precarious nature of attempting to keep things concealed inside closets. For closets are situated inside houses, so its contents can be potentially revealed to anyone in that house who opens the closet door. Moreover, Kushnick suggests that opening the closet door is an essential aspect of its metaphor, for: "the location of a closet is near at hand—things are stored there in the short term, implying in some way that the natural progression is for things in the closet to come out and be used" (Kushnick, 2010, p. 678). As such, whatever is hidden inside the closet to protect against exposure and harm, will likely eventually reveal its existence and be brought to the light. To Kushnick, opening the closet door is not solely a dangerous proposition but an opportunity for solidarity. The closet door can be opened by people outside who demonstrate attitudes of acceptance, recognition, non-judgmentalness, and compassion. These people can help closeted sexual minorities step out of enforced reclusion and experience safe opportunities for participation in the social world, thereby receiving "the full measure of existence outside the closet they are entitled to" (Kushnick, 2010, p. 680).

Accordingly, while being "in the closet" connotes hiding one's self in reclusion away from the social world, "coming out of the closet" suggests an end to hiding, repression, denial, and isolation. Yet in George Chauncey's (1995) historical overview of gay culture entitled *Gay New York*, he contends that the phrase "coming out" was actually used by the gay community long before "the closet" was used, to describe gay men's participation in drag balls which became prominent in the 1920s (Chauncey, 1995; in Okrent, 2013). Gay men would come out to the rest of their community in an elaborate ball, in a similar manner as women in Victorian era would make their formal coming out debut to society at debutante balls. In this sense, "coming out" originally referred to gay men's celebrating and rejoicing in being formally introduced to one's community, rather than coming out of the dark secrecy of a closet. Coming out of secrecy, hiding, and despair was not emphasized until

the metaphor of the closet became part of common discourse decades later (Chancey, 1995; in Okrent, 2013).

A Sociopolitical Overview of the Closet

It is important, then, to also contextualize the metaphor of the closet within a sociopolitical history of gay rights. In sociologist Steven Seidman's (2004) book *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life*, he writes that the "closet" was actually not used in common American discourse to describe the hidden identities of sexual minorities until the mid-20th century. Before then, prosecuting homosexuality was not a main focus of the state. Sodomy laws that outlawed homosexuality had existed since the formation of the United States, borrowed from the British government and derivative of the Church Law that prohibits all sexual acts that do not contribute to our species' procreation (Seidman, 2004). However, these laws were not really enforced by the U.S. government until the 20th century. Without the explicit threat of political persecution facing those who engaged in same-sex sexual acts, "gay" and "lesbian" identities were not used in common discourse to label an integral part of one's identity. Homosexuality was considered one facet of a person's relational preference, orientation or behavior, rather than being entwined with their sense of self (Seidman, 2004). In a sociopolitical context that did not explicitly prosecute homosexuality, there was less pressure for citizens who engaged in same-sex love and sexuality to be secretive, in hiding, or closeted, though stigma certainly prevailed among people's social attitudes towards homosexuality (Seidman, 2004).

Seidman writes that this laissez-faire sociopolitical attitude towards homosexuality changed in the 20th century. The U.S. government increased its efforts to prosecute homosexuality, considering those who engaged in non-heteronormative behaviors to be deviant criminals who posed a threat to social order. By the 1950s and 1960s, the government began to crackdown on

homosexuality as a criminal offense (Seidman, 2004). This created a heightened atmosphere of homophobic persecution that posed an acute threat to "deviant homosexuals" who risked losing their jobs, families, or even lives if they were "found out." This governmental crackdown created a rigid distinction between "normal" heterosexuality and "polluted" homosexuality in social discourse, which has contributed to our notion of homosexuality as a distinct identity category. Being "a homosexual" became a stigmatized identity which had to be managed, downplayed, and concealed from public knowledge for protection (Seidman, 2004). This new social discourse perpetuated disparaging messages about the "deviant homosexual" that were internalized by sexual minorities about their sense of self. Seidman suggests that "for some individuals the sheer magnitude energy and focus spent managing this stigmatized identity, and the fact that avoiding suspicion and exposure sometimes shaped a whole way of life, meant that homosexuality functioned as a sort of hidden core identity" (Seidman, 2004, p. 9). In other words, the intense preoccupation with having to hide one's homosexuality, and the deep-rooted consequences of this concealment on one's sense of self and life, influenced people to consider homosexuality as "core" to a person's identity.

The 1950s and 60s became the "heyday of the closet era," as well as the moment in history when "the closet became the defining reality of gay life in America" (Seidman, 2004, p. 14). During this climate of extreme homophobic persecution, Seidman writes that the closet was defined as a "life-shaping social pattern" in which a person presents themselves to the public in a manner at odds with their core self and private feelings. The closet forces people to choose between "a life of passing or a struggle to come out" in all spheres of life: love and marriage, work and career, place of residence, and friendship circles (Seidman, 2004, p. 7). The ongoing pressure to make major life decisions that revolve around concealing one's identity suggests that the closet is "more than an inconvenience or minor nuisance… it is a state of gay oppression produced by a condition of heterosexual domination" (Seidman, 2004, p. 7). Moreover, while living in conditions of extreme

homophobic persecution, coming out of the closet becomes a "deliberate, intense life drama" that involves struggling to accept one's shamed, core self, as well as anticipating major alterations to one's lifestyle after public disclosure of identity.

These oppressive sociopolitical conditions began to lift in America thanks to the 1969 Stonewall Riots, which was an uprising that LGBTQ people and allies participated in against the police outside of the Stonewall Inn in Manhattan, engaging in violent riots to protest oppressive police raids at queer bars across the country (Seidman, 2004). Though it was not the first of its kind, the Stonewall Riots served as a catalyst for the major social justice movement for LGBTQ rights in the United States. Throughout the 70s, activists demanded that the government recognize homosexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation and form of cultural identity rather than a criminal offense or mental illness. The LGBTQ community demanded to be acknowledged as a minority cultural group who deserve equal rights by the law, like women or people of color. In the process, "coming out of the closet" became positioned as a form of LGBTQ political activism (Seidman, 2004). Activists urged closeted individuals to publicly disclose their gay, lesbian or bisexual identities as a step towards liberation and social justice for all. As gay politician and activist Harvey Milk famously declared in a 1978 speech:

> Every gay person must come out. As difficult as it is, you must tell your immediate family. You must tell your relatives. You must tell your friends if indeed they are your friends. You must tell the people you work with. You must tell the people in the stores you shop in. Once they realize that we are indeed their children, that we are indeed everywhere, every myth, every lie, every innuendo will be destroyed once and all. And once you do, you will feel so much better. (Sabbagh & Schmitt, 2016, p. 480).

Recent discussion about "coming out of the closet" is more nuanced as a result of the 21st century U.S. sociopolitical climate. Seidman claims that sexual minorities' lives in America are vastly different now compared with the 1960s, due to an increasingly tolerant and diverse sexual landscape. In 1973, homosexuality was finally removed from the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as a form of mental illness. This occurred after LGBTQ activists disrupted the American

Psychiatric Association's annual convention to demand its removal, and after a long, contentious debate among psychiatrists about whether homosexuality was a "sexual deviation" that could be "converted" by psychiatric treatment. Now, the APA's official stance on homosexuality asserts that there is nothing pathological about homosexuality, and that the APA "does not believe that same-sex orientation should or needs to be changed, and efforts to do so represent a significant risk of harm by subjecting individuals to forms of treatment which have not been scientifically validated" (Scasta & Bialer, 2013). Additionally, in 2003, sodomy laws were struck down among all fifty states in the U.S. Moreover, in 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage nationwide, a testament to the progress the United States of America has made in tolerating sexual diversity. Indeed, a 2015 nationwide PEW survey revealed that 63% of Americans believe homosexuality should be accepted by society (Pew Research Center, 2015).

In a more liberal sociocultural climate, Seidman posits that many people's homosexual feelings are no longer central to their identity—they do not experience their core self to be "gay," "lesbian," or "bisexual." Rather, as sexual minorities become assimilated into mainstream American culture, sexual orientation is perceived as one thread of an individual's identity rather than the core of it (Seidman, 2004). Moreover, a 2016 survey found that 56% of today's "Generation Z" teenagers (ages 13-20) identify as something other than "exclusively heterosexual," compared with 35% of millennials aged 21-34 (Tsjeng, 2016). Moreover, 47% of today's teenagers choose to forgo identity labels altogether, disavowing fixed sexual identity categories such as "bisexual," "lesbian," "gay," or "straight" (Truong, 2017). Some scholars refer to our modern age as a "post-gay" liberation period where it is no longer necessary to publicly disclose a specific sexual identity at all: "we should no longer define ourselves solely in terms of our sexuality—even if our opponents do. Post-gay isn't 'un-gay.' It's about taking a critical look at gay life and no longer thinking solely in terms of struggle" (Collard, 1998; in Ghaziani, 2011, p. 99). The ability to forgo sexual identity labels

is likely due to a progressive Western culture in which declaring a gay identity no longer seems like a necessary tool with which to fight for civil rights.

Skepticism towards identity labels is supported by postmodern scholars. In queer theorist Eva Sedgwick's (1990) book *The Epistemology of the Closet*, she argues that demarking people's identities into the binary categories of "heterosexual" and "homosexual" is oppressive in and of itself. Sedgwick explains that this binary is a social construction which does not reflect how many people experience their sexuality—on a fluid spectrum or continuum, rather than as a fixed identity. As such, languaging human sexuality within binary identity categories limits freedom (Sedwick, 1990). Sedgwick deconstructs "the closet" as a social construction for which our modern Western society puts pressure on performing a speech act of "coming out" to sustain this binary. As a result of this sexual binary, our society has become obsessed with secrecy—who has a secret, what that secret is, and how can we force that person to "out" their secret. The social construct of the closet thereby becomes oppressive on all accounts—it ruptures people's sense of their own fluid sexuality, robs people of the right to their own privacy, and creates a spectacle out of their intimate lives (Sedwick, 1990). Yet Sedgwick affirms that for as long as our society upholds this sexual binary, and for as long we as live in a society that is prejudiced against same-sex attraction, the closet must continue to persist in our social discourse to highlight institutionalized homophobia:

> The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century… for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in their support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence. (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 68)

Sedgwick wrote about gay oppression in the 20th century. We cannot deny the considerable progress towards LGBTQ rights in 21st century America. In this more tolerant era, Seidman encourages us to redefine the closet, considering it less of a "life-shaping condition" and more of a "strategy of accommodation and resistance which both reproduces and contests aspects of a society organized around normative heterosexuality" (Seidman, 1999, p. 10). This perspective allows the

closet to be considered not only a traumatic experience of victimhood, but also a resourceful strategy that people enact, as active agents, to navigate environments of institutionalized heterosexism. The closet is also now being discussed in terms of a spectrum, with varying degrees of being closeted or out in everyday life. A person can be out with their friends about their same-sex relationship, but remain closeted about it at work. This perspective contends that sexual minorities do not just come out of the closet once, but participate in perception-management techniques on a regular basis, assessing whether it is safe to disclose their sexual and romantic orientation across the varying social contexts of their lives (Adams, 2011). Overall, a more nuanced picture of the closet has developed in modern times.

And yet, we certainly cannot say that we live in a "post-gay liberation period." As former President Barack Obama contended: "History does not move in straight lines; sometimes it goes sideways, sometimes it goes backward" (Remnick, 2016). With Donald Trump's 2017 election as president, threats loom large regarding the potential backsliding of hard-won LGBTQ rights. An overview of the present-day sociopolitical climate reveals that anti-LGBTQ hate crimes are surging across our nation, conversion therapies persist, and legal protection against LGBTQ discrimination continues to be denied on the basis of religious freedom. The current house Republicans are also dismantling HIV prevention and treatment initiatives and protections for transgender children in public schools, as well as seeking to render LGBT Americans invisible in the census (Pelosi, 2017). A major blow to the LGBTQ community in 2017 was the transgender ban from service in the U.S. military. These anti-queer threats require some sexual minorities to seriously reconsider coming out at all; many may uphold the necessity to "pass" as heterosexual in most areas of life to avoid harassment, degradation, and persecution. Even when the United States was making rapid strides towards LGBTQ equality under former President Barack Obama's tenure, a 2013 survey depicted that many American citizens remained entirely closeted in conservative states such as Mississippi,

Kentucky and Louisiana, where major stigma against homosexuality persists (Coffman et al., 2013). The study revealed that one-tenth of gay American men do not tell the important people in their lives about their sexual orientation, concluding that "the closet remains a major factor in American life" (Stephens-Davidowitz, 2013). In these geographic locations, the closet may still be experienced by many sexual minorities as not only a "strategy of resistance" but a daily trauma. This is particularly true for citizens who perceive their sexual orientation as a "discredited core identity" and conceal it out of shame, guilt, and fear of persecution, thereby potentially leading to despair, loneliness, substance abuse, or suicide (Seidman, 1999).

21st century social justice theorists also incorporate an intersectional framework to their understanding of LGBTQ experiences in the United States. Intersectionality was coined as a term by American civil rights activist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who used it describe Black women who belong to multiple marginalized groups in a society, and for whom feminism must commit to being anti-racist if it wants to be inclusive (Crenshaw, 1991). Nowadays, the term intersectionality has also been used to social justice agents to describe how all people possess a multiplicity of intersecting identities across race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexuality, religion, and ability. These intersecting identity factors yield greater oppression in some domains and privilege in others. For instance, being a gay, White man in America, though not without its challenges, presents greater privilege than navigating society as a Black lesbian woman in the U.S., where racism and sexism create additional barriers of discrimination. Queer people of color, in particular, can experience a "Catch-22" regarding their closeted experience. Their intersectional identities frequently require them to negotiate multiple conflicting "covering" demands that place them in a double-bind (Ramachandran, 2006). For instance, queer people of color are faced with an external demand to "cover" their racial and ethnic identities to navigate racism in the LGBTQ community, while also being pressured to cover their queer identities while navigating homophobia in their ethnic

communities. Moreover, queer people of color may face internal conflicts and covering demands. For instance, an Indian gay man raised with collectivist values may feel conflicted between a responsibility to put his family welfare before his individual desires, versus a yearning to be true to himself and come out. Accordingly, since the phenomenon of the closet is intersectional, Seidman suggests that "it is perhaps more correct to speak about multiple closets… the experience and social pattern of being in the closet vary considerably depending on factors such as age, class, gender, race, ability or disability, region, religion, and nationality" (Seidman, 2004, p. 31).

In contextualizing the closeted experience as intersectional, we must also consider the experiences of sexual minorities around the globe, particularly those who reside in the 80 countries where homosexuality remains a criminal offense. After four years of liberation whereby homosexuality was no longer legally criminalized, India's supreme court recriminalized homosexuality in December 2013, punishing gay sex with ten years of jail. In June 2013, Russia enforced a law to ban the "propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships" to minors, using violent policing to ensure that its LGBTQ community remains closeted. In February 2014, Uganda strengthened the severity of its anti-gay criminal penalties by imposing a life sentence of prison to "repeat offenders" found guilty of "aggravated homosexuality" (Strasser, 2014). And in the most devastating news of 2017, Chechnya created concentration camps in which gay men were being rounded up, tortured and killed, echoing 1930s Nazi Germany (Kramer, 2017). In these persecutory contexts, enacting the closet for sexual minorities means choosing life over death. For as long as there remain sociocultural contexts in which homophobic persecution persists, the closet will continue to remain the main strategy to survive their perilous milieus—in America and across the world. Thus, my dissertation seeks to ensure that the phenomenon of the closet persists in psychological discourse to highlight the traumatic effects of homophobia upon the human psyche.

While my dissertation aspires to illuminate the essence of the closet among sexual minorities, I do not claim for my research findings to be entirely generalizable to all non-heterosexual people across varied identities and geographic contexts. I acknowledge that there may be vast differences across intersectional sexual minority experiences. Nevertheless, I hope my emphasis on the *existential* aspects of the closet might allow parts of my interpretation to resonate with anyone, anywhere, with any configuration of intersecting identities, who has ever experienced this oppressive phenomenon. This emphasis on universality amidst intersectionality aligns with Kenji Yoshino's proposal of a civil rights paradigm that emphasizes the common humanity across identity groups. Though this dissertation primarily interprets the lived experience of the closet through an existential framework, I do touch upon distinct intersectional experiences of LGBTQ/racial injustice when relevant.

Moreover, with utmost respect to Harvey Milk, it is important to clarify that my dissertation is not a rally-cry to persuade people to come out of the closet. I acknowledge that the closet is a necessary strategy for many people's ability to lead stable lives within homophobic milieus. Rather, my main purpose is to highlight the psychic pain felt when a person is forced to conceal their sexual orientation to avoid societal persecution. It is the affective dimension—the felt sense—of being closeted that this project emphasizes, in hopes that bearing witness to such pain may urge citizens to advocate for a world that no longer places human beings in such a tenuous position.

Finally, as our understanding of sexual identity as a social construct evolves in the 21st century, my dissertation uses the umbrella term "sexual minorities" to honor the range of identities of my participants, who self-identify as gay, non-hetero, and pansexual. It is also important to address here that while I, as an activist, psychologist, and artist, am concerned with the trauma of the closet among all members of the LGBTQ community including transgender folks, I focused this research specifically on the closeted experiences of sexual minorities. This is because my clinical work has indicated that the closeted experience of transgender individuals is unique, due to the

body/gender dysphoria that often manifests while being closeted, as well as the physical transformation many engage in when coming out. I worried that if I focused this research on the LGBTQ closet in general, I may conflate the "closet" for sexual minorities with the "closet" for gender minorities, erasing important differences between these experiences. Nevertheless, I hope that all members of the LGBTQ community find this research relatable and useful for their own purposes.

The Mental Health Consequences of the Closet

The helping professions have pursued ample research to understand the mental health consequences of anti-gay prejudice and discrimination upon sexual minorities. Men and women who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual demonstrate a greater prevalence of being diagnosed with a psychological disorder than the heterosexual population (Meyer, 2003). Depression, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders are diagnosed among people who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual 1.5 times more than their heterosexual counterparts (King et al., 2008). Sexual minorities demonstrate a higher rate of suicidal ideation and completion; gay men are twice as likely to commit suicide than heterosexual men, and gay and lesbian youth are 4 times more likely to report suicidal ideation and attempts than their heterosexual peers (Haas, Eliason, et al., 2011). Post-traumatic stress disorder is also prevalent among sexual minorities; people who reported any same-sex sexual partners throughout their lifetime had greater exposure to childhood maltreatment (physical abuse, neglect, or witness to domestic violence), interpersonal violence (being attacked, raped, kidnapped, stalked, or mugged), and witness to trauma/death of a loved one, than did heterosexuals who never experienced a same-sex partnership (Roberts, Austin, et al., 2010). The prevalence of psychiatric diagnoses among sexual minorities is often conceptualized through social psychologist and public health scholar Ilan Myers' (1995) *Minority Stress Theory,* which postulates that individuals who belong

to minority groups experience chronic stress from being relegated to disadvantaged positions in society and exposed to constant prejudice and discrimination (Meyer, 1995). This chronic psychological stress is multiplied among individuals with intersecting marginalized identities, such as lesbian black women who experience "multiple minority stress" on a regular basis (Bowleg et al., 2003).

Within homophobic contexts that actively oppress sexual minorities, it is understandable that many choose the safe reclusion of the closet. Yet the closet induces its own psychological violence. Sociologist Ervin Goffman (1963) wrote about the psychological dynamics of concealing a stigmatized identity. Stigma exists as a public ideology in which all members of a society shame a deviant characteristic that violates "normalcy." Those who deviate from "normalcy" are viewed as possessing "spoiled identities" that discredit them in the eyes of others (Goffman, 1963, in Budden 2009). Perceiving oneself to be stigmatized, abnormal, and "other" by society can trigger a painful "recognition of one's own inferior social status," leading to a loss of self-worth, self-esteem, moral integrity, and feelings of inadequacy, failure, and powerlessness" (Fessler, 1999; in Budden 2009, p. 1034). If the stigma is invisible, such as homosexuality, then people may utilize "perception-management" strategies to hide their "spoiled identity" and avoid feeling painfully discredited by others (Goffman, 1963, in Budden, 2009). Psychologist John Pachankis's research (2007) demonstrates how self-concealment strategies require considerable mental effort and induce chronic stress, as a person navigating everyday social encounters carefully decides what personal information to disclose or conceal to avoid revealing one's stigmatized status. The necessity to remain "on guard" while concealing one's identity can induce persistent fear regarding the possibility of being "found out" (Pachankis, 2007). The burden of 24/7 perception-management can take a toll on daily psychological functioning; people who self-conceal a stigmatized identity report greater relational turmoil, feelings of guilt and shame, and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Pachankis, 2015).

Researchers have also sought to understand the specific stigmatized experience of homosexuality, and the costs of self-concealment for sexual minorities' psychosocial well-being. In his book *Beyond the Closet*, Stephen Seidman (2004) interviewed 30 queer research participants of different races, classes, genders, and generations, exploring how the closet shapes the "psychological and social core of an individual's life" (Seidman, 2004, p. 29). His research revealed many psychosocial costs to being in the closet. Participants felt like they were concealing their "core self" from the people that matter most in life while closeted, including family, friends, spouses and children. Consequently, the closet imposed social isolation for them—not only blocking the opportunity to build community with other LGBTQ people, but also creating emotional distance with significant others. Participants also described a pattern of deception and duplicity which made them feel guilty, ashamed and fearful. Participants' guilt and shame was also caused from internalizing society's shaming messages about homosexuality. Their fear was caused by the threat of public disgrace, loss, and violence if they were "found out." Seidman concludes:

> To be in the closet, is, then, to suffer systematic harm—to lack basic rights and a spectrum of opportunities and social benefits; to be denied respect and a feeling of social belonging; and more than likely to forfeit the kinds of intimate companionship and love that make personal happiness possible. (Seidman, 2004, p. 30)

Similarly, in *Narrating the Closet, an Auto-ethnography of Same-Sex Attraction*, Tony Adams (2011) conducted narrative research about the psychological distress of being in the closet with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer individuals. Adams' described the closet as an experience which is lived in three temporal stages: entering the closet, living in the closet, and coming out of the closet. "Living in the closet" is a time when shame, denial, and self-hatred is felt most intensely for sexual minorities. This internalized homophobia might propel them to ridicule other sexual minorities and avoid socializing with them. The person may feel preoccupied with the risk of revealing their sexual orientation, and they may lie about seemingly trivial information in their lives that might somehow reveal their secret to others. This compulsion to hide and lie can end up "wreaking havoc" on relationships with

significant others, as well as relationship with themselves, because the deceitfulness exacerbates feelings of guilt and shame. This compulsion to hide may lead sexual minorities to isolation, avoidance, and estrangement from friends and family, as well as an "existential frustration" in which their life feels void of vitality and meaning (Adams, 2011).

Taking a more nuanced approach to the phenomenon of the closet, Beals et al. (2009) sought to understand being closeted in terms of a spectrum, with varying degrees of being "in" and "out" in everyday life. They measured the psychological effects of self-concealment vs. self-disclosure in daily social interactions among LGB-identified people who had previously come out to some people in their lives. On days when sexual minorities concealed their sexual orientation from others, they experienced decreased positive affect, self-esteem, and life satisfaction. Self-concealment was also correlated with decreased social support, less opportunities for emotional processing, and increased suppression (Beals et al., 2009). The authors explain that self-concealment is an obstacle to social support because it blocks access to meeting others in the LGBTQ community who could provide a sense of belonging and a respite from isolation. Furthermore, self-concealment obstructs the opportunity for emotional processing, whereby self-disclosure can help internal conflict about one's sexuality be processed and worked through. Finally, self-concealment corresponds with suppression of thoughts, which paradoxically leads to increased preoccupation of the thoughts that a person is trying to suppress. These intrusive thoughts can heighten stress for sexual minorities, yielding self-loathing and shame (Beals et al., 2009).

In an article entitled "The Schizoid Defense of the Closet through the Existential-Phenomenology of R.D. Laing," I (2015) wrote an existential-phenomenological interpretation of how the closet's oppression can drive some sexual minorities to a state of madness. I applied existential psychiatrist R.D. Laing's description of madness among schizoid persons in his book *The Divided Self,* to the maddening experience of being in the closet as a gay man, as described by various

memoirs. The descriptions of being closeted in these memoirs share similar trajectories as described by Laing about the psychological suffering of schizoid persons. As such, I applied his themes about schizoid persons to the experience of being in the closet as a gay man (Gupta, 2015). First, a closeted gay man may feel deprived of what Laing calls "basic ontological insecurity"—he may struggle to perceive himself to be real, whole, and worthy when the world fails to provide appropriate mirroring to recognize him as such. He may also experience "unembodiment as a basic orientation to life," splitting his sense of self from his spontaneous bodily self-expression, because his homosexual bodily feelings are prohibited by the world (Gupta, 2015). This mind-body split can lead him to "perform normalcy through a False Self"—for some gay closeted men, this may involve performing a homophobic "False Self" which precipitates shame and self-persecution. Meanwhile, his "True Self" may remain "shut up" inside the closet, deprived of real human contact with the world (Gupta, 2015). The closet's "shutupness" can shape an existence that feels devoid of love, meaning, and vitality—which can lead some people to go insane. Accordingly, my article suggests that some individuals' apparent display of madness may be symptomatic of the daily trauma of trying to survive oppressive sociopolitical contexts which persecute their true selves. Therefore, it is imperative for psychologists to contextualize clinical symptoms within a sociopolitical context, "to question mainstream assumptions about clinical diagnoses and to consider reframing individual psychopathology as social pathology" (Gupta, 2015).

Ultimately, prior studies demonstrate the closet to be an oppressive sociopolitical phenomenon with vast psychological repercussions. By concealing one's stigmatized sexual orientation from others to protect against social harm, sexual minorities are psychological harmed by isolation, shame, guilt, fear, intrusive thoughts, loss of meaning, loss of vitality, and a sense of inner deadness.

The Closet as Individual and Collective Trauma

This dissertation also asks the question: can the closet be considered a trauma, clinically speaking? The field of clinical psychology has a long-standing debate about which life experiences qualify as traumatic stressors. The Fifth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) specifies that the traumatic stressor for PTSD must be direct, witnessed, or vicarious exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence (APA, 2013). Some psychologists criticize this definition as too limiting and not accounting for many people's subjective experiences of trauma that do not include explicit physical violence but are still experienced as life-threatening (Hooff, McFarlane, et al., 2009). A more inclusive framework is offered by Francine Shapiro, who identified two types of traumas: "big T" and "little t" traumas. "Big T" traumas constitute overtly threatening events to one's life and bodily integrity. "Little t" traumas describe insidious forms of violence that accumulate over time to yield traumatic symptomatology (Shapiro, 1995). "Little t" traumas include structural violence, wherein "oppressed people are routinely worn down by the insidious trauma of living day after day in a sexist, racist, classist, homophobic, and ableist society" (Burstow, 2003, p. 1296). Aside from the "big T" traumas caused by overt abuse, assault, and hate crimes, sexual minorities are frequently victimized by "little t" traumas caused by being assaulted by sociocultural homophobic messages on a regular basis.

To elaborate upon the "little t" trauma inflicted on sexual minorities, I refer to Ashwin Budden's (2009) model of traumatic shame. Budden states that "shame events" are traumatic stressors that can lead to PTSD symptoms. He conceptualizes PTSD through a social lens of disordered human relations, where people experience a threat to their social self rather than physical self. Since human beings are primarily social animals who rely on communal bonds for survival, events that cause injury to the social self can be feel so life-threatening that they induce PTSD. Budden describes shame as the "quintessential social emotion underlying social threat" Budden,

2009, p. 1033). He defines shame as a "painful self-consciousness or anxiety about negative judgment, unwanted exposure, inferiority, failure, and defeat" (Budden, 2009, p. 1033). Shame occurs when a person perceives their self as rejected from an external critical audience. This rejection becomes internalized as self-criticism, and the shamed person views themselves as inferior, inadequate, defective, worthless, or bad. Shame can manifest as humiliation, a feeling that can be so acute that it "damages the soul of the person, his or her most cherished and inner sense of identity and humanity" (Wilson, 2006; as cited in Budden, 2009, p. 1034). A shame event signals a fight-or-flight response in human beings, triggering a desperate need to protect oneself. After being shamed, people often withdraw from social interactions to prevent further exposure and self-annihilation. Since shame can produce overwhelming agony, people can become hypervigilant about hiding devalued aspects of their self, and scan their social interactions for signs of rejection. The affect of shame can be so intense that it floods consciousness and precipitates dissociation—splitting off aspects of the self that are socially devalued. People may avoid future shame events by utter isolation, and sometimes by suicide. Therefore, shame events can lead to a "social death" or "death of self" (Gilligan, 2003; in Budden, 2009, p. 1036). Conclusively, shame events can yield PTSD symptoms such as terror, helplessness and horror, hypervigilance, emotional numbing and dissociation, stimulus avoidance, and suicidality.

Budden situates shame within a sociocultural context. He states that the demand to conform to society's ideas of "normalcy" is a major factor in inducing traumatic shame. When a person's social self does not conform to the dominant culture's ideas of normalcy, they are viciously subjugated by the dominant powers-that-be, who reinforce collective guidelines about what kinds of selves are socially acceptable. Budden pinpoints stigma as the leading culprit for traumatic shame, describing stigma as a form of social control that subjugates any violation of societal "normalcy:"

> Stigma is rooted in collective processes of shaming, social control, and maintenance of in-group boundaries…stigma evokes humiliation and embarrassment over one's broken state

> and can hinder attempts to find assistance or to maintain important bonds of social support. Stigma also silences actors in their attempt to voice distress and identify sources of trauma. (Budden, 2009, p. 1037)

This collective shaming can be traumatizing for stigmatized individuals, who becomes oppressed into silence as a means of survival.

Budden's theory of trauma applies to sexual minorities in homophobic societies, where shame events are frequent. In their book *Coming out of Shame*, affect psychologists Gershon Kaufman and Lev Raphael (1996) claim that shame is inherent to being a sexual minority in our society. They explain:

> To be sick, to be unnatural, to be judged evil—these are beyond question shameful. Herein lies one of the deepest sources of the equation that being gay or lesbian *equals* being shameful… Examining the lesbian/gay experience inevitably brings us face to face with shame because that experience has been inexorably infused with shame across cultures and centuries. (Kaufman & Raphael, 1996, p. 6)

Sexual minorities in homophobic environments may internalize the belief of a fundamentally flawed self in childhood. Kaufman and Raphael state that "we learn from what we are shown" (Kaufman & Raphael, 1996, p. 88). In homophobic societies, a child experiencing same-sex attraction does not see a mirror for their budding self in the neighborhood or media. Culture is dominated by representations of heterosexuality which confirm it as the gold and only standard, and which render homosexuality invisible. Accordingly, children with same-sex sexual feelings may feel alien, inferior, and invisible. As they become acquainted with the norms of heterosexist societies, the feeling of being invisible may solidify into a necessity to be invisible, as they realize their sexual orientation is scorned by others. By adolescence, they may have witnessed contempt, ridicule, and violence directed towards other sexual minorities, or received such derogation themselves. These instances can be considered traumatic shame events, which are stored in memory the same way that memories of abuse are stored (Matos et al., 2010). Psychologist Susan Gair (2014) writes that experiences of non-mirroring and stigmatization by one's own community are "psychic assaults" that lead to "silent

traumatization" among gay and lesbian people (Gair, 2014, p. 45). She writes that "our core selves do not fit our families' or society's teachings, and are devalued, entirely unmirrored, and invisible. This fosters such a deep and intense shame, and traumatizes the self" (Gair, 2014, p. 46).

The inevitable defense against such trauma is to keep hiding. For self-protection and survival, sexual minorities may continue to render themselves invisible, inferior, and silent, thereby burying themselves deeper inside the closet. Yet hiding one's sexual orientation from the family or community can further perpetuate the notion that one is bad and wrong, as sexual minorities blames themselves without discerning that society is to blame for forcing them into hiding and silence (Gair, 2014, p. 46). According to Kaufman and Raphael, silence is an insidious weapon used by society to traumatize LGBTQ individuals:

> The tyranny of silence has been the special form of societal oppression directed at gay men and lesbians, just as segregation and apartheid have been forms of societal oppression targeted at other groups. Silence utilizes shame on a broad scale to keep a group of people hidden—prisoners within their own society. Shame is that powerful a weapon: it can have devastating impact on an entire group of people. (Kaufman & Raphael, 1996, p. 104)

This description coincides with psychologist Judith Herman's (1992) theory of trauma as "inherently a political enterprise" (Herman, 1992, p. 235). In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman defines trauma as any threatening event that overwhelms a person's capacities for adaptation, rendering them powerless, helpless, and terrified. Trauma is ubiquitous in our society because traumatizing societies make it so—sociopolitical forces continue to inflict systematic violence upon citizens, particularly members of marginalized minority groups. Since trauma is inherently political, then "only an ongoing connection with a global political movement for human rights could ultimately sustain our ability to speak about unspeakable things" (Herman, 1992, p. 237). Herman alludes to human rights violations such as rape culture unto women and girls, or institutionalized racism that murders and imprisons innocent African-American citizens. The same applies for institutionalized homophobia and transphobia taking queer lives every day. These systematic human

rights violations can traumatize entire communities of people: "in the aftermath of systematic political violence, entire communities can display symptoms of PTSD, trapped in alternating cycles of numbing and intrusion, silence and reenactment" (Herman, 1992, p. 241). As such, Herman states that the therapeutic work of trauma recovery must not only occur with individuals survivors, but with masses of people on the macro level, in public forums where collective testimony, remembrance and mourning can unfold.

In this sense, the closet can also be considered a collective trauma. According to liberation psychologists (Watkins & Shulman, 2008), collective trauma refers to calamities that affect entire cultures of people, creating traumatic symptoms among the collective. Sociologist Kai Erikson (1976) describes collective trauma as follows:

> By collective trauma… I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of the suddenness normally associated with 'trauma'. But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared… 'We' no longer exist as a connected pair of as linked cells in a larger communal body. (Erikson, 1976, p. 153)

In other words, collective traumas lead to a fracturing of social ties, replacing intimate tribal bonds with alienation and mistrust across the society. Collective traumas that are untreated can trickle down the generations, creating future societies steeped in cycle of violence and traumatic symptomatology (Watkins & Shuman, 2008). Unprocessed collective traumas become "embedded in the cultural memory of a people and passed on by the same mechanisms by which culture is generally transmitted, and therefore becomes 'normalised' within that culture" (Atkinson et al., 2010, p. 138). This normalization is evident if we consider how the closet's trauma manifests in the collective psyche of heteronormative societies as a whole. The closet perpetuates shame-based societies in which citizens feel terrified to express their unique selves and deviate from the "mainstream norm," and in which citizens live with daily hypervigilance about the possibility of

being victimized for being different. Kenji Yoshini (2006) states that the "coercive conformity" inherent to our society is a hidden assault against the civil rights of all citizens—the right for authenticity instead of assimilation. As such, Yoshino claims that the LGBT social movement applies to all citizens' basic right to express ourselves beyond enforced social norms: "This quest for authenticity is universal... the gay story becomes a story about us all—the story of the uncovered self" (Yoshino, 2006, p. 27).

This dissertation uses existential-phenomenological research to gain deeper understanding of how the collective trauma of the closet is experientially lived among sexual minorities. It seeks to aesthetically evoke the trauma of being rendered silent, invisible, and shameful by society. While my main agenda is to illuminate the trauma inflicted upon sexual minorities, I hope my research might also initiate questions about how shame-based societies enforce traumatizing social norms that punish the diversity of their citizens in general.

Chapter 3: Harnessing the Arts for Healing and Justice

The soul of the world makes its aesthetic claim upon us, and we are called into its service, called to shape its sounds into music, its colors into painting, its rhythms into poems, and through our own sufferings to hear its anguished cries. (Romanyshyn, 2002, p. 131)

Liberation Psychology and Emancipatory Art

This dissertation seeks to raise critical consciousness of the trauma of the closet using the artistic modality of filmmaking. In pursuing this agenda, I refer again to the theory of liberation psychology. Liberation psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró (1994) urged psychologists to work explicitly to meet the needs of oppressed citizens and heal collective traumas. One task of liberation psychology is to combat the "cultures of silence" that censor truths about societal oppression. Cultures of silence sustain a widespread fog of amnesia regarding the societal oppression that all citizens participate in, whether as victims, bystanders or perpetrators (Freire, 1968; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Such denial upholds the status quo of injustice and inequality in society. Liberation psychologists Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman elaborate that society maintains amnesia and denial through an "amputation of seeing," by which truths about oppression are rendered invisible to maintain the status quo. Traumas which remain silenced manifest as psychological symptoms among individuals and entire communities. As such, transforming oppression involves regaining the ability to bear witness to, mourn, and make meaning of collective traumas. Paulo Freire (1964) declared that this process can only occur through *conscientização*—by citizens gaining critical consciousness about the truths about oppression, and awakening the consciousness of others across society.

One method that liberation psychologists use to facilitate *conscientização* is emancipatory art. Art can empower oppressed communities to speak their truths and make collective traumas become visible, thereby reversing the "amputation of seeing" that keeps oppression intact (Felman, 1992; in Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 51). For example, Watkins and Shulman describe how the Nazis enacted an "erasure of witness" to their atrocities against Jews, attempting to destroy physical evidence of genocide and fracture people's psychic access to the truth (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 51). By erasing evidence and silencing speech, Holocaust victims and bystanders suffered

fragmented consciousness and confusing gaps in memory that prevented them from bearing witness to the tragic truth of genocide. Traumas that remain silenced and invisible haunt trauma survivors through symptomatology, such as:

> The fragmentation of memory, the creation of aporias or "black holes" in the narrative of the self and the world that cannot be filled. With the loss of narrative, time is distorted, and shards of the traumatic event repeat themselves again and again in psychological life as a return of the repressed. These fragments, which might be physical symptoms or tensions, nightmares, hallucinations, or recurring images of events or things, haunt survivors, who live in a state of imperfect amnesia. They may become cut off from others in their inability to speak about what has affected them so deeply. Yet they cannot let go of symptoms because they may be the only memorials to the traumatic event. (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 236)

Healing from this trauma involves regaining the ability to speak, witness, mourn, and process these silenced experiences. Art makes the invisible become visible, which can help heal symptoms of dissociation and repression that impede individual and collective psychological health. Art, then, is an act of memorial-making and un-forgetting (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Art creates a tangible memorial which declares the truth of an injustice inflicted upon an individual and community. By making the invisible become visible through visual art, the images and sensory memories that haunt trauma survivors through nightmares and flashbacks become externalized and concretized. While many mental health professionals believe the goal of psychological healing is to erase traumatic symptomology, liberation psychologists perceive symptoms as "self-created communicative actions intended to build a lasting monument once and for all to one's experience of suffering" (Shabad, 2001, in Watkins & Shulman, p. 54)). Traumatic symptoms are "memorializing experiences" that are forced to remain hidden, yet are yearning to be seen and understood (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 54). Medicating people's symptoms may further oppress disenfranchised individuals and communities, because it silences important meanings of injustice which are longing to give testimony (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Art can honor and release the messages of injustice imbedded within a trauma survivor's symptoms. Art grants the haunting shards of imagery and sensation the opportunity for emotional-processing and meaning-making. Afterwards, trauma

survivors may experience renewed vitality in everyday living, whereby the truths of their trauma have been attended to, commemorated, and communicated with the wider world.

Trauma theorist Judith Herman (1992) states that trauma survivors also experience healing when others bear witness to the injustice inflicted upon them. Bearing witness is a psychotherapist's main task in trauma work: "The therapist is called upon to bear witness to a crime. She must affirm a position of solidarity with the victim… an understanding of the fundamental injustice of the traumatic experience and the need for a resolution that restores some sense of justice" (Herman, 1992, p. 135). Feeling seen and heard in the depths of one's suffering—feeling like someone else is similarly outraged by the injustice—can lighten the burden carried by the trauma survivor alone, leading to symptom relief. Watkins and Shulman describe clinical symptoms as "a tunnel that connects the outside to the inside," whereby the messages of the trauma resounding in a survivor's inner world are presented to others in the outer world as symptoms (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 79). Others who are open to receiving the messages imbedded in the trauma survivor's symptoms transform from "passive bystanders" to "engaged witnesses" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 76). It is essential that everyday citizens become engaged witnesses for collective traumas to heal, because public witness can disrupt social amnesia: "it is only from such witness and the actions that arise from it that the dissociations within individuals, as well as between self and other, on the levels of family and community, can be mended" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 79). Art helps traumatic injustices achieve public witness, because art can actually be seen and witnessed. Art is also easily spreadable across culture, inviting public witness from the wider society. Art, then, has the power to facilitate healing across culture as a whole. Watkins and Shulman discuss emancipatory art projects that are showcased at national and international levels to educate the public and build solidarity. In these public forums, art reverses the "amputation of seeing" in society by refusing to stay silent and daring to disturb dominant cultural narratives.

Watkins and Shulman praise film as a well-suited vehicle for facilitating public witness about collective traumas. They commended films which avoid producing a coherent, linear narrative of trauma, and instead behave as a "bodily witness" to the fractured, incoherent consciousness of trauma. For instance, *Shoah* (1985) is a nine-hour film about the Holocaust, which was edited to include long stretches of silence to evoke gaps in memory, as well as shards of sensory memory strung together through montages of image, sound, movement, and texture. The filmmaker wanted to "faithfully transmit the fragmenting and unintelligible character of this history as it was lived" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 123). Watkins and Shulman state that filmmakers and psychoanalysts share a similar process while bearing witness to trauma, for both are "stranded among concrete fragments of detail from the memories being offered" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 123). Films like *Shoah* can express collective traumas in a manner that can facilitate *conscientização* about the psychological consequences of sociopolitical atrocities.

Watkins and Shulman also describe emancipatory projects which invite community members to make their own art, because trauma healing also occurs through the *process* of art-making. For instance, they describe emancipatory filmmaking projects which invite community members to participate in every aspect of film production to ensure the final film expressed their authentic voices. If the art-making is not participatory, then the artist cannot claim their art to represent the "voice" of the oppressed. Rather, the artwork reflects their distinct interpretation of other people's experiences of oppression (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). My project exists in between these two polarities. I produced a film for which community members contributed aesthetic descriptions of the closet, which inspired the film's artistic content. However, for pragmatic reasons, as well as to stay faithful to existential-phenomenological research, I did the actual filmmaking myself. In the discussion chapter, I discuss the possibilities and limitations of collaboration in this approach.

Ultimately, examined through the lens of liberation psychology, "the closet" is an oppressive experience created by cultures of silence, which further perpetuates cultures of silence. The trauma of the closet is rendered silent and invisible, forcing many people to suffer in isolation and dissociation. Homophobic societies create a cloak of social amnesia surrounding the experience of being closeted, forcing it into the shadows of public consciousness to maintain the status quo. My dissertation offers emancipatory artwork in the form of a short film to disrupt social amnesia and facilitate *conscientização*. I hope this film reverses the "amputation of seeing" that renders the trauma of the closet silent and invisible in our society. This film acts as "a tunnel from the inside to the outside," granting visibility to the traumatic symptoms of the closet and communicating these symptoms' important messages with the public. I hope this film propels catharsis and commemoration for sexual minorities whose traumatic symptoms have yet to be honored. This film may also garner LGBTQ solidarity among the general public, transforming passive bystanders into engaged witnesses.

It is important to note that I wish to position this project within a rich lineage of the queer community harnessing the creative arts for liberation and self-expression. Since the rise of modern art in the early 20th century, the creative arts have offered an outlet for queer people to express themselves in uncensored ways that counter the status quo: "modernism attempted to throw off traditional attitudes about both art and life—exploring new ways to paint, sculpt, compose, or write in order to create new ways to look at and think about the world" (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005, p. 26). LGBTQ people have discovered a safe haven in artist communities, within which critical thinking, unconventionality, experimentation, open-mindedness, and activism have flourished (Benshoff, 2005). Art is an essential vehicle for freedom among LGBTQ people. As such, I undertake this dissertation with admiration for, and in honor of, the life-saving legacy of the LGBTQ arts tradition.

Depth Psychology's Perspectives of Image and Art

My dissertation also exists within the crossroads of an epistemological question that emerges repeatedly throughout the history of psychology: *is psychology an art or a science?* In the West, there is strong will to situate psychology firmly as a "natural science." Many clinical psychologists have adopted the scientific method so that the "truths" they offer through research, and the clinical work they do, is considered empirically valid and objectively factual. Our field increasingly promotes quantitative methods, neuroscientific research, cognitive behavioral therapy, and psychiatric treatment. Yet what these natural science approaches to psychology risk losing contact with is the *human soul* (Stamper, 1994).

Depth psychologists Carl Jung (1955), James Hillman (1975) and Evangelos Christou (2007) argue that psychology is, essentially, a study of the soul. The soul, otherwise known as psyche, constitutes the "psychological seat" of human beings (Christou, 2007; in Stamper, 1994). The soul contains our innermost feelings, memories, and fantasies, as well as our spirit and ways of making meaning (Christou, 2007; in Stamper, 1994). The soul is also deeply subjective and many of its layers reside in the unconscious, which cannot be accessed by natural science methods of psychology alone (Stamper, 1994). As such, depth psychologists assert that psychology requires tools which can access and express the soul's unconscious depths in a manner that CBT workbooks and MRI scans cannot accomplish.

Art is an ideal tool for the soul-work of psychology, and doing psychology in a soulful way is an artform. Carl Jung claimed that the soul expresses itself mainly through images: "It is as if we did not know, or else continually forgot, that everything of which we are conscious is an image, and that image is psyche" (Jung, 1967; in Wojtkowski, 2009, p. 2). Jung noticed this insight amidst his personal art-making endeavors. He crafted intricate paintings which he perceived as expressions of his unconscious and revelations of his psyche. Jung's own artwork, arising from his personal process

of making the unconscious conscious, has been published in the past decade as the widely acclaimed *The Red Book*, a journal of his paintings and musings (Jung, 2009). The revelations Jung achieved while making his art ultimately shaped his theoretical contributions to the field of psychology (Wojtkowski, 2009). While reflecting upon his drive to make art as a psychologist, Jung wrote: "I once asked myself, 'What am I really doing? Certainly this has nothing to do with science. But then what is it?' Whereupon a voice within me said, 'It is art.'" (Jung, 1961, p. 185). Jung encouraged his patients to make visual art in sessions to express the images of their psyche. He explained that "the effort to give visible form to the [psyche's] image enforces a study of it in all its parts, so that in this way its effects can be completely experienced" (Jung, 1966; in Rubin, 2001, p. 82).

Jung's insights have birthed the profession of art therapy. Art therapy is founded on the premise that the visual arts can access rich, symbolic images of the psyche. As such, art can capture a deeper expression of the unconscious than talk therapy alone can (Edwards, 2014). Art therapy also posits that some human experiences cannot be communicated through words, because some experiences are beyond words. Grief, trauma, or depression may require another language to fully express its depths than verbal communication alone. (Edwards, 2014). Moreover, some human experiences are so primal and rooted in infancy that they cannot be captured by verbal language at all. Art therapy allows clients to probe into depths of the unconscious that rational thought cannot reach. It offers tools to communicate these psychological experiences through visual expression and symbolism rather than words: "It is here that art therapy offers a way of overcoming the frustration, terror and isolation such experiences may engender, by providing an alternative medium for expression and communication through which feelings might be conveyed and understood" (Edwards, 2014, p. 6). Art therapy not only offers alternative forms of expression, but the process of creating art itself can be healing. While making art, a person can develop greater insight into their life's hardships, and also reconstruct the meanings they have attached to those hardships. As art

therapist Shaun McNiff attested: "The act of placing a troublesome experience or thought into a creative space that we have made, literally changes its place within our lives. The artistic act will often have a corresponding effect on our overall relationship with the disturbance" (McNiff, 1998, "Reframing," para. 27). As such, art therapy can spur creative catharsis in its ability to transform suffering into concrete works of art.

Even if psychologists do not help patients make visual art in sessions, some argue that the clinical psychologist is still, essentially, an artist. Jungian phenomenologist Robert Romanyshyn (2002) writes that psychologists should approach human suffering through the aesthetic sensibility of a poet. A poet strives not to make sense of the world, but rather to *sense* the world. This means that the psychologist-as-poet is beckoned to bear witness to human suffering by attuning to its aesthetic, sensorial, and imaginal dimensions: "the poet's aesthetic sensibility makes him or her a witness who listens to the world's depths, to those depths where what has been forgotten, marginalized, or otherwise neglected, makes its appeal for his or her voice" (Romanyshyn, 2002, p. 128). The psychologist's task is then to be responsive—to creatively voice the depths of the world's suffering: "The soul of the world makes its aesthetic claim upon us, and we are called into its service, called to shape its sounds into music, its colors **into** painting, its rhythms into poems, and through our own sufferings to hear its anguished cries" (Romanyshyn, 2002, p. 131). Psychologists are called upon to sense, imagine, and reflect poetic images imbedded within human beings' suffering souls.

Romanyshyn states that these poetic images reflect not solely one specific individual's psyche, but the collective unconscious, the "Soul of the world," the depths of our shared humanity. In this sense, art is not only a form of individual psychology, but also of sociocultural psychology. Art can express the collective unconscious of all citizens, helping us gain consciousness of how we are collectively wounded by society. Therefore, for this dissertation, I produced an artistic short film that aimed to express the sensorial images imbedded in the psyche of closeted sexual minorities, as

described by research participants. Though my participants did not make their own art for this project, I hoped their aesthetic contributions to the film instigated healing, meaning-making and catharsis. Moreover, perhaps the images in my film will not only resonate with sexual minorities, but with all citizens who have felt the trappings of the closet as an archetypal image caused by coercive conformity. This may propel them to join in solidarity to resist the LGBTQ sociopolitical oppression that constructs the closet in the first place.

Arts-Based Research for Social Justice

This dissertation also situates itself as a form of arts-based research. Arts-based research is an innovative method of knowledge-production and dissemination at the intersection between academia and the lay-community (Leavy, 2015). It is used as an umbrella term to describe any academic research that incorporates the arts in any phase, be it data collection, analysis, interpretation, or representation (Leavy, 2015). The art modality is limited only by the researcher's imagination, and can include drawing, painting, theatrical performance, music, dance, literary writing, film, digital storytelling, and other mediums (Leavy, 2015). Similar to art therapy, arts-based research utilizes expressive art to "transcend the limits of language and call forth what cannot be articulated. The aim is to foster insight and non-discursive understanding, and to reveal 'what someone can feel' about some aspect of life" (Barone and Eisner, 2012; in Bruce et al, 2013, p. 24). As such, intertwining art with research can foster the discovery of new, nuanced, subtle, intuitive, and felt perspectives about a research topic—a different kind of knowledge than conventional scientific research can convey.

Arts-based researchers typically use visual imagery as a non-discursive route to knowledge-production, because image can "capture the ineffable, the hard-to-put-into-words" (Weber, 2008, p. 44). Additionally, visual images can convey multiple meanings that are open to interpretation, rather

than reducing a subject matter into a singular, objective "truth" (Leavy, 2015). This aligns with the human science approach to research, which investigates human experience in a manner that demonstrates its complexities and nuances. The possibility for multiple, complex interpretations also makes visual art an appropriate medium for research about marginalized communities, since conventional scientific research often claims singular, objective "truths" about a population that can actually perpetuate that community's oppression. Moreover, visual art can transmit meaning to viewers in a direct, immediate, and evocative way. Images are processed "in the subconscious without the same interpretive processes used when confronted with a written text" (Leavy, 2015, p. 225). The *immediacy* of visual communication allows images to rapidly influence viewers' perceptions about a topic (Leavy, 2015). This is apparent when we consider the ubiquity of images in culture today, such as advertisements, pornography, social media photo-sharing. These images constantly shaping our perception of ourselves, others, and our world, for better or for worst. Arts-based researchers can harness the cultural power of the image to subvert viewers' pre-existing perceptions and offer fresh, complex, unique insights about the world: "visual art may serve as a vehicle for transmitting ideology while it can as effectively be used to challenge, dislodge, and transform outdated beliefs and stereotypes" (Leavy, 2015, p. 225).

Since arts-based research can subvert and re-shape cultural perceptions, it is an excellent vehicle for social justice activism. This is particularly true if the research focuses on experiences of marginalized minorities who are misrepresented and stereotyped by popular media. In her book *Collaborative Arts-Based Research for Social Justice*, Victoria Foster (2015) discusses how arts-based research can produce "alternative stories" in collaboration with marginalized community members, in order to rupture oppressive media narratives. She describes a project called "Behind Closed Doors," where researchers collaborated with participants to produce a digital story that addressed the stigma and silencing which people with psychiatric disabilities experience in an ableist society

(Eisenhouer, 2012; in Foster, 2015). This digital story also addressed issues of representation about people with mental illness in popular media. Foster describes this project as "a kind of defiant speech, a form of talking back, when dominant discourses and the resulting stigmatization teach us to be silent" (Foster, 2015, p. 48). Thus, arts-based research can help empower marginalized minorities to fight against stereotypical, reductive media representations which perpetuate stigma against them. Researchers and community members can collaboratively produce artwork that disrupts the status quo and conveys more complex, nuanced representations of their experiences, issues and identities. The goal for this kind of research is to "understand learning not as 'affirming what we already know' but rather as 'something that disrupts our commonsense view of the world.' Thus are 'common sense' understandings revealed as cultural myths" (Kumisharo, 2002, in Foster, 2015, p. 52).

Some arts-based researchers with social justice aims seek to "popularize" their academic research and make it accessible to the public (Leavy, 2015; Jones, 2012). Popularizing research enables academics to participate in social justice advocacy, build community engagement, and watch their messages extend to a wider audience than academic journals would allow (Vannini, 2012). For instance, Patricia Leavy (2015) conducted qualitative research to understand adolescent girls' struggles with eating disorders. She disseminated her research in the format of a young adult novel called *Low-Fat Love,* for which she constructed relatable fictional characters to communicate her data (Leavy, 2015). By representing her research using teen fiction, Leavy introduced a feminist viewpoint to adolescent girls struggling with body image. Leavy has collaborated with UK-based researcher Kip Jones to pioneer a genre of arts-based research called *performative social science research* (PSS) which spreads qualitative research to the public through the media arts, including literature, theatre, and film. Kip Jones (2013) produced a short film called "Rufus Stone," to disseminate his narrative research about the development of gay identity throughout a lifetime. He interviewed

elderly participants about their gay identity throughout childhood, adolescence and adulthood. He then constructed a fictional character named Rufus Jones who consists of an amalgamation of participants' life narratives. Jones worked with a filmmaker to produce a narrative film that shares the life story of Rufus Jones. The short film follows Rufus, an elderly gay man, who returns to his childhood home in the rural countryside to confront painful childhood memories of rejection for being gay. The film's scenes are based on actual memories of being gay described by research participants during interviews. The film had multiple film screenings and is available online for the public. Jones' agenda for *performative social science research* is to harness research as a catalyst for social change. He reflects on the 21st century research landscape:

> Funders now want to know the benefits to society of our research and how it might affect society–substantially. *Performative Social Science* is a synthesis that provides solutions to many of these very requirements. Part of "doing" PSS is the breaking down of the old boundaries and previous expectations such as what research is supposed to resemble after it is "finished." Employing techniques from the Arts and Humanities, opportunities are presented to work in traditional Social Science arenas and expand the means of production and dissemination to novel and creative levels.… *Performative Social Science,* or a fusion of the arts and sciences, are central to both community engagements and as catalysts for change. (Jones, 2012, p. 6)

For my dissertation, I too produced a short film that focuses on LGBTQ issues as its key area for social change. Aligned with the aspirations for *performative social science research*, I "popularized" my research by creating a film that can be distributed across mainstream culture, in efforts to build public solidarity towards LGBTQ oppression and offer hope for sexual minorities who are in the closet. I tried to ensure that my film avoided reproducing stereotypical, conventional representations of closeted sexual minorities. Rather, I collaborated with participants to identify and illuminate the ambiguous, complex, nuanced experience of being in the closet. By expressing participants' unique images of the closet, I hope this film can disrupt the "commonsense view" of the closet as described by popular culture, and offer new understandings beyond these cultural myths.

Aside from influencing the mainstream public, I hope my arts-based approach to this project also influences fellow academics and phenomenological researchers. I hope this project inspires other phenomenological researchers to "popularize" their research—be it through art or another format—because popularizing phenomenological research has great potential to instigate social change. Research participants' lived experiences are imbedded with enormous power to alleviate isolation, to inspire empathy and compassion, to break down social barriers and stereotypical representations, and to initiate dialogue about silenced human phenomena. By disseminating our research in a manner that resonates with the general public, phenomenological researchers can not only contribute new knowledge to the social sciences, but also create lasting ripples across the sociopolitical landscape.

Film as a Tool for Liberation and Oppression

In making a film about the lived experience of the closet, it is important to position this project within the history of queer cinema in U.S. Reviewing how sexual minorities have been historically represented in cinema is important as a filmmaker and activist, because "films are cultural artifacts that are intricately connected to our understanding of gender, sexuality, history, and identity" (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005, p. xii). Thus citizens' attitudes towards LGBTQ experience are significantly shaped by the movies. Cinema has perpetuated oppressive stereotypes about LGBTQ people, as much as it has granted the queer community visibility to "come out of the closet" at a national level.

In his book *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*, Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (2005) state that Hollywood was considered a business industry in the early 1900s, which was not provided First Amendment protection by the U.S. Supreme Court. Hollywood was regulated by the 1934 "Production Code," which forbade films in the United States from

demonstrating so-called "sexual perversion" of any kind, including homosexuality (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005). As such, until the 1960s no Hollywood films showed same-sex attraction or couplings, and were instead dominated by heterosexual representations of relationship. Even so, filmmakers found implicit ways to hint that characters onscreen were gay or lesbian by applying stereotypical attributes to that character. Male characters who demonstrated "effeminate," "pansy" or "sissy" attributes were understood to be gay, and female characters who presented as "mannish" were read as lesbian (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005). Thus the popular films of that era did show that gay and lesbian people exist in our society, despite the government's attempts to keep them closeted. Nevertheless, these films portrayed sexual identity as inevitably intertwined with gender nonconformity, perpetuating the stereotypical notion that all gay men were effeminate and not "real men," and all lesbian women were masculine and not "real women." The queer characters in early Hollywood movies were also often positioned as the comical laughing stocks of the films, thereby encouraging the ridiculing of LGBTQ people on and off-screen (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005). Hollywood filmmakers also portrayed queer characters to be villains, enemies, or criminals. Gay and lesbian characters were Nazi spies, serial killers, or deranged psychopaths in films, thereby spreading the oppressive notion that queer people were sick, perverted, and criminal—a danger to society (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005). Thus, societal tropes about homosexuality were perpetuated by the movies, and the movies helped sustain oppressive societal assumptions about homosexuality.

After World War II, queer people began voicing dissatisfaction with heterosexual people making films that portrayed their identities as ridiculous, dangerous, and deviant (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005). Protesting queer representations in Hollywood paralleled a greater, nationwide, civil rights protest occurring among people of color, women, and LGBTQ people. As various civil rights movements were unfolding in the 1960s, the Production Code regulations for Hollywood were amended. This allowed Hollywood filmmakers to overtly address their characters as gay or lesbian,

allowing them to officially "come out of the closet." Yet the "pansy" or "deviant" stereotypes about queer people persisted in Hollywood movies (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005). Thankfully, during this decade, the burgeoning LGBTQ rights movement allowed queer people to begin finding one another and building communities of resistance. Part of this resistance entailed queer people creating their own films which conveyed "alternate images" of LGBTQ life, countering the images produced by Hollywood. It should be noted that, even before the 60s, queer people were creating underground "fringe films" to express sexuality in a way that was censored by U.S. law. These films took the form of counter-culture, avante-garde, experimental cinematography which defied traditional narrative structures produced by Hollywood (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005). These films were marginalized and censored from public viewership, instead screened in underground cinema venues. By the 1960s, however, Hollywood's monopoly of the cinema industry decreased as queer, independent, avant-garde films began to grow in proliferation, popularity and viewership. (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005).

By the 1970s, amidst the throes of the gay liberation movement, LGBTQ people began building a media counterculture in which they documented their own lives for public viewership (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005). This self-documentation represented a kind of "coming out" that paralleled the cry to come out of the closet spurred by the 1970s gay rights movement. Benshoff and Griffin explain about these films:

> The felt need for media representation of queer lives was acute, and rather than wait for Hollywood to mend its ways, queer people began to produce their own films in unprecedented numbers… The aim of these films was multiple. They were meant to unearth historic queer communities that had been formerly overlooked and through the process help define and solidify the struggle of contemporary queers. These documentaries also demonstrated that gay and lesbian people were indeed everywhere, in every walk of life. As such, they were cinematic extension of the coming-out strategy. (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005, p. 136)

During this time, gay male filmmakers produced narrative films that utilized Hollywood conventions to express their own lives, and lesbian filmmakers produced avant-garde feminist films that thwarted

patriarchy and the male-gaze. In the 1970s, queer people began embracing the genre of documentary filmmaking to produce realistic, autobiographical accounts of their lives. For instance, the 1977 documentary *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* was groundbreaking because it was the first film to allow "a broad cross section of actual gay and lesbian Americans to speak for themselves" (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005, p. 150). In the film, gay and lesbian citizens discuss how societal norms, psychiatry, and the criminal justice system have "brutalized" them, including enduring shock treatment and castration, being incarcerated and beaten by police, and being shamed into believing they are sinful by religious communities and families. While this documentary enabled LGBTQ citizens to voice powerful social commentary about sociopolitical oppression, other queer documentary filmmakers created memoir-like films that offered an intimate glimpse into their life. For instance, in 2003 Jonathon Caouette released his film *Tarnation,* which consisted of 20-years of home-video footage edited into an experimental, autobiographical, "confessional" documentary that chronicles his life growing up gay within an intolerant community and chaotic family system. *Tarnation* offers a profound window into Caoucette's soul as a human being and gay man amidst challenging life circumstances and a fractured society. It is a journey of "becoming" that follows him out of his painful family and sociocultural environment into his more liberated life as a gay man in New York. Caouette said he made the film for personal and cathartic purposes: "I was able to delve into subject matter that was, and still is, candy-coated and often has a big taboo surrounding it… There was definitely a sense of catharsis about putting this story out there and doing it for the sake of myself and my mother" (Caouette, in Weston 2014). Yet he expressed delight that the film was embraced by so many viewers and provided emotional catharsis for them too (Weston, 2014).

From the 1970s into the 21st century, queer filmmaking has been increasingly utilized by independent and Hollywood filmmakers alike, and queer and heterosexual filmmakers alike, as a tool for LGBTQ activism and healing. In the 1980s, activists harnessed cinema as a vehicle to chronicle

the AIDS crisis and corresponding LGBTQ oppression. In the early 2000s, Hollywood produced *Brokeback Mountain* to bring gay romance into mainstream media. Following the footsteps of Caouette, queer youth have increasingly embraced YouTube to come out of the closet in ways that are emotionally cathartic for both themselves and viewers alike, spreading the hopeful message that "it gets better." With critiques proliferating that queer films privilege the white, gay male experience, filmmakers are also increasingly illustrating intersectional LGBTQ identities in their films. For instance, the 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning* showcases the drag ball culture of New York City, highlighting the African-American and Latino gay and transgender communities that spearhead it. The 2003 documentary film *I Exist* features people who identify as queer, Arab, and Muslim, interviewing them about their experiences of both Islamophobia and homophobia. The 2010 fictional film *The Kids Are All Right* focuses on the familial life of a White, Lesbian couple raising two children. And the most recent film to win "Best Picture" at the Oscars is *Moonlight*, a poetic film which demonstrates the coming-of-age journey of a Black, gay man growing up in inner city Miami.

These films are just a few of the many movies produced all over the world to grant visibility, healing and justice towards LGBTQ experience. In producing my film "Illuminate," I heeded lessons from this history of queer cinema. I sought to produce a film that dismantled oppressive stereotypes about sexual minorities traditionally portrayed by Hollywood. I also sought to cast mostly people of color in this film, to grant visibility to non-White queer identities and experiences. Finally, I sought to produce an experimental, symbolic film, as a nod to the avant-garde, queer "fringe filmmakers" that courageously subverted status quo filmmaking in the margins of the 20th century, heterosexist, cinema culture.

Chapter 4: Developing a Cinematic-Phenomenological Research Method

Contemporary philosophy consists not in stringing concepts together,
but in describing the mingling of consciousness with the world, its involvement in a body, and its coexistence with others... and this is movie material par excellence. (Merleau Ponty, 1964, p. 59)

Existential-Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research

This dissertation illuminates the closet's trauma in two ways: (1) through an existential-phenomenological research method, and (2) through a "cinematic-phenomenological" research method that I have developed for this project, which disseminates my research findings through the format of a short film. The latter, cinematic-phenomenological research, derives its roots from the former, existential-hermeneutic phenomenological research. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, these different methods are mutually complementary—each one supplements and draws insight from the other.

Phenomenology is a qualitative research method that stems from phenomenology as a philosophy. It is situated in the human sciences, which studies human beings through a different theoretical and methodological framework than the traditional natural sciences. Natural science approaches to studying human beings utilize quantitative, experimental research in hopes of achieving objective, measurable data that can predict human behavior (Duquesne University, n.d.). While quantitative research is helpful to identify trends in human behavior, this natural science methodology can risk being too reductive and missing a holistic, nuanced understanding of individuals in their worlds. This is especially risky when conducting research about marginalized communities, who frequently experience being reduced, objectified, and stereotyped by societal institutions. The human science methodology of phenomenology offers an alternate, more emancipatory route to pursuing knowledge about the lives of members of marginalized minority groups. Rather than relying on statistical measurements or abstract theories, phenomenologists use an open-ended approach to understand how human beings experience, perceive, sense, feel, and orient themselves to their "lifeworlds" (Husserl, 1917). Phenomenologists post that the world is not purely "objective," rather, it is co-constituted by human beings' unique subjectivities and meaning-making capacities. As such, in order to understand human existence, we must learn about the

subjective experiences of human beings—how they live-through, make meaning of, and experience their "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 1927). While privileging subjective experience, phenomenology is still considered empirical in its ability to collect concrete data of people's lived experiences, identify shared structures of meaning that resound across people's subjective accounts of being-in-the-world, and unearth rich understanding of universal aspects of human experience (Van Manen, 1990). As such, to pursue empirical knowledge about the basic structures of human existence, phenomenologists shift into an open attitude that is intentionally curious about the deep meanings of people's subjective, lived experiences of being-in-the-world.

For this research project, I embraced a curious, phenomenological attitude to understand the lived experience of the closet as a sexual minority. In his book *Researching Lived Experience*, Max Van Manen (1990) writes that the phenomenological researcher's task is to collect participants' anecdotes of lived experience as data. Anecdotes are personal stories that describe a specific experience as it is lived-through in rich, vivid, detail. The experience-near quality of anecdotes can access deeper meanings of a phenomenon than abstract or theoretical reflection could (Van Manen, 2014). The researcher interprets phenomenological data by identifying core thematic meanings imbedded in each participant's anecdote, as well as core themes that repeat across all participants' anecdotes. These themes uncover the general "essence" of that phenomenon, and answer the researcher's guiding question: "what is it like for human beings to live through this phenomenon?" or "what is the essence or nature of this phenomenon?" (Van Manen, 1990). Van Manen clarifies that the term "essence" does not imply some ultimate core to which all human experience can be reduced. Rather, "essence" refers to an overarching description of a phenomenon that evokes "the essential nature of lived experience: a certain way of being in the world" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 39). As such, this dissertation posits that there are essential structures of meaning that co-constitute the phenomenon

of the closet. My goal is to interpret participants' anecdotes of their closeted lifeworlds, to produce a description that brings its essence to life. Van Manen says of such a description:

> A good description that constitutes the essence of something is construed so that the structure of lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way. When a phenomenologist asks for the essence of a phenomenon—a lived experience—then the phenomenological inquiry is not unlike an artistic endeavor, a creative attempt to somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 39).

Van Manen does not give specific guidelines of how to produce such a description, considering phenomenological writing to be an intuitive, creative craft which cannot be taught. Nevertheless, he offered essential qualities of a phenomenological description which researchers can aspire towards. A powerful phenomenological description avoids abstract concepts that distance readers from the phenomenon as it is lived-through. Rather, it illuminates meaningful insights about the phenomenon through expressive, evocative language that permit lived experience to "shine through" the text (Van Manen, 1990). The researcher engages in a process of continuous writing, re-writing, and editing, choosing every word carefully to express the phenomenon in a manner that stays faithful to participants' lived experiences, while also attempting to bring awareness to the deeper, primal, subtle, intuitive meanings of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). The final phenomenological description should be evocative enough to become animated within readers, bringing them into intimate contact with the depths of their own lived experience:

> Lived experience may be considered the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence—in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflexive appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 36)

Van Manen elaborates that the experience of being animated by a phenomenological description manifests as emotional resonance among readers. In this sense, phenomenological research is a *pathic* endeavor (Van Manen, 1990). The word *pathic* originated from *pathos*, which

refers to mood, sensibility, and our felt sense (Van Manen, 2011). A phenomenological description conveys pathic knowledge—emotional, sensual meanings that awaken in the body, in a pre-reflective and intuitive manner: "it is sensed or felt, rather than thought—and it may not even be sensed or felt directly with attention" (Gendlin, 1988, in Van Manen, 2014, p. 45). The phenomenological description may viscerally "touch" the reader, "stir their sensibilities," and invite them into emotional contact with their own lived experience (Van Manen, 1990). As such, the validity of my research can be discerned by whether my phenomenological description of the closet is poignant enough to "bring an otherwise sober-minded person (the reader but also the author) to tears" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 132).

Van Manen's approach to phenomenological research is also a *hermeneutic* endeavor. Hermeneutics is the interpretative study of texts in order to unearth meaning (Van Manen, 1990). The phenomenological researcher interprets participants' anecdotes to produce a powerful description of the core meanings of a phenomenon. The researcher's interpretation is always one interpretation of a multitude of interpretations possible in working with the text: "no single interpretation of human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary, or even potentially richer description" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 31). A final phenomenological description is one particular researcher's interpretation based on their subjective vantage point. Accordingly, for this project I acknowledge that my own subjectivity as a researcher cannot be fully "bracketed" to achieve a "pure" observation of the closeted phenomenon. Rather, my final hermeneutic-phenomenological interpretation has been co-constituted by the intermingling of my own, and my and participants', unique subjectivities and meanings about the closet. Nevertheless, aligned with the human science stance of phenomenology, this study is empirical because it collects concrete, experiential data, as well as identifies shared, meaningful structures that repeat across the data—structures without which the closeted phenomenon would not manifest as it does in sexual

minorities' lives.

This approach to phenomenological research is also an *existential* endeavor, because the overarching quest guiding the research is a "search for what it means to be human" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 12). The researcher interprets people's lived experiences of phenomena to gain deeper understanding of the shared human condition: "Phenomenology is a philosophy of the personal, the individual, which we pursue against the background of an understanding of the evasive character of the logos of other, the whole, the communal, or the social" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 7). To situate research findings within an existential context, Van Manen offers four existential categories that phenomenological researchers can use to interpret participants' data: temporality, space, embodiment, and co-existence. While many researchers doing existential-phenomenological research rely on these four categories, my dissertation unearthed five different existential categories that all human beings who have experienced societal oppression may hold in common: freedom, truth, hope, love, and power. Using these themes, I highlight the existential to facilitate solidarity.

Finally, phenomenological research can also be adopted by liberation psychologists as an *emancipatory* endeavor. The goal of liberation psychology is to liberate truths of the oppressed, rupture cultures of silence, and facilitate *conscientizacao* about sociopolitical oppression. Phenomenological research can contribute to this process by un-silencing and honoring marginalized citizens; subjective truths about their lived experiences of oppression. For this project, I aimed to un-silence participants' lived experiences of the closet and share them with the public in efforts to spur social action. Van Manen describes phenomenological research as an "action-sensitive pedagogy." He writes:

> Human science is concerned with action in that hermeneutic phenomenological reflection deepens thought and therefore radicalizes thinking and the action that flows from it. All serious and original thinking is ultimately revolutionary—revolutionary in a broader than political sense. And so to become more thoughtfully or attentively aware of aspects of human life which hitherto were merely glossed over or taken-for-granted will more likely bring us to the edge of speaking up, speaking out, or decisively acting in social situations that ask for such

> action. And while phenomenology as a form of inquiry does not prescribe any particular political agenda suited for the social historical circumstances of a particular group or social class, the thoughtfulness phenomenology sponsors is more likely to lead to an indignation, concern, or commitment that, if appropriate, may prompt us to tur to such a political agenda. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 154).

In other words, phenomenological research can sponsor thoughtfulness, concern, and even outrage towards certain lived experiences of being human. For this dissertation, I hoped to harness the actionable power of phenomenological research to invite audiences of this research to bear witness to participants' oppressive lived experiences of the closet. This may compel them to act with compassionate indignation in response to LGBTQ oppression, thereby getting one step closer towards sociopolitical emancipation and human progress.

An Artistic Approach to Phenomenological Research

According to Van Manen, producing a phenomenological description is akin to the artistic process of producing a poem. Both rely on evocative language to express the world: "Like poetry, phenomenology attempts an incantational evocative speaking, a primal telling, wherein the phenomenologist aims to utilize the voice to present an original singing of the world" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 13). Van Manen distinguishes phenomenological research from actual artwork, claiming that art and phenomenology work towards different epistemological aims. A phenomenological description seeks to convey universal meanings about human experience, whereas artwork seeks to express particular, specific experience. Moreover, a phenomenological description seeks to render its meanings explicit, whereas art strives to keep its meanings implicit. Therefore, Van Manen claims that phenomenology "starts there where poetry has reached its endpoint" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 19)

However, I believe that phenomenology and art can be one-and-the-same, and can work together for joint purposes. A phenomenological description can be produced *as art*, in order to express meanings that are both specific and universal, implicit and explicit, felt and rational. This

belief is shared by phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1948), who was fond of the arts—such as poetry, painting and cinema—as an ideal form of phenomenological language. Merleau-Ponty's approach to phenomenology emphasizes the sensual perception inherent to lived experience. He suggested that phenomenologists share our insights about lived experience through a hyper-reflexive, descriptive language which remains faithful to our sensual perception. This language must "plunge into the world instead of surveying it," in order to make visible the inextricable bond between ourselves and that which we perceive (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 38). This language must also avoid intellectualization or abstraction, but rather express our direct contact with the things of the world that have not yet been languaged (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Merleau-Ponty believed that art is an exemplary language to express lived experience, because it retains the sensuality, openness, and wonder of our primal senses (Quinn, 2009). He conceived of art as an amplification of our sensual perception, and wrote that artists possess a heightened perceptual acuity of the world which they can extend to others through their artwork (Quinn, 2009). Therefore, art can express lived experience in a more direct, pre-reflexive, experience-near manner than an ordinary written description can.

Heidegger (1950), too, believed art to be an ideal phenomenological vehicle to reveal being-in-the-world. In his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," he writes that artwork allows the "truth of the being" to be disclosed to its viewers (Heidegger, 1950, p. 16). A work of art allows its general essence to "come to stand in the light of its being" (Heidegger, 1950, p. 16). As an example, Heidegger referenced Van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes. He described this painting not simply as a representation of shoes as a piece of equipment. Rather, this painting discloses an entire experiential world travailed by the shoes:

> From out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes the toil of the worker's tread stares forth. In the crudely sold heaviness of the shoes accumulates the tenacity of the slow trudge through the far-stretching and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by the raw wind. On the leather lies the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides

the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. (Heidegger, 1950 p. 14)

As such, art sets up a world for its viewers to experience. Art opens up essential, meaningful truths about a world. Heidegger argued that, rather than viewers trying to interpret an artwork's hidden conceptual meanings, a "true work of art" immediately discloses these meanings by simply being experienced. Heidegger elaborated that art discloses its meaning via poetry, and that "all art […] is in essence, poetry" (Heidegger, 1950, p. 44). Poetry is not simply lyricism or verse, but rather language in its purest form, which can speak truth about the world by creating an opening: "What poetry, as a clearing project, unfolds of unconcealment and projects into the rift within the figure is the open; poetry allows this open to happen in such a way, indeed, that now, for the first time, in the midst of beings, it brings them to shine and sound" (Heidegger, 1950, p. 45). Ultimately, by opening an experiential world through poetry, a work of art provides a "clearing" through which viewers can access deeper meanings about the world.

Some phenomenological researchers already embrace the harmonious marriage between phenomenology and art. Todres and Galvin (2008) advocate for *aesthetic phenomenological research* that transforms traditional phenomenological description into poetic prose, through which the sensorial and emotional dimensions of a lived experience can be expressed. Whereby aesthetic means "to sense" or "to feel," an aesthetic phenomenology puts "how it feels" as central to the process of understanding (Todres & Galvin, 2008). Todres and Galvin embrace poetic language as the ideal artform for this, because poetry conveys embodied, felt meanings of human experience. In this regard, they are more assertive than Van Manen in claiming that phenomenological descriptions can explicitly be considered 'artwork" in and of themselves. To them, a poetic phenomenological description, as an artistic product in its own right, can enliven heartfelt understandings about a research topic: "Language can then connect to people in a heartfelt way and be complex enough to awaken not just a logical understanding but the sense of it as it lives. This lived experience is in

excess of the words; it is more than words can say." (Todres & Galvin, 2008, p. 570). To produce a poetic description, Todres and Galvin use a method of data interpretation called "embodied interpretation". Embodied interpretation is based on Eugene Gendlin's (1988) psychotherapeutic technique of "Focusing," which trains people to attune to their bodily *felt sense* regarding a lived experience. This bodily attunement lets the aesthetic dimensions of an experience "come alive" for the purposes of phenomenological research. The embodied interpretation process is as follows: first, the researcher writes a general phenomenological description of the phenomenon under inquiry. Then, the researcher attunes to the *felt sense* emerging in their body while reading this description. From this place of bodily attunement, the researcher locates language. Accordingly, they transform the traditionally-written phenomenological description into a piece of poetic prose, for which every word is carefully chosen to carry the embodied, felt meanings of the phenomenon—similar to crafting a poem. The goal of this process is to communicate participants' experiences in an evocative manner that can induce empathy among readers: "[Empathic understanding] may be particularly important in the human sciences, where putting an experience together as an embodied whole may serve as an important intuitive reference to support acting in caring and ethical ways" (Todres and Galvin, 2008, p. 580).

In her dissertation "The Visible and the Invisible Aspects of Miscarriage: A Phenomenological, Hermeneutic, Imaginal Study," Duquesne alumnus Denise Mahone (2014) integrated the visual arts into her own version of aesthetic phenomenology. Mahone created drawings to express the implicit, embodied, and aesthetic dimensions of miscarriage. She conducted interviews with five women regarding their experiences of miscarriage, encouraging them to share images, feelings, body sensations, thoughts, actions, conversations, and words that freely emerged in association to their experience. She then engaged in a data interpretation process inspired by Todres and Galvin's embodied interpretation. She listened to interview recordings with a sketchbook in

hand. Anytime she felt a bodily sensation in response to something said by the participant, she created a symbolic drawing to visually express the participant's words. When Mahone shared her artwork with participants, they expressed tearful astonishment by how accurately the drawings reflected their experience of miscarriage. My "cinematic-phenomenological" research method is greatly inspired by Todres and Galvin's and Mahone's approaches to aesthetic phenomenology. I would like to situate this dissertation within the interesting, evolving tradition that these phenomenologists have initiated to blend phenomenological research with art-making.

Film as Phenomenological Language

In selecting an aesthetic language for phenomenological research, Todres and Galvin preferred poetic prose, Mahone was compelled by drawings, and I am drawn to cinematography. My excitement for cinematic language is shared by Merleau-Ponty. In his essay "Film and the New Psychology," he was enchanted with cinema's unique ability to express the world in a way that is more "exact" than our ordinary perception of it:

> It is true that in our ordinary lives, we lose sight of this aesthetic value of the tiniest perceived thing. It is also true that the perceived form is never perfect in real life, that it always has blurs, smudges, and superfluous matter, as it were. Cinematographic drama is finer-grained than real-life dramas: it takes place in a world that is more exact than the real world. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 58)

Merleau-Ponty contended that in real life, our perception can sometimes obscure the essential meanings of our experience. This is because we typically approach life through a naïve, "natural attitude" that takes for granted our experiences of being-in-the world (Husserl, 1982, p. 5). Yet through the careful production and editing of cinematic elements, film has the ability to offer a slice of the world that is perceptually heightened compared with our typical experience of it. Through cinematography, viewers are able to achieve an intimate, focused contact with being-in-the-world—a kind of "honing-in" that unveils aspects of experience that our ordinary perception takes for granted

in everyday life. Therefore, film can illuminate the core, essential meaning of a particular human experience. Merleau-Ponty also praised film for its ability to convey meaning immediately and instinctively, without having to be explained or conceptualized:

> A movie is not thought; it is perceived. This is why the movies can be so gripping in their presentation of man: they do not give us his thoughts, as novels have done for so long, but his conduct or behavior. They directly present us with that special way of being in the world, of dealing with things and other people, which we can see in the sign language of gesture and gaze and which clearly defines each person we know. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 58)

As such, in considering a language with which to express being-in-the-world of the closet, cinematography can communicate meanings in a way that can be immediately sensed and perceived.

Phenomenological film theorists support the use of cinematography as a vehicle with which to express lived experience. Vivian Sobchack (1992) describes how cinematography uses the language of seeing, hearing, movement, and temporality to express its perceptual field; as such, film technology can simulate human perception (Sobchack, 1992; in Bacon, 2007). In fact, Sobchack contends that film not only simulates human perception, but has its own perception as a "being" in its own right: "film is understood to be itself a 'subject,' an object-subject' that sees and is seen…film is both presentational and representational, both a viewing subject and a visible object for the filmgoer—film is existentially embodied (mechanical) perception" (Frampton, 2012, p. 43). Sobchack situates this argument upon the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, who wrote that the objects of the world are embodied subjects in their own right, with their own being, intentionality, and perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1948). Similarly, Sobchack conceptualizes the notion of "film-body," wherein films are embodied subjects with their own intentionality, which can perceive, express, behave, and act—just like embodied persons do. She writes: "the film's body is its 'sensing and sensible being,' 'an embodied and intending consciousness" (Sobchack, 1992, in Frampton, 2012, p. 43). Just as the human body transcends our physiological anatomy, so does the film-body transcend its mechanical structures to become its own embodied existence, its own being-in-the-world

(Sobchack, 1992; in Bacon, 2007). As such, when we view a film on-screen, we are viewing the expressed perception of a "film-body" who we experience as a present, living, breathing, being-in-the-world, just like ourselves: "The film experience not only reflects upon the perceptual experience of the filmmaker…but also presents the direct experience of a perceptual existence as the film itself" (Sobchack, 1992; in Bacon, 2007, p. 3).

Because phenomenological film theory contends that films are embodied object-subjects in their own right, this theory also establishes film as a powerful tool for evoking embodied empathy. The empathic power of film can be understood by the notion of the "cinematic chiasm," which I have previously written about in an article using the theory of Merleau-Ponty (Gupta, 2015). In this article, I explain how Merleau-Ponty's theory of the "chiasm" posits that all embodied beings are intertwined as a part of an "intercorporeal flesh," a greater unity that creates a fundamental reversibility between self-and-other. Yet though we are fundamentally intertwined, we are also "perspectival beings," which means we can usually only perceive the world through our own subjective perspective of it, without knowing how other embodied subject-objects perceive the world. Language acts as a bridge, allowing a "criss-crossing" to occur between the subjective, perceptual experiences of self and others: "It suffices that I look at a landscape, that I speak of it with someone. Then, through the concordant operation of his body and my own, what I see passes into him, this individual green of the meadow under my eyes invades his vision without quitting my own" (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Language can illustrate the chiasm between self-and-other by enabling others' sensory perception to viscerally become one's own, and vice versa: "language can envelop self and other into a greater set of eyes, a universal Visibility of the "flesh" through which our individual visual fields become entwined" (Gupta, 2015, p. 43). In my paper, I argue that the chiasm can be considered the basis for embodied empathy, and this chiasm can be illuminated using the language of cinematography. A "cinematic chiasm" can induce embodied empathy between a film

and its viewers, as its cinematic language envelops viewers in the subjective, sensory perception of the film itself (Gupta, 2015). This is especially possible because, as described by Sobchack, film is experienced as a "lived-body" unto itself—an embodied being which sees, hears, and feels with its own perspective of the world. The cinematic chiasm presents a great opportunity to facilitate *conscientizacao* about the trauma of the closet. The final short film produced by this dissertation may envelop viewers in a living, breathing, embodied perspective of the world of the closet. After watching the film, viewers may experience greater empathy regarding the oppression faced by LGBTQ individuals, and a new perspective with which to perceive society.

The empathic power of film can also be understood through phenomenological film theory's notion of "film-world". Daniel Yacavone (2014) writes that "to make a film is also to construct a world" which viewers are invited to enter (Yacavone, 2014, p. xiv). He conceives of the film-world as a "singular, holistic, relational, fundamentally referential reality [which] possess pronounced sensory, symbolic, and affective dimensions. It provides 'virtual' and actual experiences that are at once cognitive and immersive and 'sensuous'" (Yacavone, 2014, p. xiv). Yacavone states that if viewers are engaged by the film, they can become immersed in an affective experience of the film-world. Immersion is possible because film as an artform includes a temporal dimension which envelops viewers inside the duration of an event. Viewers experience the cinematic world in its felt time, and therefore experience deep affective experiences while absorbed in the film's temporal rhythm. R*hythm* is key to the immersive quality of film-worlds (Yacavone, 2008). The filmmaker edits together imagery, composition, movement, gesture, and sound into a cinematic rhythm that imbues the film with "world-feelings" (Yacavone, 2008). Viewers experience these world-feelings arise in themselves as they co-exist with the film for a duration of time:

> The expressive qualities of films are also often ascribed to their rhythms. Describing filmmaking as 'sculpting in time,' Tarkovsky posits rhythm, and what he calls 'time pressures' within shots or sequences, as the source of an expressive depth in films residing beneath the

> perceptual surface of the image… And this affective link may serve as one of the main routes of immersion into its unique, expressed world. (Yacavone, 2008, p. 97)

Yacavone's emphasis on rhythm is shared by Merleau-Ponty, who also delighted in the rhythmic magic of cinematography. He wrote that the true beauty of cinema lies in the rhythmic gestalt, not in its particular storyline:

> Beauty, when it manifests itself in cinematography, lies not in the story itself, which could quite easily be recounted in prose… what matters is the selection of episodes to be represented and, in each one, the choice of shots that will be featured, the length of time, allotted to these elements, the order in which they are able to presented, the sound or words with which they are or are not to be accompanied. Taken together, all these factors contribute to form a particular overall cinematography rhythm. (Merleau-Ponty, 1948)

Thus, the immersive power of cinematography lies not in its story, but in its *rhythm* of sensory experiences that immerses us in a film-world. Each moment is made meaningful by the moment that came before it; and by the way the sound and visual effects intermingle with one another. This emphasis on the rhythm of a film is crucial for how I approached this project. I strived to craft a film that expressed the rhythm of participants' closeted lifeworlds, rather than convey linear, narrative information about participants' lives. Much like a poet precisely splices words into verse, I carefully assembled the temporal-spatial dimensions of the film—including shot duration, editing, and music—to rhythmically convey sensations, moods, and feelings of the closeted lifeworld. In doing so, I hoped for viewers to become immersed in the rhythmic film-world of the closet. Subsequently, they may carry emotional meanings about this film-world that influence how they relate to their own worlds.

Various cinematography styles could be used to immerse viewers in the lifeworld of the closet. Inspired by phenomenologists' affinity for poetry and rhythm, as well as the avant-garde, queer filmmakers of the 20th century, I decided to adopt the experimental style of "cinematic poetry" for this film. Cinematic poetry is a filmmaking genre which converges poetry and cinematography into a unique artform ("Cinematic Poems," n.d.). Popular films often contain narratives with

developed characters and plotlines. Cinematic poems, on the other hand, approach filmmaking through the lens of a poet rather than a novelist, expressing the feelings, textures, and moods of human experience through montages of imagery, movement, music, and voiceover. Examples of cinematic poetry include director Terrance Malick's films, *Badlands*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Tree of Life*, and *Knight of Cups*. These films are filled with abstract, sensual montages that convey feeling first and foremost, sometimes at the expense of coherent narrative. Malick is considered the "screen poet" of Hollywood, and some believe his films are influenced by phenomenological philosophy (Yates, 2006). Prior to making films, Malick pursued his doctorate degree in philosophy. He studied under Heidegger, and wrote a translation of Heidegger's *The Essence of Reasons* (1969) in which he explicated the phenomenological concept of "world" (Yates, 2006). Some philosophers call Malick's films "Heideggerian cinema," because his poetic cinematography discloses lifeworlds as they are experientially lived (Yates, 2006). Malick breaks with rules of narrative filmmaking by using "point of view" shots that immediately immerse viewers in character's perceptions of the film-world. He crafts every shot to poetically express the mood of his film-worlds: "The viewed elements appear to us with a richness of color, texture, form and situatedness in the world. The beauty of the rendered images fills us, as it does the characters, with a mood of wonder and awe" (Yates, 2006). Inspired by Malick's cinematography, my film too breaks from narrative filmmaking to create "screen poetry" that discloses the film-world of the closet, as it is experientially lived.

Focusing and the Felt Sense

Eugene Gendlin's (1988) *Focusing* technique also plays a fundamental role in producing a poetic film about the closeted lifeworld. Focusing is a method of awareness that helps people attune to their present-moment bodily sensations—their "felt sense" (Gendlin, 1988). Focusing posits that the body has its own intuitive wisdom—it is where we feel our deepest emotions and felt responses

to experiences. By paying close attention to our bodily "felt sense", this technique helps people unearth deeper, embodied meanings of their lived experience (Gendlin, 1988). Focusing is also a technique for *languaging* lived experience. During focusing, people are encouraged to locate specific words and/or images that symbolically language their embodied experience. It is here, in the bodily felt sense, that poetic and aesthetic descriptions of lived experience can emerge.

In his book *Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy: A Manual of the Experiential Method*, Gendlin (1998) proposes a six-step process to languaging the felt sense. The first step is "clearing a space," where a person focuses their awareness on their bodily sensations in the present moment, through a brief body scan exercise. The second step is "accessing the felt sense," which involves locating a specific sensation arising in one's body. The third step is "getting a handle," which involves clarifying the felt sense by finding a word, phrase, or image to describe its quality. Oftentimes, the handle used to language the felt sense contains symbolic imagery, making it a well-suited vehicle to access the aesthetic dimensions of a lived experience. The fourth step is "resonating," which involves speaking the word, phrase or image aloud, and checking if the handle fits with one's bodily sensations. The fifth step is "asking," which involves inquiring about the felt sense—asking "what is important here?" "what's the overall quality of this?" and "what might be one thing that this needs from me?" (Gendlin, 1998). Asking questions about the felt sense allows for something to be processed or resolved, and a new embodied experience to arrive. Finally, the sixth step is "receiving," which involves acknowledging the embodied process that occurred during Focusing, including any shifts that happened. The Focusing exercise is concluded, and the Focuser carries with them newfound meanings or resolutions based on what their body revealed to them (Gendlin, 1998).

Gendlin's Focusing steps were adapted as a phenomenological research method by Duquesne alumnus Claire LeBeau (2013), in her dissertation about the felt sense of maternal guilt. For her dissertation, participants wrote about a memory in which they felt strong guilt as a mother.

LeBeau set up interviews, in which she guided participants through Gendlin's Focusing technique to contact and describe the felt sense of maternal guilt, as it lived in their bodies. Each participant read their description aloud, and she invited them to "clear a space" to access how that "living memory" of maternal guilt manifested in their bodies. LeBeau guided participants to language their felt sense of maternal guilt through a "handle". Engaging participants with this Focusing process allowed "the process of remembering and description [to unfold] in a deeply resonant and experiential way," by connecting participants to their lived experiences "in a manner that is embodied and present" (LeBeau, 2013, p. 65). Consequently, the phenomenological research findings LeBeau unearthed were rich, complex, symbolic, and intimately rooted in participants' embodied experiences. Focusing also brought a healing component to the research, as some of her participants described a transformative shift occurring in their felt sense of maternal guilt (LeBeau, 2013). My dissertation employed Focusing in a similar manner as LeBeau's, integrating it into interviews to help participants describe their memory of the closet via present-moment bodily awareness. Moreover, I sought for Focusing to create a *shift* in participants' painful felt sense of the closet that was empowering and healing.

Focusing is also a useful technique to express and heal traumatic experiences. This is because, according to trauma theorist Besel van der Kolk (2014), traumatic memories are often imprinted in the form of long-lasting, bodily sensations (van der Kolk, 2014). Traumatic events evoke a primal threat to our bodily survival that overwhelms our rational capacities to re-member. Bodily awareness, then, can serve as a window into depths of a traumatic memory that cognitive comprehension cannot retrieve (van der Kolk, 2014). Gendlin's Focusing technique tunes into survivors' bodily sensations to release stress that has accumulated in their bodies as a result of trauma: "Trauma victims cannot recover until they become familiar with and befriend the sensations in their bodies…Physical self-awareness is the first step in releasing the tyranny of the past" (van der

Kolk, 2014, p. 100). Since my dissertation conceptualizes the closet to be a traumatic phenomenon, I attempted to create safe conditions in the Focusing process through which participants could contact their traumatic bodily sensations, and language their trauma in a way that was empowering. This required continuous check-ins about safety, to assess each participant's comfort level in contacting traumatic material. This also required a keen psychotherapeutic sensibility, where I held myself accountable to stop the Focusing process or utilize therapeutic responses if painful material emerged during the interview.

Focusing also has a strong connection to art-making. Focusing-oriented art therapist Laury Rappaport (2008) writes that Focusing and art therapy share many commonalities as psychotherapeutic modalities: both rely on intuitive, embodied experiences rather than rational, intellectual processes (Rappaport, 2008). During art therapy, the felt sense guides a person's choice of material, color and style, as well as the imagery they produce. Moreover, both Focusing and art therapy rely on symbolic and metaphoric language to express emotions. A person's embodied experience is understood through symbol and metaphor, which becomes fodder for artistic inspiration (Rappaport, 2008). Rappaport's Focusing-oriented art therapy guides patients to access a bodily felt sense, find a handle for that felt sense, and paint the image of that handle using art material. She helps patients ask questions of their felt sense such as "What's the crux of it?" "What's needed?" "What's one small step in the right direction?" The patient listens to their bodily response, notices a shift in their body, and then paints a new image based on this felt shift (Rappaport, 2008). In this vein, art-making can allow the Focusing transformation process become tangible, concrete, and potentially long-lasting.

Videography has also been used as medium for Focusing-oriented art-therapy. Yarden Kerem (2015) developed a therapeutic technique called "Felt Sensing Video Art Therapy," through which she guides clients to locate the felt sense regarding a particular problem of the psyche. She

helps clients ask questions of this felt sense such that visual images arise. Kerem then provides her clients with the digital art technologies necessary to bring these images to life, so clients can symbolize their felt sense through video art and "organize inner chaos in some form" (Kerem; in Cohen & Johnson, 2015, p. 175). The clients use computer software to edit audio-visual components together, in order to produce a short video that artistically symbolizes their bodily experience. Kerem asserts that "the goal of the work is not to create what art critics would consider good works of video art; instead, the goal is to create works that express and give symbolization to the clients' inner worlds" (Kerem; in Cohen & Johnson, 2015, p. 173).

For this dissertation, I engaged in a similar process to Kerem's felt-sense video-making, guiding patients to discern the felt sense of the closet, and language it through symbolic imagery. The images they used to describe the closet were transformed into audio-visual components to create a short film. In producing this film, I heeded Watkins and Shulman's warning (2008) that emancipatory research should not remain solely at the level of recollection, which could simply re-traumatize people. It should also provide avenues for healing and transformation. As such, my film included symbolic imagery that expressed both the painful felt sense of the closet, and also the healing "felt shifts" that occurred during Focusing. In this manner, the final film did not solely reproduce trauma, but also offered hope.

Chapter 5: Research Procedures and Processes

The notion of 'process' suggests a multiplicity of components with independent ways. But the word also carries within itself a sense of unity, a faith that all of our experiences gather together in a creative process that ultimately knows where it needs to go. (McNiff, 1998, "License to Create," para. 15)

Recruitment of Participants

I recruited five adult participants (over 18) who self-identify as sexual minorities, and who have experienced being in the closet about their sexuality. To be ethically sensitive, I recruited participants for whom I was not the first person to whom they were coming out. I recruited participants through flyers distributed at Persad Center, an LGBTQ mental health clinic in Pittsburgh. I also advertised my project on Facebook. Three participants responded to the flyer circulating Facebook, and two participants contacted me after viewing a flyer at Persad Center. I hoped to recruit a diversity of genders for this project; four participants identified as cis-men, and the fifth distanced his identity from the gender binary. I also sought to recruit participants with diverse ethnic and racial identities; three identified as white, with one identifying as Hispanic, and another as half-white/half-Hispanic.

I met with participants to review informed consent and discuss the project's agenda. During this initial conversation, I was transparent about my personal connection to this project to foster trust and credibility. Additionally, I was transparent about my intention to transform participants' lived experiences into an LGBTQ-advocacy short film, which will be disseminated online to the public. I described the Focusing exercise that they would be asked to participate in, and welcomed participants to share feelings or questions they had about it. I also invited participants to share reactions regarding my plan to make a film about their lived experience, and to disseminate this film to the public. I explained that they can withdraw participation in the research process at any time. However, I reinforced that the film and written research findings would not disclose participants' identities, and all identifying data will be stripped from the production and dissemination process.

Self-Reflexive Writing and Felt-Sensing

Before I interviewed participants regarding their lived experiences of being closeted, I engaged in self-reflexive writing about my own experience of being in my father's closet, having a father whose sexual identity was closeted, and being somewhat closeted about my own identity as queer/bisexual (see Chapter 6). From this self-reflexive writing process, I identified key assumptions I was making about the closeted phenomenon based on my own subjectivity of it, as well as my prediction of what my father's closeted experience was like. I also scheduled three Focusing sessions with a Focusing-oriented art therapist named Liz Baring, who helped me test my method of data collection using Focusing. To prepare for these sessions, I wrote an anecdote about a specific memory of being closeted in my life. Liz guided me to identify and language embodied sensations—"felt senses"—emerging in my body in response to this memory. Through her process of Focusing-oriented art therapy, she guided me to identify symbolic imagery associated with my closeted experience. This collaborative process with Liz allowed me to gain a deeper, embodied, awareness of my presuppositions about the closeted phenomenon. It also helped me fine-tune the data collection method which I would be guiding participants to participate in.

Data Collection

My data collection procedures were influenced by Claire LeBeau's (2013) dissertation about the felt sense of maternal guilt. I performed two stages of data collection: (1) collecting written anecdotes and (2) conducting in-person interviews with a Focusing component. For the first stage of data collection, I asked each participant to a written description of a painful experience of being in the closet. The writing prompt was as follows:

> Please reflect on your experience of being in the closet. Select *one particular memory* of being closeted that stands out as painful. Please describe, in as much sensorial detail as possible, what happened in that particular experience, as if you are writing a novel about it. Include any thoughts, feelings, sensations, images, and metaphors in your description that can help

> you bring that experience to life. Consider writing the memory in the *present* tense to help bring you close to the details of the experience.

Participants' written descriptions served as a jumping-off point for our interviews. I conducted a preliminary thematic interpretation of each participant's written anecdote, noting prominent themes to inquire about during our interview.

The second stage of data collection entailed setting up in-person interviews with each participant, which were audio-recorded and 1.5 to 2 hours in duration. My agenda for these interviews was to gain understanding of participants' embodied sense of the closet, to identify aesthetic dimensions of the closet, and to follow up on preliminary themes from their written anecdotes. Additionally, I asked each participant to come to the interview prepared to share one piece of art that represents their experience of being closeted. These artistic references informed my phenomenological interpretation of the closet.

At the beginning of interviews, I asked participants what it was like to write their anecdote, and we briefly discussed its content. After 10-15 minutes of discussion, I asked participants if they were comfortable to begin the Focusing activity. First, I reiterated the purpose of Focusing: that it can help us obtain deeper meaning about their closeted experience, by engaging not just with their mind's intellect but with their bodily felt sense. I also explained the procedures involved: I would guide them to language their bodily sensations through metaphor and imagery. This imagery would contribute to the short film I would produce about the experience of being in the closet. I reassured participants there is no right or wrong way to do Focusing, and however we used the time would be useful. I also said that if we ventured into psychological territory that felt uncomfortable, they could say "let's take a step back," and we would switch direction. I asked participants if they wanted to share any feelings or questions about Focusing before continuing.

Next, I asked participants if they would prefer to read their written anecdote aloud or have me read it, in order to bring its memory into the room. All participants requested I read their

description. After reading their anecdote, I invited participants to share immediate reactions. I then invited them to "clear a space" to contact their embodied presence. I guided them through the following body scan exercise:

> I'm going to invite you to gently close your eyes or lower your gaze. Just allow this opportunity to slow down. Take a moment to sink into being quiet in your body for a few seconds. Now gently bring your awareness to your breathing. No need to change your breath. Just be aware of the sensations of each breath in and out. And now begin to notice other sensations in your body. We can start with your feet. Just notice how your feet feel within your shoes and against the floor. Notice all sensations that might be there—cold, warmth, tingling, heaviness. Just pay close attention to what is. Now move up your body a little, and notice your legs against the chair, and if there are any sensations there: pressure, pulsing, heaviness, lightness. What might be there. Now notice your back against the chair—what it feels like to have your back supported by the chair. Just allow yourself to feel that support, and notice what that's like. Notice your hands, what they feel like resting there. If they are tense, tight, relaxed. Now I invite you to turn your attention inwards, and notice the inner sensations of your body. First check inside your throat area… what does it feel like there, within your throat right now. Just pay attention to what's there. And then check in with your chest area… what does it feel like within your chest right now? Just check inside and notice sensations there. And finally move down to your belly area… just scan inwards and notice what it feels like inside your belly. What sensations might be there?

Then, I asked participants to bring to mind their written description of the closet. I asked them to locate where their memory of the closet is residing in their body—if any feelings or sensations are emerging in the present moment. I said:

> Now come back into the description of the closet I just read. Hold that in mind. And see of you can locate a certain part of your body where it is taking up residence and where it kind of lives. Just check if there might be a specific place in your body where you are feeling a something… something that wants your attention in response to your memory. And see if there might be a specific sensation or feeling that you are experiencing in relation to your memory of the closet. Just check and see where that might be. And, as you pay attention to that feeling, perhaps there might be a word or phrase that seems to come close to describing it... or maybe an image. Try to locate that word, phrase or image that seems to fit with the inner felt sense of this memory you have had. And when you are ready, I invite you to share that word or image aloud with me.

Participants' shared their initial felt senses with me. Following Gendlin's (1998) Focusing steps, I reflected back their descriptions using their exact language as much as possible, to help them stay closely attuned to their embodied experience. I also asked them specific questions about their felt sense to help them language it with aesthetic imagery, such as "what is the overall quality of it?"

"Is there an image that goes along with that sensation?" "If the feeling had a form, what form would it take?" and "Is there a color associated with that feeling?" These descriptions served as the main aesthetic data with which to produce the short film. Additionally, I asked participants "what might be one thing needed to make that feeling better?" regarding their painful felt sense of the closet. This question helped participants avoid remaining stuck in their painful felt sense, and instead experience a "felt shift" in their body that was healing and empowering. I asked specific questions about the quality of this felt shift to help participants language it in greater aesthetic detail. These aesthetic descriptions were also incorporated into the film, as images of hope.

Before ending Focusing, I asked participants to tune into their body and see if there were any other sensations that beckoned attention. Finally, I invited participants to thank their body for what it showed us. Then I invited them to find their way back into the room and open their eyes. The remainder of the interview consisted of first asking participants what their Focusing process was like, and how they felt after doing. Then, we began processing the sensations and imagery that emerged for them during Focusing, and linked these to their memories of the closet. I also inquired further into participants' written anecdote about the closet, sharing preliminary thematic interpretations of it and asking for more information about their lived experience of the closet surrounding each emerging theme. At the end of our interview, I invited participants to share their artistic reference of the closet with me, and its meaning regarding their personal experience of being closeted. Before parting ways, I explained the next steps I would take to transform their data into a short film. I told them I would be in touch to share a storyboard of the film soon.

Data Interpretation

The data interpretation for this study occurred in multiple stages, in a circular rather than linear fashion. Each stage informed and re-informed the others; I often went back and forth between them, adjusting one as I tweaked the other. This circular process aligns with arts-based research, which proceeds in a holistic, spiraling manner akin to art-making. In arts-based research, each phase links back to another to shape the creation of new knowledge, rather than following a specific, linear trajectory (McNiff, 2012). My data interpretation process also aligns with the "hermeneutic circle" in phenomenological research. The hermeneutic circle posits that interpreting data involves a "spiral of interpretation," where the researcher constantly moves back and forth between parts and the whole of the data to achieve a holistic understanding, and each pass through the same data yields a different layer of interpretation. Similarly, though this section refers to each stage as a separate entity, my actual process involved weaving back-and-forth between each "part" to finally obtain the "whole" of the closeted experience. This spiraling process helped me present research findings in two distinct forms: a short film (cinematic-phenomenological description) and a piece of writing (existential-hermeneutic phenomenological description).

1. Interpreting Individual Participants' Descriptions of the Closet: When participants sent their written anecdotes to me, I coded each text using the qualitative software Nvivo. I highlighted significant meaning units across the text—key phrases that seemed to unearth "something 'telling," something 'meaningful,' something 'thematic' in the various experiential accounts" that appeared pertinent to the phenomenon of the closet (Van Manen, 1990, p. 86). Throughout the entire text, any time such a meaning unit would emerge for me, I would label it with a word or phrase that captured its meaning. Then, I noted meaning units that seemed to re-occur throughout the text, and used NVivo software to organized those together into thematic categories.

During in-person interviews, I shared these broader, preliminary themes with participants, and asked for more detailed descriptions of their lived experience of the closet regarding that theme. If the theme did not seem accurate to them, I invited clarification for it to better reflect their lived experience.

After each interview, I transcribed the audio recording of that interview. I imported the transcribed text into NVivo software, and coded meaning units imbedded in the transcribed interview text (see Appendix E). Then I combined the meaning units between both sets of participant data—the written anecdote and the transcribed interview—and organized all these meaning units into themes for each participant regarding their lived experience of the closet. For each participant, I identified a list of 7-8 main thematic categories that meaningfully captured their lived experience of the closet (see Appendix F). Finally, I explicated these themes by writing a thematic interpretation of the closet for each participant (see Chapter 7).

2. Identifying Overarching Existential Themes of the Closet: After interviewing all participants, I also identified overarching, existential themes that repeated across all participants' descriptions of the closet. I did this by reviewing the list of 7-8 thematic categories for each participant, as well as the specific textual quotes contained in each category for each participant using NVivo software. I reviewed this data with the lens of an "existential psychologist," seeking to discover what broad, existential themes were shared across participants' individualized thematic categories about the closet. The broad existential themes that seemed to repeat over and over again across all participants' subthemes were: truth, love, freedom, hope and power. I created five separate word documents for each existential theme, and then I copied/pasted participants' subthemes, as well as their original quotes for each subtheme, within these word documents. In this manner, I organized all participants' subthemes into the broader existential themes of truth, love,

freedom, hope and power. I reviewed all themes and subthemes as a whole, in order to understand the overarching meaning of these themes in participants' lives.

I also spent time trying to identify the relationship of these themes to one another, and in relation to the closeted experience as a whole. Existential-phenomenological theory suggests that when interpreting phenomenological data to capture its essential structure, it is important that all themes work together in an interrelated manner to co-constitute the phenomenon under inquiry. Moreover, each theme must be essential to the nature of the phenomenon, such that the phenomenon itself would change if one theme was deleted. To affirm that these themes were essential aspects of the closeted phenomenon, I asked myself: "Is the lived experience of the closet still the same if I change or delete this theme from my interpretation? Does the phenomenon of the closet, without this theme, lose its fundamental meaning?" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 107). After probing the set of themes in this manner, I felt secure that each were essential "parts" that co-constituted the "whole" of the closeted experience.

3. Producing a Cinematic-Phenomenological Description of the Closet: After completing interviews with research participants, I began the process of creating a short film that could illustrate these themes cinematically. I used four types of aesthetic data to create the film. First, I reviewed participants' symbolic images that arose during the Focusing exercise. I reviewed this Focusing data immediately after each interview, while the images and sensations were still fresh for me. For each participant, I listed key bodily sensations and symbolic images that emerged during Focusing. Next, I spent time in reverie, "dwelling with" the kaleidoscope of images that appeared in my imagination, inspired by participants' Focusing descriptions. "Dwelling with" data is an important step in the phenomenological data interpretation process, for "when we stop and linger with something, it secretes its sense and its full significance becomes...amplified" (Wertz, 1985, in

Finlay, 2014, p. 1). After dwelling with the data and allowing its images to unfold in my imagination, I took notes on how to translate these images into cinematography—how each image could logistically manifest as shots and scenes of a film. If it seemed impossible to directly represent a participant's symbolic image as a filmmaker, I gave myself creative license to construct cinematic images that were close-enough in conveying the same felt sense. Second, I reviewed participants' written anecdotes and interview transcriptions, and identified other imagery that arose in their description of the closet, aside from Focusing. I took notes on how to make these images manifest onscreen as cinematography. Third, I reviewed their written anecdotes and interview transcriptions again and identified any feelings, sensations, and imagery that arose in my own embodiment and imagination in response to the text. Finally, I reviewed participants' artistic references of the closet, and took notes on how to incorporate them into the film via imagery, music, voiceover, specific scenes, overall aesthetic motifs, and color grading of footage.

I also wrote a short poetic description of the lived experience of the closet, based on the five existential themes I identified during the previous data interpretation phase (truth, freedom, hope, love, power). Adhering to the conventions of the cinematic poetry genre, this poetic description served as the voiceover for the film, bringing its essence to life through a narrative that could give coherent form to the abstract images unfolding onscreen. I edited this poetic description until it seemed to capture all five participants' lived experiences of the closet. I also used participants' direct language as much as possible when editing the words.

This poetic description gave the film structure, allowing me to slot in images to visually bring the narrative to life. I assembled the voiceover and images into a storyboard. A storyboard is the visual outline for a film which lays out the shots and scenes in order. The storyboard was created using stock imagery. It also included the text for the voice-over, laid over the panels of images. I edited this storyboard until I felt it was in a good place, and emailed it to participants for feedback

before video production. When sending the storyboard, I specified which themes/images were influenced by each participant's description of the closet. Four participants responded to my email about the storyboard. One participant sent a response that the imagery elicited tears in his eyes. Another responded that he trusted my intuition. A third participant wrote that that the word choices for the script were "fantastic" and "admirable," and that the storyboard "truly conveys a narrative in which the audience can feel the pain associated with the "closet," the validation of the experience, and hope for cathartic expression that an individual desires." A fourth participant responded with an offer to help me with post-production at a later stage in the filmmaking process.

After receiving feedback from these participants, I then began video production. This involved purchasing props, scouting locations, hiring actors, securing equipment, and scheduling shoots. Since the filmmaking process itself was a major undertaking, its details are described in the final section of this chapter.

The filmmaking notes, voiceover script, and storyboard can all be viewed in Chapter 8.

4. Writing an Existential-Hermeneutic Phenomenological Description of the Closet:

After finalizing the film storyboard, I began the official hermeneutic writing process to create a written phenomenological description of the closet. I relied on the word documents that organized participants' quotes and data, as well as the poetic voiceover for the film, to write an in-depth, hermeneutic phenomenological description that explicated both the "whole" of the closeted phenomenon, as well as the "parts" that co-constitute the whole. This writing process was also guided by Van Manen's approach to existential-hermeneutic phenomenological interpretation (Van Manen, 1990). I sought for my written description to avoid jargon, and instead use descriptive language that permitted the lived experience of the closet to "shine through" the text (Van Manen, 1990). I also incorporated quotes from participants to illustrate the individual ways in which this

shared phenomenon was experienced. Finally, it is important to note that this written description was heavily influenced by my cinematic-phenomenological interpretation of the closet. I referred to the short film many times, integrating its cinematic insights into the written interpretation. The integration of these "cinematic insights" into my written phenomenological description demonstrated that, epistemologically, film can introduce significant phenomenological meanings about lived experience in a manner that is unique to its medium. Moreover, since this data interpretation process was cyclic rather than linear, this process also worked in reverse. My written hermeneutic-phenomenological interpretation also influenced the making of my film, such that these two methods mutually influenced each other. The result of this "hermeneutic spiral" was the production of both a cinematic and written phenomenological description of the closet which seamlessly aligned with one another, and which expressed the same lived experience in two different but complimentary ways.

Filmmaking

After finalizing the storyboard, I began a six-month process of video production, in intimate collaboration with my beloved co-cinematographer Joseph Carreno. The first step entailed a casting call to recruit actors. I emailed casting call flyers to Pittsburgh Filmmakers and the theater departments of Carnegie Mellon, University of Pittsburgh, and Point Park University. Most actors who responded were talented undergraduate theater students at these universities. The cast for the film includes Orlando Davis (lead), Javier Spivey (partner), Monisha Schwartz, Isaiah Noreiga, Lee Lytle, Jacob Wasson, Marybeth Grimaldi, Matt Rich, and Hakim Fontaine (supporting actors). Each actor was paid a modest daily rate. We hired Orlando for 7 days of shooting, and the supporting cast for 2 days of shooting. All actors identified as either part of the LGBTQ community or strong allies. Being a queer woman of color, I found it important to assemble a cast that represented diverse

racial, sexual, and gender identities. The cast members were incredibly passionate, inspiring, and supportive of one another. They were forthcoming about injecting their own voices and stories to the heart and soul of this project. It was truly a delight to work them; by the end of video production, we felt like family. While this section presents the filmmaking procedures concisely, I expand upon each cast member's incredible contributions to this film in the discussion chapter of this dissertation (Chapter 10).

Once the cast was set, I proceeded to purchase props, scout for locations, and schedule film shoots. I also worked closely with Joe to test out camera and lighting equipment. Before every shoot, Joe and I sketched out a detailed storyboard for each scene, determining which shots we must shoot to communicate the closet's "film-world" and "world-feelings." We also determined which film equipment, lighting effects, and props to use to evoke the "felt sense" of the closet in various scenes. This included technical considerations such as: how to fog up a mirror without fogging up the camera lens, in order to evoke a dissociative fog. This also included more creative decisions, such as whether to put makeup on Orlando while he is constrained in chains, to demonstrate his rebellion against the constraints on his freedom of self-expression. Moreover, it included decisions on how to direct actors, such as requesting Orlando transition his bodily expression from anger to fear to hopelessness throughout the scene's duration. Many of these decisions arose spontaneously, in an improvised manner throughout the filmmaking process. Each new creative idea, technical execution, or acting direction contributed insight to my understanding of the lived experience of the closet. These cinematic insights helped me write and fine-tune the existential-hermeneutic phenomenological description of the closet in Chapter 9.

Filmmaking also required sensitivity regarding navigating marginalized community spaces. For instance, one scene involves a candlelight vigil, to demonstrate the healing power of solidarity amidst community trauma. I knew there was a candlelight vigil in Pittsburgh organized by activist

Ciora Thomas, to honor trans women of color who have been killed by hate crimes or police brutality. Having met Ciora previously, I asked if I could film the vigil for my short film. She agreed and requested that I share the footage with her too. In addition to filming footage for my film, I acted as an unofficial "videographer" for her event, and edited the footage into a beautiful montage of the vigil for Ciora to cherish and share. Moreover, while filming this event, I was conscious of Joe and my respective identities—he is a white-passing cis-Latino man and I am a cis-woman of color. As such, we decided it was more sensitive for me to shoot all the footage of the vigil event, since I am a small woman of color and my body may seem less intrusive than his while recording the event. Finally, before filming this public event (or the People's Pride march for a later scene), I made sure to thoroughly research legal guidelines about filming crowds without written consent. I discovered that as a filmmaker I am legally allowed to capture footage of people in crowds, as long as they are in public spaces. Nevertheless, I tried to "blur" the footage of crowd members as much as possible. I also tried to avoid filming crowd members' faces directly, in order to sustain respect for their privacy at this event.

After shooting all scenes, the final step of filmmaking involved editing the footage on Adobe Premiere Pro. During editing, the succession speed and transitions were determined with consideration to the felt-rhythm of the closet, as described by research participants. The film's rhythmic editing was guided by my sense of the implicit temporal dimensions of the closeted phenomenon—from being deep in despair to coming out into an environment of love and hope. I also color-graded scenes to best reflect the mood of the closeted world, at its different temporal stages of being closeted and coming out. Additionally, I added a beautiful soundtrack created by my friend Lesley Flanigan, who generously contributed her gorgeous music for this film (lesleyflanigan.com). I selected the music to best convey the world-feelings of the closet, at its different temporal stages of being closeted and coming out. Finally, I recorded my voice as the

voiceover for the film. I shared the film with research participants and cast members before disseminating it to the public.

Chapter 6: The Researcher's Closet

And you, my father, there on that sad height
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray,
Do not go gentle into that good night,
Rage, rage, against the dying of the light. (Thomas, 2009, p. 643)

Personal Reflections of the Closet

Phenomenological research asks the researcher to be self-reflexive of their biases, assumptions, and subjective experiences regarding the phenomenon under inquiry (Van Manen, 1990). An existential-hermeneutic approach to research suggests these biases will inevitably be carried into data collection and interpretation (Van Manen, 1990). As humans, we cannot separate our subjectivity from the world we seek to know (Gadamer, 1960). Nevertheless, self-reflexivity helps establish rigor. As such, before interviewing my participants about their lived experiences of the closet, I reflected upon the meanings of the closet established by my own life history.

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My father was a gentle and kind-hearted man. He was the sun of our family, the rock upon whom our Indian immigrant relatives relied to pursue the American dream. A computer software and artificial intelligence scientist renowned in his field, news reports described my dad as a 'genius' and a 'visionary ahead of his time'. At his funeral, more than three hundred people arrived to mourn the loss of this man who touched them so deeply with his generosity and wisdom, professionally and personally. Thirteen years later, I still recall the sound of heavy sobs coming from his colleagues, friends, and family whose hearts were forever broken by his sudden death at 53.

My own heart fluctuated between broken and frozen for years after his death. In the worst of times I worried that I never really knew my dad. My father was a guiding light, bestowing wisdom and kindness upon me by his lessons and example, as he did for all those he inspired. And my father was also the quintessential "playful dad," initiating goofy pillow fights and food-eating contests with us kids. Yet there was something deeper which often felt absent, that certain intimacy expected of parents and children, fathers and daughters—an intimacy which seemed forever

ungraspable now that he had died. My grief was not only because my beloved father had died, but because all these people mourning my dad—including perhaps myself—never got to know him in his full humanity. Moreover, I grieve for the possibility that my dad himself may have never felt known, accepted, and loved for who he really was.

My father identified as gay man whose sexual identity was kept in the closet from most people in his life unto his death. He was raised in India in an era when homosexuality was so taboo that it was not even a known construct in the Hindi language, yet nevertheless was a criminal offense according to India's Supreme Court legislation. He migrated to the United States right before the AIDS crisis hit, and long before a single state allowed for gay marriage. My father married my fierce and intelligent Indian mother, had three quirky children who he adored, and was successful in building a sustainable life for all of us in an all-white, conservative New England town until the end of his days. In reflecting upon my father's life journey, I understand the closet to have offered a life-raft: a fundamental instrument for survival in a world that is intolerant of difference.

My dad died at the age of 53 from brain injuries sustained from a bicycle accident. Some psychologists would diagnose my subsequent depression as "Complicated Bereavement." Complicated it was, as to my knowledge I was the only one in dad's personal life, aside from my mother, to whom he had come out as gay. He came out to me six years before his death, when I was 13. With gentleness, he said something like: "Yes sweetie, it's true, I'm gay. But I love your mother very much and we will remain together. And if you could, please let's keep this between us." My mom told me that he did not want to lie or hide from his own daughter. He wanted an honest relationship with me, to relate to me with integrity. Coming out to me perhaps was not only a gesture of integrity but of intimacy—an attempt to increase the closeness of our father-daughter bond. And yet my dad also wanted to keep on surviving and thriving in a world that was hostile to his identity. Being closeted seemed, to me, like a complicated battle between the yearning to live

with integrity and intimacy versus the need to protect oneself through secrecy. I can't imagine the kind of sorrow that this tension inflicted. Nevertheless, his request that I keep his sexual identity private made his closet become my closet too. I suppressed the secret in order to protect him and our family for fifteen years. We sadly never spoke about it again.

When I began my doctoral studies at Duquesne, I found myself in a more queer-friendly social circle than I had ever been before. Here, I felt safe to begin coming out of my father's closet and allowing the unconscious to become conscious. As I began coming out of the closet, the clinical symptoms I had suffered for so many years, which I could not make sense of until now, gradually began to dissipate. I realized these symptoms were rooted in the oppression of the closet. With renewed vitality, I began to explore homosexuality—both my father's gay identity and my *own* burgeoning awareness of my bisexuality, always known to me but never before safe to articulate until now. Craving knowledge, I discovered contemporary books like Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home,* which chronicles her own coming out journey as a lesbian alongside her gay father's experience remaining closeted. I also raided my dad's personal library to grasp some guidance from his own self-exploration journey. On his dusty bookshelves sat dozens of books about homosexuality, stretched across genres of genetics, neuroscience, fiction, memoir, and political history. My father, ever the hungry scientist, must have too devoured these books to better understand himself. He possessed classic coming out memoirs such as Paul Monette's *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* and Andrew Tobias's *The Best Little Boy in the World*, as well as tragic biographies like Calvin Trillin's *Remembering Denny.* Reading these books offered me poignant glimpses into the lived world of the gay closet. They helped me feel closer to my father in some way.

Yet reading about these authors' despair while in the closet also felt unbearable at times. My compassion felt persecutory in these moments; I struggled to cope with the idea that my dad might have felt similar despair. One night, I called my brother, confiding to him my persecutory feelings

regarding the possible extent of my father's suffering due to homophobia. I was wading through the intergenerational trauma of the closet in a manner that triggered my own despair. I asked my brother: "How do I keep living in a world that makes such good people feel so hopeless?" After pondering, he offered me this gift: "You just have to surround yourself with people who feel like you do, and work together to make the world less horrible."

This conversation occurred during my second year in the Duquesne's clinical psychology program. It has guided the course of my personal and professional life since then. My scholarship and clinical work are now dedicated to assuaging the effects of societal oppression on marginalized minorities. My personal life now overflows with precious people who too have felt traumatized by society and are healing themselves and others by actively seeking to transform society. True to my brother's advice, my despair has lifted as I continue devoting my heart to human rights. And this dissertation is also a manifestation of my brother's advice: it is the end-result of being surrounded by kindred spirits—faculty, colleagues, research participants, artists, family and friends—who have collectively supported me in creating a piece of art that might make this world a little less horrible.

I hope my dad, wherever he might be, receives this dissertation as a gesture of my love. I hope he feels "seen" by it for who he really was during his short lifetime here on earth—a beautiful, courageous, brilliant person in all his queerness and humanity.

Self-Reflexivity of Researcher Bias

Before beginning this study, I carried many preconceptions about the closet, based on my own subjectivity of being in my father's closet. And while my subjective experience of my own bisexuality is certainly important to this project, I sense that my real pull to examine the closet's trauma arises from the tragic sense that my father was never able to be free of it while alive. For this reason, I found my subjective reactions towards my father's experience of being closeted, and the

intergenerational trauma I inherited as a result, to be the guiding force that rose to the forefront of this project. From my own experience of intergenerational trauma, I assumed that the closet was about shame: the constant, persistent feeling of being bad and wrong for who you are. Aligned with Budden's theory of traumatic shame, I assumed this shame to be lived as a traumatic experience that yielded PTSD symptomology. I also assumed the closet to cause extreme social anxiety—a feeling of not belonging, being abnormal, and fearing judgment and ostracism by others. Moreover, I assumed the closet to cause great isolation and loneliness, experiencing a glass wall separating oneself from others. Finally, I assume the closet to be a dissociative experience, wherein one may lull themselves into long stretches of numbness to bear the passage of time. These preconceptions emerged based on my own subjective experience of the intergenerational trauma of the closet. I also brought speculations into this research about what my dad's closet as an Indian gay man was like. I assumed the closet was a journey from shame to self-empowerment that my dad endured as best he could, during the era and sociocultural environment in which he lived, as an ethnic and sexual minority. I assumed the closet propelled him to sink into despair during this journey, yet re-emerge with wisdom, strength and vitality. And I assumed that his coming out of the closet to me was a gesture of intimacy, an invitation for closeness, an attempt to be seen as a human being—all while attempting to survive in a world wrought with terror for being gay. My assumptions about the closet were confirmed to some degree by participants' data. Yet I was surprised by which themes arose to the forefront of data which I had not considered (freedom, truth, love, hope, power), and which themes were relegated to the background (shame, social anxiety, dissociation). This helped me understand the closeted phenomenon with a fresh perspective.

I also carried an explicitly biased agenda as a researcher, based on my grief and compassion for my father's suffering. I pursued this study with an activist political agenda, rather than a neutral stance. I desired to make a statement through this dissertation: that the closet is a traumatizing

phenomenon whose pain must be widely shared and empathized with in order to shape a more just world. Pursuing phenomenological research with an activist agenda differs from Husserlian phenomenology, which states that we must set aside preconceived notions to obtain an "objective" understanding of a phenomenon. I had no intention of bracketing my biases, which for the most part seemed fine. However, at times my bias threatened to deter my openness to nuance; I could not bring myself to consider the closet as anything but horrible and bad. I feared that a nuanced perspective would betray my compassion for my father, and weaken the political activism of this work. Thankfully, my interviews with participants helped me gradually obtain a nuanced understanding of how the closet is lived. They taught me how the closeted experience allows beauty, power, and hope to sparkle subversively amidst oppression. For instance, one participant described his closet to be a secret world of his own where he could express himself and be free. Another participant described feelings of exuberance and thrill about a romantic relationship with a same-sex partner, despite the relationship being "bound to the shadows" by the closet. Another participant talked about how his exploration of same-sex attraction was "undoubtedly natural and gratifying," though he had to lie about it due to the closet. Another participant discussed how, despite remaining closeted to many people, the several friends to whom he felt safe to come out offered him love and acceptance. Still another stated that his sexual feelings felt inherently beautiful and pleasurable, but society's shaming messages tried to take the beauty and pleasure away. I was surprised by these more pleasant, beautiful expressions and experiences imbedded in participants' descriptions of the closet. I found these expressions to offer glimmers of hope, demonstrating how the light can still somehow sparkle amidst shadows of darkness. The presence of light, beauty, and hope amidst the closet's trauma became a crucial insight in my research findings, and offered me a nuanced perspective that ruptured my original presuppositions of the closet as solely horrifying and bad. These findings

affirmed to me that beauty and hope can still somehow exist amidst the depths of the closet's trauma, and they can be harnessed in order to eventually come out of the closet and heal from it.

The Researcher's Focusing Session

Prior to conducting interviews with participants, I participated in my own Focusing sessions with Focusing-oriented art therapist Liz Baring. We set up three sessions where Liz trained me in Gendlin's six steps of Focusing, and taught me to unearth aesthetic dimensions of the felt sense. Liz collaborated with me to develop and test my data collection method. Participating in Focusing helped develop my capabilities in guiding participants through Focusing. It also allowed me to obtain first-hand knowledge of what I would be asking participants to do.

We engaged in the following Focusing process: first, I wrote an anecdote about my experience being in the closet about having a gay father. I brought my written anecdote into a Focusing session with Liz. Before reading my anecdote, Liz guided me through Gendlin's first step of Focusing: "clearing a space" through a body scan exercise to make contact with my body's sensations. Then she slowly read my written description of the closet aloud. After reading it, Liz asked me to locate sensations arising in my body in response to my memory of the closet. As I described my various bodily sensations, she reflected my words verbatim, asked questions of my felt senses, and helped me track the moment-to-moment sensations arising in my body. The following sections describe the content that emerged from this process.

Summary of my written description of the closet:

I described a memory of being at a bar with my college ex-boyfriend when I was 20. At this time, I was feeling insecure and attempting to transform myself to be somebody that he would like and accept—somebody that I am not. I had gotten so good at being somebody else that I did not

even realize it was a performance anymore. Midway through our conversation, my ex-boyfriend said: "If my child was gay, I would definitely send him to therapy and convert him into being straight." With these words, rage overtook me. The cacophony of sounds at the bar became muted and all I could hear was my heart thumping out of my chest. My performativity as a "sweet, likeable woman" diminished as I spat out hostile words, a torrent of rage directed at him. He looks at me shocked; I had transformed from a "sweet" woman to this person filled with rage. Once my anger died down, we left the bar in silence. I remember feeling like I had silenced myself again. I never told this ex-boyfriend the cause of my anger in that moment. And though deep down I knew my anger was valid, still I felt ashamed.

My felt sense of the closet – sensations and images:

Tensing from exposure: After Liz finished reading my anecdote, I immediately felt my body tense up. The tension made me want to protect myself. This tension seemed to emerge as a result of feeling self-conscious while Liz read my description. I felt exposed and wondered what she was thinking of me. My body was tensing to shield itself from vulnerable exposure.

Sinking into a pool: I also noticed a dull, sinking feeling from my chest to my belly. Liz asked questions like: "What is the quality of that sinking feeling?" The sinking felt like numbness, trying to help me dissociate from feeling exposed. She also asked "Is there an image that goes along with that? Are you sinking into something?" An image of a pool emerged for me. Liz asked questions to further probe this image: "How big is the pool? How far is your body in the pool?" I responded that my body is submerged all the way inside the pool, and that I'm witnessing it in the pool as if in slow motion. Liz asked, "What does it feel like to be there?" I responded that it felt quiet and lonely, but comfortable. Liz responded, "it's comfortable… it sounds like you are used to

it. It is familiar." I responded that it felt like a dullness or numbness that was comfortable. Liz asked, "Is there something more underneath that dullness and numbness? Does that dullness, that numbness, have a message for you?" I tuned into this dull feeling in my body, and responded: "it's saying, 'you're comfortable, but you're not really living.'"

A confident oak tree: Liz asked me, "What do you need to be really living?" I responded "I would need confidence." Liz encouraged me to check in with my body and see if there were any feelings that needed my attention now, as I said the word confidence. I felt a feeling of rootedness growing in my belly area. The image associated with it was a giant, strong oak tree. It was alone, but it was rising above the water, and it helped me feel rooted in my own body. Liz asked me if I wanted to draw this oak tree; I said yes and drew a tree with strong roots.

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Engaging in Focusing helped me fine-tune my data collection procedures for this project. It also allowed me to share with participants that I had gone through the process myself which I was guiding them to do. Focusing took me on an embodied, exhilarating adventure of my own. First, I contacted a dull, numb, sinking feeling of being closeted. Then, I experienced a felt shift by sensing a strongly rooted, grounded, confident oak tree growing in me. These images enlightened me to my own experience of being closeted and coming out. I realized that my own closeted experience incited dissociation, which helped me feel comfortably numb, drifting in a pool of oppression, protected but isolated. Coming out of the closet required me to develop groundedness and confidence, like a strong oak tree. This confidence would help me stand tall and strong—even if I

had to stand alone. These metaphoric images surpassed stereotypical, clichéd images of the closet. They offered new meanings about the phenomenon of the closet.

I became excited to guide participants through their own Focusing journeys. I anticipated helping participants unearth their own interesting, symbolic, embodied images of the closet. These images would collectively contribute to a poetic short film that could rupture stereotypical ideas of the closet and offer a fresh take on it. I also hoped to facilitate "felt shift" for participants transform their painful embodied experience of being closeted, as my own Focusing process did for me.

Chapter 7: Participants' Individual Closeted Experiences

> The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen. (Kübler-Ross, 2014, p. 96)

Introduction to Participants and Individualized Data Interpretation

This chapter shares individual lived experiences of being in the closet as a sexual minority, as described by five research participants. Four participants identified as cis-men, the fifth distanced himself from the gender binary but used he/him/his pronouns. Three participants were white, one was Hispanic, and another was half-White, half-Hispanic. Participants' ages ranged from early twenties to mid-sixties. All participants' names have been changed to protect their identities. All participants had come out about their sexual orientation to others before sharing their experiences with me for this dissertation. One participant was not yet out to their family members. All participants were enthusiastic about contributing their stories for this project for personal and sociocultural healing. Sharing their stories seemed to help participants meaningfully integrate their time in the closet within the wider context of their life, as well as feel positive about contributing to the creation of an LGBTQ advocacy film that might provide hope and healing for others currently struggling within the confines of the closet.

Each participant's individual closeted experience is conveyed in this chapter via four sections. In the first section, I summarize the participant's written description of the closet. In the second section, I share key sensations and images about "felt sense of the closet" which arose during the Focusing portion of our interview, where I guided the participant to language his embodied experience of the closet. In the third section, I share key themes of the participant's overall closeted experience that emerged via a thematic interpretation of both his written and interview data. In the fourth section, I share each participant's artistic reference to the closet.

Across all five participants' experiences of the closet, these four sections were integrated to producing the cinematic-phenomenological description of the closet (i.e. short film) showcased in Chapter 8, as well as the general essence of the closet written in Chapter 9.

ANDRES' CLOSET

Summary of Andres' Written Description

Andres self-identifies as a Hispanic, non-heterosexual, cis-man in his late twenties. Andres' specific memory of the closet took place around Valentine's Day during high school. He was in a secret, on-off relationship with a young man, and was shopping for a gift for his beloved. However, he was with his mother and had to lie to her about the gift, as well as his feelings of excitement, anxiety, and love. Because he and his partner were raised by religious parents who said disparaging thing about gay people, they were afraid of the consequences if they were "found out" for their sexual orientation. Andres felt sadness and loss about not being able to share important feelings and experiences with his mom, who had once been his best friend. When he got home from shopping, he shut himself inside his bedroom, wrapped the gift, and made a Valentine's Day card. The next day at school, he nervously went up to his partner to give him the gift. Sometimes, at school, Andres would be ignored by his beloved who, closeted as well, would put on a persona and act heterosexual. Andres could rationalize this behavior as an attempt to avoid being bullied by homophobic peers. Nevertheless, being ignored would cause Andres to fall into despairing episodes. However, that day, his partner was openly affectionate with him at school, in front of their supportive group of friends. He invited Andres to go to their "secret place" to speak. There, he held Andres in an embrace and began to cry. He delivered a speech about how even though he had strong feelings for Andres, continuing their romance would only harm them because they could never have a public relationship. As long as they lived in the closet, which they believed was their only option, their relationship would keep hurting them. These words were painful to hear. Yet Andres also felt relief by them, because his partner was speaking the truth for the first time—not only about his feelings for Andres, but also about the oppressive circumstances that prevented them from having a future together. They kissed one last time, hugged, and let go. Though their breakup

was painful, it also provided Andres with confirmation that he could, in fact, be loved. This gave him hope.

Andres' Felt Sense of the Closet: Sensations and Images

Rough and heavy pain: Andres' immediate sensation in response to his description of the closet was a rough and heavy pain between his chest and eyes. This pain felt like when he wanted to cry. Andres associated this sensation to great sadness while being in the closet. This sadness began when he first felt sexual attraction towards males as a teenager. He connected this sadness with a sense of loss: "I feel I lost something in my teenage years for not being heterosexual, and that will always be painful to think about." He elaborated that it was a "great injustice… to me, to him, to everyone who has to go through this. It reminds me of a great sadness." The pain reminded him of his depression and suicidality as a teenager: "That's part of the great injustice. Like people don't kill themselves because they want to. It's because they either don't feel any support, or they feel like there is an injustice so big that it is beyond what is happening to them at the moment. And I guess, it goes back to that pain I felt." As a teenager, this emotional pain was ever-present and constantly overwhelming Andres, leading him to tears throughout his days.

Black flowing gel: As Andres brought speech to his emotional pain, his bodily sensation transformed from a roughness to a flowing movement. He described it as a black gel-like substance which was flowing slowly between his chest and his eyes. He reflected that he did not typically bottle up his sadness, but allowed his tears to flow while enduring distress from being closeted. At this present time, however, he did not feel like crying, because he felt more angry than sad about the loss he endured while closeted.

Wheel of fire: When Andres said that he was feeling angry about the loss he endured while in the closet, I asked him to locate in his body where the anger resided. He felt his anger in his belly, as a warm sensation moving in a circular pattern. The image of a spinning wheel of fire for him. He remarked, "I associate fire with rebellion. And red, I guess. Red reminds me of social movements." Andres commented that this embodied experience felt weird, because "I don't really feel anger very much. Well, I feel it. But I don't express anger very much." Andres also shared that sometimes he transforms his sadness into anger, and then channels that anger to branch out and do things that will affect the well-being of the community.

Frozen solid in ice: Andres' described his feet as feeling "ice cold" and associated this sensation with an inability to move. When I asked what his feet might need in order to thaw, he said they need movement, because they currently felt stuck and frozen in inaction. Andres continued:

> I guess what's resonating with me right now is the lack of involvement that I have with the issues here. I feel like my experiences as a teenager molded my trajectory to what I have done as a young adult. Like getting into all these movements… these LGBTQ social movements. But now here I am, frozen solid.

I commented that the sensation of being "frozen solid" was in stark contrast to the wheel of fire in Andres' belly. He responded: "Yeah, that's what I was thinking, actually. Like maybe those need to meet. You ask me what they needed. I feel like they might need each other."

Key Themes from Andres' Written and Interview Data

Self-expression is not allowed: In Andrés' description of the closet, he recounted being prohibited from expressing himself freely within a world of others. His emotional experiences, affectionate, loving, and sexual gestures, physical mannerisms, and general self were not allowed the freedom of expression in most social environments. Though Andres felt euphoric about buying his beloved a Valentine's Day gift, he could not express his emotions to his mother: "There I was, once

again, lying to my mother, when all I really wanted to do was tell her how happy I was that I was about to give the perfect gift to the person I loved." Though Andres wanted to leap into the arms of his beloved at school, he was denied the freedom to publicly express his affection:

> This is no way to experience or live love. Love is lived spontaneously and free. When you see the person you love, you want to rush to them, you want to look them in the eyes, you want to kiss them, you want to hold them, you want engage with them differently. But we were bound to the shadows… it just felt oppressive and wrong.

And though Andres' body sought to physically express itself with "non-masculine" mannerisms and gestures, he felt the need to restrict his bodily expression: "There's a Cards Against Humanity[1] card that says 'calculating every mannerism as to imply heterosexuality,' and that's what it would be like." At the most basic level of bodily freedom, spontaneous self-expression was prohibited by the closet.

Living in fear of consequences: Andres described constant fear of what might happen if he *did* express himself. His religious mother openly condemned same-sex relationships, so he feared her reaction if she found out about his sexual orientation. His school administration also openly condemned homosexuality, and he was surrounded by cruel, homophobic peers at school. So he and his partner both feared being condemned, bullied or attacked if their relationship was revealed. Andres experienced this fear in a very visceral way; his heart would race every time he was with his partner about the possibility of being "found out". This visceral fear of being attacked remains with him today, though he is now out in most spheres of life. He labeled his fear as a "PTSD" reaction that occurs among members of marginalized minority groups. This fear is also intersectional; it arises when Andres grapples with the possibility of anti-Hispanic and anti-gay prejudice in rural geographic locations:

[1] "Cards Against Humanity" is a party game in which players complete fill-in-the-blank statements using words or phrases printed on playing cards.

> Violence is a real thing. We could see that today with the Orlando shooting. I guess I didn't realize until the other day, I still live in an experience of fear. Especially when I leave the city, my boyfriend and I are really scared that, if we stay in this area full of pro-Trump stickers… we're like, whoa, we are Gay and Hispanics here. Like, we're gonna die.

Andres described a recent incident passing a white construction worker in which "I felt my body like cringing, and I just wanted to run, or walk really quickly, have that experience happen really quickly to avoid whatever could happen." This visceral fear leads him to censor self-expression in some public spaces: "I still restrict myself. And I still don't always present my partner as my partner. I catch myself sometimes not wanting to hold my partner in certain places, because of fear."

The safety of seclusion: While closeted, Andres felt safe to express himself only in spaces that were secluded. When he purchased a Valentine's Day gift for his partner, he closed his bedroom door and dwelled there alone, carefully wrapping the gift and constructing a card. When he and his partner sought to be physically affectionate at school, they would hide themselves in shadowy, secluded spaces. Andres recounted spending a great deal of time alone in his room as a teenager, unable to be himself and explore his desires outside the confines of his bedroom walls:

> When I was in my old teenage house, I would just close the door and be in my room for the whole time. And then come out to eat. And then go back in. Because my interests were gay things. I was a singing kid, so I was like, oh I'm going to put makeup on today, I would wear eyeliner. Which is not okay, so I didn't want my parents to find out.

Shutting the door and being alone in private, secluded, shadowy spaces gave Andres the safety to express and be himself, to create, explore, and play, to pursue his natural desires and yearnings. There was great safety in seclusion, yet also great depression, loneliness and unfairness—because in order for Andres to be himself, he had to shut the world out.

A barrier to emotional honesty: Andres described creating a persona around his mother to hide his sexual orientation from her. He found himself constantly pretending to be someone he was

not: "Because of being in the closet and not being able to be myself, I was somebody completely different with her, just to make her happy. I'd pretend to be heterosexual, I'd pretend to go to church, I'd pretend I was fine. I'd pretend, I pretended all the time." He pretended to be someone he was not because he feared rejection from his mother for being non-heterosexual. Though Andres rationally understood his reason for hiding his truth from his mother, nevertheless he felt great guilt about lying to her. His heterosexual persona made him feel deceptive, and it erected a barrier between them: "Although I knew concealing it was for the best, it was still the "lesser evil" because I used to have a very close relationship with her. I now felt not only like there was a barrier between us, but that I was deceiving her in some way." Moreover, Andres withheld the truth from his mother not only about his sexual orientation, but also about his daily feelings. When he felt nervous or anxious about his boyfriend, he would tell his mother he was "just fine". When he felt sad about being closeted, he would tell her he was "just fine". And when he felt excited about giving a gift to his beloved, he would have to hide these feelings from his mother:

> There I was, once again, lying to my mother, when all I really wanted to do was tell her how happy I was that I was about to give the perfect gift to the person I loved. I had done a similar thing years before, when I had my first girlfriend, and mom had even helped me out with buying everything, getting dressed, etc. This time, she couldn't be part of this moment.

Grieving the loss of love: One the most difficult aspects of the closeted experience for Andres was grieving the loss of love he endured with his mother, who had been his best friend growing up. He lost his special relationship because he could no longer be himself around his mother due to the persona he had built around her. Since his mother was very religious and espoused disparaging beliefs about LGBTQ people, this fractured his ability to feel close to her: "Coming out of her mouth was very hurtful, and that kinda broke my relationship with her."

Andres also grieved the loss of love in his romantic relationship with his high-school partner. The closet imposed secrecy on their relationship, which often manifested as his partner turning completely cold and ignoring him around their peers at school. He recounted:

> Every time he would ignore me, I would start spiraling back down into my depression. Even though I could get what he was doing, I still wanted to be with him, and I wanted his acknowledgement and affect. It was days like this, sometimes weeks, that I would fall in very despairing episodes.

Whenever his partner withdrew love and concealed his feelings, Andres would question if he could ever be loved. This deepened his despair.

<u>At the brink of death:</u> Andres spiraled into depressive, despairing episodes several times during high school. He felt despair when his romantic partner ignored him and withheld love. He also felt despair caused by an "inner battle" between his Baptist upbringing, which led him to believe gay people were doomed to hell, and his same-sex attraction. This battle "tore my self-esteem apart. I had been on the brink of death a couple times due to this." In his darkest days, he felt certain that he would inevitably go to hell and would prepare himself to die. Andres explained that these despairing episodes led him to attempt suicide twice. Aside from literally being on the brink of death due to suicidality, Andres also describes moving through the world as a ghost-like presence, with an absence of vitality, during his periods of depression: "I would wear hoodies to school, didn't care about my appearance. I didn't feel energy… Like I could barely move because I didn't have energy. I would walk slowly and barely interact with people. I would not go to the cafeteria, and would go off to corners and cry." He also described enduring perpetual emotional pain which would prevent him from being present throughout his day, because the pain would overwhelm him. He would often wish to just "not be there": "I had to go to the bathroom and cry, like I was not really there. And not only because [the pain] was hard to live with, but also because I didn't want to be there. So

my mind wasn't there." In its darkest moments, the closet instigated feelings of great despair that threatened to kill Andres' vitality, literally and figuratively.

A supportive circle of friends: Love and friendship behaved as antidotes to Andres' despair, bringing him back to life and giving him hope for life. When his romantic partner offered affection, Andres would "spring back to life". Andres also felt loved by a supportive circle of friends around whom he and his partner could express themselves openly: "In a way, they were our family, since they were our biggest emotional support. While we were around them, we could be ourselves, and we could express our emotions, hold hands, kiss, or be touchy in general." Even before he had officially come out, this circle of friends gently hinted that they knew he was not heterosexual and it was okay with them. Andres coped with his depression by turning towards these friends, directing his energy towards sustaining bonds that could alleviate his emotional pain:

> In trying to avoid the pain, I would try to create close relationships. I was more interested in trying to bond with people than anything else. Because I feel like I had lost everything already, so I was trying to gain friendships. Which I ultimately did. That's what got me through the last years of high school, and what got me to come out of the closet. Because I was friends with people that were very accepting, my friends just loved me. I didn't have to be concerned because I knew they cared for me and would be there for me. So my coping was giving more energy to those friendships whenever these things came up for me.

Affirmed by speaking and hearing the truth: Andres' pain was thrown into relief when the truth could be openly spoken. Speaking the truth, and hearing the truth be spoken, offered him a breath of fresh air amidst artifice and pretense. This relief was felt most strongly when his high-school romantic partner openly disclosed his true feelings for Andres. This partner had never verbally admitted his feelings for Andres. The silence was painful, making Andres wonder if he could be loved. Andres attributed his partner's silence to the closet's oppression, which censored self-expression. He found it courageous and beautiful, then, when his partner let go of the closet's constraints to express his emotional truths aloud during a break-up speech. Andres explains:

> It was the first time that his 'harmful' words were actually a relief. I feel like he could have just continued what he used to do which was just ignore me. But instead he decided to literally let all his emotion out. And be honest and real about what was happening. Like this is how I feel, but this is the reality of life. He was finally the most truthful about his feelings, and even though what he said was sad, it was very true.

Hearing the truth spoken aloud was liberating, because it served as an affirmation of Andres' reality. This affirmation of reality helped Andres feel sane. Moreover, Andres explained that he had struggled with feelings of lovability due to internalizing society's stereotypical messages that gay relationships were hyper-sexual but lacking in love. As such, his partner's open disclosure about his strong feelings conveyed to Andres that he could, in fact, be loved:

> It was very liberating for me. Because I was like, I know what I feel for you. And I'm assuming that you feel the same way, but you've never mentioned it. So even though he was ending it, it freed me from this ambiguous experience that I was having. I feel like it was good for me, because it was like, oh… I *can* be loved.

Ultimately, Andres felt healed by hearing another person speak his truth and reflect back Andres' truth. These spoken disclosures brought sanity, relief, and liberation to Andres, as well as hope that he could someday be in a reciprocally loving relationship: "It proved that I can continue being gay and I'll be fine. Even though this person can't be with me, doesn't mean it's not going to work out for me in the future. So instead of pain coming out of it, it was more like, hope."

The power of anger and destruction: Andres' description of coming out of the closet included experiences of anger and destruction. For Andres, both anger and destruction were sources of empowerment. His anger served as a fuel for self-assertion, propelling him to stand up against oppression. When his school administration sought to prohibit same-sex affection and kissing occurring in his friend group, Andres recounted: "We were like, fuck that, you can't make us not love ourselves." His anger was a fire which allowed him to proclaim: "Fuck you, administration!" He labeled this empowerment as a kind of destruction, because "we were destroying that [conservative] tradition" by breaking its norms and asserting same-sex love. Andres'

anger also fueled his ability to stand up to his family when they said disparaging things about LGBTQ people. He let them know that it was not acceptable. Again, Andres experienced this empowerment as a kind of destruction, because standing up to his family "does destroy family dynamics, in a way. But then, years have passed. And there has been rebirth, in that I'm closer to my mother now." This theme of destruction and rebirth was also present in Andres' description of destroying his heterosexual persona when coming out of the closet. He recounts: "I started dressing differently, and I started being funny, like my persona was totally destroyed and I was like this perky person." Andres associated the destruction of his persona to the death and rebirth that occurs through reincarnation: "Coming out of the closet is kind of like a death. I feel like that was an old me, and I have been reincarnated into this other body now." Andres related his personal process of reincarnation to a larger, societal process of transformation, where destruction must also occur. He used race relations and the Black Lives Matter movement as an example:

> For example, the Black Lives Matters movement, there's a lot of pain, and there's a lot of change that has to come... They're experiencing pain and anger. And then the white community is experiencing pain and anger because they feel attacked. So there has to be fire and death in order for rebirth. The phoenix would be a good example. There's all this fire and death, and then a phoenix is reborn.

Andres linked the goal of killing white supremacy with the goal of killing heteronormativity. Both are processes of death and rebirth that are painful yet necessary: "Societally, change is painful. But heteronormativity kind of has to die in order to make space for inclusion and difference."

As Andres was discussing these themes of anger, destruction and rebirth, his bodily presence transformed in the room. At the beginning of the interview, when recounting the pain of being in the closet, his hands shielded his face and his body shirked into the couch. Then, Andres assertively began proclaiming "fuck that!" as he recalled coming out and destroying heteronormative constraints. While doing so, his posture straightened, chest lifted, and he began to powerfully take

up his space in the room. By the end of the interview, Andres sat very differently across from me—so present, proud, and powerful in his body and being.

Andres' Artistic Reference of the Closet

During high school, when Andres was in the closet, he read *Dante's Inferno* to learn what hell would be like and prepare himself to die. Raised as a Baptist Christian, he was convinced that he was going to hell as a sinner—not only because he was attracted to men but also because he was constantly lying to his mom and "living a lie". In *Dante's Inferno*, the liars were doomed to the final circle of hell, which consisted of a layer of ice where people were frozen solid. Andres associated his frozen feet during the Focusing exercise to being frozen in this final layer of hell:

> It goes back to my feet I guess. They're cold, in the final level of hell. Like, people who went to the final level of Hell in *Dante's Inferno* were liars. And I felt like I had to lie to her all the time. Because my life was a lie. And she was living a lie about her son. So…it was very hard. And again, at the moment I was Christian, so it was also very hard for me. Because I was sinning both emotionally, cuz I liked men, and because I was lying to my parents all the time.

Moreover, in *Dante's Inferno*, all the stories of hell described people being in physical pain. Andres remarked that his emotional pain while on earth felt worse than any physical pain in hell could.

BEN'S CLOSET

Summary of Ben's Written Description

Ben self-identifies as a white, gay cis-man in his early twenties. Ben wrote that the phenomenon of the closet has been present for him from infancy to current adulthood, but there was a particular experience in which its suffering became "excruciatingly apparent". In high school, he was attracted to a girl who became his girlfriend. He experienced genuine feelings for her which confused him, because deep down he knew he was more sexually and emotionally attracted to men. His attraction to men was a piece of inner knowledge that was unbeknownst to her, his peers, and

their families. Ben felt he had everything going for him in terms of society's expectations: a beautiful girlfriend, exceptional grades, great friends. Yet something felt missing: his relationship with his girlfriend felt emotionally empty, their sexual connectivity was not enough, and he felt he was settling for what was expected of him by society. Ben began to feel like he was compromising his integrity by maintaining a relationship with her. Meanwhile, he became internally preoccupied with his sexual attraction towards men, which he explored on gay internet dating sites. His interactions with men on these sites would feel natural and gratifying if not for the shame he felt about engaging in them secretly without his girlfriend's knowledge. To cope with this shame, Ben rationalized by telling himself a lie: that his connections with men are not emotional, just physical. This lie created overwhelming confusion and an excruciating inner debate. When he realized his denial, he decided it was unfair to continue deceiving his girlfriend, who he loved deeply as a friend. He broke up with her several days later. However, Ben never told her about his attraction to men, nor the pain and conflict that his inner debate had caused him, which he regrets to this day.

Ben's Felt Sense of the Closet: Sensations and Images

<u>Uncomfortably warm layers:</u> Ben's immediate sensation upon listening to his description was his entire body warming up, in an unpleasant and uncomfortable way. He described it as a feeling of being bundled up with layers such as a hat, gloves, and a scarf on a really cold day, and then walking into someone's extremely warm house. He described an uncomfortable feeling of persistent heat that occurs when you still have all those bundled layers on inside the warm house, and you can't take them off just yet. Ben associated this uncomfortable warmth with a feeling of anger about having to "put on a façade" during his time in the closet. He also associated this feeling with regret about not being able to tell his girlfriend the truth about his attraction to men.

A clamped down jaw: I asked Ben to identify where in his body the word "anger" might reside. He felt it in his jaw, as a sensation of clamping down on his teeth, such that his mouth felt firmly shut. He associated the feeling of clamping down on teeth with his tendency to clamp down on his anger to resist expressing it:

> I do it myself. Its where I immediately associate the word anger. I was sitting here the whole time as you were reading and I was being in tune with my body. I noticed that it just got tighter and tighter. It wasn't uncontrollable, I knew that I could open my mouth if I wanted to. It reminded me of when you have a little sister or son or daughter and they do something wrong. And you get angry, and you clamp down on your teeth.

Ben elaborated that he clamps down on his jaw because he fears what might happen if he *does* express his anger. He also reflected that his jaw being tightly shut was "a metaphor in and of itself for the lock being locked. For the closet door being closed. For that last brick being paved."

Letting out laughter: When asked what his clenched jaw needs to be less fearful of expressing itself, Ben said "well obviously I guess to talk. Just get my jaw unclamped so air passes through." He also said that his jaw needed laughter: "when you are in a good, hearty laugh, your mouth is completely adjacent, which is the complete opposite of it being tightly shut." Ben explained that laughter is one of the most effective coping mechanisms for him amidst adversity:

> I think that's a big thing for me, laughter, as one of the more healthy psychological defenses… It's still a defense, nonetheless, but its protective in and of itself. I've always kind of been that person that never really enters a continued denial. But I would more or less prefer to laugh about it… And the laughter is symbolic for, you know, opening of the mouth, opening of the floodgates, so that water can move through.

Ben reflected on the therapeutic value of laughter as a shared experience with others: "You know, sometimes you need to not be so serious. But also there has always been something healing to see other people smile. And kind of, the shared experience of smiling together, and laughing together."

Sinking into bed: As Ben discussed laughter, he felt a numb, tingling sensation in his body. He described it as the feeling of finally returning home after a long day at work: "You finally get home and you eat something and you go to lay down, and as you like stretch out, like that feeling that your body has." He described it as a comfortable "sinking" feeling, like sinking into the bed: "not sinking in a bad way… sinking like you can decompress yourself."

Blue calm waters: When talking about laughter, Ben noticed the hot sensation leaving his body, replaced by a cooling feeling. This cooling sensation manifested in his body as a blue color, like the blue of calm waters. As he described these blue calm waters, he also imagined hearing the wind outside.

A compulsion to move: Ben's feet felt antsy, and he felt a compulsion to tap them because they wanted to move. He associated this antsyness with a dissatisfaction for being "complacent" while in the closet. He explained: "I guess I get tired of sitting still. And that reminds me of being dissatisfied with the feeling of being in the closet. Not being myself. I guess that's why I feel the compulsion to move in the present."

Stiff like a lock: Ben also described discomfort about not gesturing with his hands during the Focusing exercise: "I'm usually I'm a big hand gesturer. And with my eyes shut I feel like I don't hand gesture as much. And that feels weird to me, not to talk with my hands." He described the sensation of his hands as a feeling of stiffness—"stiff like a lock". As Ben's hands felt locked into stiffness and stillness, the image of a heavy lock emerged for him.

<u>A featureless white mask</u>: Ben described his face as feeling flat: "almost as if though I have a flat affect, which is the very opposite of me. I talk with my face just as much as I talk with my hands." The image associated with this felt sense of flatness was a pale, porcelain white face without its features—without his eyes, eyebrows, or nose: "kind of like a blank slated mask". This image evoked a sense of emptiness for Ben. In connecting this image with the closet, he said that we tend to associate identity with a face. So by seeing this image of himself without his face, Ben felt like his identity was taken away from him by the closet.

Key Themes from Ben's Written and Interview Data

<u>Settling for societal expectations:</u> In Ben's description of the closet, he described feeling like he was supposed to have "everything going for him" because he had a beautiful girlfriend, good grades, and a wide circle of friends. By society's standards, this is considered the pinnacle of achievement for a high-school man. However, Ben also described feeling empty amidst this supposed success, as if there was something missing. This feeling of *something missing* arose most often in his sexual experiences with his girlfriend, during which he felt romantic emptiness and knew deep down that their connection was "not enough". Ben explained, "I began to feel like I was settling for what was expected of me." He expressed dissatisfaction about his complacency for remaining in a heterosexual relationship and not exploring his full sexuality.

<u>Internal vs external knowledge and worlds:</u> Ben contrasted his "internal" knowledge of his sexuality with the lack of knowledge about it in the "external" world. His attraction to men was something he knew internally, but this knowledge remained "unbeknownst" to his girlfriend and his parents, who perceived him as a heterosexual man. Since Ben was the only one who knew about his true desires, the closet seemed to split his existence between an "internal" and an "external" world.

In the internal world, he possessed self-knowledge about his truest yearnings, drives, and preoccupations. Yet this truth was not accessible to the external world. The external world only had knowledge of Ben through his external appearance as a heterosexual man in a happy, successful relationship with a young woman—an appearance which was unreal and untrue. This split between internal vs. external knowledge—and internal vs. external worlds—caused Ben to feel shame, because he felt he was constantly lying to his significant others. Ben yearned to make his inner truth known to others in the external world. He described deeply regretting not being able to bridge this internal-external divide.

Self-policing self-expression: Ben also described being the target of external speculation about whether he was gay. He wondered if he partially remained in a heterosexual relationship to protect himself from speculation and teasing. While in the closet, this external speculation produced anxiety for Ben and led him to constantly "self-police" his natural mannerisms and self-expressions. For instance, he did not really talk that much, in case the way he talked made people "catch on" that he was gay. Ben described a constant *need* to self-police: "I consistently felt as though I had to make sure everything was right. I had to make sure that my hair wasn't frizzy. I had to make sure that my clothes were right. I had to make sure these things aligned, so that I felt okay. So there was this self-policing for so many years to fit in." Now, Ben proudly seeks to divulge in his unique mannerisms and expressions, rather than police them. Even so, the need for self-policing returns when he is reminded of the possibility of gay-bashing or homophobic comments in present day.

Regretting the façade: Ben expressed anger and regret about having to "put on a façade" while in the closet. He felt that he was "cheated" out of the ability to be open about who he was—

to be "100% honest" and express all of himself to others. He wavered between being angry at himself and being angry at society, which he felt didn't leave him with a choice:

> One of the things I regret is not being open about it then... I feel like I cheated myself out of it. But doing what I wanted to do didn't seem like it could have been an option at the time. So that's where the anger is directed at… that I did have to hold back, that I couldn't express it all…So not just anger at myself, but also angry that I had to put on that façade in general.

Ben described "locking in a façade" to prevent bad things from happening to him: "locking away the true me, so that way it couldn't be hurt." In doing so, he felt guilt and shame about lacking integrity and lying to people he cared about:

> It's not that easy to just be like, okay, you self, be expressive about who you really are. But it just felt, in a way, like a lie. And my upbringing was always pretty heavy on not liking liars. My mom always said, you can do anything you want to do. But don't lie about it. I don't like liars and I don't like thieves, she used to always say. So that's something that resonates with me, because I, it, was a lie. I continued to try to lie to myself, whether it was so that I could do these things that I desired to do, or that I shouldn't. So it was either a lie or a lie…

One of Ben's major regrets was breaking up with his girlfriend, yet not being open and telling her he was gay. Now, Ben makes it a point to be "an open book" about being gay, and he affiliates himself with the LGBTQ community as much as possible: "I think that's self-affirming. I can tell you [I'm gay], and you can't take that away from me. You can't make me hide parts of myself anymore." Ben said he felt grateful for the closeted experience because of how he has emerged from it—with greater self-honesty and the decision to be true to himself:

> I am grateful for the closeted experience, in a way. 'Cause it was kind of, revitalizing… Despite a lot of, you know, ridicule, I was still able to become what I feel is me. That it didn't hinder me from becoming who I am now, you know. It made it hard, but I didn't, you know, keep up that charade for long… You know, so I have a lot of time to be honest with myself, I have a lot of time to experience what I want to.

Excruciating inner debate: Ben described a painful "inner debate" that reoccurred while closeted. Though deep down, he knew he yearned to be with a man, he also experienced genuine feelings towards his girlfriend. This confused him, as he could not tell whether it was possible to be

in a true romantic relationship with her. He could also perform sexually with her, despite feelings of emptiness while doing so, which "caused an influx of confusion given the fact that I am more sexually and emotionally attracted to men." Ben described their relationship as growing "closer yet farther apart," a dynamic which felt "contradictory and disorganization internally." When Ben began exploring his attraction to men online, it felt very gratifying and natural. However, he rationalized to himself that his attraction to men was "only physical and not emotional." This rationalization perpetuated his confusion. Ben described a continual "push-pull" dynamic of pursuing intimacy with a man online, and then pulling away from it due to feelings of shame and guilt, as well as respect for his girlfriend and integrity for himself. Ben was finally able to end this excruciating inner debate by ending his relationship with his girlfriend. Breaking up with her permitted him to fully explore his sexuality with integrity.

Ultimately, Ben was able to achieve clarity through a process of self-exploration: "You can't really define yourself before you explore it. So it was hard for me to be like, oh well I'm I'm gay, or I like guys, or I like girls. But I came to realize that I like girls more as an intimate friendship than in the romantic way." He said he was also able to come to this realization through his academic studies: "I think a lot of my feelings now could also be attributed to my academic background. Because I was able to scholastically look at these things in depth. And write about these things in depth without being criticized." His self-exploration not only led him to the realization that he gay, but also that he could be happy in being open and truthful about being gay: "Partly, in being so comfortable with myself, is finding that I could be happy by telling the truth. I could be happy by going out there and getting the things that I actually do desire despite what people may feel or say." This realization helped him come out of the closet to his mother.

Cut by shaming comments: Ben described feeling "cut" by others' derogatory comments about homosexuality. Currently he is out as gay in most aspects of life, yet others still sometimes make antagonistic comments about gay people in his vicinity—family, friends and people at work. Ben felt his neck heating up and turning red as he recounted these experiences. In each experience, Ben felt "cut" by others' antagonistic comments: "The quickest thing that a lot of [people] say to me to get under my skin… is to call me a f*ggot[2]. And each time, it's that little cut. It's a little cut." He described these cuts as similar to paper cuts—not enough to entirely debilitate or kill you, but wounding nevertheless. These comments feel like a "hit to self-perception" which can shame him back into the closet at any moment. Due to the constantly threat of being shamed by antagonistic comments, Ben described the closet as "omnipresent". He reflected:

> There will forever be a part of me that is still there. There's just this part that's stuck there. Sometimes you never really know when you're going to be symbolically thrown back into the closet for expressing that you are a certain way. Or shamed for being that certain way. You may be out of the closet verbally, but you could be put back psychically with shame.

Others' acceptance empowers self-love: Others' reactions caused Ben shame, yet others' reactions also had the power to assuage this shame. When he first came out to his mother, he feared her rejection and disapproval: "Is she going to still gonna accept me, is she still gonna support me, is she gonna try to convince me not to be that way? Is she going to think I have a problem? And you know, none of those things happened. But I was fearful of it." Instead, Ben received acceptance, love, and a willingness to learn: "She was okay with it. And she worked through it, she worked with me. She wanted to learn more about it. So after coming out to my mom, it just seemed so much easier to come out to everyone else." Receiving explicit acceptance from his mother felt relieving to

[2] Please note that I have decided to include asterisks to censor slurs in this dissertation in order to communicate my awareness of the gravity of the word, the historical and present day violence it has caused, and the painful experience of it for many people when read or heard.

Ben, like "flood gates opening and water rushing through." His mom's acceptance helped Ben accept and affirm himself. Ben now loves being open with the world about his sexuality: "I went from fearing saying that I'm gay, to really loving saying it. Even if it makes somebody feel uncomfortable."

Just as his mother did for him, Ben now actively seeks to provide acceptance to others in the LGBTQ community struggling with low self-esteem. He wants to help them love themselves the same way he loves himself, particularly transgender individuals: "[I want to] show them that they can love themselves for who they are.... I'll feel like I have fulfilled my purpose with each person that I help see that." Ben said he hopes to help others feel comfortable opening up about themselves to him: "You have somebody whose crying, they want to talk they seem somewhat resistant, like they're really not too sure if they want to let you in. But you kind of, unlock that door and crack it open just a little bit, and then you wait for them to open it." Participating in this dissertation also fulfills Ben's purpose to help others gain self-love:

> I'm just glad that my perspective on my own experience has the ability to help other people… I hope that with every pair of eyes that sees this film, they get something out of it. Because I got something out of the experience. So just knowing that it could be out there and has the potential to help someone is rewarding in and of itself.

Encountering diversity: Ben also attributed his ability to come out to moving out of a small, homogenous town and being exposed to diversity in the diverse city of Pittsburgh:

> On a given night in Southside, you'll see about 550 different types of individuals. Down in the south, where this situation that happened, it was more sheltered. There was less diversity. If you didn't wear a camouflage jacket and one of those bright orange, dock hunting hats, you were a problem. If you wore tight jeans, you were a problem. If you wore, eccentric clothes, you were a problem.

Once he arrived in Pittsburgh, Ben described feeling free to explore and express more of himself, because he experienced himself as a diverse human being among a kaleidoscope of other diverse human beings: "I felt that there were more differences around me, that people wouldn't necessarily

stagnate on how I was different. Because you know, it was an acknowledgment that everybody's different, and that's okay, for most of the time."

Ben's Artistic Reference of the Closet

Ben shared a quote that brought him great solace during his experiences of being closeted: "When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace". Ben explained:

> When the power of love—so whether that's love for other people, or love for yourself—overcomes the love of power—so loving power is essentially that façade. Because for me to have that façade, I felt as if though it gave me power over the other people. But you know, that was essentially the lie. But to love myself was moreso what gave me power over them. Because I feel like that's why they would say the things to me, or try to purposely make me feel uncomfortable, was because they're truly not happy with themselves. So as long as I'm happy with myself, it doesn't really matter what somebody else says to me.

Maintaining a façade helped Ben feel power over others in an oppressive world which rendered him powerless. However, once he became happy with himself and acquired self-love, Ben no longer needed to feel power over others, because he detected an inner sense of power within: self-love. This insight has provided Ben with solace when he is targeted by others' homophobic comments. It reminds him that when others are harming him to gain a sense of power, it is probably because they do not love themselves: "Cuz that's kind of the truth, you know. It's the quickest way to mediate yourself in a situation where somebody is verbally antagonizing you. So this is what I'm going to have to think about, the next time somebody calls me a f*ggot."

MANUEL'S CLOSET

Summary of Manuel's Written Description

Manuel self-identifies as a half-White, half-Hispanic, pansexual person in his early twenties, who goes by his/him/his pronouns. Manuel described his high-school years of being closeted as a

time of intense self-loathing, denial, and self-destruction through alcohol consumption. He perceived his attraction to men as a disease that he needed to combat, and he hated himself and his body for it. Alcohol helped him avoid reality, forget his pain, and "keep his impulses in check." Manuel described an evening where he was a high school party with his friends, who were "all straight jocks". His agenda was to get wasted and hook up with a "chick" to affirm his masculinity to his friends. He made out with a girl and re-joined his friends afterwards, who all applauded his success as a "lady killer." Then, they ran into a high school acquaintance sitting on a bench outside the party. This person was openly gay, and he seemed comfortable and not ashamed of his sexuality. The presence of this openly gay man evoked feelings of fury, jealousy, and confusion for Manuel, as well as reminded him of the need to suppress his own sexuality. In a moment of extreme anger, Manuel shouted "fucking f*ggot" to this person, and began continuously yelling homophobic slurs at him. Eventually, he began punching this gay man, who was so drunk on the bench that he could not defend himself. While some party-goers tried to stop him, his jock friends cheered him on. Manuel reflected that every punch that landed on this man's body was meant to punish him for putting his sexuality in Manuel's mind. Later, he went home and physically punished himself through self-harm, as an attempt to drain out "every last drip" of the "impure" thoughts and impulses from his mind and body.

Manuel's Felt Sense of the Closet: Sensations and Images

<u>Dodging a bullet:</u> Manuel's immediate bodily sensation upon hearing his narrative read aloud was a reactionary, defensive feeling. He described his body tightening up in response to me reading the word "f*ggot". He said that when he hears a homophobic word, he has been conditioned to turn his head due its harshness, as if dodging a bullet. He described it as a "startle" and "jerk" response due to that word "popping out of nowhere", similar to if a black person heard a

white person say the N-word: "Since I identify with the word f*ggot, and I know that other people who use that word don't identify with that, it can be really harsh and powerful." He sometimes hears that word said aloud in the locker room or skate park. It makes his ears jump and his head turn: "It really is a defensive mode at that point." When a person uses that word who does not identify with it, it feels like a bullet is being launched in his direction: "even if the person isn't intending to hit someone directly, if you are a person in the room who identifies with that word…that bullet's coming for you. Even if it's not their intention, you're going to get hit with it."

The pressure of inflating a rock: Manuel also described feelings of tension and pressure located between his eyes and forehead. He elaborated that this tension felt like "where you're very very nervous and trying to think and locate your thoughts." He experienced tension and tightness in "everything that connects my heart up to my head. Anything that would help me communicate." Manuel felt like all his racing thoughts were being "absorbed into the pressure of his forehead," and he wanted to get these thoughts to come out of his mouth. He wished he could feel "comfortable and capable of expressing all the racing thoughts with speech." When I inquired into the pressure he was experiencing in his forehead, he likened the pressure to "inflating a rock," in the sense of "trying to add more and more thoughts, and more and more substance, to something that can't grow or expand. And not being able to release any of that properly." Connecting this sensation with his experience of being closeted, he reflected that the closet did not allow Manuel to express himself, so consequently many racing, anxious thoughts would build up in his mind. Because he was unable to release his thoughts out of his mouth through speech, he experienced great feelings of pressure, tension, and tightness.

Seeping and spreading mud: Because he could not release his thoughts into speech, Manuel described a feeling of "seeping" occurring throughout his body: "my brain and my mouth that are kinda like seeping into other parts of my body, like down to my heart." He described the seeping feeling as a deep, heavy mud-like substance which is "forcing itself through spaces, through cracks. And everything in its way is trembling." He further explained that this mud was expanding inside of him and he needed to give it a "different route to expand somewhere outside of me."

Needing the cyst to pop: Manuel said this buildup of pressure felt like "a big cyst… it just needs to be popped." If the cyst were popped, it would allow all the buildup to come out and be gone: "I want everything built up in me to just to come out, even if it has to like explode. It has to burst somehow. Just so that I can move freely." Manuel elaborated that it was like a "hardened puss… something you need to get out of your body and you're waiting for it. You don't know when it's going to come out but its making you stressed as hell. You'll do anything to get it out." I asked Manuel what he thought would help him get it all out. He said it would help if someone else came and popped the cyst for him, rather than do it himself. Relating this to the closet, he described the buildup of pressure as emotional pain that he was carrying around for so long, from having to restrict his feelings and expressions while closeted:

> It's just like this containment of emotion and feeling and expression… I've been carrying this luggage for so long, that you just want it out of you. You just want it quick, fast, done, you just want it to pop. But you don't feel comfortable doing it yourself and need someone to show you the route.

Immovable stone statue: Manuel said his body felt confined and "compressed in on itself." His arms, back, forehead, and hands, were stiff because the pressure kept building up, and "there's

nowhere else for all this buildup to let go." He described his body as a golem[3] or rock which was "incapable of moving… I'm being filled up and everything just feels really heavy." He also described his body as a "stone statue" from his whole waist up. When I suggested he move his hands or feet, he responded, "Honestly, I feel incapable of that right now."

***The face of a friend*:** I told Manuel that I wanted to help create a shift in his body to come out of the experience he was presently enduring. I asked him to reflect on his time being closeted in high school, and identify anything or anyone that helped him overcome the pain to get to where he is now. Manuel recalled his friend David as a supportive person with whom he felt comfortable crying. With David, he felt safe to express himself: "I could be comfortable showing my emotions and vulnerabilities with him. I can't show my vulnerabilities to everyone 'cause that could put me in danger. But with David I could freely put myself 100% out there, like everything on the line, and know that I would be okay." David was a safe person to whom expressing himself released the painful pressure building inside. I asked Manuel to bring David's face into his mind. Manuel responded with tears in his eyes: "It's like honestly making me smile. It's like a relief."

Puncturing a balloon: Upon bringing David's face into his mind, the pressure in Manuel's body began to release. He associated this release to the image of puncturing a balloon: "like when you put a light little hole in a balloon and it starts to seep out, a little bit, a little bit. And everything's releasing." Manuel said that his body did not feel tense or constricted at all anymore. He attributed

[3] In Hebrew, "golem" stands for "shapeless mass." In Jewish folklore, a golem is an anthropomorphic figure created from inanimate matter, such as clay or mud.

this feeling of release to the knowledge that he has friends with whom he can be vulnerable and confide in.

Unburying a rock: Manuel said this Focusing process helped him confront the pain buried in him from his closeted experience. He shared the metaphor of digging up a rock that has been deeply buried underground: "If you don't dig out everything you need to get out of the hole, then it's going to keep building up. You need to dig your shovel all the way down, and when you have it all the way down, then you pull it up." Similar to unburying a rock from the dirt, Focusing allowed Manuel to make direct contact with the pain of the closet and to process it. He felt it was necessary to fully confront his pain, so that he could "get [my] hands down there and pull it all out."

An inner force of power: Manuel also felt astonished about his inner resources for power, which he contacted via Focusing. During the focusing process, he had initially felt overtaken by the painful force of the mud seeping through his body. He said that "it feels like the only thing to use right now is just like force… to kind of combat the force that's just like pushing itself through me." Manuel tapped into a powerful force within him to combat the painful, oppressive force of the closet: the face of a friend. The image of David's face served as a force of love to combat the pain and fear of the closet. Manuel said that previously, when his trauma of the closet has been triggered, he has felt helpless in the face of its force. However, he now realizes he can be in control of this experience, because he has a powerful force within him that can combat the closet's force:

> In the past I've never had a release from it. There was no conclusion, there was no compromise, there was nothing that ended it on a positive note. This was the first moment that I got to like, handle it myself. That I didn't have to wait it out. I didn't have to wait for it to end. I was actually able to use something to combat it… It just felt weird to like be in control of it. And to know that I could do something about it. And that like, equally with how powerful the physical responses were…Like physically, to know how powerful I was too—to know that I was able to bring forward opposing physical forces that were able to undo that, that were even more powerful than that.

Key Themes from Manuel's Written and Interview Data

The violence of internal and external homophobia: A prominent theme that arose in Manuel's description of the closet was the violence of homophobia. He was raised by a very conservative, homophobic father who uttered homophobic and racist slurs. He grew up internalizing that hatred, and even enacting it himself: "I was brought up like completely opposite of the person who I am now. So I know both perspectives of it, and I know how powerful hatred can be. And how violent it can actually get." Manuel describes the hatred of homophobia manifesting as both self-directed and other-directed violence. Internalized homophobia caused him to hate himself and his body. He engaged in alcoholism and self-harm to punish himself for his "impure" and "diseased" nature:

> I was filled with self-loathing and every day I existed was a struggle because I was living in denial. I thought I had a disease and all I knew and wanted to do was to combat it and all of the persuasions that came with it. I hated my body, I hated myself, and I hated who I knew I could become if I didn't keep my impulses in check. I could comfortably say that by my senior year of high school that I was a full-blown alcoholic. I wanted to destroy my body.

Manuel's self-hatred for his homosexual feelings translated to a hatred of gay people who were out, open and confident about their sexuality. He reflected that both self-and-other directed violence stemmed from the same source of internalized homophobia:

> For every punch I had landed on his body I had probably done four times as much to myself when I got home later that night. I hated myself for having the "impure" thoughts that I did and I even hated myself for hating myself. It was as if the blood that came from his face when I struck it was the same that I needed to rid myself of. What I had done to that boy's body isn't only the hatred I possessed for him, but it was also the self-hatred that had been instilled into me by my family, friends, and "loved ones".

Manuel expressed great remorse about his violence towards other sexual minorities. He also shared wisdom about the fine line between self-and-other hatred—the ways they can be two sides of the same coin. In light of the 2016 Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting and the speculation of Omar Mateen's homosexuality, Manuel found it important to courageously share his own narrative of

violence. Now, he experiences constant vigilance regarding violence not only for himself but for other queer people in heteronormative environments. He seeks to disrupt anti-gay slurs and behaviors, to protect others from being victimized by the homophobic violence that he once enacted while closeted: "I feel some responsibility to ensure that other queer people wouldn't have to go through experiences like that."

<u>Presenting a passing image</u>: In high school, Manuel became aware of social norms for how to present oneself as a straight, white, cis-passing man. Manuel sought to hide his own difference—his queerness as well as half-Latino heritage, wherein he can pass for completely white. He adopted these norms and sought to pass as a hyper-masculine, straight white jock, which helped him receive recognition and affirmation from his peers. Manuel also hoped that by crafting an external heteronormative presentation, this could change his internal sexual impulses:

> I thought that physically presenting myself those ways and verbally being like a straight person, would equally challenge and change my sexuality. I thought making those changes would change who I was internally. If I changed my outward appearance and actions, that eventually that would change my sexual desires.

Nevertheless, Manuel's externally crafted presentation did not change his sexual feelings. This made him angry, because "no matter how many efforts that I took to change myself about those things, hide those things, and challenge those things, it only further reinforced that I was living a lie." Today, though Manuel has made progress in undoing internalized homophobia and being out as pansexual, he remarked that he still passes a straight, white, cis-boy to the outer world: "Because of my past, I've crafted myself in a way that physically and visually I outwardly project as a hyper-heteronormative person. Even though it's ridiculous to think that you can present one way, and have that represent your entire sexuality and gender." He sometimes feels upset with himself for having constructed a passing image, both as straight-passing and White-passing. He wonders if he should make efforts to change his experience to reveal "who he really is" to others. Then he

counters this thinking by asserting that there is no need to craft a stereotypical visual image to prove himself to others: “I don’t have to look or sound or be like any stereotypes to legitimize who I am… Sexuality has nothing to do with a person’s physical presentation. It’s ridiculous that we put all this importance on imagery and presentation.”

Restrictions and constraints: For Manuel, one of the major consequences of the closet was the restrictions it placed on his emotional expression. He mourned being unable to freely express his feelings the way that heterosexual people are allowed to: “being hetero is a privilege in our society. It is a privilege in the way that you can freely and openly express every bit of your emotions.” He explained that when spending time with his dad, brother, or friends, he could talk about hooking up with a “hot chick” and it was acceptable, but he was not allowed to talk about his sexual and romantic encounters with people of other genders. Manuel was not yet out to his brother, and he remarked that the closet’s restrictions on his emotional expression limited the closeness of his relationship to his brother. Additionally, Manual explained that if he were to talk about romantic feelings or sexual encounters with other men in heteronormative social environments, he feared becoming victimized by violence: “like I’ve always played hockey. If I were to bring up things like that, about hooking up with guys, in a locker room or like at a skate park… I could very well face some violent threats. Both verbal or physical. It poses a real danger, just to even freely speak.” Manuel related the closet’s constraints on his emotional expression to being in jail:

> I’ve been in jail before. I’ve been in booking, processing, overnight type of stuff. It’s like knowing that your release should be in the next two or three days, and just waiting, waiting, waiting and feeling so constrained. Like, feeling so anxious. Just having all this pain, even with your body, you don’t know what to do with yourself. And once you’re out of there, you just feel like you’re on top of the world.

As such, Manuel described a feeling of “release” in knowing he has loved ones with whom he can openly speak about his experiences and emotions. Being able to openly express his feelings feels like

freedom: "It's just like something that feels free… like with David, I can freely talk to about that kind of stuff… no regrets, everything is already out there."

Affirmed for being normal: Manuel said that he stopped viewing his sexuality as a poisonous disease because other people in his life, with whom he disclosed his experiences and emotions, have responded by normalizing his sexuality. For instance, his current romantic partner Jackie, is the first partner to whom he can openly talk about his sexual experiences with guys. Before her, he felt he had to hide his sexuality in his romantic relationships with women. Manuel explained:

> With my previous girlfriend… those were still the things that with her I didn't feel comfortable bringing up… I didn't feel comfortable saying, hey I hooked up with someone that's not a girl. So I guess with Jackie, it was kinda the first partner with that I could openly talk about my sexual experiences with men, and other people that weren't women.

When he first told Jackie about his sexual experiences and feelings for guys, she responded by normalizing it: "There was no, oh that's good for you or whatever, or oh wow that's weird or strange. It was just, okay, that's normal. It's nothing to… its no reason to have a coming out party." Jackie affirmed that his sexuality was normal, and that he is simply human like everyone else. This helped dissipate his shame, and helped Manuel realize that homosexuality is not some bad perversion that he had to drain out of him.

Focusing on personal environments: Manuel described how difficult it was to heal from the pain of the closet when surrounded by an intolerant and homophobic world. When in the depths of the closet, he felt he could not come out until the whole world became less prejudiced. Yet as Manuel reflected on his coming out process, he realized that one should not focus on trying to change the whole wide world. Instead, it was important to seek out acceptance in one's immediate, personal environment:

> Cuz that's an important thing too, being how high suicide rates are for LGBTQ people. It's important to not tell them "hey you are not going to be safe until we change the world". That they're never going to feel comfortable with themselves. They're never going to feel safe, protected, and wanted. It's more important to tell them, hey just be fortunate… be happy and fortunate for the people you have, and use them as a resource. Just by recognizing what I have in front of me in the present… that that is much more personally important.

Manuel believed this was an important insight to share with other queer individuals struggling in the closet—that instead of trying to gain acceptance from the whole wide world, they should seek out people in their personal, immediate environments who are accepting of them. For Manuel, that meant distancing himself from his prior social circle of hyper-masculine, prejudiced "jocks", and finding open-minded people like David or Jackie with whom he can be himself. Moreover, Manuel, who identifies as an activist, said that others doing activist work might feel more hopeful if they focus on changing intolerance in their personal, immediate environments, instead of changing the magnitude of the whole world's intolerance:

> Even though I know I can't change the whole world, and our whole society to think differently…I am fortunate to have the people that I do have. And it's impossible for me to think that I can only come to a compromise or a solution by changing the whole world. Hopefully we can have that happen someday. But if you solve your personal environments, that's how you can live with it. That's how you can not be in pain… it's going to take a while to change the whole world. But don't use that as your end goal. Don't say, I'm not ready to be who I am until we change the whole world.

Manuel's Artistic Reference of the Closet

Manuel has been listening to the band "Against Me!" since middle school. The lead singer of the band came out as a trans woman. She made an album about her experiences as trans around the same time that Manuel was becoming comfortable with his pansexuality. He referenced a specific song by Against Me! whose lyrics really spoke to his closeted experience: "Drinking with the Jocks". The lyrics are as follows:

> *I'm drinking with the jocks*
> *I'm laughing at the f*ggots*
> *Just like one of the boys*

Swinging my dick in my hands

All my life
All my life
Just like I was one of them

*Look at all them b*tches, yeah*
I'm going to fuck them all
*Look at all that p*ssy, yeah*
Fill it up with cum

All my life
All my life
Wishing I was one of them

There will always be a difference between me and you.

RODNEY'S CLOSET

Summary of Rodney's Written Description

Rodney self-identifies as a white, gay, cis-man in his mid-sixties. Rodney wrote about being placed in a closet from his earliest memories onwards. As a child, he was punished for not doing what was expected as a boy and breaking gender norms, such as playing with paper dolls, reading fairytales, dressing up, playing house as the mother, cooking, and sewing. He was not allowed to cry or be sensitive. The closet caused him to live a life of being secretive and isolated, because it was wrong to be who he was. All of this made him hate being a child. Rodney felt like family, friends, relatives and the world were against him. He recounted the closet as a time of intense loneliness and sadness. Rodney described an experience as a young adult in which had entered a Catholic monastery and was studying to become an Augustinian brother. He left the seminary to move in with his first boyfriend. He could not share this event with his parents, which felt devastating. He had to continue to lie to them and hide his sexual identity, rather than be able to share important life

moments with them. When the relationship ended and Rodney moved home with his parents, things got worse because he lived a double life. One day, Rodney's mother found several love letters in his room. He had been found out, and was confronted and accused of being a liar. He remembers this as an intense time of hate, anger and sadness. In this moment, Rodney lashed out at his mother for a life of pent up falsehood. Consequently, he was banished from their family home. Eventually, Rodney reconciled with his parents as they came to understand how important it was to be true to himself. Nevertheless, it took years for the sadness to go away. Yet today, 40 years later, Rodney feels grateful to be alive, to be himself, and loved for who he is.

Rodney's Felt Sense of the Closet: Sensations and Images

A throat closing up: Rodney immediately experienced a difficult sensation emerging in his throat, like a sore throat. It felt like there was "a block, like a roughness, an agitation" there. This feeling frightened Rodney: "It closed me up immediately… I felt like it could get me out of control if I let it. That's my fear, that that will overwhelm me and I will not come back from it." Rodney described his throat as the weakest part of his body, and that the sensation arising there made him feel "terribly afraid". He explained that his throat is where he feels his feelings most. As such, it is his most "vulnerable spot," where he can feel most threatened:

> It's where I feel physically most vulnerable. It's the part of my body that I will often protect if I feel threatened…if I feel something emotional… it goes right there to my throat. And I wanna protect it. Because that's where I… it has to do I think with a voice. With my voice, which is so weak. I feel like it is difficult to make sound come from my throat.

Paradoxically, though Rodney described his throat as vulnerable, weak and threatened, he also acknowledged a strength and power that lived there: "There's a strength or fear, I'm not sure which…There's some strength there that's not frightening. I'm afraid of the strength of my throat." Rodney said his throat would similarly close up as a child, when he was singled out by a teacher in class: "The first thing that would happen is I would feel it in my throat… and it would choke me, it

would inhibit me from speaking. I couldn't speak. I was so afraid." Rodney said this fear of speaking continued to adulthood: "I would completely close up, and I would get that same feeling in my throat." Rodney connected this "closing up" of his throat to the closet's censorship of his voice—not being able to express to the world who he was:

> That was the hardest thing about being in the closet. When I'd have an emotion, or a life experience, when something would happen to me in life, like my first boyfriend. I wanted to be able to go to my parents and say "look what's happening to me! I love this person! He likes me!" but I couldn't share that. I couldn't share that. I wanted to be able to tell them. But it was wrong. It was a sin. So that's where I know I'm the most vulnerable. I think [my throat] is the place where if I did that, that's when I was punished. If I said something, if I was expressing that part of myself through my voice, you can't do that. So that might be… where the hurt was, where I got that pain. Right there. Stop it. Stop it. Silence. Silence.

Held together by my hands: To shift focus from the frightening feeling in his throat, Rodney focused on the powerful, centering feeling of his hands. He said: "They're just very strong. They are very connected. They keep me in place. They've been where everything is held. They are where I sense the world. It's where I can sense the me. That's where who I am is centered, is in my hands." Rodney's sense of self is empowered and expressed by his hands. Rodney is also an artist, and from childhood onwards he would express himself with his artists' hands because he could not express himself with his voice. So Rodney's hands became his voice:

> When I was a child, I played there. I could find joy there. I could make drama there. Anything with my hands. My hands brought it to me. I could pull it in or I could let it out. All through the power of my hands… And if I can speak from my heart to my hands, that's where my beauty comes.

Rodney's hands also served as a form of protection. As we explored the frightening, vulnerable, out-of-control feeling in Rodney's throat, he said: "I was glad I had my hands, because they kept it together. They said it's okay, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay. No one's going to hurt you. No one's going to make you feel bad."

Comforted by warmth of the heart: Rodney also focused his attention on his chest and heart area. He remarked that there was a comfort there, a strength. He described a very beautiful and pleasurable sensation emanating from his heart. He described it as:

> A lightness, it's a tingling, it's a laughter. It's where my smile is. It's where I love from. Just a strong connection there. If I'm kissing my husband, I'm feeling it here. Love is there. It wells up there. It's very comforting right now to stick my hands and hold over that. It's very comforting… it's nice.

I asked Rodney to elaborate on this image of "love welling up" around his heart. He described his heart as emitting heat, warmth: "It could be almost like steam…a steam room. or a hot cup of tea. You know, watching that steam go off the top. It's a beautiful feeling, I love that. It's nice, it completely relaxed me."

The groin's beauty and creativity: Rodney also identified his groin as an important bodily area connected with his closeted experience. He experienced his groin's sexual feelings to be beautiful: "I'm the luckiest guy in the world to have that. I'm grateful every day that I'm made this way. That this is me." Yet it took a long time to truly enjoy his sexual feelings, because society shamed it:

> It took a long time to allow myself. Because of childhood. That was also coupled with sexual repression. I think that sort of happens a lot. I know that happened to me. There's a shame… you can't do that, that's bad. Masturbation is bad. Sex of course with a man is bad. It took a lot of therapy and a lot of doing this, what we're doing now, going inwards, to say okay, it's okay. It's not a bad thing to enjoy it. It's a good thing.

Rodney explained that now he tries to celebrate his sexual feelings. When he experiences his groin's sexual desires, he makes a conscious effort to allow those feelings to happen rather than repress them. He invites his sexual feelings to become a part of what he is doing, such as art-making. Rodney explained that his sexual feelings fuel his creativity: "When I'm painting, and I feel like it's coming out well, and when its right, I can feel it in my groin. It's almost a sexual feeling. Or it's the

same. And I use that, and I feel, okay this painting is now good. That's a wonderful feeling. I love that feeling, so let's use that feeling."

Key Themes from Rodney's Written and Interview Data

Sadness and emptiness: Rodney describes his experience of the closet as a time of great sadness, emptiness, and loneliness. The sensation of being a sad child "was really about oppression and being in the closet from birth." He described the sadness as a time of feeling empty, because there was something in him that wanted to come out but could not, and it felt neglected:

> There was that sadness, that… I guess that equated with being empty, being neglected. Whatever that was that was inside of me that wanted to come out. But actually I felt empty, I felt sadness. A deep sadness that carried through. And this made me feel that once again. To go back to that place of emptiness.

Rodney said that writing his narrative for this project brought up the closet's feelings of sadness and emptiness again, as well as feelings of helplessness.

Grateful to be / wrong to be me: Rodney said that from an early age he experienced self-love and gratitude for who he was: "I think I was lucky, in that there was a strength in me. That, I don't know where it came from. But, yeah. I've always been happy to be. Grateful to be who I was, who I am." From the very beginning, he was always happy to be uniquely Rodney. Yet at times this self-gratitude became fractured by society's lies, which made him believe it was bad and wrong to be himself. This was one of the great tragedies of the closet for Rodney—being told that something was wrong with him for who he was. He remembers his father saying: "Rodney, if you keep acting like this people are going to think you're a fruit." Additionally, he has a memory of his grandmother telling his mother, "You better watch this child". Rodney remembers thinking, "What does that

mean? What's wrong, what's wrong, what's wrong?" He explained: "I think it's such a bad thing for anyone to be told that who, what you are is wrong. It's not your fault. It's not my fault that I am the way I am. It's not my fault that I like what I like. And why is it so bad to be that? And the closet did that." When Rodney believed the lies that it was bad to be who he was, he would doubt his self-love and experience shame. Thankfully, others reminded him he is worthy just as he is: "When I was feeling undeserving, [they said] you are enough, just as you are. You are enough." Other people's affirmations restored Rodney's self-love: "I feel like it's always been there. Hidden, or disguised, or transformed into something else. And it took work and realization and help of people around me to say, you can feel that way, it's okay. Loving yourself is a good thing. Don't be afraid."

Fearing punishment: Rodney described being constantly punished for being who he was and doing what he liked: "I was punished for not doing what was expected of a boy. I enjoyed dolls (my favorite were paper dolls), fairytales, dressing up, playing house (being the mother), wanting to cook and sew, etc." He always wanted to please his mother, but she had a temper and would yell when he transgressed gender norms: "She could spew her anger at you, just in her eyes and in her look, she would well up with anger… she was a tiny woman, but she had a very big voice. She was very loud when she wanted to be. She would yell at me." When his mother yelled at him and told him to stop doing things he enjoyed, "that's when I would feel hopeless, because what can I do?" Rodney could not stop being himself, yet he was punished for being who he was again and again.

A secret world of my own: Because the world told Rodney it was wrong to be himself, he created a secret world of his own where he was free to be himself: "At first the idea of the closet was, I went into my own world, that was my closet. Even before sexuality came into the picture, it was really just… the world said you can't be who you are. So I went into my, I made my own closet.

It became my world." He explained that he never stopped being himself. Rather, he continued being himself secretly in his bedroom. For instance, as a child Rodney was punished by his parents for playing with dolls. So in the secret world of his bedroom, he would spend hours making beautiful fabric dolls and hiding them underneath his bed. Rodney described the closet's secret world as beautiful, because in it he was free to express himself:

> I was expressing all of those things in my own little secret world. When I was playing with the doll or making it secretly under the table. I was in charge there, the whole environment. And so that world was, you know, I loved that world. It was freedom. That was right. That was a good thing.

Rodney elaborates that he created a secret world partially because he harbored contempt for the outside, hateful world that did not allow him to be himself. Creating his own world was, in some sense, his way of fighting back: "It just drove me to say to the world, the only fight back was able to... well I hate you. Fuck you. Fuck all of you. Because I have a secret. I have a world that is so beautiful. And so colorful. And so much fun. And I'm just going to live there." Rodney's contempt for the outside world led him to become further and further submerged inside his secret world. Consequently, he became more cut off from others and the world around him: "I totally closed the world out. I didn't care about them, I didn't have friends particularly…I felt empty, I felt sadness. A deep sadness that carried through." One of the most challenging but powerful aspects of coming out of the closet for Rodney was breaking out of isolation and connecting with the wider world: "That was the hard part, to break out of that and not be afraid… now I want my circle to be complete. Not a hidden circle, a circle that I can share. And just connecting with all the energy of life around me. That's a very powerful thing."

A life of pent-up falsehood: Rodney described the closet as a time of constant lying and hiding. As a kid, he would fake being happy to everyone around him, though inside he felt profound sadness and emptiness: "I could get around with the adults in the world with a big grin. I

said to my mom when I became an adult, I was so miserable as a child. She said, 'oh no you weren't. You were a happy child! You were smiling all the time!' I went, 'It was just to not be punished.'" This pent-up falsehood continued into young adulthood, when Rodney began a serious relationship with his boyfriend but had to lie to his parents about it. He recalled this time as living a "double life." He was living with his parents at the time, and though he had many adventures of love with his boyfriend, he had to compartmentalize that part of his life. Rodney felt great anger at having to lie and hide himself, when he wanted to share important things about his life with his parents. When his mother found love letters between he and his boyfriend, she angrily confronted him about being a liar. In response, Rodney lashed out to her "for a life of pent-up falsehood." This burst of anger caused a painful rupture between them for some time. Yet it was also a much-needed gesture of self-affirmation, empowering Rodney to refuse hiding his truth any longer and to begin living a life that was true to himself.

(un)Welcomed by the group: Rodney described carrying a deep belief, even after coming out of the closet, that other people would not like him if they knew who he really was. So he kept people at arm's length for protection: "The hard thing was, I believed this for a long time. You know, nobody knows me. And if you knew me, you wouldn't like me anymore. So you know what, I don't like you first." This belief was rooted in experiences of rejection by groups growing up. Rodney felt singled out at school, in crowds, and at church. His church's rejection of him felt most painful. Rodney described church as essentially a big dinner party: "You're a guest at this church and you're welcome. And there's a beautiful feast, and it's so amazing and so magical." He loved the idea of being welcomed into such a beautiful community. Yet when he came out as gay to his church community, he felt immediate rejection: "I felt them saying, everyone's welcome, everyone's welcome…except for you."

Being rejected by groups was frightening and painful for Rodney. Accordingly, being welcomed by groups has been one of the most healing aspects of coming out for him. Rodney described being welcomed and invited by various therapy groups throughout the decades. He has experienced great affirmation from the people in these groups, who have embraced him just as he is. The acceptance from these group members helped Rodney realize he did not have to shut himself away inside his secret world. He became hopeful that he could be welcomed into the world at large: "I didn't know there was anything else. I felt trapped in that. So hope was confusion. It wasn't until finally, someone does invite you in. Or you can allow yourself to feel something freely without cutting yourself off…Then hope grows."

Letting light in: Rodney said his process of coming out of the closet was like finally "letting the light in", after being submerged in darkness for so long. By letting the light in, he could also shine his own light outward. He described "letting light in" as an act of freedom that dissipated his shame and allowed him to claim himself proudly to the world:

> What I feel really fortunate about… is that when I opened that closet door and didn't care what the world said about me, that was such freedom. And I wanted then to, sort of let light in. let it in. and then let my light shine outward. And be absolutely… I was out in my work, in my play, in my life, in my family. Even with my husband, I love introducing him as my husband, now that we're married, to the world. This is me, and my relationship with him is me, and it's a good thing. It's not bad, there is no shame anymore.

Rodney's process of "letting light in" not only involved being open about his sexuality to the world. He also described an ongoing introspective process of shining a light upon the layers of himself which the closet had suppressed for so long. He described each of these layers as their "own closet door" waiting to be opened. He also associated this introspective process to the image of "curtains waiting to be drawn back". Rodney explained:

> Continuing to open myself up and to find the layers, find the anger find the shame, find the woman, all of those things were closet doors opening. And there are still doors. I'm still inside. And that is the whole closet thing. It's all the layers of…. I used to look at them like

> curtains. If the light was right you could see through the curtain, and got even more, push that curtain away, and go to the next one… and keep going keep going, keep opening yourself up.

The power of love: Rodney mentioned "the power of love" several times while describing the complicated relationship with his mother. He and his mother had an estranged relationship for a long time after she discovered he was gay; her religious upbringing made it difficult to accept him. Despite being hurt by her initial rejection, Rodney worried about his mother's own emotional pain and suffering. Though they were not speaking, Rodney called a nun and requested she meet with his mother to help her heal from her own psychological suffering in discovering her son was gay. Rodney remarked that the power of love and compassion can prevail even amidst the most difficult relationships: "That's the strength of love, you know. That's where loves comes in. That's the power. Yeah. I loved her."

Later, he and his mother began having a long-distance phone relationship to reconnect about their lives. Eventually Rodney became infected with HIV, and his mother got worried that he could die. Indeed, the doctors said he was close to death. Rodney's mother and father sold their house and moved across the country to be with him. Rodney had been very unwell prior to their move, unable to eat. But once his mother was there with him, he began to quickly recover. Rodney believed his mother's love saved his life:

> That is the power of love. And in fact, now my physicians say its not true but it is true. Because I had wasting syndrome, and my doctors had given me everything they could imagine to give me to get my appetite high. I just didn't want to eat. I really was just giving up, and I kept losing weight. They said I was 90 pounds, which was just bone. And then mom came, she cooked. She brought me food. I ate. I gained weight. It was the beginning of a recovery. From that. From that. That is the power of love… it's why I'm alive. You know, my doctors kept telling me, you have a year to live. And then a year goes by. And you know, 25 almost 30 years go by, and why are you still alive? And I'm like, I don't know….The power of love.

For Rodney, his own love empowered him to feel compassion for his mother, despite her initial rejection of him. Later, the power of his mother's love actually saved his life.

The power of the feminine: Rodney said that coming out of the closet allowed him to discover and embrace the "power of the feminine" within him. He had always been aware of "the girl in me" since he was a young boy and enjoyed playing with dolls: "I always knew or felt when I was a boy… when I was playing, the girl in me came out. It was denied in the real world, but I could play in secret with her." Rodney had to express his femininity in seclusion as a kid. But in adulthood, he was welcomed by a women's support group which helped him to openly express his feminine power. Nowadays, Rodney harnesses his femininity as his source of strength and creativity:

> I realized that what I had been doing for so long, even in my painting, is that I learned that my strength is in the feminine in me. That's where my strength lies. It's good to be a male… lots of advantages in being a male. I don't really like being a male, but I used the privilege of being male, which there is, I used it. But what I realized is that where my real strength is, is the woman in me. And when she had freedom to come out, without having to be colored over, making it look like it really wasn't her… that's when I started painting.

Rodney not only referenced the power of his own femininity, but the power of women in general. As he discussed the 2017 women's marches happening all over the world, Rodney commented that "women's leadership is the way forward"—women would lead us in the fight for justice.

Rodney's Artistic Reference of the Closet

In representing his closeted experience via art, Rodney identified the painting "The Scream" by Edvard Munch. He felt "that exact way" while closeted. Rodney also referenced any paintings that Picasso did during his blue period: "very somber, those blues that symbolize for me too that same feeling, this all-encompassing world of blue."

VICTOR'S CLOSET

Summary of Victor's Written Description:

Victor self-identifies as a white, gay, cis-man in his forties. In his written description of the closet, he described being fully aware of being gay from the earliest ages, though he did not know how to explain it to himself. As a kid he felt something was not right inside. But he did not have sufficient knowledge to understand his sexuality, nor did he have anyone he could to talk to about it. As a child Victor felt very afraid knowing he was different from everyone around him, since no one else expressed anything similar to what he was feeling. Throughout his upbringing, Victor felt very afraid to be found out, to the extent that he would not bathe at friends' houses, as if taking his clothes off would somehow reveal himself to them. Victor's fear gradually evolved into feelings of rage at the slightest annoyances during his teens and early twenties, such as being triggered by road rage and lashing out violently to others.

Victor wrote that his actions, fueled by fear and anger due to being in the closet, ended up with him being arrested one night and going to jail. It was this incident, interestingly, that propelled him to come out. He remembers seeing the police car parked outside on the street for him, and in that moment he knew that he would come out. He felt a weight being completely lifted off his shoulders as his anger dissipated. Victor stopped fearing the consequences of coming out in that moment. A few hours later, while in jail, he wrote a letter to his mother telling her he is gay.

Victor's Felt Sense of the Closet: Sensations and Images

Please note that the audio file recording Victor's interview unfortunately became corrupted. I did, however, take robust notes during the interview, so the description of Victor's closeted experience includes data recollected from these notes. Though this section includes quotes from Victor's written description, I was unable to include lengthy quotations from his interview. As such, his section will be shorter than the rest. Nevertheless, Victor's descriptions and insights of the closet are very important to share, albeit in a more condensed form.

Tension heating up: Victor's immediate sensations upon hearing me read his description of the closet were tension and nervousness. This tension felt like his body was heating up, as if there was an electric blanket plugged into his body or a heating vent directly beside him. Victor said this uncomfortable, heated, tense feeling was a re-creation of his feelings while closeted.

A soldier on guard: Victor described his body as feeling constricted. He associated this constriction with his fear of being found out while closeted, which led him to interact with the world with the vigilance of a soldier. Just like a soldier, he was always on guard and ready to defend himself.

Holding up a weight: Victor described his tension manifesting as a feeling of heaviness in his chest. It felt like he was attempting to hold up a giant weight upon his chest. He connected this with the feeling of being weighing down by fear while closeted. Victor explained that fear was the driving force behind everything he experienced in the closet.

Letting go and cooling down: I asked Victor what his body needed to stop feeling tense. He said it would need to let go of the weight. I asked him to imagine physically lifting a weight off his chest and setting it down to the floor, and to check in with his body afterwards to see what sensations arise. He described a feeling of "cooling down" drifting through his body. I asked if this cooling down had a color associated with it. He described it as a bright orange color cooling down his body. Victor connected this feeling of letting go to the "I don't care release" he experienced when he stopped fearing consequences of coming out as gay. He described this release as a "cold breath of fresh air" about no longer having to lie and hide to the people that matter.

Key Themes from Victor's Written and Interview Data

Feeling different in mind and body: Victor's earliest memories of being closeted were painful feelings about being different from everyone around him. He believed he was experiencing feelings in his body and thoughts in his mind that were different than everyone else, and he did not like this. He explained:

> For many years, I was fully aware of my being gay, even if at the earliest stages, I didn't know how to explain it to myself. I mean, when you are just a little kid, and something just doesn't feel right inside but you know nothing about it or have anyone that you think you can talk to. It can be very scary to know that you are very different than everyone else around you. No one seems to be expressing anything similar to what you are feeling. No one.

Victor also experienced being bullied and put down throughout his upbringing, which made him feel even worse about his sexual feelings. Moreover, Victor grew up in a family that was religious and tried to push their beliefs on others, including the notion of homophobia as sinful. Accordingly, he became aware that the part of him which made him different was not acceptable to the people around him. To cope with the pain of being different, Victor would try to prevent his body from feeling what it was feeling, attempting to dissociate from his body's natural arousal towards men.

Imprisoned by fear: Victor identified fear as the driving force behind his entire closeted experience. All other feelings, such as anger, were rooted in fear. He was constantly lying and hiding from others to avoid being exposed and found out for being gay. Hiding entailed actions such as: "really dumb stuff that would only make sense to a kid, like not bathing at a friend's/family's home, as if taking your clothes off would somehow reveal yourself to them". The closet imprisoned Victor in feelings of fear and anger, such that all his actions were driven by these emotions: "My choices at that time resulted in some actions that are way more embarrassing then condemning. Yet, could be seen as otherwise and were, even by myself for a time." When Victor actually *was* arrested and jailed

one evening (for a reason not disclosed), he felt like he was being released from the prison of the closet:

> The coming out process was far from a call to mom & dad or a sit down after dinner. It was a letter home from county jail… The moment I saw the police car parked on the street, I knew. It was like a weight was completely lifted off my shoulders. The anger left. A short while later while in jail, I wrote the letter to mom.

Being arrested and placed in an actual jail cell somehow acted as a wake up call for Victor. He did not experience jail to be nearly as bad as what his closeted life had been to this point. This moment propelled Victor to stop caring about the consequences of being "found out" as gay. As such, he decided in that moment to come out to his mother. Coming out was like a "cold breath of fresh air" that helped Victor feel released from the prison of the closet. It released him from fear and allowed him to stop hiding and lying to the people that mattered to him.

<u>Not caring about consequences:</u> "Not caring about consequences" was a strong theme in Victor's description of the closet, for better and for worst. In its most destructive form, not caring about consequences while closeted propelled Victor to try to show the world that he was invulnerable—that he could care less about what happened to him or anyone else. This "I don't care" posturing was enacted to disguise Victor's profound fear of being found out as gay. He would act with rage and violence towards others to "show you I'm not afraid." These actions provided him with an "I don't care release." Due to his anger at the time, he did not care about what happened to other people as a consequence of his violent actions. Because of his indifference to the consequences of his actions, Victor lost many friends.

Yet not caring about consequences also ultimately helped Victor come out of the closet and stop fearing other people's reactions to him for being gay. He explained: "When I finally did come out, it wasn't the anger, it was the not caring about consequences that did it. I was young, fit, and actually as nice as I have always been (until angered)." As such, not caring about consequences of

others' reactions gave Victor the confidence to stop denying his sexuality and come out, such that he could attempt to date men and pursue a fulfilling life for himself. In other words, not caring about the consequences of others' reactions allowed Victor to care about the things that mattered most to him. This, too, was an "I don't care" release.

Raging at minor injustices: Victor identifies rage as a distinguishing emotion while closeted. He described his rage as:

> Irrational violent anger at the slightest notion of annoyance by the end of my teens and into my twenties… Literally flying off into a rage for small infractions, dozens road rage incidents that should have ended with my incarceration at a federal prison (this was just before everyone had a cell phone), pulling knives on co-workers, and shouting things at people that didn't deserve it. There were times I would shake for days, I was so triggered by what had upset me.

Events that triggered Victor's violent rage included minor experiences of injustice where he experienced people committing a wrongdoing, such as cutting him off on the road. When he believed someone was in the wrong, he would react with violent anger. When Victor came out of the closet and began to direct his energy towards LGBTQ activism, his everyday experiences of violent rage dissipated. It seems that, prior to coming out, Victor's righteous anger about his own sociopolitical oppression was constantly triggered by minor experiences of injustice in his everyday life. After coming out, he identified the true source of his anger (LGBTQ injustice), and embraced a platform upon which to productively express this anger.

A fog clearing out: Now, Victor fights for LGBTQ rights through the vehicle of education and logic, rather than destructive anger. One of the things he values most about coming out is having access to his clear and logical mind, which allows him to think things through carefully and decide the best route of approaching situations. While in the closet, he described his mind as feeling foggy, because the mental energy it took to deny and hide his sexuality blocked access to his mind's

powerful thinking abilities. Coming out of the closet helped the fog clear out, allowing him to rejoice in the clarity of his astute mind.

Finding hope through finding others: Victor explained that hope did not really exist for him for most of his life, while closeted. He did not know what hope felt like as a sensation until his mid-twenties, when he was in jail and felt a glimmer of hope that his mother would react positively to his coming out. Victor also identified the gay community as a stepping stone for hope. When he discovered there were others like him who were gay and okay, he felt hopeful that he could be okay too—that there was nothing wrong with who he was, and that he was *good* for who he was. Learning more about the gay community, and also learning about the diversity of people in general, helped Victor accept the parts of him that made him different.

Victor's Artistic Reference of the Closet

Victor identified political hip hop as important to his closeted experience—particularly the group Public Enemy and their song "Fight the Power". Discovering Public Enemy became a source of hope for Victor while coming out. He felt inspired by the anti-racist political movement that Public Enemy partook in, because they represented a voice for something—a way to express their views about racial injustice in a useful, entertaining and informative manner. Moreover, Public Enemy has expressed alliance towards the LGBTQ community, promoting the belief that the racial and LGBTQ political movements are fighting against similar systems of oppression, and should unite to fuel their collective emancipatory agendas. Victor explains that in the past five years, Public Enemy has released a music video in which they feature Harvey Milk, which reinforces his passion for the group and their intersectional message.

Chapter 8: Cinematic-Phenomenological Description of the Closet

There is something that might be called cinematic beauty. It can only be expressed in a film, and it must be present for that film to be a moving work. When it is well expressed, one experiences a particularly deep emotion while watching that film. I believe that it is this quality that draws people to come and see a film, and that it is the hope of attaining this quality that inspires the filmmaker to make his film in the first place. In other words, I believe that the essence of the cinema lies on cinematic beauty. (Kurosawa, 1972; in Swanky, 2016, "Preface," para. 23)

Introduction to Cinematic-Phenomenological Description

This chapter outlines the "cinematic-phenomenological" interpretive process through which I produced a short film about the lived experience of being in the closet, as described by five research participants. First, I illustrate the specific "filmmaking notes" that I used to transform individual participant data into cinematography. Then, I showcase the voiceover script and storyboard I crafted to organize the disparate pieces of cinematography into a coherent work of phenomenological art. I also provide a weblink to the final film produced by this cinematic-phenomenological process, as well as credits for the film. This chapter ends with cinematic insights about the phenomenon of the closet, as expressed by the film itself as its own form of phenomenological data.

Transforming Data into Cinematography

To begin my cinematic-phenomenological data interpretation process, I created a set of "filmmaking notes" through which I transformed participant data into cinematography. The first set of notes includes images of the closeted experience that appeared in each individual participant's written anecdotes, Focusing sensations and images, interview descriptions, and artistic references. I included any data that I thought I could possibly somehow visually represent via cinematography. The second set of notes organizes participants' images into five "existential themes" of truth, freedom, hope, love, and power that co-constitute the closeted phenomenon These five themes were unearthed by the rigorous process of coding meaning units in participants' written and transcribed data using the qualitative software Nvivo, as well as identifying core existential themes that repeated across these meaning units (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 9 for a detailed description of the process of existential thematic interpretation). Organizing the imagery using these existential themes allowed me to begin to assemble a coherent, meaningful story via these various disparate

images of the closeted phenomenon. The third set of notes demonstrates how I translated participants' images into cinematographic images that could be realistically executed for the purposes of this film, taking into account the film's budget, access to props and locations, and my artistic capabilities.

1. Participants' Individual Imagery of the Closet

Participant	Focusing Imagery	Other Imagery	Artistic Reference
Andres	rough and heavy tears; black flowing gel; frozen solid in ice, a spinning wheel of fire	creating a persona; a circle of friends; being held in an embrace; participation in social movements	Dante's Inferno—hell as frozen layer of ice
Ben	a featureless white mask; clamped down jaw, opening the mouth; letting laughter out, locking in a façade; compulsion to move, sinking into bed, blue calm waters	a dam break	"When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace"
Manuel	seeping and spreading mud, imploding a rock, needing the cyst to pop, immovable stone statue, the face of a friend, puncturing a balloon	restrictions and constraints, breaking out of jail, unburying a rock, supported by the immediate community	Against me! "Drinking with the jocks"
Rodney	a throat closing up, warmed up by love; a steamy cup of tea; the power of my hands; the groin's beauty and creativity	a beautiful world of my own; welcomed by the group; pulling back the curtains, letting light in; the power of the feminine	Picasso's blue period, "The Scream" painting
Victor	a soldier on guard, heating up like a vent, letting a weight go	imprisoned by fear, a fog clearing up	Public Enemy's hip hop; alliance of racial justice/LGBT political movements

2. Organizing Participants' Images into Existential Themes:

Existential Theme	Participants' Imagery
Truth	The groin's beauty and creativity, a beautiful world of my own; creating a persona, a featureless white mask; a throat closing up, locking in a façade; imploding a rock; unburying a rock, fog clearing up, pulling back curtains, letting light in
Freedom	a soldier on guard, restrictions and constraints, imprisoned by fear, released from jail, heating up like a vent; clamped down jaw; compulsion to move, immovable stone statue
Hope	rough and heavy tears; black flowing gel; frozen solid in ice; seeping and spreading mud, needing the cyst to pop, Dante's Inferno—hell as frozen layer of ice; "The Scream" painting, Picasso's blue period
Love	the face of a friend, a circle of friends; welcomed by the group, warmed up by love; being held in an embrace; letting laughter out; a steamy cup of tea; a dam break; puncturing a balloon, sinking into bed; supported by the immediate community
Power	a spinning wheel of fire, participation in social movements;; the power of my hands, letting a weight go, Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," alliance of LGBTQ/racial justice movements, blue calm waters, the power of the feminine; "When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace."

3. Translating Participants' Images into Cinematography:

Existential Theme	Participants' Imagery	Cinematography
Truth	The groin's beauty and creativity	- a beautiful crystal glistening in light
	A beautiful world of my own	- a bedroom with light and rainbows
	Creating a persona	- building a white mask out of plaster
	A featureless white mask	- building a white mask out of plaster
	Locking in a façade	- closeup of hanging lock
	Unburying a rock	- burying/unburying a crystal in dirt
	Imploding a rock	- hammering a crystal into pieces
	A fog clearing up	- fogging up bathroom mirror
	Pulling back curtains	- sunlight through sheer curtains
	Letting light in	- sunlight through sheer curtains
	A throat closing up	- wrap mouth in chains
Freedom	A soldier on guard	- closeup eyes darting back & forth
	Restrictions and constraints	- hands, feet, groin in chains
	Imprisoned by fear	- jail-like scene in basement
	Released from jail	- jail-like scene in basement

	Heating up like a vent Clamped down jaw Compulsion to move Immovable stone statue	- sweat pouring down face - wrap mouth in chains - wrap body in chains - porcelain statue
Hope	Rough and heavy tears Black flowing gel Seeping and spreading mud Imploding a rock Needing the cyst to pop Picasso's blue period "The Scream" painting Frozen solid in ice Dante's Inferno—hell as frozen layer of ice	- water dripping down glass - black oil dripping down glass - mud dripping down glass - splashing mud onto wall - splashing mud onto wall - color correction in blue tint - closeup face screaming in anger - closeup of icy frozen lake - freezing porcelain figure in ice
Love	The face of a friend A circle of friends Welcomed by the group Warmed up by love Being held in an embrace Letting laughter out A steamy cup of tea A dam break Puncturing a balloon Sinking into bed Supported by immediate surrounding community	- closeup of kind face - campfire friends gathered in circle - campfire friends gathered in circle t - closeup of campfire - shots of hugging, affection - friends laughing together - sipping on steamy mug of tea - water rushing through dam in river - releasing balloons into sky - laying on bed - solidarity at candlelight vigil
Power	A spinning wheel of fire Participation in social movements The power of my hands Letting a weight go Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," alliance of LGBTQ/racial justice Blue calm waters The power of the feminine "When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace."	- waving fire torches - pride parade, waving rainbow flags -hands in zen-like Namaste position - releasing balloons into sky - Black Lives Matter sign - candles floating on blue still lake - female voiceover & vocals, makeup - quote in film script

Phenomenological Interpretation as Film Script

I also wrote a poetic description of the closet to serve as the voiceover script for the film. This film script describes the existential "essence" of the closet. It was produced via coding and interpreting participants' written anecdotes and interview data. The script is written in a broad and general manner for the purposes of the film. Yet its specific meanings are explicated and unpacked via a traditional existential-phenomenological interpretation presented in the following chapter.

Much like the images were organized by existential themes, the film script too is organized by themes of truth, freedom, hope, love, and power (in that order). Each paragraph in the film script describes a specific existential theme. This creates a coherent flow and story arc to the film.

I wrote the voiceover in the second person in order for it to speak directly to LGBTQ viewers who have once been closeted, or are currently in the closet. The script aspires to behave as an empathic mirror and a message of hope for these viewers.

***

It begins with your truth. Maybe it's a truth that you've felt all along. But you're born into the lies that that tell you it's bad, tell you it's wrong, tell you you're not loveable, or that you'll go to hell. So you do everything you can to protect yourself. But that means lying to everyone you love, and maybe even hiding yourself from yourself. Soon your existence is split in two. The debate becomes excruciating. The only world that feels safe is a world with no one else. How much you yearn to share your truth, and hear it spoken back with love.

But speech is not allowed. Feelings are not allowed. Movement is not allowed. Love is not allowed. Freedom is not allowed. While they have all the freedom in the world to express their hate, you're prohibited from the basic human right to express yourself.

Sadness overwhelms you. You grieve all that you have lost, the future that can never be. Then grief become despair. The hatred from outside finds its way inside. It seeps and builds inside your bones, and all you can think about is getting it all out. But silence seals it all inside. Death seems like the only choice, cause hell on earth feels somehow worse.

What you need to stay alive is pure. It's love, the sweetest kind. Love will be right there waiting, as you take your first steps out. Love will set your speech free, so you can share your world with the world. Love will remind you you're worthy, exactly as you are. I promise you, my love, we are here.

Let that anger in you burn to life. Let that anger fuel your fight for power. You'll gain power to shout your truth. You'll gain power to love yourself. You'll gain the power to let go of the fear that controls you.

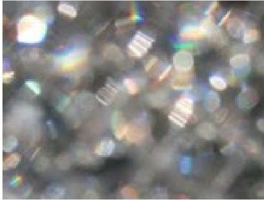
The world will continue to hurt, and there is still so much left to be mourned. But there are personal worlds inside the whole wide world. Those are the worlds that can heal you, and those are the worlds you can heal. And when, some day, the power of love overcomes the love of power, that's when this world will know peace.

Assembling a Film Storyboard

I then crafted a film storyboard which assembles together stock imagery and voiceover script regarding the existential themes of the closet. The stock images were "slotted into" the voiceover script, organized and reorganized until the story seemed like it had a coherent flow. I emailed the storyboard to participants for feedback and approval before beginning production, specifying which themes/images were influenced by each participant's specific descriptions of the closet.

ILLUMINATE: ROUGH STORYOARD

It begins with your truth.



Maybe it's a truth that you've felt all along.

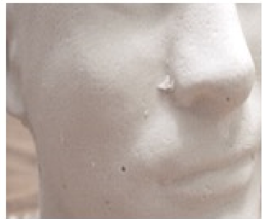
But you're born into the lies that tell you you're bad, tell you you're wrong,

tell you you're unlovable, and that you'll go to hell.

So you do everything you can to protect yourself.

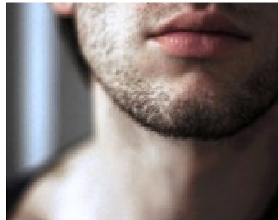
But that means lying to everyone that you love,

And maybe even hiding your self from yourself.

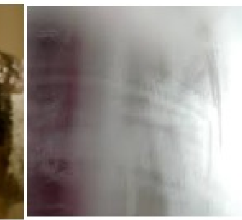


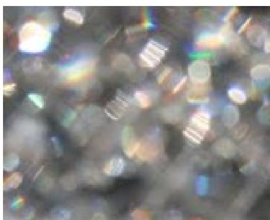
Soon your existence is split in two.

The debate becomes excruciating.



The only world that feels safe is a world with no one else.





How much you yearn to share your truth

And hear it spoken back with love.

But speech is not allowed..

Movement is not allowed.

Love is not allowed.

Feelings are not allowed.

Freedom is not allowed.

While they have all the freedom in the world

to express their hate…

You're prohibited from your basic human right

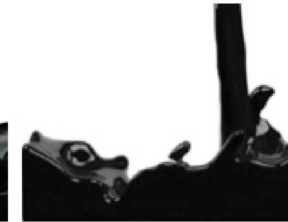
to express yourself.

Sadness overwhelms you.

You grieve all that you have lost,

The future that can never be.

Then grief becomes despair.



The hatred from outside finds its way inside.

It seeps and builds inside your bones

And all you can think about is getting it all out.

But silence seals it all inside.

Death seems like the only choice,

'cause hell on earth seems somehow worse.

What you need to stay alive is pure.

Its love, the sweetest kind.

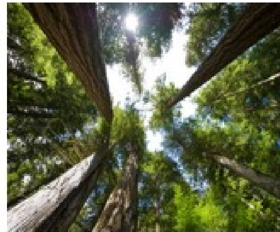
Love will be right there waiting as you take your first steps out.

Love will set your speech free,

so you can share your world with the world.

Love will remind you you're worthy, exactly as you are.

I promise you, my love, we are here.



Let that anger in you burn to life

Let that anger fuel your fight for power.

You'll gain the power to claim your truth.

You'll gain the power to love yourself.

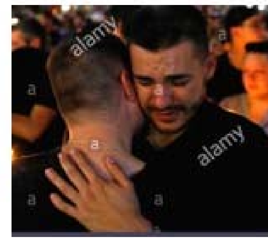
You'll gain the power to fight for the rights we deserve.

The world will continue to hurt,

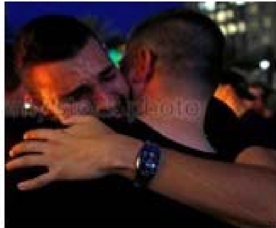
And there is still so much left to be feared

But there are personal worlds inside the whole wide world.

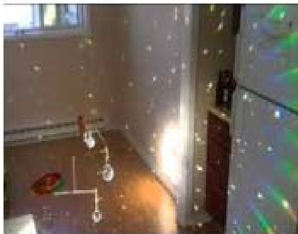
Those are the worlds that can heal you,



And those are the worlds you can heal.



And when someday the power of love overcomes the love of power



That's when this world will know peace.

Final Short Film: "Illuminate"

The last step in creating a cinematic-phenomenological interpretation of the closet involved a six-month filmmaking production process to bring the storyboard to life as a short film, in collaboration with cinematographers, actors, and musicians (Please refer to the final section of Chapter 10 to "meet" the cast and crew). The final film can be viewed online at **www.illuminatethecloset.com.** It is titled "Illuminate" – not only to bring light to an experience of community trauma whose very form of oppression has forced it to be hidden inside shadows, but also to illuminate the beauty that dances subversively amidst these shadows.

Film credits: Directed by Nisha Gupta. Cinematography by Joseph Carreno and Nisha Gupta. Acting by Orlando Davis (lead), Javier Spivey, Monisha Schwartz, Isaiah Noreiga, Lee Lytle, Jacob Wasson, Marybeth Grimaldi, Matt Rich, and Hakim Fontaine. Music by Lesley Flanigan.

The Cinematic World of the Closet

In his book *Researching Lived Experience*, Max Van Manen (1990) writes that phenomenological researchers can interpret not only textual data regarding their phenomenon of interest, but also visual data. He writes:

> Objects of art are visual, tactile, auditory, kinetic texts—texts consisting of not a verbal language but a language nevertheless, and a language with its own grammar. Because artists are involved in giving shape to their lived experience, the products of art are, in a sense, lived experiences transformed into transcended configurations. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 74)

Van Manen implies that works of art are sensorial expressions of artists' lived experiences. As such, phenomenological researchers can absorb artwork to obtain key insights about a particular human phenomenon, just as they would a written protocol. Moreover, phenomenological film theorist Daniel Yacavone (2014) suggested that "to make a film is also to construct a world" with its own set of world-feelings and world-time, which viewers become enveloped in for the duration of the film (Yacavone, 2014, p. xiv). As such, after becoming enveloped in the cinematic world of the closet through the film "Illuminate," what core meanings about the closet can we come to understand?

In portraying the lived experience of the closet, the film 'Illuminate' portrays two different worlds—a world which exists "inside" the closet and a world which exists "outside" of it. The world inside the closet is depicted as colorless, muted in grayscale, moody blues, and dark shadows. The world outside the closet appears vibrant, colorful, and shimmering in sunlight. The film also depicts the world inside the closet as people-less and lonely. When other people do appear in this world, their presence is frightening and unsafe. The world outside the closet, however, is filled with other people, whose support, affection, and solidarity are life-giving. Additionally, the landscape inside the closet includes mostly indoor environments, which are insular and walled-off. Exiting the closet's walls entails entering a world outdoors, surrounded by nature's cool breeze and a buzzing social environment. The film also depicts the world inside the closet as abstract, where consciousness is rooted mainly in imagination or fantasy. Outside of the closet, consciousness appears grounded in reality, embodiment, and the material

world. Moreover, inside the closet, there appears to be very little movement, as energy depletes, freedom is restricted, and stillness settles in. Yet the world outside the closet offers freedom and energy to move one's body along with other moving bodies in the world. Finally, "Illuminate" conveys the feelings in the closet to evoke fear, numbness, loneliness, confusion, shame, anger, sorrow, and the constant struggle to survive. The world outside of the closet, however, includes feelings of relief, love, empowerment, peace, and hope.

A core phenomenological insight I gleaned from the film "Illuminate" is that the closet, as a human phenomenon, cannot exist without the possibility of traversing from one world to another. For, without an understanding that it is possible to escape the dismal world of the closet, it is difficult for hope to exist. Without hope, it is difficult for humans to exist. Being closeted and alive requires some glimmer of hope that one can make it outside of the closet, however faint that hope might be. As such, "Illuminate" suggests that the possibility of someday "coming out of the closet" is an essential aspect to the closeted phenomenon.

A second insight I retrieved about the lived experience of the closet from "Illuminate" is that the journey of coming out of the closet—of traversing from inside to outside—is not experienced as a binary process from one polarity to another, from utter darkness into euphoric light. At times, there does appear to be peaks of utter darkness as well as euphoric light—such as feeling utterly silenced and frozen in emotional pain, or enveloped in the loving embrace of a welcoming group. But most often, the closet's overarching journey from inside to outside consists of smaller, micro-journeys between these two worlds. For instance, though one might feel isolated inside the closet's walls, nevertheless, he may still travel to heights of ecstasy while savoring a lover's touch while closeted. Moreover, though one might feel relief and empowerment after exiting the closet and being welcomed into the LGBTQ community, nevertheless, he may feel pushed back inside the fearful closet when LGBTQ-hate crimes occur in the world-at-large. As such, "Illuminate" suggests that being "inside" and "outside" the closet

are not entirely binary, polar-opposite experiences, for each world can be experienced within the other. Moreover, attempts to permanently exit the closet may become a never-ending journey, until someday the "outside" world can become peaceful enough to render the closeted world entirely unnecessary.

Chapter 9: Existential-Hermeneutic Phenomenological Description of the Closet

> Liberty, freedom and democracy are very fuzzy words, but human rights is very specific. (Ito, in "Joichi Ito about Freedom," n.d.)

Introduction to Existential-Hermeneutic Phenomenological Description

This chapter provides a written phenomenological description of the closet, produced by interpreting the textual descriptions of five research participants who identify as sexual minorities. Using Max Van Manen's (1990) approach to existential-hermeneutic phenomenological interpretation, I synthesize key themes that arose among all five participants' written anecdotes and interviews, which together convey the essence of the closet as a human phenomenon. It is important to restate that, aligned with Van Manen's use of the word "essence," I do not suggest that this interpretation is the ultimate authority upon which the closet can be reduced. Rather, it is one interpretation out of many possible interpretations, created by five participants' unique subjectivities, my own unique subjectivity, and the intermingling between them. Nevertheless, I believe this interpretation captures certain essential qualities that co-constitute the phenomenon of the closet—structures of meaning without which the closet would not manifest as it does in sexual minorities' lives.

Though this chapter's written description can be read as a stand-alone piece, it is intended to be coupled with the film-viewing from the previous chapter (www.illuminatethecloset.com). In other words, this chapter provides a written explication of the short film "Illuminate." Each existential theme presented in this chapter (truth, freedom, love, hope, power) is conveyed as a distinct "scene" in the film "Illuminate." In both the short film and this written description, I attempt to convey the same research findings and thematic meanings about the lived experience of the closet. The goal for presenting my research findings in these two distinct ways is to help readers/viewers of this dissertation understand the essence of the closet—as a lived experience and as a world unto itself—with both heart and mind, emotions and rationality, pathos and logos.

This chapter begins by introducing the key organizing principle that holds the thematic interpretation together: that the closet is lived by sexual minorities as a traumatic loss of existential

rights. Next, the chapter explicates five existential themes that arose across all participants' data, and that together co-constitute the essence of the closeted phenomenon: truth, freedom, love, hope and power. Concrete details and quotes from participants' written narratives, focusing exercises, and interview transcripts are incorporated to substantiate these themes and ground them in lived experience. The chapter concludes with a summary about the lived experience of the closet as a sexual minority, as interpreted by both this written description and the short film.

The Closet as a Traumatic Loss of Existential Rights

During the focusing portion of his interview, while attuning to the lived memory of the closet in his body, Andres felt a heavy, stiff pain lodged between his chest and his eyes. Reflecting upon the meaning of this pain, he said: "I feel like I lost something in my teenage years for not being heterosexual. And I think that will always be painful to think about… I feel like it was a great injustice. To me… to everyone who has to go through this. It reminds me of a great sadness." His great sadness, this great injustice, was organized upon a great loss. Rodney described a similar quality of sadness amidst his own time in the closet: "That sensation of being a sad child was really about oppression and being in the closet from birth. There was that sadness, that I guess equated with

being empty. It was a time of feeling empty, a feeling that I felt, that deep inside of myself I was just sad." At some point, great sadness seemed to well up amidst all participants' descriptions of the closet, manifesting as a poignant grief or emptiness because of a loss, or an absence perhaps, that felt unjust. But what exactly is it that Andres, Rodney, and other sexual minorities submersed inside the closet, had lost?

The answer to this question arrived amidst a long discovery process that I engaged in as a researcher. I unearthed five core existential themes that repeatedly flickered across participants' descriptions about the closet: freedom, truth, love, hope, and power. These themes emerged again and again in the data, and the particular manner in which they showed up felt significant. The first four themes appeared primarily as absences, or something missing, fragile, or unreachable—like a mirage in the desert, glimmering from afar but ungraspable, or even like a drop of precious water taken away when needed the most. While submersed inside the closet, participants' freedom of expression was prohibited, their various truths were silenced, their access to love was obstructed, and their hold on hope was slippery or even absent. Freedom lost, truth lost, love lost, and hope lost. *This* was the great loss—the great injustice—that the closet impelled and those in it endured.

But what is *this*, really? What core organizing principle holds these themes together? I sought to find the right language that could encapsulate the core meaning of these themes among participants, sexual minorities, and human beings in general. After more time wading through shadows of trauma, my inquiry led me to the insight that human beings need these constituents to physiologically exist—to maintain the will to live and avoid the call of death. For Andres had shared:

> I had tried to kill myself. And I know other people tried to kill themselves. And I think… that's part of the great injustice. Like people don't kill themselves because they want to. It's because either that they don't feel any support, or that they do feel like there is an injustice so big that it is beyond their reach to go beyond what is happening to them at the moment.

Andres describes the injustice of the closet to be a loss that feels so profound, so irreversible, so "beyond reach," that suicide felt like the only option. Since the closet is lived differently for

everyone, with varying degrees of being "in" or "out" in everyday life, not every sexual minority who has been in the closet may have reached such depths of despair. But for some people, in the darkest hours of the closeted experience, where truth, freedom, love, hope and power all seem to have eroded, suicidality might seem like the only solution to one's pain. Therefore, my preliminary interpretation suggested that the essence of the closet is lived as a traumatic loss of the existential needs for freedom, truth, love, and hope. In their ability to aid human survival, all of these needs are interdependent upon each other. The closet obstructs the ability to exercise freedom, including free disclosure of one's truth. Without the ability to share truth, love becomes elusive. Without access to love, one's hold on hope can dissipate. And without hope, the will to live is lost. As such these existential needs collectively work to maintain a human being's existence, and the closet's deprivation of them can be experienced as traumatic. For trauma encompasses any experience that puts one's life at risk. Accordingly, when deeply submerged inside the closeted experience, losing truth, freedom, love, and hope can feel like losing the ability to survive, to stay alive, to exist at all.

Yet as I delved further into the existential-phenomenological interpretation process, "existential needs" did not seem like the most precise term to describe this cluster of themes. For, as Rodney proclaimed, his sadness and emptiness while closeted was "really about oppression." And as Andres stated, the traumatic loss perpetuated by the closet was "a great injustice… to me… to everyone who has to go through this." A sense of unfairness is implicit in the words "oppression" and "injustice"—an inference that this should not be the case, yet our unfair society makes it so for sexual minorities who must endure this phenomenon. This implicit unfairness evoked anger in most participants. For instance, Ben associated the closet with a sense of being "cheated." He explained:

> One of the things I regret is not being open about it then... I feel like I cheated myself out of it. But doing what I wanted to do didn't seem like it could have been an option at the time. So that's where the anger is directed at… that I did have to hold back, that I couldn't express it all. So not just anger at myself, but also angry that I had to put on that façade in general.

Ben felt angry about being cheating out of the ability to openly express himself and his truths to the world-at-large. Being cheated implies a wrongdoing, whereby one is not granted what one rightfully deserves. Ben seemed uncertain about where to direct his anger: did he cheat himself out of the ability to be truthful, or did society cheat him out of it by leaving him with no other choice? Either way, being "cheated" means Ben felt that something was withheld from him which he rightfully deserved. All participants expressed similar feelings of anger, to different degrees and extents, while describing unfair deprivations that heterosexual people did not have to suffer through as they did.

As such, truth, freedom, love, and hope can be considered "existential rights" to which all human beings deserve access, yet sexual minorities are unfairly deprived of by the oppressive closet. For, human rights are rooted in the notion of fairness. From the U.S. Declaration of Independence declaring "all men are created equal" to the UN's Universal Bill of Human Rights that declares "everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person," these phrases affirm that all people, regardless of sexual orientation, race, religion, gender, and ability, are entitled to the fair treatment of getting their basic human needs met. Moreover, existential rights and existential needs are irrevocably intertwined. It is the responsibility of a society's governing institution to ensure all citizens have equal access to getting their basic human needs met to stay alive. Framed within a sociopolitical context, all citizens should be legally entitled to getting their basic human needs met, such that basic human needs become basic human rights. Sexual minorities are entitled to the right to truth, freedom, love, and hope—just like everyone else. Sexual minorities are also entitled to the right to stay alive, survive, and exist—just like everyone else. Yet the closet, caused by homophobic sociopolitical policies and norms, renders these rights inaccessible for sexual minorities. Therefore, the essence of the closet is experienced as *a traumatic loss of the existential rights to truth, freedom, love, and hope*. The deprivation of these rights pulls sexual minorities into a world of grief, sadness, emptiness,

loneliness, confusion, fear, shame, guilt, rage, helplessness, hopelessness, and excruciating emotional pain that one constantly seeks to escape.

Yet a fifth existential theme was also deeply imbedded in participants' descriptions of the closet: *power*. Power appeared as a strong, palpable presence in participants' beings and bodies—a presence that helped participants challenge the oppressive deprivations of the closet, and restore their access to freedom, truth, love, and hope. Some participants were aware of their resources for power while closeted, and harnessed it subversively to seek freedom amidst their oppressive situations. Other participants were less aware of their resources for power, and required loving others to point it out to them. Either way, healing from the trauma of the closet involved gaining and embracing resources for power, and harnessing them to empower oneself and one's community in the face of injustice in the world-at-large. As Rodney explained:

> It's about finding that the power lives inside of you. Once you can realize that you are strong and that you have the power, and find a way to connect to it… then you can actually have the power to do anything. You are all the more powerful. You are full of power. And we need to be continued to be told that. Because the world, like what my parents would do—some in ignorance and some because they want power over you—try to negate that. And we can't allow that to happen. We do have a right to love. We do have a right to those things that are so much a part of who we are.

The remainder of this chapter unpacks how the existential rights to truth, freedom, love, hope, and power appear (and disappear) amidst participants' descriptions of being in the closet. Though I have written about each existential theme as a distinct category with its own set of subthemes, it will become obvious that all five are interrelated with one another to co-constitute the essence of the closet as a human phenomenon. Each broad existential theme that I have identified was present in all five participants' descriptions of the closet. Yet it is important to note that, while most subthemes were relevant for all five participants, not *all* subthemes included in this interpretation were discussed by *all* participants. Nevertheless, I included any subthemes that

emerged across at least several participants' data, and which offered significant insight about how the closet can possibly manifest in sexual minorities' lives.

1. The Closet as Obscurity of *Truth*

Discovering a felt truth: Most participants described the closet beginning with a dawning awareness of a truth about oneself. The truth was often felt before they had words for it—a feeling of being different from others, a feeling of being aroused by the same gender. This kernel of truth was felt by participants as early as infancy, or later as puberty awakened. For some participants, this truth immediately brought discomfort, sadness, or fear about being different. Victor explained:

> I was fully aware of my being gay, even if at the earliest stages, I didn't know how to explain it to myself. I mean, when you are just a little kid, and something just doesn't feel right inside but you know nothing about it or have anyone that you think you can talk to. It can be very scary to know that you are very different than everyone else around you. No one seems to be expressing anything similar to what you are feeling. No one.

Likewise, Andres recalled that "starting in the closet, which was like starting to feel sexual attraction for males, was sadness." Yet for other participants, this dawning awareness about their sexual attraction was experienced as pleasurable; the feelings arising in their body felt natural, gratifying, and even beautiful. For instance, during adolescence Ben described exploring his same-sex attraction on internet chatrooms, though he had a girlfriend. He remarked that if not for the shame

and guilt he felt about lying to his girlfriend, he would have taken pleasure in his sexual feelings: "if I wasn't with this girl, then my pursuing a male-on-male romantic interaction would have been undoubtedly gratifying and natural." Additionally, Rodney described early feelings of being grateful for who he was—including his body's sexual feelings, which he experienced as beautiful. Yet society shamed him for who he was, diminishing his enjoyment of his feelings:

> I've always been happy and grateful to be who I was. I feel like that was always there… But it's when I believed the lies that it was bad to be who I was… that it became hidden, or disguised, or transformed into something else... And that was also coupled with sexual repression. I think that sort of happens a lot. I know that happened to me. There's a shame… you can't do that, that's bad. Masturbation is bad. Sex of course with a man is bad.

Though Rodney at first felt grateful for being gay and found beauty in his sexual feelings, he quickly realized that the social world attached alternate values to his feelings of same-sex attraction, seeking to erase or disparage them. All participants described internalizing messages by the society that they were bad and wrong for being different, or that they would go to hell for their sexual feelings towards the same gender. Society's lies were absorbed as true, causing shame and fear to fracture the beautiful and the natural.

<u>Hiding behind a façade:</u> All participants described burying the truth about their same-sex attraction, in order to protect themselves from losing love, being bullied, or being physically assaulted. This concealment of truth marked an official entrance into the closet. For Victor, hiding the truth entailed refusing to bathe at a friend's house, fearing his homosexuality will be exposed by the sight of his naked flesh. For Rodney, it involved making sure to never speak at school, because his self-expression would surely be punished. For Ben, it involved acquiring a girlfriend and exhibiting the ideal heterosexual romance, while secretly yearning to be caressed by a man. Among all participants, a façade or persona was presented to the outside world to hide the truth about their sexual orientation, to "pass" as heterosexual, and to avoid being targeted by homophobic hate.

Manuel, who is half-Latino and half-white, described crafting an external presentation as a "straight, white, cis-boy" in order to sidestep both homophobic and racial prejudice. Although passing as the dominant cultural group was protective, participants also felt like they were living a lie and being dishonest about who they really were by building a facade. Ben explained:

> It's not that easy to just be like, okay, you self, be expressive about who you really are. But it just felt, in a way, like a lie. And my upbringing was always pretty heavy on not liking liars. My mom always said, you can do anything you want to do. But don't lie about it. I don't like liars and I don't like thieves, she used to always say. So that's something that resonates with me, because I, it, was a lie. I continued to try to lie to myself, whether it was so that I could do these things that I desired to do, or that I shouldn't. So it was either a lie or a lie.

Feeling like a liar confounded the guilt and shame already persecuting participants by the prejudiced world. With the loss of truth, participants mourned the loss of integrity. They all expressed remorse about betraying their ethical code by being dishonest to the people they love. Andres, who grew up with a very religious upbringing, felt certain that he would go to hell, not only for being attracted to men but for also being a liar. He explained:

> I started reading [Dante's Inferno] when I was in high school. Because I wanted to know what hell was like, because I was trying to prepare myself to die. People who went to the final level of Hell in Dante's Inferno were liars. And my life was a lie…And again, at the moment I was Christian, so it was also very hard for me. Because I was sinning both emotionally, cuz I liked men, and because I was lying to my parents all the time.

Ben and Rodney, who also were raised Christian, described a similar persecutory feeling of self-blame for lying to others. Both participants also experienced anger at not being able to be honest due to society's intolerance of their sexual orientation. Rodney said he eventually yelled in anger at his mother about having to live a life of "pent-up falsehood." Ben described feelings of anger at "being cheated" out of the ability to be open and honest about who he was to the people in his life.

Silencing emotional truths: The closet not only silenced participants' ability to disclose the truth about their sexual orientation to others, but also silenced their ability to share emotional truths

regarding their basic existence and everyday being-in-the-world—including daily feelings of love, excitement, desire, fear, anger, and sadness. All participants lamented the fact that they felt unable to talk to anyone about what they were going through emotionally and psychologically. They were unable to express their true feelings regarding everyday relational experiences that heterosexual people can freely talk about—feeling excited by a new love interest, feeling devastated by heartbreak, feeling confused by an ambiguous relational encounter. For instance, Andres described feeling nervous, euphoric, and joyful about buying his beloved the perfect Valentine's Day gift. Yet when his mother detected something was going on and asked him how he was feeling, he concealed his true feelings and just responded with "I'm fine." Moreover, when she asked him who the gift was for, he lied and said there was a gift exchange among friends. Andres recounted: "There I was, once again, lying to my mother, when all I really wanted to do was tell her how happy I was that I was about to give the perfect gift to the person I loved." Similarly, Rodney reflected:

> That was the hardest thing about being in the closet. When I'd have an emotion, or a life experience, when something would happen to me in life, like my first boyfriend. I wanted to be able to go to my parents and say "look what's happening to me! I love this person! He likes me!" but I couldn't share that. I couldn't share that… Stop it. Stop it. Silence. Silence.

Participants also could not share their persistent feelings of sadness, pain, and despair from being closeted and having to hide themselves from the world-at-large. Rodney said that as a kid, he would fake being happy to everyone around him, though inside he felt profound sadness and emptiness: "I could get around with the adults in the world with a big grin. I said to my mom when I became an adult, I was so miserable as a child. She said, 'oh no you weren't. You were a happy child! You were smiling all the time!' I went, 'It was just to not be punished." Manuel, too, described acute pain in not being able to communicate his anguish of the closet with others. During the focusing component of his interview, he felt insufferable tension from having his painful emotions from the closet build up inside of him, with no release: "It's just like this containment of emotion and feeling and expression… I've been carrying this luggage for so long, that you just want it out of you. You

just want it quick, fast, done, you just want it to pop." Manuel yearned to be able to release his racing thoughts and painful emotions through speech. Yet because the closet did not allow Manuel to communicate his true feelings, the agony seemed to build up inside, like a pressure-cooker about to pop.

Dissociating from reality: Two participants described silencing their true feelings even to themselves, via rationalization, denial or repression. Ben explained: "I begin to rationalize: I am not connecting with [men] emotionally, it's just physical. This is a lie I am telling to myself to compensate for the feelings of shame associated with the secrecy of going behind this girl's back to talk to guys." Lying to himself caused Ben to experience an "excruciating inner debate" which split his existence and made him question reality: *Am I gay or am I not? Is this relationship real or is it not? Am I loveable or am I not?* Additionally, Manuel hoped that his external, heterosexual façade would transform the reality of his internal sexual impulses towards men: "I thought that physically presenting myself like a straight person…would change who I was internally. If I changed my outward appearance and actions, that eventually that would change my sexual desires." Nevertheless, his external facade did not change his sexual feelings. It became too painful for Manuel to endure feelings he wished he did not have, so he tried to dissociate from reality by numbing himself with alcohol: "Every day I existed was a struggle because I was living in denial…I had found some love in alcohol and it was real good at helping me avoid my realities and to forget my pains." As such, the closet's obscurity of truth caused great confusion among both Ben and Manuel's about their true feelings and realities. Manuel attempted to cope with this tension by dissociating from reality altogether through alcoholism. Dissociation can help to detach from pain of the closet, stretching across the mind like a layer of heavy fog. Yet this dissociative fog can further obscure a person's grasp on their reality.

Ben said he gained clarity about his sexual orientation only after breaking up with his girlfriend and embarking on an active self-exploration journey: "I can't really tell somebody what I am, if I don't know what I am. So I had to kind of find that first. So after I had a few sexual encounters with other males, and flirted or sweet-talked or whatever you wanna call it, it became apparent that this was something I was comfortable in." Self-exploration provided Ben with the insight needed to dissolve confusion and achieve clarity about his true feelings, desires, and reality. Similarly, Victor described his coming out process as a "fog clearing out," offering him clarity to think things through and perceive reality in a way that was difficult with his foggy, clouded mind while in the closet.

Restoring truth with speech: All participants described how truth, integrity, intimacy, and reality were restored when they finally spoke their truth to a safe, accepting person. "Coming out" as an act of speech was healing not only because participants could finally disclose the truth of their sexual orientation to another person in the world. Both Manuel and Andres critiqued the need for queer people to have to "come out" with a fixed label on their sexual orientation at all. Nevertheless, all participants attested to the fact that coming out, as an act of speech, granted them the freedom to stop hiding their emotional truths about their basic existence and being-in-the-world. Participants could finally share their daily highs and lows, their formative life experiences, the fluctuating landscape of their heart and soul—all which make a human being who they really are. For instance, Ben said that coming out to his mother, and receiving an explicit response of acceptance from her, felt like "an opening of the floodgates". He elaborated:

> There was so much that was held back. And once I finally said that and let it go, everything came rushing through. Now my mom gets the spiel about every man that I ever meet. And it feels so great. Like that's where the comfortability is. That I can chit chat with her, girl talk, you know about men… it's like releasing water from the dam… just how the water so seamlessly flows.

For Manuel, being able to be open about his sexuality with his good friend David provided a release from the build-up of pressure he felt from restricting his emotions for so long:

> I could be comfortable showing my emotions and vulnerabilities with him. I can't show my vulnerabilities to everyone 'cause that could put me in danger. But with David I can freely talk to about that kind of stuff, like everything on the line, and know that I would be okay… It's just something that feels free.

Coming out as an act of speech empowered participants to destroy the persona that hid their truth, claim their authentic feelings and realities, and openly express themselves to the world-at-large. As such, "coming out" is not simply about saying "I am gay." Rather, those three words carry with them a human being's entire existence which can finally be affirmed, expressed and shared.

2. The Closet as Paralysis of *Freedom*

<u>Prohibited from the freedom of self-expression</u>: All participants repeatedly referenced their inability to express themselves freely within the world-at-large. They described their sexual orientation, bodily mannerisms, affectionate and loving nature, emotions, and general self as not being granted the basic human right to freedom of expression. Participants did not merely feel insecure about expressing parts of themselves that made them different from others. They felt like they were not allowed to—that the closet imposed a prohibition which denied them of their right. Andres described being prohibited from freely expressing his love to his partner in public places:

> This is no way to experience or live love. Love is lived spontaneously and free. When you see the person you love, you want to rush to them, you want to look them in the eyes, you want to kiss them, you want to hold them, you want engage with them differently. But we were bound to the shadows. If we saw each other in the hallway, we had to nod our heads in acknowledgement. A cordial "hi" would sometimes be said. It just felt oppressive and wrong.

To Andres, the prohibition of his self-expression epitomized what it meant to be oppressed as a sexual minority. Additionally, Rodney described being unable to express his stereotypically-feminine attributes and activities; he was punished by his parents when he transgressed gender norms: "I was punished for not doing what was expected of a boy. I enjoyed dolls (my favorite were paper dolls), fairytales, dressing up, playing house (being the mother), wanting to cook and sew, etc. I wasn't supposed to cry or be sensitive." When he was caught expressing himself, he was yelled at or physically punished by his mother. He remembers his father saying, "Rodney, if you keep acting like this people are going to think you're a fruit."

Participants described how unfair it was to witness heteronormative individuals freely express themselves around them, while their own self-expression was bound to the shadows. Andres said: "I would see others be so affectionate with their love object… and I had to hide in the shadows, away from the world." Manuel discussed how it was acceptable to freely talk about his hookups with "hot chicks", but not about his feelings and relations with other genders. He asserted: "Being hetero is a privilege in our society. It is a privilege in the way that you can freely and openly express every bit of your emotions." Even worse was the tendency for participants to hear expressions of homophobic hate speech proliferate freely around them by others. Victor, Ben, and Andres all described growing up in social environments where people freely disparaged gay people and uttered gay slurs. Ben explained: "Growing up, whenever you see so many people saying, 'oh he's gay, oh he's a f*ggot,' and they're talking about other people, you begin to kind of internalize that." While people all around them had the freedom to express their hate, participants' own expressions of love were prohibited by society and the oppressive closet.

Self-policing self-expression: All participants also described internalizing this prohibition to the extent that they began to "self-police" their own expression. Victor described self-policing his sexual arousal in attempt to prevent his body from feeling its natural feelings towards men. Rodney, similarly, described experiencing "sexual repression" while closeted, whereby he tried to prohibit his groin's feelings because he internalized messages that "you can't do that, that's bad." Ben described being the target of external speculation about whether he was gay, which led him to constantly self-police his natural mannerisms: "I consistently felt as though I had to make sure everything was right. I had to make sure that my hair wasn't frizzy. I had to make sure that my clothes were right. I had to make sure these things aligned, so that I felt okay. So there was this self-policing for so many years to fit in." Though Ben now proudly expresses his unique mannerisms in public, the need for self-policing returns when he is reminded of the possibility of gay-bashing in present day. Andres, who described himself as having non-masculine bodily mannerisms, described the closet as a constant experience of monitoring his bodily movement: "There's a Cards Against Humanity card that says 'calculating every mannerism as to imply heterosexuality,' and that's what it would be like." Manuel's form of policing was more violent: he would punish his body with substance use or self-harm to keep his body's "impulses" in check. He would also violently police other sexual minorities who dare freely express themselves in ways he could not:

> I had decided that it was time to punish the "f*ggot", to punish every ounce of sin and corruption in his body. I needed to teach him a lesson for even putting his sexuality in my mind. For every punch I had landed on his body I had probably done four times as much to myself when I got home later that night… It was as if the blood that came from his face when I struck it was the same that I needed to rid myself of.

Manuel's form of policing was more violent than the other participants', and it extended both internally and externally. Yet it shared the same root cause as the other participants' self-policing behaviors: internalizing the prohibition on the freedom of self-expression.

Constrained from bodily movement: All participants described their prohibition of self-expression revolving around bodily constraint. While closeted, participants were restricted from moving their body freely to express affection for their romantic partners in public. They could not move their mouths to freely speak about themselves, their lives, and their loves. Participants with non-masculine mannerisms could not move their hands freely to gesture naturally. Some participants even felt they could not allow their groin to experience its natural sexual arousal reactions. It became clear that the closet prohibited spontaneous self-expression at the most basic level of bodily freedom. As such, oppression of freedom was not lived by participants as an abstraction, but rather as a concrete, physiological, embodied, daily reality.

During their focusing portion of their interviews, the restrictions that the closet placed upon bodily freedom was acutely felt among all participants. While describing how the experience of the closet manifested in their bodies, Andres described his feet as feeling "ice cold" and "frozen solid;" he associated this with an inability to move. Ben described his jaw as "clamped down" and his mouth wired tightly shut, as well as his hands as "locked down," "stiff like a lock," and unable to gesture—he felt various parts of his body locked into stiffness, stillness, and silence. Rodney described his throat as "closing up" because it felt threatened and vulnerable, and he could not produce sound from it. Manuel described his body as feeling very confined, stiff, and "compressed in on itself." He further described his body as "a golem," "a rock," or "a stone statue" which was "incapable of moving". Finally, Victor also described his body as feeling "constricted," which reminded him of how his body would move through the world "like a soldier on guard" while closeted, always ready to defend himself. All participants, through varying language, described their bodies as being stiff and difficult to move due to the oppressive constraints of the closet.

Fear and vigilance against assault: All participants identified fear as the primary emotion associated with being prohibited from free self-expression. Specifically, they feared being assaulted by others if they were to freely and spontaneously express themselves. Victor, who had been bullied during his upbringing, explained that "fear was the driving force behind everything" he experienced while in the closet, and that he constantly felt his body being "weighed down by fear". Andres described a very visceral sense of fear of being attacked where he feels his heart race, his body cringe, and a desire to run. He labeled this as a "PTSD" reaction that occurs among members of marginalized minority groups. Andres' fear was intersectional in that he grappled with the possibility of both anti-Hispanic and anti-gay violence in his geographic social environment:

> Violence is a real thing. We could see that today with the Orlando shooting. I guess I didn't realize until the other day, I still live in an experience of fear. Especially when I leave the city, my boyfriend and I are really scared that, if we stay in this area full of pro-Trump stickers… we're like, whoa, we are Gay and Hispanics here. Like, we're gonna die.

Andres said that this fear of being attacked leads him to continue censoring self-expression in certain public spaces: "I still restrict myself. And I still don't always present my partner as my partner. I catch myself sometimes not wanting to hold my partner in certain places, because of fear." Manuel, too, described being vigilant and censoring self-expression in certain public places such as the men's locker room: "If I were to bring up things like that, about hooking up with guys, in a locker room or like at a skate park… I could very well face some violent threats. Both verbal or physical. It poses a real danger, just to even freely speak." Manuel said he often hears the gay slur "f*ggot" in the men's locker room. Each time he does, it startles his body as if a bullet is being launched in his direction: "even if the person isn't intending to hit someone directly, if you are a person in the room who identifies with that word…that bullet's coming for you. Even if it's not their intention, you're going to get hit with it." Similarly, Ben described feeling like he was being "cut" by others derogatory comments and slurs towards gay people: "The quickest thing that a lot of

[people] say to me to get under my skin… is to call me a f*ggot. And each time, it's that little cut. It's a little cut." He described these cuts as similar to paper cuts—not enough to entirely debilitate or kill you, but wounding nevertheless. Not only did direct anti-gay slurs feel cutting to Ben, but also more subtle micro-aggressions, such as hearing his grandmother sigh with disgust when a scene of two men kissing appeared on TV. Due to the constantly threat of being assaulted by derogatory comments and micro-aggressions in the world-at-large, Ben described the closet as "omnipresent" for him:

> There will forever be a part of me that is still there. There's just this part that's stuck there. Sometimes you never really know when you're going to be symbolically thrown back into the closet for expressing that you are a certain way. You may be out of the closet verbally, but you could be put back psychically with shame.

Freedom as rebellion: All participants described ultimately achieving a certain degree of freedom over their bodies, their expressions, and themselves. They accessed freedom by rebelling against the constraints thrust upon them by homophobia in the world-at-large. For most participants, this rebellion occurred amidst their coming out process. Andres' rebellion took the form of anger and destruction, which served as sources of empowerment for him. His anger served as a fuel for self-assertion, propelling him to stand up against oppression after coming out. When his school administration sought to prohibit same-sex affection among he and his friends, Andres recounted: "We were like, fuck that, you can't make us not love ourselves." His anger was felt like a fire which allowed him to proclaim: "Fuck you, administration!" Andres also identified this empowerment as a kind of destruction, because "we were destroying that [conservative] tradition" by breaking its norms and asserting same-sex love. For Victor, his specific form of rebellion arrived in the form of indifference. Wherein the closet's oppression is maintained by fear, Victor described experiencing an "I don't care" release which helped him stop fearing others' rejection of him for being gay. He explains: "When I finally did come out, it wasn't the anger, it was the not caring

about consequences that did it. I was young, fit, and actually as nice as I have always been." In a sense, Victor rebelled against fear and stopped caring about consequences, which gave him the confidence to stop hiding his sexuality and come out. Similarly, Rodney described his coming out journey as a feeling of "not caring what the world says," which allowed him to open the closet door and let light in. He explains:

> When I opened that closet door and didn't care what the world said about me, that was such freedom. And I wanted then to, sort of let light in… and then let my light shine outward. And be absolutely… I was out in my work, in my play, in my life, in my family. Even with my husband, I love introducing him as my husband, now that we're married, to the world. This is me, and my relationship with him is me, and it's a good thing. It's not bad, there is no shame anymore.

Rodney described "letting light in" as an act of freedom that dissipated his shame and allowed him to claim himself proudly to the world-at-large. Likewise, for Ben, his specific form of rebellion occurred as a commitment to becoming an "open book" as a gay man across all domains of his life: "I think that's self-affirming. I can tell you [I'm gay], and you can't take that away from me. You can't make me hide parts of myself anymore." In these various ways, participants subverted the oppression of the closet by rebelling against its constraints and demanding their freedom to express themselves openly to the world.

Interestingly, Rodney's rebellion also occurred from an early age, while still closeted. As a child, he described rebelling against his parents and society by creating a secret world of his own where he was free to be himself: "the world said you can't be who you are. So I went into my… I made my own closet. It became my world." In the secrecy of his bedroom, Rodney subverted the oppression of the closet and freely expressed the parts of him that were prohibited in social spaces, such as playing with dolls: "I was expressing all of those things in my own little secret world. When I was playing with the doll or making it secretly under the table. I was in charge there, the whole environment. And so that world was… it was freedom." Rodney explained that creating his own

world was his way of fighting back against the hateful world-at-large that said he wasn't allowed to be himself: "The only fight back was able to… well I hate you. Fuck you. Fuck all of you. Because I have a secret. I have a world that is so beautiful. And so colorful. And so much fun. And I'm just going to live there." As such, Rodney's act of freedom, in some sense, *was* his closet: a secret world where he was in control and free.

3. The Closet as a Barrier to *Love*

A safe but secluded world of my own: Most participants described expressing themselves freely inside the confines of their bedroom walls. In this sense, the concrete space of the closet was actually their bedrooms: a safe space where they could shut the door and freely be. Being alone in the secluded privacy of their bedrooms gave participants the freedom to create, explore, and play, to pursue their natural desires and yearnings. Yet though there was great safety in seclusion, there was also great loneliness, unfairness, and despair—because in order for participants to be themselves, they had to shut the rest of the world out. For instance, Andres explained:

> In my old teenage house, I would just close the door and be in my room for the whole time. And then come out to eat. And then go back in. Because my interests were gay things. So I didn't want my parents to find out… I was a singing kid, so I was like, oh I'm going to put makeup on today, I would wear eyeliner… Which is not okay.

Reflecting on this time, Andres expressed anger at having to seclude himself to be himself: "It was also all very depressing. And it was very unfair… Like why do we have to do this? Because you're all a bunch of assholes, pretty much." Ben, too, expressed himself within the confines of his bedroom, going online to gay internet dating sites and talking to other young men to explore his "internal" sexual desires. Yet from an "external' perspective, he was in a happy, heterosexual relationship with a woman to all who knew him. Ben expressed remorse at keeping his "internal" world such a secret from his "external" world, which split himself off from all significant others in his life. Rodney described cherishing the seclusion of his bedroom, which he transformed into a "secret world of my own." In the secret world of his bedroom, he would spend hours making fabric dolls and hiding them underneath his bed. Rodney described the closet's secret world as beautiful, because in it he was free to express himself. Yet, he also partially created it due to feelings of contempt towards the outside world. Consequently, as Rodney kept going further inside this secret world, he describes becoming increasingly cut off from the world-at-large: "I totally closed the world out. I didn't care about them, I didn't have friends particularly…I felt empty, I felt sadness. A deep sadness that carried through." Rodney said one of the most challenging aspects of coming out of the closet was breaking out of that isolation and connecting with the world-at-large: "That was the hard part, to break out of that and not be afraid. Now I want my circle to be complete. Not a hidden circle, a circle that I can share. And just connecting with all the energy of life around me. That's a very powerful thing."

The façade's loss of intimacy: All participants described building a facade or persona to hide their sexual orientation from others while in the closet. This façade precipitated not only the loss of truth but the loss of intimacy—whereby intimacy requires the ability to vulnerably share one's truths with others. As participants felt themselves becoming less honest and self-disclosive

with family and friends, they all described feeling increasingly estranged from their significant others. For instance, Andres described being best friends with his mother growing up. However, once he discovered his same-sex attraction, he began concealing this from his mother because she espoused anti-gay Baptist religious beliefs. He recounts: "Because of being in the closet and not being able to be myself, I was somebody completely different with her, just to make her happy. I'd pretend to be heterosexual, I'd pretend to go to church, I'd pretend I was fine. I'd pretend, I pretended all the time." Andres describes his heterosexual persona as erecting a "barrier" between them, because he could not tell her the most important things happening in his life: "I couldn't tell her about who I was or what I did, or even share with her some of life's best experiences: love and being loved." This barrier, which dissipated their special, intimate bond, was one of the most painful aspects of being in the closet for Andres: "I think it's like, a big loss for me. It was something else I had to grieve. Because I lost my mother. And I didn't just lose my mother, but also my friend." Similarly, Ben mourned the distance that grew between he and his ex-girlfriend in high school, who he deeply loved as a friend. Yet as he hid his sexual orientation from her behind a "façade," he recounts their relationship growing "further apart" and "disorganized internally". Ben finally broke up with her, yet he did not tell her why: "In the moment, I don't tell her that I am attracted emotionally and physically to men. I regret not telling her about my confliction and the pain that the internal debate causes." Ben regretted not being more open and emotionally intimate with this friend for whom he cared so much, but with whom he thereafter became estranged. Manuel, too, described the closet's constraints on his relationship with his brother, to whom he was close yet he had not yet come out. He explained that while he could talk to his brother about his relationship with women, the restrictions that the closet placed on his full emotional expression created limitations on the closeness of their relationship. Manuel stated a desire to come out to his brother so that he could feel more intimately connected with him. Moreover, Rodney described wanting nothing more than

to have a close relationship with his mother, to please her, and to share in "girl talk" with her. Yet, though he was having many adventurous experiences of love with his first boyfriend, he had to compartmentalize the intimate details of his life from her, and essentially live a "double life" where he lied about who he was or what he did. Victor explained that he built an "I don't care" façade that was aggressive and indifferent to consequences, in order to hide how scared he really felt inside. He explained that this "I don't care" façade, and the consequences of his actions when enacting this façade, lost him many friends for whom he deeply cared. All participants, in their own ways, grieved the loss of intimacy that the closet precipitated with the people that mattered most in life.

Love as the wellspring of life: The closet's barrier to love was especially tragic when considering that, among most participants, love was experienced as an essential ingredient of life—perhaps even the well-spring of life—without which it was difficult to survive. In various ways, participants described how the deprivation of love felt annihilating, and the presence of love rescued them from despair and even death. Andres described falling into "very despairing episodes" during high school, particularly when his beloved would ignore him to pass as straight. When his partner withdrew love, Andres would feel unlovable, and would move through the world drained of vitality: "I would wear hoodies to school, didn't care about my appearance. I didn't feel energy… Like I could barely move because I didn't have energy. I would walk slowly and barely interact with people." Then, when his partner paid him attention, he would "spring back to life." Andres said his despairing episodes brought him to "the brink of death" twice, in the form of suicide attempts. What helped him sidestep death—what brought him back to life, essentially—was reaching out to a supportive circle of friends who offered Andres love:

> I feel like I had lost everything already, so I was trying to gain friendships. Which I ultimately did. That's what got me through the last years of high school, and what got me to come out of the closet. Because I was friends with people that were very accepting, my friends just

> loved me…So my coping was giving more energy to those friendships whenever these things came up for me.

Similarly, Manuel described profound emotional pain that the closet incited during the Focusing portion of his interview. He described despair as spreading inside of him like heavy mud which is "forcing itself through spaces, through cracks. And everything in its way is trembling." He described the pain morphing his body into a "golem," "rock," and "stone statue," incapable of moving and drained of life. Manuel stated that he needed someone else to release him from this pain; he expressed helplessness that the pain could be alleviated on his own. Then he envisioned the face of his close friend David, who had responded to him with acceptance and love when he came out. Seeing David's loving face in his mind brought tears of relief to Manuel, restored his feelings of hope and vitality, and released him of his built-up despair: "it's like when you put a light little hole in a balloon and it starts to seep out, a little bit, a little bit. And everything's releasing." Manuel attributed this release to the knowledge that he has friends who love him and to whom he can freely express himself. Moreover, Rodney reveled in the power of love to literally bring him back to life when he thought he was dying of HIV. Up to that point, he had had an estranged relationship with his mother due to his sexuality. But upon worrying about her son dying, she moved across the country to be close to Rodney and take care of him. Rodney had been very sick prior to her move, unable to eat. But once his mother was physically there with him, amazingly, he began to recover.

> I really was just giving up, and I kept losing weight. They said I was 90 pounds, which was just bone. And then Mom came, she cooked. She brought me food. I ate. I gained weight. It was the beginning of a recovery. From that. From that. That is the power of love… it's why I'm alive. My doctors kept telling me, you have a year to live. And then a year goes by. And almost 30 years go by, and why are you still alive? And I'm like, I don't know…the power of love.

As such, Rodney believed that the power of his mother's love saved his life when he was on death's bed. For most participants, in one way or another, love was the source that restored hope and meaning in life, which the closet's oppression had threatened to wipe away.

Self-love requires others' love: All participants described the oppressive force of the closet eroding positive feelings about themselves, precipitating shame and self-loathing. Likewise, all participants also said that others' explicit affirmations of love were necessary to develop and maintain self-love. For instance, Ben described fearing his mother's rejection if he came out to her. But instead, she responded to him with explicit acceptance, love, and a willingness to learn. Her response helped him affirm himself and love his own sexuality: "I went from fearing saying that I'm gay, to really loving saying it. Even if it makes somebody feel uncomfortable." Ben now actively seeks to play an accepting role for others in the LGBTQ community who struggle with low self-esteem. He wishes to help them love themselves the same way he has come to love himself: "[I want to] show them that they can love themselves for who they are.... I'll feel like I have fulfilled my purpose with each person that I help see that." Ben asserted the importance of others taking the responsibility to initiate affirmation for LGBTQ people: "You have somebody whose crying, they want to talk but they seem somewhat resistant, like they're really not too sure if they want to let you in. But you unlock that door and crack it open just a little bit, and then you wait for them to open it." Similarly, Andres said that the closet "tore [his] self-esteem apart". Yet he had supportive friends at school who would hint to him, before he came out, that they were aware of his same-sex attraction and it was okay if he were gay. Internalizing their affirmation helped heal his self-esteem. Andres also described a moment when his lover, who was also closeted, explicitly declared his feelings for Andres for the first time. Until that point, Andres had internalized the message that gay men "just like to party and have sex and they're disgusting," which made him feel unlovable. Yet hearing his partner verbally express his loving feelings for Andres helped him feel lovable: "It was good for me, because like, oh, I can be loved… I can continue being gay and I'll be fine." Rodney remarked that he always had a foundation of self-love from an early age: "I was lucky, in that there

was a strength in me. I don't know where it came from. But I've always been happy to be, grateful to be who I was." Yet at times he would absorb society's messages that it was bad to be himself. As such, shame would seep in and fracture his self-love. It took other people's affirmations to remind Rodney it was okay to love himself, just as he is: "It took work and realization and help of people around me to say, you can feel that way, it's okay. Loving yourself is a good thing. Don't be afraid… When I was feeling undeserving, look: you are enough, just as you are. You are enough."

Though Manuel and Victor did not explicitly mention self-love, they both discussed how their shame was alleviated by others' affirmations of them. Manuel explained that he continues to struggle with shame about his sexuality at times. But his current partner has normalized his feelings and experiences of homosexuality, affirming that he is simply human like everyone else: "There was no… oh wow that's weird or strange. It was just, okay that's normal". Her affirmation of his normalcy has helped dissipate Manuel's self-loathing regarding his sexual encounters with guys, reminding him that his sexuality is not a bad perversion that needs to be destroyed. Victor said that he continued to believe something was wrong with him for being different until he finally came out to his mother and she responded positively, with acceptance and affirmation. Additionally, when Victor discovered others who were gay and okay, this helped him realize there was nothing wrong with being gay—that, in fact, it was good to be gay. All participants required explicit affirmation and love from others to alleviate their shame, and to begin relating to themselves with positive self-regard and self-love.

4. The Closet as Fragility of *Hope*

Trapped in despair: In the darkest moments of the closeted experience, all participants seemed to become overwhelmed by a state of despair that stripped them of vitality and hope. Each participant's experience of despair took different forms, such as suicidality, hopelessness, insufferable emotional pain, helplessness, emptiness, and nihilism. The closet seemed to trap them in these disturbing feelings, such that for a period of time it felt like there was no way out. For Andres, the peak of his "deep despairing episodes" occurred in high school. He described a vicious inner-battle between his Baptist upbringing, which dictated that gay people were doomed to hell, and his sexual orientation. Andres described his despair as a resignation to hopelessness; a certainty that he would inevitably go to hell. He began to read Dante's *Inferno* to learn what hell was like and prepare himself to die: 'I wanted to know what hell was like, because I was trying to prepare myself to die. I tried twice to kill myself…And the reason that I tried, was like… if I'm going to hell anyway, because I was already suffering, so I was like, well let's just do this right now. Why prolong the suffering?" Andres elaborated that the emotional pain he experienced while alive and closeted was far worse than the physical pain described in Dante's version of hell: "Most of the images in that story are physical pain. And physical pain has always been less traumatic to me than emotional pain. For example, there are these stories of people of being shot in half, and I was like, well that doesn't

sound as bad as this pain that I'm in right now." As such, Andres' experience of despair not only included hopelessness but insufferable emotional pain that he yearned to escape through death. For Victor, his despair while closeted took the form of nihilism—of "not caring about the consequences" of what happened to his own well-being or anyone else's. He described acting violently to those around him with this "I don't care" stance. Victor explained that hope as a sensation did not really exist for him most of his life, while closeted. Instead, fear was the overriding feeling that trapped him underneath a heavy weight, and made him indifferent to his life and others'. Manuel's experience of despair took the form of helplessness in the face of overpowering emotional pain. He described the overpowering pain as "forcing itself through spaces, through cracks. And everything in its way is trembling." The pain was further described as a "black hole" that was forcefully sucking him in, and that he could not rescue himself from. Manuel expressed helplessness in the face of the closet's force; for some time, he kept asserting that nothing could be done to change his pain until the outside world stops being oppressive. Rodney, too, experienced despair in the form of helplessness. He described a sensation of his throat closing in on itself which was so overpowering, and which made him feel "so terribly afraid", that he felt helplessness in the face of it. He worried about being unable to "come back:" from the overpowering fear he was experiencing: 'I felt like it could get me out of control if I let it. That's my fear, that that will overwhelm me and I will not come back from it." Rodney also said that recounting his years in the closet made him return to a "place of emptiness" and "helplessness," and he worried these feelings would overwhelm him. Finally, though Ben's experience of despair was less palpable, he expressed a sense of "emptiness" while closeted, encapsulated in the symbolic image of a blank-slated mask which stripped him of his features and identity. Ben described his emotions flattening and becoming numb and empty, because his identity felt taken away by the closet.

For all participants, as they described their experience of despair in various degrees and with various feelings, I felt the need to quickly jump in, prevent re-traumatization, and instill hope. I did this by seeking to help them identify their personal power in the face of insufferable pain, by asking them how they had come out of the closet despite feelings of helplessness, and by reassuring them that I bore witness to their identity in its full beauty.

The violence of hatred and shame: Participants' sense of despair was perpetuated by living in a world that directed hate towards LGBTQ people. They described internalizing this hate such that it manifested as shame inside of them. Ben used the word "shame" as a verb rather than a noun, he said that each time someone shamed him through verbalizing anti-gay micro-aggressions or slurs, it felt like a "little cut" against his self-perception. Similarly, Manuel described experiencing anti-gay slurs as "bullets" being launched in his direction. For most participants, the cumulative violence of being shamed by these cuts and bullets caused great harm—upon themselves as well as other people. Manuel experienced this violence from any early age onwards, growing up with a father who frequently uttered anti-gay slurs. Manuel described internalizing such hatred, which manifested as both self-directed and other-directed physical violence. He reflected that both forms of violence stem from the same source of despair: internalized homophobia. Internalized homophobia caused him to engage in alcoholism and self-harm to punish himself for his "disease":

> I was filled with self-loathing and every day I existed was a struggle because I was living in denial. I thought I had a disease and all I knew and wanted to do was to combat it and all of the persuasions that came with it. I hated my body, I hated myself, and I hated who I knew I could become if I didn't keep my impulses in check…I wanted to destroy my body.

Manuel's self-loathing also translated to a hatred of gay people who were out, open and confident about their sexuality. He found himself drunkenly beating up a gay peer one day after a high school party: "It was as if the blood that came from his face when I struck it was the same that I needed to rid myself of. What I had done to that boy's body isn't only the hatred I possessed for him, but it

was also the self-hatred that had been instilled into me by my family, friends, and "loved ones." Manuel expressed great remorse about the fine line between self-and-other hatred—the ways they can be two sides of the same coin. In light of the 2016 Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting and the speculation of Omar Mateen's internalized homophobia, Manuel found it important to courageously share the ways in which self-loathing precipitated his own acts of anti-gay violence: 'I know how powerful hatred can be. And how violent it can actually get." Other participants also described becoming physically violent while in the closet as a result of internalizing hatred. For Andres, the violence of shame and self-loathing was directed towards himself, in the form of suicide attempts. Victor found himself engaging in acts of physical violence towards other people while closeted. He described "literally flying off into a rage for small infractions, dozens road rage incidents that should have ended with my incarceration at a federal prison…pulling knives on co-workers, and shouting things at people that didn't deserve it." As such, the hatred inflicted upon participants by the homophobic world violently found its way inside of them. This inner self-hatred became so painful and despairing for some participants that they sought to re-externalize it, expressing it through concrete acts of physical violence towards themselves and/or the world-at-large.

Rage that needs an outlet: All participants described feelings of anger arising, to varying degrees, in response to being closeted. Rodney described feelings of contempt towards the world-at-large for telling him it was not okay to be himself: "It just drove me to say to the world…well I hate you. Fuck you. Fuck all of you." Ben described anger heating up his body as he reflected on hiding who he was for so long. He felt himself clenching his jaw to hold back from expressing this anger. When anger was combined with despair, this could potentially lead to acts of violent rage described in the previous section. Yet when anger was combined with hope and channeled in a useful direction, it could actually serve as a fuel for justice and social transformation. For instance,

while closeted, Victor described feeling "irrational violent anger at the slightest notion of annoyance by the end of my teens and into my twenties… There were times I would shake for days, I was so triggered by what had upset me." Prior to coming out, Victor's rage about his sociopolitical oppression seemed to be constantly triggered by minor experiences of injustice in everyday life—such as a driver committed a wrongdoing to him by cutting him off on the road. Yet when he came out of the closet and began to direct his energy towards LGBTQ rights, he ceased acting violently in rage. After coming out, Victor seemed to identify the central source of his anger and embrace a social platform upon which to channel his anger into activism. Similarly, Andres described feeling angry at the losses he endured while closeted. He experienced his anger as a "spinning wheel of fire" in his belly. Andres associated this image with the rebellion of social movements. He further reflected that as he began to come out of the closet, his despair transformed into anger, which he sought to harness productively in the form of activism: "starting in the closet… or starting to feel sexual attraction for males, was sadness. And then I turned that sadness into anger. And used the anger to branch out into doing things that would affect the well-being of our community and our people." Andres reflected on this productive transformation of anger as a "phoenix rising from the ashes," such that the flames of anger can be utilized to destroy systems of oppression so something new can be born. In this sense, Andres proclaimed that anger and destruction might be inherent aspects to the process of societal transformation:

> For example, the Black Lives Matters movement, there's a lot of pain, and there's a lot of change that has to come... They're experiencing pain and anger. And then the white community is experiencing pain and anger because they feel attacked. So there has to be fire and death in order for rebirth. The phoenix would be a good example. There's all this fire and death, and then a phoenix is reborn.

Victor and Andres' examples of transmuting rage into activism suggest that anger and destruction, when harnessed with an attitude of hope, can be repurposed as tools for societal regeneration rather than enacted as senseless violence.

Finding hope by finding community: All participants described hope growing when they discovered a community in the world which offered acceptance and belonging. Victor said that hope, as a sensation, was non-existent for him until he came out of the closet. Once he came out, he found a gay community which became his stepping stone for hope. When he discovered there were others like him who were gay and okay, he felt hopeful that he could be okay too. Learning more about the gay community and the diversity of people helped Victor feel accepted for the parts of him that made him different. Ben, too, said that when he moved from a conservative town to a more liberal city, he felt immersed in a diverse community of people whose kaleidoscope of identities helped him feel hopeful about exploring and expressing the parts of himself he previously had to conceal: "I felt that there were more differences around me, that people wouldn't necessarily stagnate on how I was different. Because it was an acknowledgment that everybody's different, and that's okay, for most of the time." Rodney described being rejected by many groups for being gay as a child and young adult. He longed to experience a sense of belonging with these groups, but felt them saying to him: "everyone's welcome, everyone's welcome…except for you." This led him to carry a deep belief that others would reject him if they knew who he really was. To protect himself, Rodney kept people at arm's length and isolated himself for years. Then, as an adult, he began joining therapy groups which made him feel welcomed and accepted. He felt affirmed by these communities, who brought hope to Rodney that people could like him for who he really is. This hope allowed him to stop shutting the world out: "I didn't know there was anything else. I felt trapped in that… It wasn't until finally, someone does invite you in…then hope grows."

Manuel asserted that in order to maintain hope, LGBTQ people should focus on seeking acceptance from their immediate, personal environments, rather than from the whole world. He suggested that if LGBTQ people believe they cannot come out until the whole world transforms to

be tolerant, they may struggle with hopelessness and even suicidality. Rather, they should locate and embrace specific people in their immediate communities who are accepting and tolerant:

> Being how high suicide rates are for LGBTQ people, it's important to not tell them "hey you are not going to be safe until we change the world". That they're never going to feel comfortable with themselves. They're never going to feel safe, protected, and wanted. It's more important to tell them…be happy and fortunate for the people you have, and use them as a resource. Just by recognizing what I have in front of me in the present… that that is much more personally important.

This insight has been crucial for Manuel's well-being. As an activist, he described sometimes feeling like he will not be okay until his activism transforms the whole world's prejudices. But he feels more hopeful when, instead, he focuses his activism on transforming intolerant attitudes in his immediate, personal environments:

> Even though I know I can't change the whole world, and our whole society to think differently…I am fortunate to have the people that I do have. And it's impossible for me to think that I can only come to a compromise or a solution by changing the whole world. Hopefully we can have that happen someday. But if you solve your personal environments, that's how you can live with it. That's how you can not be in pain. it's going to take a while to change the whole world. But don't use that as your end goal. Don't say, I'm not ready to be who I am until we change the whole world.

For all participants, finding a local community of people in the world-at-large, with whom they could feel a sense of belonging, was an invaluable resource for coming out and maintaining hope.

5. The Way Out: Gaining Resources for *Power*

Truth, freedom, love, and hope were all described mostly as absences in participants' descriptions of being closeted. Yet there was one existential right that appeared mostly as a presence: power. Power helped participants restore their personal and collective truths, demand their freedom to be who they are, tear down the walls to love, and maintain and spread hope. This section describes the various resources for power that participants harnessed in their journeys to coming out of the closet and re-joining the world-at-large. This section is written differently than the previous sections; for the other themes, I included any subthemes that arose in two or more participants descriptions of the closet. In this section, I included any and all subthemes of power that arose in at least one participant's description of (coming out of) the closet. I did this because it seems invaluable for the LGBTQ community, allies, and helping professionals alike to learn about the multiple resources available through which queer people can experience empowerment in the face of the closet's oppression.

Love as power: Most participants described others' love as a resource that empowered them to come out of the closet and heal. Andres said his friends gently hinted that they would be okay if he were gay, long before he came out to them. Their easy-going acceptance of his sexuality helped heal the shattered self-esteem caused by the closet's oppression. Additionally, Rodney described love as literally bringing him back to life. When he was very ill, his health began to heal as his mother lovingly took care of him, despite years of estrangement between them due to the closet's oppression. Manuel said that others' love became internalized as an inner force within him, which battled the destructive force of the closet. During Focusing, while his body felt overtaken by the pain of the closet, he said, "it feels like, the only thing to use right now is just like force… to kind of combat the force that's just like pushing itself through me." Then Manuel brought to mind

his friend' face, who has offered him love amidst his distress. Remembering his friend's love became an internal force of power within, which helped Manuel triumph over the closet's trauma:

> In the past, I've never had a release from it. There was no conclusion, there was no compromise, there was nothing that ended it on a positive note. This was the first moment that… I was actually able to use something to combat it… It just felt weird to like be in control of it, and to know that I could do something about it. And that like, equally with how powerful the physical responses were, like physically, to know how powerful I was too. To know that I was able to bring forward opposing physical forces that were able to undo that, that were even more powerful than that.

As such, most participants described love as a force of incredible power that could combat the powerful oppression of the closet.

Moreover, some participants also expressed desire to offer their love to other LGBTQ individuals oppressed by the closet. Ben stated: "[I want to] show them that they can love themselves for who they are.... I'll feel like I have fulfilled my purpose with each person that I help see that." Ben said that thinking about the power of love provided solace for him when the closet's oppression felt too painful-—"whether that's love for other people, or love for yourself." He cited a quote that brought him comfort throughout middle school: "When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace". Accordingly, receiving others' love empowered participants to heal their own wounds, and also motivated them to offer love to others, in order to cultivate a world where the collective power of love can someday triumph.

Knowledge as power: Most participants also discussed becoming empowered by knowledge and education. Ben said that studying human sexuality helped him come out of the closet, because it aided his self-discovery process: "I was able to scholastically look at these things in depth. And write about these things in depth without being criticized." Obtaining knowledge about LGBTQ experiences helped Ben comprehend his own sexuality better, empowering him to proudly identify as gay. Additionally, Manuel felt healed by obtaining introspective knowledge about how

homophobia has harmed him psychologically. He compared this process of self-knowledge to digging up a rock that has been buried underground: "If you don't dig out everything you need to get out of the hole, then it's going to keep building up. You need to dig your shovel all the way down, and when you have it all the way down, then you pull it up." This introspective process was painful at times, but it ultimately empowers him to dissipate the closet's oppressive influence on his life. Rodney, too, described self-knowledge as continuously shedding light upon the layers of his psyche that have been suppressed. He explained:

> Continuing to open myself up and to find the layers, find the anger, find the shame, find the woman—all of those things were closet doors opening. And there are still doors. I'm still inside. And that is the whole closet thing… I used to look at them like curtains. If the light was right you could see through the curtain, push that curtain away, and go to the next one… and keep going keep going, keep opening yourself up.

Rodney pursued introspection to empower his psychological growth as a gay man and human being. Victor, who grew up in a conservative neighborhood, felt empowered by learning about the existence of a gay community, and about human diversity in general. Obtaining knowledge about human diversity helped him accept his own difference. Victor said that now, when he fights for LGBTQ rights, he prefers to do so through the vehicle of education and logic, which he deems a more effective than rage, destruction, and rioting. Victor said that while he was in the closet, his mental faculties were fogged up. As such, he now rejoices in accessing his logical mind and using it to educate others about LGBTQ injustice.

Anger as power: All participants expressed anger in response to their closeted experiences. Andres harnessed his anger as a fuel for activism in society. Andres expressed discomfort about his anger: "I don't really feel anger very much. Well, I feel it. But I don't express anger very much." Yet when he does feel anger, he has used it to "branch out and do things that will affect the well-being of the community." Moreover, Andres' anger helped him advocate for himself as he began

taking a firm stance against oppression in various social spaces. When his school administration prohibited same-sex affection on campus, Andres recounted: “We were like, fuck that, you can’t make us not love ourselves.” His anger expressed itself as advocacy which eventually got the administration to change their laws. Andres’ anger also helped him stand up to his family when they said disparaging things about LGBTQ people. He told them it was not acceptable to say those things. Andres’ experience demonstrates how anger about oppression is not only natural, but can also be a fuel for activism to dismantle the oppressive systems which ignite such anger in the first place.

Movement as power: All participants described their freedom of movement becoming disempowered by the closet’s oppressive constraints. Andres described his feet as unable to move, frozen solid in ice. Ben described his hands unable to move and “locked in” together. Manuel described his body unable to move like a “golem” or a “rock”. Since the closet prevented participants from moving, it is no wonder that movement served as another source of power for participants’ coming out processes. The power of movement has two meanings in this context. It means becoming empowered to move one’s body in a manner that was previously prohibited—such as engaging in affectionate and sexual embodied relations with the same gender. Yet the power of movement, described by participants, also means participating in social movements. For instance, Andres described his feet as frozen solid due to the closet’s oppression. To undo this oppression, he said he needed to become more active in local LGBTQ social movements. He explained:

> I guess what’s resonating with me right now is the lack of involvement that I have with the issues here. I feel like my experiences as a teenager molded my trajectory to what I have done as a young adult. Like getting into all these movements… these LGBTQ social movements. But now here I am, frozen solid… Like maybe those need to meet. You ask me what they needed. I feel like they might need each other.

For Andres, participating in social movements served as a rebellious fire that could thaw the oppression of the closet. Similarly, Victor discussed how becoming exposed to social justice movements as a teenager, through political hip-hop groups such as Public Enemy, dissipated the nihilism that the closet inflicted. He felt inspired by the anti-racist movement that Public Enemy promoted—they represented a voice for something, a way to express their views about injustice in a useful, entertaining and informative manner. Moreover, Public Enemy has allied itself with the LGBTQ community, stating that the racial and LGBTQ justice movements are fighting against similar systems of oppression, and should therefore unite in solidarity. Victor said participating in social movements, the weight of rage he carried has lifted, because he has given it a useful voice.

Humor as power: Ben mentioned laughter as another resource to combat the closet's oppression. Whereas the closet silences speech, humor can reverse this silence: "when you are in a good, hearty laugh, your mouth is completely adjacent, which is the complete opposite of it being tightly shut." Ben identifies laughter as one of the most effective coping mechanisms amidst adversity:

> I think that's a big thing for me, laughter, as one of the more healthy psychological defenses… It's still a defense, nonetheless, but its protective in and of itself. I've always kind of been that person that never really enters a continued denial. But I would more or less prefer to laugh about it… And the laughter is symbolic for, you know, opening of the mouth, opening of the floodgates, so that water can move through.

Ben remarked that sharing in laughter with other people, even amidst difficult circumstances, has a special healing power: "You know, sometimes you need to not be so serious. There has always been something healing to see other people smile. And kind of, the shared experience of smiling together, and laughing together."

Femininity as power: Rodney said that harnessing the power of "the woman in me" was essential to his coming out journey. He had been aware of his inner "girl" since he was a child, yet hid his femininity because it was disparaged by society: "I always knew or felt when I was a boy… when I was playing, the girl in me came out. It was denied in the real world, but I could play in secret with her." In adulthood, Rodney was welcomed by a women's support group which allowed him to openly claim his own feminine power. Nowadays, Rodney harnesses his femininity as his source of strength and creativity:

> I realized that what I had been doing for so long, even in my painting, is that I learned that my strength is in the feminine in me. That's where my strength lies. It's good to be a male… lots of advantages in being a male. I don't really like being a male, but I used the privilege of being male, which there is, I used it. But what I realized is that where my real strength is, is the woman in me. And when she had freedom to come out, without having to be colored over, making it look like it really wasn't her… that's when I started painting.

Rodney not only celebrated the power of his own femininity, but the power of women in general. Alluding to the 2017 women's marches, Rodney proclaimed that women's leadership was "the way forward"—the power of women would lead us towards justice.

Sexuality as power: Rodney said embracing his sexuality was another way he has empowered himself against the closet's oppression. For so long, his appreciation for his sexual feelings was blocked because society shamed them: "That was also coupled with sexual repression…There's a shame… you can't do that, that's bad. Masturbation is bad. Sex of course with a man is bad." Rodney did a lot of work in therapy to get to the point where he can celebrate his sexual feelings. Now, when he notices his groin's sexual impulses, he makes sure to consciously enjoy those feelings, allowing them to occur rather than repressing them. Rodney has empowered himself to perceive his sexuality as beautiful: "I'm the luckiest guy in the world to have that. I'm grateful every day that I'm made this way. That this is me."

Creativity as power: Several participants also identified art as a resource for power amidst injustice. For instance, Manuel is an artist whose work focuses on intersectional social injustice. Rodney, too, is an artist. He relies on the power of his artist's hands as a source of strength against the closet's oppression. Rodney described his artist's hands as "very strong. They are very connected. They keep me in place. They've been where everything is held. They are where I sense the world. It's where I can sense the me. That's where who I am is centered, is in my hands." From the earliest age, Rodney would use his hands to express himself creatively, because he could not do so with his voice. In fact, Rodney's artists' hands *became* his voice:

> When I was a child, I played there. I could find joy there. I could make drama there. Anything with my hands. My hands brought it to me. I could pull it in or I could let it out. All through the power of my hands… And if I can speak from my heart to my hands, that's where my beauty comes.

Rodney also explained that his art-making is connected to his groin; in other words, his sexuality fuels his creativity: "When I'm painting, and I feel like it's coming out well, and when its right, I can feel it in my groin. It's almost a sexual feeling. Or it's the same. And I use that, and I feel, okay this painting is now good. That's a wonderful feeling. I love that feeling, so let's use that feeling." As such, Rodney celebrates his sexuality as a beautiful life force which allows him to express himself to the world.

Finally, though Ben did not mention making art himself, he rejoiced in the ability to contribute his creativity to the creation of this dissertation's short film, "Illuminate". He said:

> I hope that with every pair of eyes that sees this film, they get something out of it. Because I got something out of the experience. So just… knowing that it has the potential to help somebody, because I know that that's what you intend it for. That's enough. Just knowing that it could be out there and has the potential to help is rewarding in and of itself. So I'm just glad to be a part of it too.

Among all participants, sharing their stories of the closet for this dissertation seemed empowering in and of itself. They seemed to feel empowered not only by gaining insight into their personal

experiences of the closet, but by helping to create a work of art that would be shared with others, for the purposes of healing and justice.

Summary: The Lived Experience of the Closet

Sexual minorities may enter "the closet" to survive in societies where homophobic hate proliferates. The closet is experienced as a world unto itself—a secret, insular world within the world-at-large. The closet is a world created by sexual minorities to remain safe from prejudice, discrimination, and violence directed at them from society. The closet is also a world created by homophobic societies to oppress sexual minorities into invisibility and silence. The main way that homophobic societies force sexual minorities into the closet is by depriving them of access to basic existential rights: the right to truth, freedom, love, hope, and power. The ability to access these rights is required for people to stay sane, healthy, and even alive. Yet the more that society revokes these rights from sexual minorities, the further they become submerged inside the world of the closet. As such, the closet exists as both a safe refuge and a place of oppression—it protects sexual minorities from prejudice, discrimination and violence while simultaneously depriving them of the basic existential rights required to survive and thrive.

In the world of the closet, access to truth is revoked. Sexual minorities may discover a glimmer of truth about their natural sexual desires, yet this truth becomes obscured by society's distorted lies about homosexuality, which tell them it is bad and wrong. Due to feelings of shame and fear that are caused by society's lies, sexual minorities may bury their truth and construct a façade to pass as heterosexual. As they bury their truth further underground, they become increasingly submerged inside the world of the closet. Hiding one's truth is both protective and painful; it keeps them safe from homophobic persecution in the outside world, while simultaneously inflicting inner persecutory feelings of guilt and shame about lying to the people they love. The

closet causes some sexual minorities to hide their truth even from themselves through denial and repression, confusing their grasp on reality and causing an excruciating inner debate to unfold. By revoking access to truth, the closet enforces a world of silence—it not only silences truth-telling about one's sexual orientation, but also truth-telling about their general existence and being-in-the-world. The closet forbids sexual minorities from speaking to anyone about the daily ups and downs, joys and sufferings, and emotional details of their life. This is why "coming out" as an act of speech feels so relieving. Breaking the closet's silence not only allows sexual minorities to be honest about their sexual orientation with themselves and with others, but also to share their full spectrum of humanity with the people that matter most to them.

In the closet, access to freedom is also revoked. While others in society are granted the right to freely express themselves, even their prejudiced and hateful beliefs, the closet prohibits sexual minorities from the basic human right to free expression—even when all they wish to express is love. This prohibition on self-expression is enforced at the level of bodily freedom; sexual minorities' bodies may literally feel shackled, frozen, locked down, and paralyzed while closeted. The prohibition is also often internalized, as one polices their own expression and the expressions of others to stay within heterosexual norms. This policing is regulated by a state of constant fear about being ridiculed, rejected, or violently assaulted if sexual minorities dare exercise their freedom of self-expression in society. In this sense, closeted sexual minorities remain vigilant about their very lives being at risk if they express themselves freely. Yet although the closet restricts freedom, in some ways it also offers a safe space to exercise freedom. Sexual minorities may subversively harness the closet's secret world to express same-sex love and desire, to break gender norms, and to engage in other natural expressions that would be punished by society. As such, the closet can subversively become a world of beauty, because within it one can be free to express their beautiful, full spectrum of humanity which society forbids.

In the closet, access to love erodes. The closet becomes a world that is mainly secluded and people-less. Even when one's existence intermingles with others, still a barrier to intimacy exists due to a heterosexual façade that prevents anyone from getting too close to really know them. Upon entering the closeted world, many sexual minorities grieve the loss of love, for they are leaving behind parents, siblings, and friends to whom they may have once felt close. Therefore, sexual minorities may feel utterly alone in this insular world, as if they only have themselves. The isolation enforced by the closet can actually become fatal because love, like oxygen, is a necessary ingredient to stay alive for human beings. As such, the closet's withholding of love has the power to kill life, figuratively and literally. Some sexual minorities in the closet may feel like they are robotically going through the motions of life; others may attempt to take their lives. Yet the offering of love also has the power to re-awaken life. Sexual minorities may experience renewed vitality when they are affirmed by significant others that they are loved and accepted, exactly as they are. In fact, receiving others' love can help sexual minorities begin to love and accept themselves, undoing the shame and self-hatred caused by homophobic societies.

In the world of the closet, access to hope also erodes. The feeling-world of the closet, at its darkest hours, becomes a world of despair. Sexual minorities may feel helpless, powerless, and hopeless as their rights to truth, freedom, and love become increasingly inaccessible. They may also internalize the homophobia directed at them from society, manifesting as self-hatred and rage. If the rage and hate overwhelms them, some sexual minorities may seek to expunge these feelings by externalizing them, which may lead them to become physically violence towards themselves or others. As such, at its most hopeless and enraged state, the despair of the closeted world can lead sexual minorities to further perpetuate the violence of homophobia, through attempting suicide or assaulting others. But rage coupled with hope can yield a different outcome. Many sexual minorities, in coming out of the closet, harness their rage about injustice to engage in social movements, which

provide a voice and forum for their righteous anger. Hope grows as sexual minorities exit the closeted world and realize there are others like them in society, who have experienced the despair and rage of the closet themselves and are banding together to fight for their collective rights. Hope grows as sexual minorities find community and belonging in society, and realize they are not alone. Society, once seen as solely hateful and terrifying, begins to also be perceived as a place of solidarity.

Society's homophobia has sought to disempower sexual minorities and exile them into the closet. As such, exiting the closeted world and rejoining society requires becoming empowered—harnessing one's internal and external resources for power. Love is a source of power. Other people in sexual minorities' lives can deliberately offer explicit love and affirmation towards them. This love is received as a breath of life, healing internalized oppression and helping them come out of the closeted world. Receiving others' love empowers sexual minorities to love themselves. Eventually, this love is paid forward, as many sexual minorities seek to empower other members of the LGBTQ community to realize they too are loveable exactly as they are.

Knowledge is a source of power. Obtaining self-knowledge by engaging in introspection and by researching human sexuality empowers sexual minorities to understand and accept themselves, as well as make meaning of their experiences. Knowledge can also be harnessed as a tool for social change, as some sexual minorities may become empowered to spread education about LGBTQ experience to transform ignorant beliefs across society.

Anger is a source of power. The righteous and imminent anger among sexual minorities about having their basic rights revoked can be channeled as a fuel for passionate social activism.

Movement is a source or power. Wherein the closet restricts freedom of bodily expression and movement, sexual minorities can reclaim their right to bodily expression by joining social movements, by dancing on streets and in bars, and by marching alongside other moving bodies in a spirit of protest and pride.

Humor is a source of power. Sexual minorities can dare to share in laughter and comradery even in the worst of times, even despite homophobia's attempts to bring them down.

Femininity is a source of power, identified by some gay men who have been forced by institutionalized homophobia and patriarchy to sever expression of their feminine sides. Yet sexual minorities across the gender spectrum can empower themselves to embrace the full spectrum of their gender expression, refusing to conform to homophobia's oppressive gender restrictions.

Creativity is a source of power. Making and spreading art across society empowers one's voice to be loudly heard, rather than silenced by the closeted world.

Finally, sexuality is a source of power. Perhaps the ultimate form of empowerment involves cherishing the very thing that homophobic societies seek to repress—the beautiful, natural, pleasurable, sexual feelings of one's body and being.

By empowering themselves with the resources available to them, sexual minorities can restore access to their basic existential rights: the right to love, the right to freedom, the right to truth, the right to hope, and the right to power. By restoring access to these rights, they may exit the world of the closet and experience renewed honesty, authenticity, intimacy, freedom, sexuality, community, solidarity, and hope within society. It is true that prejudice, discrimination, and violence still exist across society, and re-entering the closet will remain a necessity at times. Yet an inner peace may also emerge as sexual minorities come to realize that society is made up of multiple different worlds within it. In some worlds, homophobic hate still prevails. In other worlds, there exists sweet and utter freedom to be themselves. And still, in other worlds, there is opportunity to transform others' ignorance into awareness and acceptance. Perhaps someday there will be one world—a world-at-large where love and peace prevail. Until then, sexual minorities can know that the world of the closet will always exist to protect them when they need it. Moreover, a world of solidarity will also always exist, fighting fiercely for their human rights.

Chapter 10: Discussion

From the preceding reflections there clearly follows a conclusion: if we want psychology to make a significant contribution...we have to redesign our theoretical and practical tools, but redesign them from the standpoint of our own people: from their sufferings, their aspirations, and their struggles. (Martin-Baró, 1994, p. 25)

An Existential Rights Paradigm

This cinematic-phenomenological research study interpreted five participants' lived experiences of being in the closet as sexual minorities. The main findings of this research suggest that the closet is experienced as a traumatic loss of existential rights: the right to truth, freedom, love, hope, and power. These themes are considered "existential rights" because sexual minorities experience a sense of injustice at being unfairly deprived of needs which they rightfully deserve, and which heterosexual citizens have better access to within societies of institutionalized homophobia. These themes are also considered "existential rights" in that truth, freedom, love, hope, and power are necessary ingredients for universal human welfare, and the loss of them collectively can threaten a human's existence. Alleviating the closet's trauma, or "coming out of the closet," requires sexual minorities to re-gain access to these existential rights. Dismantling the closet's oppression altogether requires citizens of society to join in solidarity to transform society's unfair distribution of access to these existential rights. Therefore, in the broadest sense, this research offers phenomenological and psychological insights for social justice agents across disciplines to consider an emancipatory paradigm based on existential rights.

The relationship between "existential needs" and "existential rights" that I am introducing here aligns with the "basic needs approach" to human rights, which was promoted by economists in the 1970s in order to combat sociopolitical factors contributing to poverty in developing countries (Stewart, 1989). These economists founded their basic needs approach to human rights upon philosopher John Rawls' (1989) argument that all citizens of a society should have access to "enough basic goods and services to maintain a level of living above a basic minimum" (Rawls, 1989, in Stewart, 1989, p. 348). A needs-based approach to human rights is founded upon a "strong implication that needs ought to be fulfilled, while rights connotes not only a stronger moral, but also some legal imperative" (Stewart, 1989, p. 349). As such, translating human needs to human rights

creates accountability and responsibility, whereby a society's governing sociopolitical institutions are expected to implement societal policies that ensure all citizens have access to their basic needs. In socioeconomic terms, these core needs include material items such as food, water, health, education, and shelter (Stewart, 1989). My dissertation's research findings contribute a psychological perspective to the "basic needs approach" to human rights, positing that truth, freedom, love, hope and power are existential needs. These existential needs are as essential to human welfare as basic material needs. Therefore, truth, love, freedom, hope and power are existential rights, and a society's governing powers must be held accountable for maintaining fair distribution of these rights.

While no psychological or political literature yet exists regarding "existential rights" specifically, the field of psychology has increasingly been playing a role in shaping human rights law (Velez, 2016). Psychology's contributions to human rights revolve around the United Nation's inclusion of the "right to health" as an inalienable human right, such that "the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition" (United Nations, 2008). The UN's definition of health not only includes physical well-being but also mental and social well-being. Moreover, the United Nations states that all human rights are interdependent and interrelated. In other words, the right to health is tightly bound up with other human rights, and violations upon these other human rights impact the right to health (United Nations, 2008). It is here that psychologists have discovered a point of access in shaping human rights discourse: by revealing how various kinds of human rights violations impact citizens' inalienable right to mental health (Velez, 2016). Mental health practitioners working with victims of structural violence have attested to "gross human rights violations" as the root cause of marginalized people's mental illness (Lykes & Sibley, 2014). In this vein, the World Health Organization recognizes that "all humans have the right to mental health and to be protected from social conditions that have detrimental effects on their

psychosocial well-being" (Lykes & Sibley, 2014). They argue that public policies of a society must shape a climate that "respects and protects basic civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights [as] fundamental to the promotion of the mental health of the population" (Lykes & Sibley, 2014).

Moreover, liberation psychologist Ignacio Martin-Baró (1994) wrote that structural injustice produces mental health problems that affect not only individual functioning, but also the functioning of entire societies. As such, the sociopolitical order of a society becomes "not only an economic and political problem; it is also essentially a mental health problem" (Martin-Baró, 1994, p. 120). At a time in history when the oppressive sociopolitical order of El Salvador was inflicting great trauma upon the El Salvadoran poor, Martin-Baró argued that psychologists were faced with an urgent "task of education"—to contribute "professional knowledge towards the building of a new future" which can secure the mental health of the people. Now in 2017, when considering the sociopolitical circumstances of the United States and across the globe, I believe psychologists are being confronted with a similar urgent task:

> As members of the human community, we believe we are obligated to contribute where and when we can to the betterment of the human condition. In the spirit of this conviction and as psychologists, we believe that bringing psychological knowledge to bear in matters of public policy represents a unique opportunity to make such contributions. In claiming this as our goal we again echo the words of Martin-Baró: 'the concern of the social scientist should not be so much to explain the world as to change it.'" (Russel & Bohan, 2010, p. 62)

As a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology, my dissertation's research findings beckon me to contribute the following professional knowledge for the betterment of the human condition—that truth, freedom, love, hope and power are existential rights which are fundamental to the mental health of LGBTQ citizens, and all human beings in general. As such, it is imperative that a society's governing laws grant access to these existential rights for all citizens, in order to shape a just society that functions healthier as a whole. The rest of this section offers a brief meditation on these existential rights, introducing each right broadly as it appears in the literature of existential psychology, liberation psychology, and legal discourse. I discuss how each right is revoked among

LGBTQ citizens by the oppression of the closet. I also offer preliminary suggestions for how society can restore LGBTQ citizens' access to these existential rights, by transforming sociocultural norms and public policies. Please note that amidst this discussion, it felt essential to include the rights of transgender people alongside sexual minorities, in order to be inclusive and stand in solidarity regarding the distressing sociopolitical circumstances of our times.

The Right to Truth

Truth and psychology: Existential psychologist R.D. Laing (1965) noted how oppressive societies enforce sociocultural norms that coerce people into constructing a "false self" and burying their "true self" underground (Laing, 1965). These societies silence people's truths which differ from the norm, obscuring their realities in a manner that can cause them to go insane: "human beings, in their everyday interactions with each other, are able to distort the truth so effectively that they are able to affect each other's reality —and hence their sanity as well" (Thompson, 2001). Building upon this notion, liberation psychologists reflect how oppressive societies not only silence people's personal truths, but also prevent people from gaining consciousness about the wider truth about the systematic injustice traumatizing them on a daily basis (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Oppressive societies maintain "cultures of silence" which entrench citizens in denial about the reality of the unjust sociopolitical system they are imbedded within. Accordingly, many people may live in a dissociative state to cope with the daily effects of sociopolitical trauma: "one attempts to live in a world without seeing it clearly. How can one be at home in such a world out of focus? How can one not feel disconnected, even unreal?" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Healing from sociopolitical trauma involves restoring citizens' contact with reality, consciousness, and truth.

Truth and the law: The United Nations asserts that citizens have an "inalienable right to the truth" regarding "gross human rights violations" (Antkowiak, 2002). The UN states that the "desire to know" is a "basic human need," because citizens who have been victimized by sociopolitical violence experience profound psychological anguish without access to the truth about the injustices that have impacted them (Antkowiak, 2002). The UN perceives "the right to truth" as both an individual and collective right, because public truth-telling about human rights violations can prevent societies from repeating sociopolitical injustices in the future (Antkowiak, 2002).

Truth and the closet: Homophobic and transphobic societies revoke "the right to truth" from LGBTQ citizens using the oppressive instrument of the closet. The closet is upheld by public policies which prevent sexual and gender minorities from expressing their truths, such as the criminalization of homosexuality, the lack of legal protection against LGBTQ discrimination, the lack of healthcare coverage for transgender medical care, and the transgender ban in the U.S. military. Being forced to silence one's truth and live in self-denial can be traumatizing, causing psychic fragmentation, dissociation, or madness. These policies also silence sexual and gender minorities from speaking the truth about experiences of being societally oppressed for being queer. In doing so, these societies perpetuate "cultures of silence" that sever citizens' awareness about the very nature of its sociopolitical oppression. This silencing of truth can have grave psychological consequences for closeted LGBTQ citizens who may internalize the oppression if they are not conscious of it, leading to traumatic shame and possibly suicide. "Cultures of silence" can also have psychological costs for entire societies steeped in institutionalized oppression, because they distort the truth about the sexual and gender diversity of its population. Consequently, citizens believe the lies that same-sex attraction and transgender identities are abnormal, rather than natural manifestations of the sexual and gender spectrum.

Restoring the right to truth: Healing the sociopolitical trauma of the closet requires society to "come out of the closet" as a collective and acknowledge multiple truths: that institutionalized homophobia and transphobia run deep in the foundations of our society; that this institutionalized oppression has tragic consequences upon LGBTQ citizens and their loved ones; and that sexual and gender identity is much more diverse across the population than openly acknowledged, thereby making it a normal aspect of society. It also requires societies to strike down laws that sustain the closet and silence personal and societal truths—such as the criminalization of homosexuality, the lack of legal protection against LGBTQ discrimination, and the transgender ban in the military.

The Right to Freedom

Freedom and psychology: Existential psychologist Rollo May (1981) wrote that "human dignity is based on freedom and freedom on human dignity. The one presupposes the other" (May, 1981, p. 9). He defined freedom as "possibility"—being free to explore the many different possibilities for one's life. Mental illness manifests when people's access to possibility becomes blocked, paralyzed, and oppressed. People who lose their freedom can become traumatized into apathy, rage, or even insanity: "if you take [freedom] away, you get radical disintegration on the part of the victim" (May, 1981, p. 21). According to May, the purpose of psychology is "to set people free" (May, 1981, p. 19). Similarly, liberation psychologists believe freedom constitutes the very foundation of being human: "Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion." The goal of liberation psychology is to liberate human beings from internal and external oppressions, so they can pursue the possibilities for their lives. This involves enabling oppressed citizens to exercise their "freedom of expression," so they can raise public consciousness of their experiences of oppression in order to transform society (Freire, 1968; Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

Freedom and the law: Freedom is considered essential to human existence by national and international law. The U.S. Constitution and the United Nations position freedom as an inalienable human right, as well as the foundation of all other human rights: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (United Nations, 2008). Specifically, the freedom of *expression* has been lauded as vital to democracy: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (United Nations, 2008).

Freedom and the closet: Homophobic and transphobic societies withhold "the right to freedom" from LGBTQ people, prohibiting their self-expression by forcing them into the closet. Laws such as the criminalization of homosexuality, the lack of legal protection against LGBTQ discrimination, the lack of transgender healthcare coverage, and the transgender military ban, all uphold the trauma of the LGBTQ closet. Accordingly, these laws prohibit sexual and gender minorities from expressing their love and affection, their spontaneous bodily mannerisms, and their identities via freedom of speech. Though the "right to free speech" is touted as essential to democracy, this right is not conferred to LGBTQ citizens living in oppressive societies, who are often discriminated against if they come out. Moreover, "the right to free speech" is exercised with hypocrisy in society, used by "free speech' advocates to sustain their right to express anti-LGBTQ hate speech, which further oppresses queer people into the closet. As their freedom is revoked by the closet, sexual and gender minorities can experience traumatic symptomology such as vigilance, fear, shame, loss of meaning, apathy, rage, and hopelessness that yields suicidality.

Restoring the right to freedom: To dismantle the closet's oppression, society must restore freedom for citizens across sexual and gender identities to explore the many possibilities for their existence, without fearing that their lives will be at risk for doing so. We must also question why LGBTQ citizens' right to freedom of expression is considered illegal in many countries around the world, and is still not given legal protection against discrimination in most U.S. states. Finally, we must also consider the hypocrisy with which society's current public policies confer the right to free speech among some citizens but not others. For instance, should U.S. citizens' abuse of free speech (i.e. hate speech) be legal even though it is traumatizing, while LGBTQ expressions of love and identity are not guaranteed legal protection, even though they are harmless?

The Right to Love

Love and psychology: Existential psychologist Erich Fromm (1955) stated that participating in intimate relationships is a basic human necessity, without which people can feel so alienated that they literally go insane. Yet our modern society blocks citizens' basic need for intimacy, because its capitalistic culture encourages people to relate to each other through narcissistic, commodified personas rather than with authenticity, vulnerability, and love (From, 1955). Restoring sanity requires shaping a "sane society" in which authentic, loving encounters become possible again (Fromm, 1955). Liberation psychologists also state that psychological health depends on "the ability to love" (Martín-Baró, 1994). Yet in systems of sociopolitical oppression, "love finds itself blocked by the personal and social lie, by the simplistic schemes that divide the world into black and white, by the violence that corrodes the foundation of respect and trust between people and groups" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 115). In other words, sociopolitical oppression erodes citizens' ability to love each other because it breeds mistrust, alienation, scapegoating, prejudice, and violence. This erosion of love results in collective trauma, whereby supportive

community bonds disintegrate across society as a whole (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 107). As such, the ultimate goal for liberation psychology is to create a new society in which "it will be easier to love" (Freire, 1968).

Love and the law: Love is suggested in human right discourse in the form of "the right to participate in cultural and social life" and "the right to marry" (United Nations, 2008). The United Nations states that participation in cultural and social life is a universal human right for all citizens (United Nations, 2008). This right helps create inclusivity and "combat social exclusion" among minority citizens, thereby instilling a belongingness and representation with one's social community (United Nations, 1995). The "right to love" is also legally conferred as the "right to marry," which historically has only been allowed between a man and a woman: "Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family" (United Nations, 2008). Yet in 2015, the United States' Supreme Court made a historic decision to expand the legal right to marry to be inclusive of same-sex couples, citing enduring love and avoiding loneliness as a constitutional right for all citizens. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy declared:

> No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were. As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies a love that may endure even past death. It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The constitution grants them that right. The judgment of the Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit is reversed. *It is so ordered.* (Barnett & Katz, 2016).

Love and the closet: While marriage equality clearly indicates progress, heteronormative societies still withhold the "right to love" from LGBTQ people by failing to grant legal protection against LGBTQ discrimination, by debating legalities of same-sex marriage and gay and lesbian

adoption, by criminalizing homosexuality, and by banning transgender people from the military—all of which perpetuate the trauma of the closet. The closet condemns LGBTQ people into isolation, preventing them from accessing intimacy or cultivating family bonds which hetero and cis-gender people freely can do. These public policies also promote the message that LGBTQ people are undeserving of love, and that LGBTQ identities indicate perversion, promiscuity and abnormality. Sexual and gender minorities can internalize these messages and believe they are not entitled to love—a basic existential need that Fromm claimed was required to maintain sanity. Moreover, the closet prevents LGBTQ people from experiencing belongingness with their local community. While "participation in cultural and social life" is a universal human right, the closet condemns sexual and gender minorities from participating in their communities because it prevents them from revealing their authentic self to others. Instead, the closet forces queer people to enact a heteronormative persona, which imposes a barrier to experiencing intimacy and belongingness with others. The closet also erodes community bonds among hetero and cis-gender people, because institutionalized homophobia creates restrictive social norms that prevent citizens from expressing any aspect of their humanity that veers outside these norms. As such, the closet shapes a society in which human relating unfolds between a persona and a persona, echoing Fromm's description of an "insane society" where true intimacy cannot flourish.

Restoring the right to love: Alleviating the trauma of the closet requires societies to change public policies that block sexual minorities' participation in intimate relationships, such as creating families or participating in community and social life. This involves striking down laws that criminalize homosexuality, ban same-sex marriage, and ban adoption among same-sex couples. It also involves erecting laws that provide legal protection against LGBTQ discrimination, without which the need for the closet as a protective defense will only continue. Finally, it requires societies

to challenge restrictive homophobic and gender norms which prevent all citizens from creating authentic community bonds free of artifice and fear.

The Right to Hope

Hope and psychology: In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, existential psychologist Victor Frankl (1963) described the fatal consequences of hopelessness among Holocaust prisoners in concentration camps. Prisoners who gave up hope of liberation, and who could no longer see a meaningful future for themselves, lost the will to live and were prone to death by suicide or illness:

> Those who know how close the connection is between the state of mind of a man—his courage and hope, or lack of them—and the state of immunity of his body will understood that the sudden loss of hope and courage can have a deadly effect. The ultimate cause of my friend's death was that the expected liberation did not come and he was severely disappointed. This suddenly lowered his body's resistance against the latent typhus infection. His faith in the future and his will to live had become paralyzed and his body fell victim to illness. (Frankl, 1963, p. 75)

Existential philosopher James Leonard Park (2006) labels this kind of hopelessness "existential despair". He describes existential despair as "the utter hopelessness of everything…we see no hope even in the process of trying. This existential despair is not the loss of hope for this or that project, not even the simultaneous collapse of all our ordinary hopes, but it is the comprehensive loss of hope for existence" (Park, 2006). Existential despair is a pervasive, permanent hopelessness whereby all efforts to continue existing feel futile. If this despair feels impossible to overcome, suicidality may appear as the only solution (Park, 2006). As such, hope is a necessary ingredient for the will to live, and hopelessness can result in death. Liberation psychologists also consider hope to be necessary for liberation. Yet oppressive sociopolitical conditions can cause helplessness, fatalism, and resignation among marginalized citizens, resulting from "feelings of hopelessness and despair that develop from the realization of the improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society" (Lewis, 1969, in Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 209). Nevertheless, Paulo Freire

implored people to avoid becoming stuck in despair, because only hope can propel us towards an emancipated future: "Hopelessness is a form of silence… The dehumanization resulting from an unjust order is not a cause for despair but for hope, leading to the incessant pursuit of the humanity denied by injustice…As long as I fight, I am moved by hope; and if I fight with hope, then I can wait" (Freire, 1968, p. 64).

Hope and the law: While no legal statutes address "the right to hope" specifically, the United States' and United Nations' Bill of Rights documents declare that "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person." The right to life is a fundamental human right. As such, creating sociopolitical conditions that sustain the *will to live* is essential to ensuring that all citizens realize they have the *right to live*, the right to exist at all.

Hope and the closet: Homophobic and transphobic societies fail to sustain a just sociopolitical environment for LGBTQ citizens, upholding public policies that prevent them from maintaining their "right to hope". Laws which perpetuate the trauma of the closet can cause sexual and gender minorities to feel dissociated, fragmented, imprisoned, isolated, powerless, helpless, and hopeless. These feelings can lead closeted queer people to question the point of their existence. Laws which uphold the closet also repress the awareness that LGBTQ persons exist in a society, therefore conveying the notion that gender and sexual minorities do not have the right to exist at all. Homophobic and transphobic societies can perpetuate a sense of global injustice that seems so enormous that it appears impossible to resolve. This is especially true in countries such as Uganda, Russia and Iran where the criminalization of homosexuality sentences sexual minorities to life in prison, concentration camps, and death. For some oppressed LGBTQ citizens, the impossibility of resolving this enormous injustice can spur existential despair and suicidality, as all efforts to continue

existing appear futile. In the United States alone, the suicide rates are four times greater for LGB youth and two times greater for questioning youth than their heterosexual counterparts. Moreover, 40% of transgender adults have reported making at least one suicide attempt in their lives.

Restoring the right to hope: To resolve the suicidality epidemic among LGBTQ persons in the United States and abroad, societies must change oppressive public policies which contribute to such hopelessness, and which communicate to sexual and gender minorities that they do not have the right to exist.

The Right to Power:

Power and psychology: Existential psychologist Rollo May (1972) wrote that "power" originates from the Latin word *posse,* which means "to be able." According to May, all human beings require various forms of power: the power to be capable, to be self-assertive, the power to be recognized, the power to be self-affirmed, and the power to *be* in general. Therefore, "power is essential for all living things" (May, 1972, p. 16) Because power is fundamental to human existence, and all human beings have a natural need for power, then powerlessness can feel intolerable. Feelings of powerlessness can lead people to act violently in a desperate, enraged attempt to re-assert their power:

> As we make people powerless, we promote their violence rather than its control. Deeds of violence in our society are performed largely by those trying to establish their self-esteem, to defend their self-image, and to demonstrate that they, too, are significant. Regardless of how derailed or wrongly used these motivations may be or how destructive their expression, they are still the manifestations of positive interpersonal needs. (May, 1972, p. 22)

Rendering people powerless can not only cause them to become "enraged to the point of violence," but also to go insane. May describes how some psychotic patients in his clinical practice would behave aggressively; he interpreted their violence as "the end result of repressed anger and

rage, combined with constant fear based on the patient's powerlessness. Behind the pseudo-power of the madness we can often find a personal struggling for some sense of significance, some way of making a difference" (May, 1972, p. 26). Liberation psychologists suggest that powerlessness results from a "disparity of resources," which often makes power political (Martin-Baró, 1994). Power also becomes political when people seek to influence the overarching sociopolitical system to maintain their rights and resources, and to advance their own social interests (Martin-Baró, 1994). Sociopolitical oppression occurs when a society routinely and systematically renders certain individuals and groups powerlessness by consistently depriving them of rights and resources, while consistently designating rights and resources to other groups. In this regard, the goal of liberation psychology is to "lead toward the people gaining power, a power that allows them to become the protagonist of their own history and to effect those changes that would make…societies more just and more humane" (Martín-Baró, 1994, p. 30).

Power and the law: Wherein power is dependent on resource distribution, most democratic societies declare that all citizens should have equal access to the rights and resources required to live with dignity. The U.S. Declaration of Independence states that if society's governing powers do not provide equal access to citizens, then "the people" should be able to exercise their own powers to change, re-organize, or even overthrow government to get their basic rights met:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. (Adams, 2001, p. 13).

This declaration is aspirational, because society's governing laws have always perpetuated an imbalance of power and an unequal distribution of rights. For instance, the text above is written to

endow men with power and equality, but not women. Nevertheless, democracy is established to allow citizens of society to exert their own power to challenge unjust governmental powers that fail to represent their rights. The history of the United States, and the civil rights movements that have happened here, are testimony to the power of citizens to shape a more just and equal society for all.

Power and the closet: Homophobic and transphobic societies are inherently organized with an imbalance of power —they revoke rights and resources from LGBTQ citizens while disproportionality bestowing them to heterosexual and cis-gender people. As such, these society's public policies empower hetero and cis citizens while simultaneously disempowering LGBTQ citizens. For instance, in countries that criminalize homosexuality, the power to have sex, to love and to exist at all are bestowed for heterosexual citizens, but not LGB citizens. Moreover, until 2015 the U.S. law bestowed straight citizens with the right to heterosexual marriages, while banning same-sex marriages. Most U.S. states also empower cis and straight people with protection against discrimination on the basis of race, sex, ability or religion, but not sexual orientation or gender identity. Finally, the United States has enforced a ban of transgender people from the military, while granting power to cis-gender people to remain deployed. Societies who fail to offer protection against LGBTQ discrimination, or whose governing laws actively discriminate against gender and sexual minorities, perpetuate the oppression of the closet. The closet further disempowers sexual and gender minorities by revoking them of existential rights they are entitled to: the right to truth, to freedom, to love, to hope, and to power. As these rights are revoked by the closet, LGBTQ citizens may feel increasingly powerless. Rollo May said that power is essential to being human (May, 1972). As such, the natural outcome of rendering people powerless is rage. Societies which force LGBTQ citizens into the closet can also be forcing them into states of despair and rage, which may sometimes manifest as violence. May (1972) reminds us that in oppressive sociopolitical situations,

violence is a desperate attempt to get one's basic existential need met for *power* as a human being. For, to be empowered is to be significant, self-assertive, recognized, affirmed, and capable of making a difference in our world.

Restoring the right to power: The history of democracy is founded upon civil rights movements. The LGBTQ social movement officially arose in the 1960s, marked by the historic Stone Wall Riots during which oppressed LGBTQ people rebelled against sociopolitical oppression and re-asserted their power via violent riots. Eventually, their re-assertion of power transformed from violent riots to a successful social movement which has advanced society to where we are today. Nevertheless, the closet persists as the distribution of human rights remains imbalanced, empowering hetero and cis-gender citizens while disempowering LGBTQ citizens. Dismantling the closet's oppression requires citizens of society to assert their power of citizenship by participating in social movements that demand equal rights and resources for all. It also requires governmental officials of democratic societies to honor the ideals with which democracy was designed. This means that governmental officials must allow themselves to be influenced by the power of the people to transform society's laws on behalf of justice for all.

* * *

I have described the above existential rights briefly, while also specifying their significance to LGBTQ sociopolitical oppression. One can argue that these rights also apply to all citizens across all identity groups who have felt marginalized by society. As such, this existential rights paradigm can also be used as an emancipatory tool for various kinds of social movements, including racial justice, women's rights, etc. In designing an existential rights paradigm that can be adopted by different

identity groups, I must return to legal scholar Kenji Yoshino's (2006) book *Covering: A Hidden Assault on our Civil Rights*. In his book, Yoshino calls for a "new civil rights paradigm" organized upon broad principles of common humanity that apply to diverse citizens across identity groups (Yoshino, 2006). A "common humanity" approach to civil rights can foster solidarity in pursuit of collective social justice, which may motivate citizens to advocate for the rights of not only their own identity group, but also other groups. Accordingly, my existential rights paradigm supports Yoshino's vision of a new civil rights paradigm based on common humanity. This paradigm can serve as a foundation for various identity groups to join in solidarity to form an intersectional social movement on behalf of collective emancipation. In envisioning a broad, collective, social movement, I seek to blend the existential with the intersectional—acknowledging that no two identity groups experience sociopolitical oppression in the same exact manner, yet all citizens who have been oppressed by society have had their right to truth, freedom, love, hope, and power revoked, albeit in different ways and to degrees. As such, this paradigm can help organize common ground and solidarity.

One potential project evolving from this dissertation is to write a book about *Liberation Psychology and Existential Rights*, in which I would explicate the existential rights to truth, freedom, love, hope, and power in greater detail using relevant psychological and political literature. I may write this book in a manner that allows psychologists, lawyers, social activists, and other public policy influencers across different intersecting identity groups to adapt the paradigm to fit their specific emancipatory agendas. I may also position this book as a contribution to the field of liberation psychology, following the footsteps of Martín-Baró and encouraging the current generation of psychologists to consider their role in shaping public policy and fusing the clinical with the political.

A Rights-Based Approach to Clinical Psychology

While the previous section suggested ways in which the field of psychology can influence the law, this section suggests ways in which the law can influence psychology. This dissertation recommends that clinical psychologists adopt *a rights-based approach* to our work as psychotherapists, researchers, and teachers. A rights-based approach to psychotherapy, research and pedagogy avoids neutrality and positions clinical psychology as an explicit form of activism and advocacy. Liberation psychologists critique mainstream psychology for trying to separate professional pursuits from social advocacy efforts. While mainstream psychology strives to remain apolitical and value-free in attempt to be empirical and objective, liberation psychologists assert that political neutrality is never value-free, for silence regarding oppressive public policies sends a clear message: that the sociopolitical oppression facing many marginalized clients is unimportant or unspeakable (Russell & Bohan, 2010). Moreover, to be silent about political matters conveys to members of marginalized minority groups that a clinical psychologist's values reside with the oppressive dominant culture: "to avoid explicitly addressing matters of politics is not to be apolitical; it is to condone by silence a particular political meaning: the political status quo" (Russell & Bohan, 2010). As such, adopting a rights-based approach to our psychotherapy, research and teaching endeavors enables clinical psychologists to take an explicit stand against sociopolitical oppression, therefore standing on the right side of history.

A rights-based approach to psychotherapy: A rights-based approach to psychotherapy aligns with liberation psychology's theory that people's psychological struggles are inseparable from their sociopolitical contexts. Accordingly, conceptualizing a client's presenting problem through solely an individualistic and intrapsychic framework, as is the case with many mainstream psychotherapy approaches, fails to recognize major etiological factors contributing to their suffering

(Russell & Bohan, 2010). For instance, liberation psychotherapists Glenda Russell and Janis Bohan (2010) compare psychotherapy with LGBTQ clients from a mainstream approach versus a liberation psychology approach. They use the example of homonegativity among LGBTQ clients, which refers to negative feelings and beliefs about the LGBTQ community and oneself, and which can manifest as self-defeating behaviors. Mainstream psychotherapists may conceptualize homonegativity as a form of "intra-psychic self-denigration" that lies within the LGBTQ individual, and should thereby be processed mainly at the individual and intrapsychic level (Russell & Bohan, 2010, p. 65). Alternatively, liberation psychotherapists conceptualize homonegativity as a systematic, sociopolitical malady which inevitably manifests inside all individuals: "given our collective immersion in this oppression, it is no wonder that we all—LGBT people included—incorporate and express the personal and social alienation it embodies" (Russell & Bohan, 2010, p. 65). Conceptualizing homonegativity as a "fundamentally sociopolitical phenomenon," rather than an intrapsychic malady, relieves LGBTQ clients from the notion that there is something wrong with them that must be fixed—a shame-based message that they are bombarded with on a daily basis. A liberation psychotherapist would help LGBTQ clients gain consciousness of the internalized oppression imbedded in their clinical symptoms, and also of the inevitability that all citizens will possess homonegativity while living in homophobic societies. This consciousness-raising could help alleviate the shame caused by oppressive sociopolitical systems, which could be perpetuated by psychotherapists accustomed to locating pathology within the individual rather than the system. Consciousness-raising in psychotherapy aligns with Paulo Freire's belief that liberation from oppression requires *conscientização*—a process by which marginalized people gain critical consciousness of the true nature of sociopolitical oppression that impacts them personally (Freire, 1968). Psychologists can facilitate *conscientização* in therapy by helping clients gain insight into how

sociopolitical oppression can manifest as clinical symptoms, which are also carried by many citizens living in this society.

To facilitate *conscientização* in psychotherapy, my dissertation's research findings contribute an existential-rights paradigm to this emancipatory work. A rights-based approach to psychotherapy involves helping marginalized clients gain critical consciousness of how their access to truth, freedom, love, hope, and power has become eroded by sociopolitical oppression. Psychotherapists can help clients explore how their sense of self and reality, freedom of possibility, participation in intimate relationships, hope for the future, or feelings of agency and self-efficacy have been affected by living in an oppressive sociopolitical system. Psychotherapists can raise consciousness among clients that truth, freedom, love, hope and power are basic human rights, which marginalized minorities are equally deserving of as members of the dominant group. Psychotherapists can also provide psychoeducation that having one's basic rights revoked can inevitably lead to feelings of rage, despair, helplessness, meaninglessness, etc. This consciousness-raising can normalize difficult feelings and symptoms which marginalized clients suffer with, and which may cause them self-denigration and disempowerment. It can also help to reduce internalized oppression and increase self-worth, as marginalized clients realize the rights they are entitled to as human beings. Finally, a rights-based approach to *conscientização* involves empowering clients to fight for their basic existential rights. Psychotherapists can serve as allies to help clients identify resources for power with which to obtain their basic rights, on both a personal micro-level of everyday living, as well as a collective macro-level of joining sociopolitical movements. In this manner, a rights-based approach to psychotherapy empowers clients to become self-advocates to fight for their personal and collective rights, wherein "activity directed toward social change that is relevant to one's life is intertwined with personal well-being: "changing oneself by becoming active changes the world; changing the world changes oneself" (Russell & Bohan, 2010, p. 71). As clients heal from internalized oppression, claim

their worth, and fight for sociopolitical change alongside a community of fellow activists, feelings of helplessness, despair, rage, and shame may dissipate, as agency, pride, and hope take their place. This approach to psychotherapy aligns with the ultimate goal of *conscientização*: to "make manifest the historical dialectic...between individual growth and community organization, between personal liberation and social transformation" (Martín-Baró, 1994; in Russell & Bohan, 2010, p. 71).

A rights-based approach to research: Psychologists who engage in social science research can also integrate an existential rights paradigm into their research endeavors. A rights-based approach to research is rooted in liberation psychology's belief that social science research can never remain politically neutral, for there is always an inherent power imbalance while conducting research. Moreover, liberation psychologists believe that one can never simply pursue knowledge for knowledge's sake, for "knowledge is used for purposes that must be clearly and ethically discerned" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 269). As such, rather than trying to conduct research in a politically-neutral manner, "a critical approach involves researchers in reflecting and clarifying their own motives and commitments, and then to question the effect of these on those they are partnering with to do research" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 269). In other words, liberatory research beckons researchers to make their political agendas explicit, and engage in rigorous reflexivity regarding the potential impact of their research on participants and communities. Making the researcher's political agenda explicit presents opportunities for liberation psychologists to partner with community members to produce research that spurs critical consciousness and sociopolitical change. Liberation psychologists Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman have described liberatory research endeavors that serve as a tool for critical consciousness to inform community organizing, public policy, and litigation efforts. These projects have been effective in initiating social change because "liberatory research efforts can help open or hold open a social space where psychological

experience can be understood in social and historical context, where critical understandings can be built, differences and their impacts explored, and emancipatory action initiated and reflected upon" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p, 269).

My dissertation's research findings contribute an existential rights framework upon which to organize liberatory research. This framework may be particularly helpful for phenomenological researchers wishing to do research with a social justice agenda. Wherein *conscientização* seeks to awaken widespread awareness about experiences of oppression, phenomenological research can contribute to this consciousness-raising by researching marginalized citizens' lived experiences of oppression. Moreover, phenomenological researchers often utilize existential thematic frameworks to organize their data interpretation. For instance, Duquesne alumnus Karin Arndt (2013) organized her dissertation's data interpretation of women's experiences of solitude around the thematic categories of temporality, spatiality, embodiment, language, and co-existence, identified by philosophers Merleau-Ponty and Medard Boss as the basic existential givens of human existence (Arndt, 2013). Other researchers have organized their existential-phenomenological interpretation upon Irvin Yalom's existential givens of freedom, isolation, meaninglessness, and death (Lemberger-Truelove, 2016). In pursuing a rights-based approach to phenomenological research, my dissertation's research findings propose a new set of existential "givens" upon which to organize emancipatory phenomenological research: truth, freedom, love, hope, and power. I hypothesize that these five themes are basic existential rights that are universally shared by all citizens, and that sociopolitical oppression seeks to revoke from marginalized citizens. Other phenomenological researchers can use this set of existential themes to explicate marginalized participants' lived experiences of oppression. Conducting data interpretation using this set of existential rights helps to position phenomenological research as a tool for *conscientização* and sociopolitical emancipation. Accordingly, a rights-based approach to phenomenological research transforms it into action

research, because "reflection and the action that flows from it are not dissociated. We work to understand in order to act differently in the world" (Watkins & Shulman, 2008, p. 269).

A rights-based approach to pedagogy: Psychology professors concerned with social justice can adopt a rights-based approach to pedagogy as they educate the future psychologists and citizens of society. In developing a rights-based approach to pedagogy, I must refer to Paulo Freire's (1868) theory of education in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Freire conceived of teaching itself as a political act, whose practice must be democratic rather than authoritarian in order to be just. A democratic approach to teaching requires educators to avoid hierarchal power dynamic whereby fixed, institutionalized knowledge is funneled into students' minds. Rather, educators should create democratic learning environments in which students contribute their own expertise about a subject, based on their own lived realities, in order to co-create collective knowledge that benefits all:

> Our relationship with the learners demands that we respect them and demands equally that we be aware of the concrete conditions of their world, the conditions that shape them. To try to know the reality that our students live is a task that the educational practice imposes on us. (Freire, 1968, p. 58).

This democratic approach to pedagogy requires teachers to possess the humility to learn from students, just as students are expected to learn from teachers, for "humility helps us to understand this obvious truth: no one knows it all; no one is ignorant of everything. We all know something; we are all ignorant of something" (Freire, 1968, p. 39). Humility is particularly important in counseling and psychology programs, where multicultural competence is emphasized as essential 21st century values of our field (American Psychological Association, 2008). Many universities seek to honor this value by actively recruiting minority students to join psychology graduate programs, indeed an important step to diversify our field (Rogers & Molina, 2006). Yet many psychology curriculums frequently still teach knowledge from the 20th century, which was constructed mainly by white, heterosexual, cis-gender men—some who produced psychological theories that actively oppressed

racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ people, and women. To sincerely uphold the ethical commitments of our field, we must be self-reflexive about the kind of knowledge that is being transmitted in classrooms to the future psychologists and citizens of society. Social justice-oriented psychology professors can challenge curriculums rooted in contexts of white supremacy, patriarchy, and heterosexism, by listening to their diverse students' expertise and truths, and valuing these students to be important co-creators of knowledge production (Vera & Speight, 2003). These students' personal expertise can help increase critical consciousness about the psychological effects of sociopolitical oppression, which is essential for the field of psychology to continue learning about. As such, a democratic approach to pedagogy can ultimately advance the field of psychology as a whole, by producing and transmitting knowledge about *all* citizens' psychological realities—including members of oppressed minority groups whose voices have historically been absent from our field's process of knowledge production.

To ensure they are shaping democratic learning environments, psychology professors can adopt a rights-based approach to pedagogy. This approach is particularly useful for minority students who often experience being marginalized by college classrooms that are unconsciously shaped by white supremacy, patriarchy, and heterosexism. A rights-based approach to pedagogy requires professors to be mindful of how access to truth, freedom, love, hope, and power are distributed within the classroom. While designing course curriculums and shaping class dialogue, professors can ask themselves: whose truths are given voice in this class, and whose truths are being silenced? And am I responding in validating or invalidating ways to students' truths that are different from my own, and that potentially make me uncomfortable? Moreover, professors can ask themselves: does my classroom allow freedom of thought and critical consciousness to flourish? Or am I imposing knowledge in an authoritarian manner that shuts down students' ability to engage in free imagination, creative ideation, and critical thinking—all of which can yield new possibilities that

evolve the field of psychology as a whole? Professors can also ask themselves: how is loving citizenship being modeled in my classroom? Am I shaping a dialogical environment infused with love, where students' truths are empathically heard and compassionately responded to by their fellow human beings? Or is my classroom unloving and unsafe, wherein students experience their vulnerable humanity being negated, debated, and condemned by their fellow human beings? These questions also factor into students' access to hope, which is particularly salient for marginalized minority students aspiring to join the field of psychology. Does the classroom create hopeful prospects for these students, helping them see their identities are reflected in the course material and believe that the field is willing to be shaped by their unique perspectives and voices? Or does the classroom wound them, instilling jadedness and hopelessness that their voices do not matter, that their identities are not reflected within psychology, and that their contributions to the field are not welcome? Finally, psychology professors can ask themselves: am I setting up a classroom that empowers all my students, granting them agency to pursue their ideals as future psychologists and citizens of society? Or does my classroom erect barriers which strip away some students' agency, instilling a sense of disempowerment that recapitulates what many marginalized minority students experience in the dominant culture at large?

A rights-based approach to pedagogy invites psychologists to view the classroom as a microcosm of society. Therefore, how professors model citizenship in the classroom can either mirror the sociopolitical oppression in society, or can offer a corrective experience that challenges and transforms systems of oppression—both within higher education and society at large. Paulo Freire said of citizenship: "Citizenship is not obtained by chance: it is a construction that, never finished, demands we fight for it. It demands commitment, political clarity, coherence, decision. For this reason a democratic education cannot be realized apart from an education of and for citizenship" (Freire, 1968, p. 90). A rights-based approach to clinical psychology demands that we

practice relating to clients, research participants, and students as fellow citizens, modeling a kind of citizenship with them that is liberatory, loving, and just. A rights-based approach to clinical psychology demands that we do not simply "practice psychology," but we practice the best of what it means to be human, together.

The Closet as Sociopolitical Trauma

The closet's PTSD symptomology: Aside from illuminating the experience of the closet as an existential phenomenon, this dissertation also sought to investigate the following research question: *can the closet be considered a kind of trauma, clinically speaking?* My research findings demonstrate that being in the closet as a sexual minority is associated with traumatic stressors and symptoms that align with the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder. The DSM-5 defines the traumatic stressor for PTSD as an actual experience of death, physical injury or sexual violence, or an experience of being threatened by death, injury or sexual violence (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). PTSD can be caused by being directly exposed to these stressors, or by witnessing another person undergo them. PTSD can also be caused by indirect and vicarious exposure to the traumatic stressor, such as learning about a relative or friend's experience of death, injury or sexual violence. The traumatic stressor can occur a single time or be repeated, such as being exposed to reminders of the stressor on a regular basis (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

In their descriptions of the closet, three research participants alluded to being exposed to the traumatic stressor of actual or threatened physical violence. One participant, Andres, mentioned direct experiences of being physically attacked due to homophobia when he was young. As such, he described living with the threat of physical violence as a constant possibility in his mind. Two participants, Ben and Manuel, described the threat of physical violence being ever-present when in public, due to the constant possibility of gay-bashing in homophobic environments. These

participants described utilizing the closet as a vehicle for safety in public spaces where the threat of physical violence feels palpable, such as men's locker rooms, rural neighborhoods, or simply when going out at night. As such, sexual minorities may not just be exposed to a traumatic stressor once in their lives. Some LGBTQ people are exposed to prolonged and repeated traumatization in their everyday existence, as the threat of physical violence in homophobic sociocultural environments is omnipresent to them.

Moreover, the DSM-5 criteria for a traumatic stressor includes indirect or vicarious exposure to physical violence (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). All sexual minorities may experience PTSD symptomology when vicariously exposed to reports of homophobic violence towards fellow members of the LGBTQ community. This vicarious traumatization can be explained by the literature on collective identity, which posits that cultural groups often create a collective identity whereby trauma which befalls one member of the group can traumatize all members (Alexander et al., 2004). Collective identity and vicarious traumatization could explain why all five research participants revealed PTSD symptomology in their descriptions of being closeted as sexual minorities, though two participants did not explicitly address physical violence. All five participants described symptoms while closeted that coincide with the DSM-5's criteria of PTSD symptoms. The most frequent PTSD symptom described by participants was hypervigilance. Hypervigilance entails a heightened state of alert with startle responses, overwhelming fear, paranoia, and preoccupation with potential threats in the environment. For members of marginalized minority groups living in traumatizing sociopolitical contexts, vigilance and paranoia can be considered healthy and functional rather than pathological, due to the realistic threat of violence in their everyday surroundings (Grier & Cobbs, 1968). All five research participants in this study described being closeted as an experience of persistent, daily vigilance about being victimized if their sexual orientation were found out, like "a soldier on guard" (Victor). They described coping with this fear

of threat by self-policing around others to avoid violent homophobic consequences, such that they would "calculate every mannerism as to imply heterosexuality" (Andres). They described startle responses to homophobic slurs as if "a bullet were being launched in my direction" (Manuel). They described each homophobic micro-aggression to be experienced like a physical assault, like a "little cut" that wounds (Ben). They described moving through the world living in a state of "overwhelming fear" (Rodney).

Participants also described other PTSD symptoms identified by the DSM-5 while being closeted. They all described feeling increasingly isolated from significant others and the world around them. They all described intensely negative thoughts and assumptions about oneself and the world, as well as self-blame or blame of others for causing their distress. They all experienced perpetual negative affect common to PTSD: fear, shame, and rage. While all participants described feelings of anger, three participants described enacting their aggression at themselves or at others—through suicidality (Andres) or destructive, violent behavior towards others (Manuel, Rodney). Three participants also described avoidance of trauma-related stimuli, by attempting to dissociate from their sexual feelings (Manuel, Rodney, Victor).

It is important to note that while most traumatic symptoms decreased for participants after coming out of the closet for the first time, some PTSD symptoms remained. Three participants reported persistent hypervigilance about homophobic violence that emerges today, even after having come out to most people in their life (Andres, Ben, Manuel). They described the necessity to enact the closet as a defensive strategy in homophobic spaces where they may be physically assaulted if their sexual orientation is apparent. These participants also described how shame, anger, and fear regarding their sexual orientation can re-emerge depending on their interpersonal and sociopolitical circumstances at any given point. This beckons more nuanced questions than what my dissertation originally posed. I wonder: is being a sexual minority in a homophobic society inherently a traumatic

experience, regardless of how "out" or "closeted" one is in life? If so, what role does the closet play in the overarching trauma of being a sexual minority in a homophobic society?

To shed light on these questions, I refer to Michael Hobbes' (2017) essay *The Epidemic of Gay Loneliness*. Hobbes describes gay male friends who were raised with gay parents or in queer-friendly neighborhoods, and who "came out of the closet into a world where marriage, a picket fence and a golden retriever were not just feasible, but expected" (Hobbes, 2017). This is a testimony to the progress LGBTQ activists have accomplished in transforming society. And yet the trauma of society persists. Hobbes described how he and his gay friends still struggle with loneliness, depression, anxiety, and suicidality at far higher rates than heterosexual people, even though they are out of the closet and living in queer-friendly environments. Hobbes associates this phenomenon with minority stress theory, which states that "being a member of a marginalized group requires extra effort" which precipitates daily, chronic stress that members of majority groups do not have to experience (Hobbes, 2017). As cited by Hobbes, minority stress researcher John Pachankis contends that "the real damage gets done in the five or so years between realizing your sexuality and starting to tell other people. Even relatively small stressors in this period have an outsized effect—not because they're directly traumatic, but because we start to expect them" (Hobbes, 2017). As such, though minority stress is omnipresent for gay men throughout their lives, the "real damage" of it occurs during the years of being closeted. Hobbes also cites trauma psychologist William Elder, who states that minority stress is, in and of itself, a traumatic stressor for gay men:

> The trauma for gay men is the prolonged nature of it… if you experience one traumatic event, you have the kind of PTSD that can be resolved in four to six months of therapy. But if you experience years and years of small stressors—little things where you think, Was that because of my sexuality?—that can be even worse. (Hobbes, 2017).

These theorists and writers suggest that sexual minorities experience chronic, daily stress from living in a society that they have been primed to experience as rejecting. This minority stress can induce

traumatic symptomology that is most debilitating while deeply closeted, but that may persist long after a person has come out.

Applying a liberation psychology framework to this discussion, I contend that the chronic minority stress of being an LGBTQ person in our society is a form of sociopolitical trauma. Sociopolitical trauma can arise simply by virtue of belonging to a cultural group that has experienced societal marginalization and discrimination in history and present day (Duran & Duran, 1998). Sociopolitical trauma leads members of marginalized communities, and entire communities themselves, to feel "overwhelmed, feel existentially unsafe, and find the world profoundly and imminently dangerous," which is accompanied by "such feelings as terror, hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness, despair, distrust, rage, and oftentimes guilt" (Burstow, 2003, p. 1303). Individuals belonging to oppressed groups may experience traumatic symptoms simply as they go about their days. Feminist trauma theorist Bonnie Burstow (2003) describes a woman who, a year after being raped, felt terrified of being attacked while walking down the street at night. Her traumatic symptoms cannot be alleviated simply by processing the past experience of being raped, for she is living in a sociopolitical system in which being attacked and raped is an ever-present, realistic possibility for women. Burstow asserts:

> Traumatized people experience the world as dangerous not because they have been rendered inadequate by the trauma and, therefore, have an essentially distorted worldview. They so experience it because events or conditions have brought home how very dangerous the world is and have precluded the editing out practices by which less traumatized people construct an essentially safe and benign world. (Burstow, 2003, p. 1304)

In the above quotation, we can replace "traumatized people" with "members of marginalized cultural groups," and "less traumatized people" with "members of dominant cultural groups." Many psychologists working with members of marginalized cultural groups ignore how the worldly context and group membership of the client naturally contributes to PTSD symptomology, such as vigilance and functional paranoia. If we pursue clinical work without keen awareness and recognition

of sociopolitical trauma, we may fail to actually treat minority clients' core psychological wounds, and therefore fail to do our jobs effectively (Quiros & Berger, 2015).

<u>The closet's embodied trauma</u>: While interviewing participants for this study, I experienced their underlying and persistent sociopolitical trauma emerge as an embodied, felt phenomenon. During the Focusing portion of interviews, participants' descriptions of the closet felt imbued with feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, or painful emptiness—traumatic, sensorial affects that were present and alive in both bodies in the room. I was reminded of phenomenological researcher Linda Finlay's (2005) description of "reflexive embodied empathy" with research participants (Finlay, 2005). She describes her body becoming completely submerged in a participant's lived experience during an interview, to the extent that she felt his terror so deeply that her own body shook with fear. Finlay encourages researchers to utilize experiences of reflexive embodied empathy as data with which to understand the phenomena under inquiry (Finlay, 2005). Accordingly, my own experience of embodied reflexive empathy involved absorbing participants' despair, to the extent that my own body felt despair. The visceral experience that I shared in the room with these participants confirmed to me that the closet was, indeed, an experience of trauma for sexual minorities. Moreover, the trauma seemed to appear in the room as not just a memory but an alive, embodied, ongoing phenomenon.

This traumatic embodiment of the closet that emerged in research interviews aligns with well-known psychological frameworks of how trauma is imprinted in the body (van der Kolk, 2014). Slightly less well-known, but equally significant, are conceptual frameworks developed by feminist and social justice psychologists about the intersection between embodiment, trauma, and sociopolitical oppression. For instance, in her article "Towards a Radical Understanding of Trauma and Trauma Work," Burstow (2003) describes how marginalized minorities are "routinely violated in

both overt physical ways and in other ways inherent in systematic oppression," producing traumatic symptomology based on entire intergenerational cycles of sociopolitical oppression (Burstow, 2003, p. 1294). She writes that this insidious, sociopolitical trauma "befalls embodied individuals, and even when there is no explicit assault on the body, people become alienated from their bodies in some respect" (Burstow, 2003, p. 1302). Somatic psychologist Rae Johnson (2014) builds upon this notion of oppression as embodied trauma in her article "Grasping and Transforming the Embodied Experience of Oppression." She states that oppression is inherently traumatic, and that "the legacy of oppression is perhaps most strongly felt in our bodies" (Johnson, 2014, p. 84). Johnson explains how the traumatic forces of sociopolitical dominance, subjugation and control are most frequently enacted at an insidious, non-verbal, bodily level of communication between members of dominant and marginalized cultural groups. As such, sociopolitical trauma can become imprinted in the body of marginalized community members as a result of participating in subtle, non-verbal, oppressive, social encounters throughout their lives. Johnson describes how oppression is imprinted in the body in three main ways: *embodied memory*, wherein the body retains physical sensations of oppressive memories; *somatic vigilance*, wherein the body develops an acutely sensitive and vigilant nervous system, and *somatic withdrawal and alienation*, wherein a person feels disconnected from their body (Johnson, 2009, in Bannerman, 2017). Johnson asserts that just as the body becomes a container for sociopolitical trauma, the body can also become an "important source of knowledge in unlearning oppression" and re-claiming power (Johnson, 2014, p. 87).

All three of these manifestations of embodied sociopolitical trauma arose in the room with research participants during Focusing—the closet's trauma appeared as embodied memories, somatic vigilance, and somatic withdrawal and alienation. While this was unfolding, I became concerned about the potential to re-traumatize participants with this Focusing technique during the interview. I worried that the embodied nature of Focusing may activate sensitive traumatic material

in participants' bodies which they had been previously disconnected from, and which might take them by surprise and overwhelm them. So with all participants, it became ethically imperative for me to help participants' bodies "come out" of the closet's trauma that I had been guiding them to contact. I sought to do this by utilizing Focusing to facilitate an empowering, "felt shift" in their embodied awareness. For instance, during the Focusing exercise, Andres described his legs as frozen solid, symbolizing his despair and emotional pain while closeted. I facilitated a felt shift in his body through which he experienced a wheel of fire in his belly, which symbolized the power of anger and rebellion to release despair and incite social change. Both Ben and Victor experienced their bodies heating up uncomfortably, symbolizing anxiety and tension while closeted. I facilitated a felt shift through which both felt their bodies cooling down, releasing tension, and acquiring peace. Rodney experienced overwhelming fear and anguish about the vulnerability of his throat and voice, symbolizing his inability to express himself while closeted. Rodney's felt shift entailed shifting his awareness to the power of his artistic hands, which behave as his voice of self-expression to the world. And finally, Manuel experienced himself unable to move as mud and dirt seeped through his body and took it over, symbolizing his internalization of homophobic hatred while closeted. I facilitated a felt shift through which he brought to mind the face of a friend who had responded with love and acceptance when he came out. Immediately, Manuel's body relaxed, his mouth smiled, and he shed a tear as the homophobic hatred dissipated from within. Manuel's sociopolitical trauma seemed to become the most activated during Focusing. Later in our interview, I asked him to reflect on his Focusing experience. Manuel responded:

> I thought it was really important how adamant you were about resolving it. Even at some point, I was saying-no it can't be fixed, it can't be solved. I was confident that there was like no way to resolve it. But then you kept trying to make myself push it, and that was good. That you kept pushing. I guess the therapist I was working with before, I felt more stressed every time I was leaving him because he just kept asking me a bunch of questions that didn't come to any compromise. It was just kinda like my trauma… just like kept bringing things up but with no resolve. I think that it's important to show them it, go into it… but as long as you bring them out.

As such, as a researcher it was crucial for me to avoid letting participants' bodies remain imbedded in traumatic recollections of oppression, but rather to facilitate a "coming out" from their embodied trauma while interviewing them about this phenomenon. I believe I was ultimately able to accomplish this task. Yet this interview process also made me aware of the incredible vulnerability of doing research about sociopolitical trauma, and of employing the embodied Focusing technique as a research method. Great sensitivity is required when guiding marginalized minority clients to access their embodied trauma about sociopolitical oppression. Accordingly, I might not recommend Focusing as a research method to investigate traumatic phenomena, unless the potential for re-traumatization is explicitly mentioned during informed consent, and the researcher has trauma-focused and social justice therapeutic training. Ethically-speaking, I am wary about researchers using this method who are not also trained as somatic, culturally-sensitive, trauma-focused therapists.

Healing sociopolitical trauma via Focusing: Nevertheless, I am indeed a psychotherapist with training in somatic, trauma-focused, and social justice interventions. As such, this dissertation's research process also revealed to me the power of Focusing as a therapeutic intervention to help heal sociopolitical trauma among marginalized minorities. Focusing helped participants of this dissertation make experiential contact with the closet's trauma, gain critical consciousness about how their sociopolitical trauma has affected their bodies and lives, and undergo a healing, "felt shift" in their bodies which was empowering. This process aligns with Rae Johnson's (2014) model for working somatically with sociopolitical oppression called "Embodied Critical Transformation" (Johnson, 2014). Through the various stages of this model, Johnson guides participants to become conscious of, reflect upon, and transform the ways in which their bodies carry and respond to systemic oppression. Phase one entails an "embodied experience of oppression." In this phase, Johnson guides participants to focus on a concrete experience of

oppression, and identify sensations arising in their body in response to this experience. Phase two entails "embodied critical reflection," in which participants reflect upon bodily sensations arising in response to their concrete experience of oppression, and engage in the "crucial task of unpacking, deconstructing, and examining" how these somatic experiences connect with oppressive societal experiences that they have experienced (Johnson, 2014, p. 89). This embodied reflective process allows participants to acquire critical consciousness about their experiences of oppression, and become aware of how these experiences have shaped their bodies and beings. Phase three entails "integrated distillation." During this phase, participants check in with their bodies about newfound realizations about oppression they developed during the critical reflection phase. Typically, gaining critical consciousness about sociopolitical oppression can facilitate a sense of integration, anchoring, and relief in participants' bodies regarding their oppressive lived experiences (Johnson, 2014). Finally, Johnson encourages participants to experiment with new ways of being embodied in society, enacting a bodily presence in a more empowering manner than before. As a result of this process, participants may feel better equipped to respond to future instances of oppression in a manner that is empowering (Johnson, 2014).

Clearly, the process of Focusing that I engaged in with research participants for this dissertation fits well with Johnson's phases of "Embodied Critical Transformation." Similarly, the process I facilitated also coincides with a Focusing-oriented psychotherapy model developed by Linda Rappaport (1998) to work with clients with PTSD. In her work with traumatized clients, Rappaport adapted the Focusing technique to fit Judith Herman's three therapeutic stages for trauma recovery: (1) establishing safety, (2) remembering and mourning the trauma, and (3) gaining reconnection and empowerment regarding one's life and future (Herman, 1992; Rappaport, 1998). For the first stage, Rappaport helps clients with PTSD establish safety in their bodies by guiding them to envision a real or imaginary "safe place," and allow the felt sense of that safe place to

envelop their bodies: "this is an important step in creating a safe place within that the client can always choose to return to, whenever she or he needs to" (Rappaport, 1998, p. 2). For the second stage, Rappaport guides clients to remember and mourn their trauma by focusing their awareness on issues pertaining to the traumatic experience, and "sensing the whole feel of it in her or his body" (Rappaport, 1998, p. 3). She guides clients to locate a symbolic image or a word that expresses the felt sense of their trauma. For the third stage, Rappaport facilitates a "felt shift" in clients' embodiment of their trauma which is healing and empowering. She asks clients: "imagine this issue (or the thing being worked on) is all healed. What would that look and feel like? Sense that in your body…Now ask, so what's needed to bring that about…and what's a good step in the right direction?" (Rappaport, 1998, p. 3). She helps clients tune into their bodies, sense what is needed to heal, and immerse their embodied awareness in this "felt shift"—this new direction for healing. Finally, Rappaport helps trauma survivors reflect on this bodily felt shift and integrate it into their lives, as a new direction towards empowerment and healing (Rappaport, 1998).

The Focusing process that I utilized with research participants for this dissertation both aligns with, and fails to align with, Johnson's and Rappaport's somatic approaches to therapy with traumatized individuals. As Rappaport emphasizes, it is imperative to establish safety with traumatized individuals before engaging in somatic work with them. In my own approach to working somatically with the closet's trauma, I sought to establish safety among research participants by explaining in depth the process of Focusing, obtaining informed consent, and providing ample room to discuss concerns or issues. I also tried to establish a trusting alliance with research participants to create relational safety before engaging in Focusing. I also asserted to them that if we approached traumatic material that felt too vulnerable during Focusing, they could inform me to take a step back, and I would suggest stepping back too. Finally, I provided research participants with referrals for local psychotherapists in the event that they wanted to work through painful

psychic material in an official therapeutic context. These steps were helpful in establishing some safety for the context of this research project. However, I am concerned that I failed to facilitate an embodied "safe place" for participants to return to if their trauma became overwhelming, as Rappaport advises in her model of Focusing for PTSD. I believe this failure was a major ethical misstep in my data collection process, though my participants did not express concerns about a lack of safety. Even so, I regret not spending more time reviewing existing literature on Focusing-oriented psychotherapy with trauma survivors, or ethical ways to conduct qualitative research about traumatic experiences. This would have prepared me to be more informed and competent in establishing embodied safety for participants, before guiding them through this somatic technique. It may have also quelled my anxiety about re-traumatizing participants.

Nevertheless, the Focusing processes I facilitated for participants did align with the other stages identified by Johnson and Rapport in doing somatic therapy for trauma healing—making experiential contact with the embodied trauma, working through the embodied trauma, and transforming the embodied trauma in empowering ways. Using Focusing, I guided participants to remember a concrete experience of traumatic oppression and focusing on their felt sense of it. The Focusing technique helped them critically reflect on, work through, and mourn their trauma by locating symbolic language and imagery that expressed their felt sense of it. Our research interviews also helped them critical reflect upon how sociopolitical oppression has impacted their lives, by conceptualizing and interpreting their embodied experience of oppression within the overall context of their lives. Finally, the Focusing technique helped facilitate a "felt shift" in participants' bodies which mimicked the healing transformation coming out of the closet. This "felt shift" was particularly significant for sociopolitical trauma, because it allowed participants to identify internal resources for power which they could access when their trauma gets triggered by society. Identifying these inner resources for power provided participants with a new direction, a next step,

that they could actively enact in their lives. For instance, Andres bodily felt shift alerted him to the power of anger that resides within him, which he can utilize to join social movements and work towards social change. Additionally, Manuel's felt shift made him realize that when society's oppression threatens him, he can empower himself to reach out to the people in his life who love him for who he is. Moreover, Rodney's felt shift reminded him of his artistic hands as his source of empowerment, which he can use to create art as a voice of self-expression in a society that tries to silence him.

The last stage of this Focusing process also affirmed the importance of psychotherapists helping marginalized minorities heal from sociopolitical trauma by facilitating *self-empowerment.* Wherein helplessness is core to the experience of trauma, empowerment is core to trauma recovery (Herman, 2003). Judith Herman describes a sexual assault survivor who, at the final stage of her trauma work, reflected: "How would I like to feel? I wanted to feel safe in the world. I wanted to feel powerful. And so I focused on what was working in my life, in the ways I was taking power in real-life situations" (Herman, 2003, p. 196). Herman describes various steps that trauma survivors can take to re-assert their power in the world that has traumatized them: engage in healthy self-defense strategies, confront and stand up to perpetrators, break silences through truth-telling, and fight for social change. Vast healing can occur when survivors choose to empower themselves by participating in social action:

> Social action offers the survivor a source of power that draws upon her own initiative, energy and resourcefulness but that magnifies these qualities far beyond her own capacities. It offers her an alliance with others based on cooperation. It offers her an alliance with others based on cooperation and shared purpose. Participation in organized, demanding social efforts calls up the survivor's most mature and adaptive coping strategies of patience, anticipation, altruism and humor. It brings out the best in her; in return, the survivor gains the sense of connection with the best in other people. (Herman, 2003, p. 207)

Herman's description of how trauma survivors gain self-empowerment through social action aligns with liberation psychotherapists' approach to empowering marginalized clients in therapy. The

ultimate goal of liberation psychotherapy, according to Russell and Bohan, is to empower clients to become self-advocates who work towards social change. In this sense, working to heal oneself helps to heal society, and working to heal society helps to heal oneself (Russell & Bohan, 2010).

Yet liberation psychologists assert that mental health professionals should not simply work to help members of marginalized minority groups heal from sociopolitical trauma via psychotherapy. We also have a responsibility to ameliorate the oppressive sociopolitical factors that continue to traumatize marginalized communities on an ongoing basis. Since sociopolitical traumas are socially-produced, we cannot resolve these traumas by solely treating it at the individual-level, within the therapist's office (Martin-Baró, 1994). Rather, psychologists have a responsibility to treat trauma at the macro-level level of its "social roots… the traumatogenic structures or social conditions" that reproduce this trauma among citizens over and over again (Martin-Baró, 1994, p. 123). Put another way, psychotherapists should certainly encourage marginalized clients in psychotherapy to engage in social activism outside of therapy, in order to heal from their sociopolitical trauma. Yet, we must also play the role of social activists outside the therapist office, joining with our clients as citizens in solidarity to fight for macro-level, systematic change.

Cinematic-Phenomenology for Healing and Justice

Inspired by this rally-cry posited by liberation psychologists, I sought to effect macro-level, systematic change through this dissertation by developing a cinematic-phenomenological research method. This method enabled me to create the film "Illuminate" to raise critical consciousness across society about the closeted experience (viewable at www.illuminatethecloset.com). Utilizing cinematic-phenomenology as a tool for healing and justice, I aspire for my film to reduce citizens' prejudiced attitudes about homosexuality which sustain the sociopolitical trauma of the closet. A next step for this project is to collect empirical data about viewers' reactions to the film, so I can

learn if cinematic-phenomenology does have the potential to facilitate macro-level healing of sociopolitical trauma. Nevertheless, while working on this film, I did discern three key avenues by which cinematic-phenomenology could propel sociopolitical healing and justice on behalf of marginalized sexual minorities: by its ability to create beauty, compassion, and hope.

Cinematic-phenomenology and beauty: Cinematic-phenomenology can facilitate sociopolitical healing because it can express marginalized minorities' experiences in a beautiful manner. Beauty is defined as aesthetic pleasure, that which is pleasing to the senses. Beauty is considered a poignant, peak, sensual experience that elevates the human soul: "Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears" (Poe, 1864, p. 163). In times of personal and collective injustice, when it is difficult to see the world as anything but ugly, the need for beauty becomes paramount. In her essay "Finding Beauty in a Fractured World", art scholar Nancy Adler (2015) posed the question:

> When faced with the uncertainty, calamity, and crises that define twenty-first century society, how can we have the audacity to even consider seeking beauty, let alone actually find it? Not by avoiding or denying reality but, rather, by seeing reality accurately, yet differently, and then seeking to transform it. (Adler, 2015, p. 481).

Adler states that seeking beauty does not mean we ignore the injustices that proliferate across society. Rather, seeking beauty means cherishing flickers of beauty within the ugliness. Adler states that the artist's task in an unjust society is to express glimpses of beauty amidst the ugliness of the world, so others are reminded of how beautiful the world can be (Adler, 2015). The artist is challenged to re-envision a world filled with beauty, and to inspire others to work collectively to transform the world into that vision of beauty (Adler, 2015).

Yet many artists agree that beautiful art encompasses not only the prettiness and light of the world, but also the ugliness, pain and tragedy. For instance, in her essay "Art in a Time of Atrocity," painter and art scholar Bracha L Ettinger (2016) explains that beautiful art does not turn a blind eye

to the violence of the world: "Art that denies violence abandons its victims as if they are irrelevant to human life" (Ettinger, 2016). To Ettinger, the source of beauty lies in experiences of trauma and pain, as well as experiences of healing, light and joy: "[beauty] signals an encounter with the horrible that we are trying to avoid…as well as with the other's desire for another life to a wretched existence and longing for light" (Ettinger, 2016). Therefore, beautiful art captures the wretched and the horrible, while also illuminating a pathway towards joy and light. In contemporary art circles, many artists state that true beauty cannot be found in "pretty" or "picturesque" images at all, but rather images that capture the raw tragedies of life: "the composed and stylized pretty image is revealed in idealistic fashion as a mask, behind which we find soul, truth, and life" (Galt, 2011). On the other hand, art theorists Alain de Botton and John Armstrong (2013) critique this perspective by stating that "pretty" art has an important therapeutic function for human beings: it provides hope, optimism, and encouragement in times of despair: In their book *Art as Therapy,* they write:

> The more difficult our lives, the more a graceful depiction of a flower might move us. The tears — if they come — are in response not to how sad the image is, but how pretty…We should be able to enjoy an ideal image without regarding it as a false picture of how things usually are. A beautiful, though partial, vision can be all the more precious to us because we are so aware of how rarely life satisfies our desires (de Botton & Armstrong, 2013).

As such, "pretty," simple, and sensorially-pleasing images have just as important a place in our society as images which express the depths of the world's suffering.

For my film "Illuminate," I wished to create a piece of aesthetic beauty that could capture the violence and tragedy of the closet alongside images of pleasure, prettiness, and light. My desire to do so was evoked by the data gathered from my cinematic-phenomenological research method. While interviewing participants about their experiences of the closet, I noticed that they expressed descriptions of beauty, pleasure and light alongside darker, more painful descriptions of the closet's trauma. For instance, Andres described the thrill and euphoria of being embraced by his same-sex lover, although this embrace was confined to secrecy. Rodney described his closet as a secret,

beautiful world of his own where he could freely be himself. Similarly, Andres described the closet as a space where he could express himself creatively in all the ways society forbid. Moreover, both Ben and Rodney described experiencing their sexual feelings and impulses as natural, gratifying, pleasurable, and beautiful, before society sought to fracture this beauty. Finally, Manuel expressed gratitude and joy about having loving people in his personal environment who he could come out to and be supported by, even though the larger world still harbored its ugly prejudices.

Again and again as I listened to these descriptions, I perceived beauty. I felt bliss. My eyes teared up with deep gratitude that these moments of bliss and beauty, however small and subtle, could be cherished by participants amidst their traumatic experiences of oppression. While feeling moved by the beauty within my participants' tragic stories, I was reminded of the four days following my father's bicycle accident, during which he remained in a coma before he finally died. I remember how my brothers and I became extremely sensitized to glimmers of aesthetic beauty within our surroundings, as we wondered if our father would live or die. We climbed up a mountain to watch the sunset. We played our father's favorite classical Hindi song, our soul elevating to pitches of bliss by its rhythm. My brother picked a small flower from the grass and became intrigued by its intricate, perfect pattern. I gazed into the blazing fire of a Hindu prayer ceremony until my soul began to blend into its flames. When my family's chanting voices blurred into one harmonious voice of prayer, I wept with gratitude at the beauty of community. Akin to Botton and Armstrong's description of the power of a flower's beauty amidst painful times in life, these glimmers of aesthetic beauty brought me precious hope and solace during one of the most tragic times of my life.

So as I began crafting a short film about the lived experience of the closet, I felt it necessary to incorporate glimmers of aesthetic beauty, pleasure, and bliss throughout the cinematography of the film. I wanted 'illuminate' to communicate to viewers that amidst such deep sorrow, light and

hope could still exist. Particularly for viewers of the film who remained mostly closeted, I wanted to convey that these glimmers of beauty, light and hope were worth searching for and locating amidst their experience of suffering, because they could serve as "keys" to unlocking solace, healing, and liberation—and perhaps to eventually coming out. Moreover, incorporating these glimmers of beauty also felt ethically imperative, to avoid creating a film that would solely re-traumatize viewers and plunge them into despair.

As a filmmaker, my sense of what "aesthetic beauty" should mean for the cinematography of this film evolved from both my participants' descriptions of the closet, and my own hermeneutic interpretation of their descriptions. Several pieces of data, in particular, shaped my approach to creating "aesthetic beauty" through the film's cinematography. First, both Rodney and Ben had discussed how their embodied, sexual feelings felt inherently pleasurable, beautiful and natural, prior to absorbing society's shaming messages about it. After these interviews, the words "beautiful" and "natural" established an important link in mind as both a psychologist and artist. I thought: *homosexuality is natural, natural is beautiful, and homosexuality is beautiful.* My imagination searched to find a symbolic image that could illustrate the inherent beauty of a person's homosexual nature. A symbolic image was provided for me in my interview with Manuel. He discussed how coming out of the closet was like "digging up a rock" that had been buried far underground. The image of a rock recurred in Manuel's descriptions of being closeted and coming out. In my imagination, "rock," "beautiful," and "natural" clicked, and I began a mission to find the perfect rock that could encapsulate a person's beautiful, natural homosexuality. After weeks of visiting several gem and crystal stores, I discovered a small, beautiful crystal with rainbows that glistened in the sunlight. While holding this rock in the sun, I reveled to myself: *I cannot believe that nature can create something so beautiful.* As I watched rainbows dance across the crystal as the sunrays hit it, I remembered the symbolic power of the rainbow for the LGBTQ community, and felt thrilled to have discovered a

crystal which created natural rainbows. This crystal became the central motif to capture the natural beauty of homosexuality in the film 'illuminate." I introduced the glistening, sparkling, rainbow-filled crystal at the beginning of the film to symbolize the protagonist's initial discovery of his natural homosexual feelings. The protagonist spins the crystal around in his hands, playing with it curiously (this opening scene could also be symbolic of masturbation, and the early discovery of sexuality that masturbation allows for). This crystal symbolizes the protagonist's embodied sexual feelings, so natural and beautiful. I carried this "sparkling crystal light" motif across various scenes of the film, to remind viewers of the beautiful light that can be found amidst the closet's trauma—the beautiful light that exists within themselves and their homosexuality, as nature intended them to be.

Aside from incorporating an abstract motif of "sparkling crystal light" throughout the film, I also decided to build a beautiful love-making bedroom scene into the narrative, to illuminate the pleasure and bliss that can still exist while inside the closeted experience. This scene was inspired by Rodney, Ben, and Andres' descriptions of how the physical space of their closet was actually their bedroom – a secret, safe space where they could be free to explore themselves and their homosexual desires. Moreover, Rodney and Andres described feelings of elation about being in an intimate relationship with their same-sex lovers, coupled by sadness that they could not share these blissful feelings with others in their lives. As such, I wanted to create a bedroom scene where the protagonist of the film enjoys the sensual pleasures of lovemaking with his male lover, even though this experience occurs in the throes of remaining deeply closeted. My co-cinematographer Joseph Carreno filmed this scene carefully and beautifully with slow, deliberate camera movements to softly "graze flesh," in order to evoke the sensual pleasures of the intimate encounter. I also directed the actors to interact with one another with facial expressions and body movements that evoked a sleepy, blissful haze. Joe and I also set-up a mobile with crystal prisms in the corner of the bedroom, which we spun around and around to create dancing shadows and light across the walls of the

bedroom. In post-production, I added an additional layer of the "sparkling crystal light" motif onto the bedroom footage, in order to accentuate the aesthetic beauty of the scene. My end goal was to create a scene that evokes the romance, sensuality, bliss, ecstasy, and beauty possible in a homosexual sexual encounter, whether this scene took place in reality or in fantasy (i.e. masturbation).

Moreover, I wanted to portray same-sex intimacy in this aesthetically beautiful manner to counteract the damage done by media portrayals of homosexuality as ugly and bad in the past and present day. In her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Marion Young (2011) states that the dominant culture marks certain identity groups as "normal" and other groups as "deviant" from the norm. When a person is marked as "Other", this status stigmatizes their body and creates a cultural aversion against it. By creating cultural aversion against minority bodies, these bodies are thereby rendered "disgusting," "vile," and "ugly," while "normal" bodies are perceived by the dominant culture as "beautiful." Young explains:

> When the dominant culture defines some groups as different, as the Other, the members of those groups are imprisoned in their bodies. Dominant discourse defines them in terms of bodily characteristics, and constructs those bodies as ugly, dirty, defiled, impure, contaminated, or sick. (Young, 2011, p. 123).

The media culture has historically perpetuated stigma and aversion against minority bodies by portraying them as deviant, sinister, or ugly, while showcasing bodies of the dominant culture as pure, good, or beautiful. For instance, many gay or bisexual male characters onscreen are portrayed as villainous or sinister (Benshoff & Griffin, 2005). Thus aesthetic beauty becomes political—whose bodies get to be portrayed as beautiful and pleasurable, and whose do not? For this reason, 'illuminate' showcased homosexual male bodies locked in an embrace in an aesthetically beautiful manner, in order to reverse the stigmatized perception of homosexual embodiment from deviant and aversive to beautiful, natural, pleasurable, and good.

As such, in directing the cinematography of 'illuminate,' I sought to balance the painful truths of the closeted experience with aesthetic beauty—to craft a poetic rhythm that fluctuates between pleasure and pain, ecstasy and sorrow, shadows and light. In creating this rhythm, I hoped to communicate that the closeted experience, painful as it is, also entails an intimate exploration of one's homosexuality—an experience that is pleasurable, sensual, and at its highest climax, blissful. By witnessing the sparkling beauty of homosexuality amidst the dark shadows of the closet, I hoped this film may inspire viewers who are currently closeted to reconnect with and embrace the light of who they are, amidst the pain of societal oppression.

Cinematic-phenomenology and compassion: Cinematic-phenomenological research can also facilitate healing and justice because it can evoke compassion towards marginalized communities. In her book *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, legal scholar Martha C. Nussbaum (2013) explains that sociopolitical change occurs not merely by engaging citizens' rationality, but by cultivating their emotions: "All political principles, the good as well as the bad, need emotional support to ensure their stability over time, and all decent societies need to guard against division and hierarchy by cultivating sentiments of sympathy and love" (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 3). Nussbaum identifies compassion as the quintessential emotion driving social justice, defined as "a painful emotion directed at the serious suffering of another creature or creatures" (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 142). When we feel compassion, we take seriously the suffering of another. We believe that a person is experiencing a painful predicament which is not their fault. And, typically, we experience compassion when a person appears similar to ourselves, with similar possibilities in life (Nussbaum, 2013). Nussbaum writes that this latter point is an obstacle in pursuit of justice, as it creates social divisions that impede the ability to feel compassionately towards members of the cultural out-group. Most often, human beings experience compassion towards kin, friends, and members of our in-

group community. Yet to shape a nation who cares about the welfare, dignity, and rights of their fellow citizens, compassion must be cultivated towards people outside of one's immediate circle, such as the "cultural other" who appears distant: "If distant people and abstract principles are to get a grip on our emotions, therefore, these emotions must somehow position them within our circle of concern, creating a sense of 'our' life in which these people and events matter as part of our 'us,' our own flourishing" (Nussbaum, 2013, p. 11). Nussbaum states that this is the task of the *artist* in society—to broaden citizens' circles of concern by creating artwork that cultivates compassion. Artists can influence public emotion using "indirect appeals" of symbol, poetry, memory, narrative, and music (Nussbaum, 2013). Nussbaum suggests that the human mind is easily moved by these aesthetic vehicles, which leads people to develop strong attachments to artworks and their subject matter. Artists can produce aesthetic creations which express sociopolitical principles of justice and love. These works of art can accordingly move people to feel compassionately towards their fellow citizens' welfare—including those who would ordinarily seem distant to them.

Similarly, in her essay "Art in a Time of Atrocity," art scholar Bracha Ettinger (2016) writes that the artist's task is to act as a compassionate witness to violence in the world. In times of atrocity, works of art can compassionately contain and convey such violence, so viewers become touched by a similar stroke of compassion. Art can expose viewers to trauma in a way that is healing rather than re-traumatizing, because art "works slowly… it allows us to enter the space of the trauma of others and of our own with neither fight nor flight, and to dwell in its resonance" (Ettinger, 2016). Dwelling in the pain of the other, and allowing it to resonate with one's own pain, gives birth to compassion. Ettinger writes that:

> Art as a primary ethical form of compassion…appears as a form of fragile communication in which complete strangers can understand one another by resonance, both inside and outside one's close 'community.' One then realizes that humans are part of fragile and shared systems. (Ettinger, 2016)

In other words, art awakens compassion towards strangers, because it creates an experience of resonance that demonstrate that our psyches are not separate but interconnected. Likewise, in his essay "What is Art?," Leo Tolstoy (1899) wrote that the core quality of art is its capacity for "emotional infectiousness"—the emotions of the artist transmitting to the viewer to create a shared psychic experience between strangers. He explained: "Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them" (Tolstoy, 1899, p. 43). Tolstoy described a real work of art as one that "infects" viewers with the same emotions that the artist experienced while creating the art. Since art is shared among many people, art can infect entire communities with the same emotion. Thus art is "a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity" (Tolstoy, 1899, p. 123). This is especially true if the particular emotion being infected is compassion. Because art has the potential to cultivate widespread compassion, Nussbaum insists that governmental institutions should provide ample space and resources for artists to create work that bears witness to the violence of the world, and expresses sociopolitical principles of love and justice (Nussbaum, 2013). This can infect the minds and hearts of all who absorb the art, leading to a more compassionate nation.

The main emotion that drove me to create the film "Illuminate" was indeed compassion—intense, visceral compassion towards my father's suffering, and towards all who have experienced the closet. While perhaps all modes of art could be adequate vehicles to transmit my compassion to viewers, I believe cinematic-phenomenology has special potential to do this. This is because cinematic-phenomenology is not just a method of art but a method of research, allowing me to engage in profound conversations with multiple people about their painful experiences of being closeted. My intimate conversations with research participants moved me to my core. These

poignant interpersonal experiences, and the corresponding effect they had on me emotionally, were a life-force driving the creation of a film. I went home after each interview, filled to the brim with love and pain, and the artistic content poured out of me—not simply from my mind's imagination but from my soul's tears. My profound compassion for participants' suffering led me to an almost obsessive perfectionism while filmmaking. I obsessed over every detail of the cinematography to ensure that this film was conveying the exact emotions that I believed participants were communicating to me, and that I felt in my own core. This obsessiveness naturally led to many instances of disappointment, as I was introduced to the inevitable logistical limitations of the filmmaking process—both as a technical medium and in myself as a beginner filmmaker. For instance, I remember feeling so upset while filmmaking the campfire scene, because we could not get the shot to capture steam pouring off the top of a mug in the exact way I had envisioned in my mind. One participant, Rodney, said that his partner's love warms his heart like a "steamy cup of tea." He described in great detail a powerful image of steam bubbling over the rim of the mug. This description became ingrained in my mind as a very specific image to capture Rodney's relief in being embraced by warmth and love. Yet when it came time to actually filming the shot, we could not exactly reproduce the image in my mind no matter how hard we tried. Failures such as this reoccurred throughout the filmmaking process, due to technical issues like time of day, changes in weather, communication mishaps, or props that did not work as intended. These failures, however minor they were, made me feel disappointed because I wanted so badly for film viewers to be "emotional infected" by the same exact emotions of compassion that I felt while interviewing participants. I realize now that I was hoping for an impossible task. Translating words to cinematography inevitably involves multiple different layers of interpretation, through which certain details will inevitably become lost in translation. Despite these "failures," I believe my cinematic-phenomenological research method does contain vast potential to evoke "emotional infectiousness"

in services of sociopolitical change. During phenomenological research interviews, participants "infect" the researcher with a feeling of compassion towards their lived experiences of oppression. Then, the researcher makes a film which can act as a "compassionate witness" to participants' lived experiences, translating some semblance of her own felt sense into the film's cinematography. Ultimately, all who view this film will be infected by a feeling of compassion towards participants' lived experiences of oppression, thereby moving them to behave more compassionately towards their fellow citizens in society.

It is important to note that at times the "emotional infectiousness" of my film felt almost too successful, to the point that I worried about the film potentially re-traumatizing viewers who were marginalized. For instance, the film's second scene about "the loss of freedom" entails the main actor of the film, Orlando, being chained to a chair in a dark shadowy basement. His mouth, torso, crotch, hands and legs are wrapped in metal chains to evoke restrictions and constraints the freedom of self-expression. Orlando is a powerful emotive actor, and as he sat there wrapped in chains he beautifully portrayed the process of angrily fighting against oppression, and eventually being overcome by learned helplessness. When watching this scene, I winced in pain. Orlando shared similar discomfort about the scene, stating that "That scene was hard to watch. It was hard to watch me give up." Orlando is also a Black man, so the scene's imagery inevitably evokes the intersectional traumatization of not only being oppressed as a sexual minority but a racial minority, wherein the historical trauma of slavery and the ongoing injustice of mass incarceration may traumatize members of the Black community on a regular basis. The film felt significant to communicate the profound pain that LGBT and racial oppression inflicts, and yet I worried it went "too far." I asked Orlando about his opinion of this, and he responded, "It's hard to watch, but it's important to show. It's important to show so people understand how bad it feels." The scene makes me wince and my stomach churn every time I watch it. I imagine it may affect other viewers

similarly, across the spectrum of sexual and racial identities. Yet perhaps this is the very goal I was seeking to accomplish—to "emotionally infect" viewers with discomfort, pain, and ultimately, compassion towards the lived experience of being oppressed as a marginalized minority.

An important question emerges in this discussion of emotional infection: should the goal of cinematic-phenomenology be to evoke compassionate concern towards others' suffering, or empathic identification towards them? At the forefront of this project, I aspired to utilize cinematic-phenomenology to evoke empathy among viewers. While filmmaking, I sought to accurately express participants' own emotions regarding their lived experiences of the closet—terror, numbness, dissociation, entrapment, sexual desire, hopelessness, relief, joy, empowerment, and hope. I hoped my film would allow viewers to experience the same feelings as sexual minorities experienced felt while closeted, such that they could "step into their shoes" and vicariously experience the closeted lifeworld. As mentioned previously, I now realize that replicating participants "exact emotions" is not possible due to the various levels of hermeneutic interpretation involved in the process of translating their words into cinematography. Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether empathy or compassion should be the main aspiration for art and justice. Nussbaum states that compassion is often an outgrowth of empathy, yet empathy is not necessary for compassion. She defines empathy as "the ability to imagine the situation of the other, taking the other's perspective" (Nussbaum, 2013). Nussbaum states that empathy is not simply emotional contagion but also requires a cognitive component of imagining the predicament of an other. She explains that sociopaths and lawyers can use empathy for manipulative purposes, but not for altruistic aims. Thus empathy is not a prerequisite for justice. Compassion typically requires some degree of empathy—of being able to vividly imagine and feel the predicament of the other, and consider what it is like to be in their position. Yet empathy requires love in order to transform into compassion, and thereby

justice (Nussbaum, 2013). As such, while compassion is certainly a "political emotion," empathy may not be, unless coupled with loving, altruistic aims.

After completing the film "Illuminate," I assessed some viewers' immediate responses to obtain preliminary feedback on whether emotional infectiousness was accomplished. I received the following responses from viewers who do not identify as sexual minorities: "Wow, it sends chills down my spine. It's like I felt what it was like to go through that experience, though I have never experienced anything similar." Another viewer tearfully said, "It just goes to show that we are all simply human." Still another said, "I felt it in my bones". These responses demonstrate that emotional infectiousness was achieved by the film "Illuminate". Yet what exactly is this emotional experience which viewers describe—is it empathy or compassion? It would be interesting to pursue a follow-up research project that formally evaluates viewers' affective responses to the film, including assessing for experiences of empathy and/or compassion. This follow-up study could include a literature review of these two emotions—how they differentiate, how they overlap, and their interrelated role as political emotions in pursuit of social justice.

Cinematic-phenomenology and hope: Finally, cinematic-phenomenology can facilitate healing from sociopolitical trauma because it can spark hope. During dark sociopolitical periods, when progress retreats and equality seems like faraway fantasy, the great activists of our times have called for hope. In his 1968 sermon "The Meaning of Hope," Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. emphasized the importance of hope for survival in times when so many people are rendered hopeless by racism. King distinguished between hope and optimism. Optimism is the unrealistic belief that everything will automatically be better and turn out fine. Hope, on the other hand, is realistic—it is the "willingness to face the risk of failure and embrace an 'in-spite-of-quality"—that in spite of all the hurdles on the way to justice, we keep on trying to reach it (King, 1968, p. 3). King

also stated that hope is a "recognition that what is hoped-for is in some sense already present" (King, 1968, p. 3). He explained that just because principles of equality, justice, and peace do not prevail across the nation or the world, does not mean they are non-existent. They exist in each one of us, and in our neighbors and our friends who embody such ideals. Thus hope for the future rests in the power of the present: "Peace is not here. It's not fulfilled, but peace is here in the sense that there are some people who love peace and peace is here in the sense that it is in those persons as a power that drives them to seek to make peace a reality" (King, 1968, p. 3). As such, hope means having faith in this power—that even amidst the tragic contradictions of our current oppressive world, one sustains faith in the power of people's love. This power will steer us towards justice. King famously paraphrased Unitarian minister Theodore Parker's assertion that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice" (King, 1967).

King mourned the loss of hope among people, which he said was synonymous with losing life: "If one loses hope, he may still be alive physically but he's dead spiritually and psychologically… He died when he lost hope. When you lose hope you lose creativity, you lose rationality. People who lose hope become bitter… And so hope is necessary for life" (King, 1968, p. 5). This sentiment was echoed by Harvey Milk, the first openly-gay elected governmental official in the United States. In his 1978 "Hope Speech," Milk lamented that he would never forget "the looks on faces of people who've lost hope," particularly minority citizens (Milk, 1978). He wanted to serve as a role model for gay people who have lost of hope. Milk positioned his journey of becoming the first openly-gay governmental official in the United States as a reminder to gay people that hope is possible when all appears bleak—a hopeful future outside of the closet can exist for them, too. Milk said hope is one of the most important messages to give marginalized people in America:

> The only thing they have to look forward to is hope. And you have to give them hope. Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope for a better place to come to if the pressures at home are too great. Hope that all will be all right. Without hope, not only gays, but the blacks, the seniors, the handicapped, the us'es, the us'es will give up. And if you help

> elect to the central committee and other offices, more gay people, that gives a green light to all who feel disenfranchised, a green light to move forward. It means hope to a nation that has given up, because if a gay person makes it, the doors are open to everyone. So if there is a message I have to give, it is that I've found one overriding thing about my personal election, it's the fact that if a gay person can be elected, it's a green light. And you and you and you, you have to give people hope (Milk, 1978).

At this current time in history, my dissertation is motivated by the urgent task put forth by Martin Luther King Jr. and Harvey Milk—to create a message of hope to members of oppressed minority groups who feel hopeless right now. While Milk sought to embody his political position as a message of hope, my message of hope manifests through art. In their book *Art as Therapy*, Alain de Botton and John Armstrong (2013) identify hope to be a core therapeutic function of art. de Botton states that many people are in danger of being overwhelmed by darkness of the world, losing hope, and being unable to cope. Uplifting art can serve as an antidote to despair, gifting us with optimism and reminding us of the joyful aspects of life and humanity (de Botton and Armstrong, 2013). As such, my film "Illuminate" not only conveys the despair of being closeted, but also uplifting aspects of being a sexual minority and coming out of the closet. Just as Harvey Milk positioned himself as "an object of hope" for gay people who were feeling hopeless, I position the protagonist of the film as an "object of hope" who enacts a coming out journey from shame into self-love, loneliness into community, and helplessness into power, fear into peace. The emotional journey of the protagonist aims to provide a message of hope for viewers who are currently closeted: that life can get better, and that people do exist who will love and stand in solidarity with them.

Interestingly, this journey from loneliness and despair to community and hope was actually experienced, in a very personal way, by both myself and Orlando in the process of creating this film. After we finished filming the final scene, Orlando and I chatted about what the entire filmmaking experience was like for each of us. He shared that while filming the initial scenes with just Joe and myself, he felt lonely. For instance, the first scene we filmed with Orlando was a mask-building scene in a bathroom with a mirror. Orlando said that while acting in this scene, he felt all alone with

his own reflection. It was an eerie and isolating experience for him. The next scene we filmed was the basement scene, where Orlando was wrapped and constrained in metal chains. Orlando remained in this chair, wrapped in chains, for two hours as we filmed the scene. He said that when he was "released" from the chains upon completion of filming, his body felt an intense surge of freedom. I shared with Orlando that I had worried about his subjective experience the entire time we were filming the chains scene. I worried about his embodied immobilization, discomfort, and pain. I thanked him for trusting Joe and I to film the scenes, with an understanding that he hardly knew us and we him, yet we were asking him to endure painful embodied experiences for the sake of art.

These first two scenes, which sought to capture the closet's loneliness and despair, were indeed experienced as lonely, depressing and painful to even film, for both myself and Orlando. Therefore, we shared relief while filming the remaining scenes that sought to convey hope and empowerment: a coming-out scene in beautiful nature surrounded by friends, and a Pride parade scene on the streets of Pittsburgh surrounded by community. While filming the coming-out campfire scene, I could see how happy Orlando was to be surrounded by the other cast members who shared laughter, comraderie and affection with him. I felt so happy to set up an experience in which Orlando could be surrounded by peer support, after having asked him to "suffer" so profoundly alone in the prior two scenes. Orlando said that filming the campfire scene did not even feel like acting to him—it felt so natural to be on-set with the other cast members, and "there was so much love" that day. He decided to share with the other cast members his actual coming out story as a bisexual man, and they responded with kindness, acceptance and love. Filming this scene was such a beautiful experience of creative catharsis, where art mimicked reality and reality mimicked art. In this manner, one could suggest that this scene blurs the distinction between "fiction" and

"documentary" style filmmaking, for Joe and I were filming the actual experience of Orlando coming out to a supportive circle of friends and receiving love in response.

A similar blurring of boundaries between fiction and documentary occurred while filming the Pride parade scene. In this scene, Orlando, the rest of the cast members, myself and Joe were actually partaking in the People's Pride Y2K protest march in Pittsburgh, with hundreds of people surrounding us. We were immersed in a crowd of solidarity and power all day, as we shouted our voices to fight for our collective rights. The expressions of exuberance, empowerment and determination that we captured across cast members' faces were real and true to their actual lived experience of being at the Pride march that day. In terms of our shooting schedule, this was one of the last scenes we shot with cast members for "Illuminate." I am so glad that not only does the film's narrative journey end with a scene of hope and empowerment, but the actual lived experience of filming 'illuminate'—for myself, Orlando, Joe, and all cast members—culminated on a note of hope for all of us. For, we are not only artists but minority artists. In a beautiful parallel process, the lived experience of filming 'Illuminate" seemed to bring healing and hope for each of us amidst our own subjective experience of sociopolitical trauma in being minority citizens in Trump's America.

It is important to note, however, that when crafting this cinematic message of hope for the film "illuminate," I tried to ensure that my film did not perpetuate blind optimism about the world's injustices, as Martin Luther King Jr. warned. For instance, my film depicts hopeful scenes of Orlando coming out of the closet to a supportive circle of friends, as well as marching for his community's human rights across the streets of Pittsburgh. These scenes are meant to establish peak experiences of hope, empowerment, and joy. Yet in the next scene, Orlando is shown mourning during a candlelight vigil for recent LGBTQ+ hate crimes. In the film's final scene, he is thrown back into the closet as a result of these hate crimes. Yet the window is open, sunlight is pouring inside, and Orlando is gazing outside with peace upon his face. In this manner, my film symbolically

suggests that the journey towards justice may seem long and never-ending, but the power of love, community, and solidarity bring us one step closer every day.

Limitations of Research Study and Method

While I believe my cinematic-phenomenological research method successfully imparted beauty, compassion and hope about the closeted experience, this project also had several limitations. The first limitation was the challenges in making this cinematic-phenomenological research process truly collaborative with research participants. Liberation psychologists Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman (2008) have described emancipatory filmmaking research projects that included participants in every step of the filmmaking process. While my cinematic-phenomenological research method was designed to position me as the main "artist" of the work, I still sought to make the art-making process collaborative somehow. I hoped to position participants as "artist-collaborators" throughout the duration of the project, in order to ensure accurate representation, distribute creative authority, and engage them in creative healing. However, after participating in the data collection phase of the project (writing a narrative and being interviewed by me), all research participants stopped remaining active participants and slipped into a more passive role. For instance, prior to film production, I sent the film storyboard to all five participants, detailing parts of it that were directly inspired by their contributions and asking for their creative input. Three participants replied with general encouragement that was very helpful, yet did not provide specific creative feedback. Though I worried about this initially, I have since realized that when doing arts-based research, the expectations of participation must be clearly defined at the outset of the project. All participants had consented to being active participants in the data collection stage: writing an anecdote of their closeted experience and being interviewed by me for two hours, including participating in Focusing. These procedures alone asked a lot of participants. Asking them to also

actively participate in the filmmaking process may have simply been requesting too much. Additionally, perhaps they trusted my artistic intuition to transform their lived experiences into a film, and did not deem it necessary to actively steer the art-making process.

Nevertheless, I was faced with a dilemma. As a phenomenologist and activist, I wanted to request ongoing feedback from participants about "Illuminate" to ensure accurate representation. Yet I also did not want to overwhelm participants who had already given so much of their time, energy, and soul. This dilemma arose again and again throughout the filmmaking process. Without ongoing feedback from participants, I worried whether the creative choices I was making accurately reflected their lived experiences. I wanted so badly for my film to honor and do justice to them, and I worried about "getting it wrong" and accidentally perpetuating injustice. Yet I reminded myself that almost every detail of the film was directly influenced by participants' data—their written anecdotes, Focusing imagery, and interviews. Their lived experiences were the artistic fodder which created the film, with myself as a vessel—this was the point of cinematic-phenomenology, after all. Moreover, throughout the filmmaking process I invited ongoing feedback from the cast, many who identified as LGBTQ. I asked actors to share their feelings, thoughts, and suggestions for the film direction and cinematography, and adapted my filmmaking accordingly. I also showed rough cuts of the film to cast members, "member checking" for resonance regarding their own lived experiences of the closet. Perhaps the baton was symbolically handed over from research participants to cast members, who became my community collaborators for the filmmaking portion of the cinematic-phenomenological process. In that sense, perhaps my cinematic-phenomenology process did ensure active collaboration with the LGBTQ community from start to finish. As I develop my cinematic-phenomenological research method beyond this dissertation, I will gain clarity about how "participatory research" and "collaboration" can manifest for this method.

Another shortcoming of this project was its lack of diversity and intersectionality regarding LGBTQ experiences across gender, racial, and ethnic identities. While I hoped to recruit participants of diverse genders for this study, four participants identified as cis-men while one disavowed himself from the gender binary (and uses he/him/his pronouns). No participant identified as a woman. As such, though I refer to this dissertation as a study of the "lived experience of being in the closet as a sexual minority" because no other phrasing can accurately reflect the wide range of my participants' identities, nevertheless this study may not truly represent the closeted experience for sexual minorities who identify as women. I had mixed feelings about this recruitment outcome. On one hand, there is something serendipitous about it, in light of my task to write a dissertation on behalf of my father's experience of being a gay man in the closet. Phenomenological researcher Robert D. Romanynshyn wrote that "research with soul in mind" devotes itself to the "unfinished business of the ancestor's in one's work," seeking closure to their unanswered questions. As such, this recruitment outcome is fitting in my attempt to respond to, honor, and gain closure about my father's experiences of being in the closet as a gay man through my research project. Nevertheless, in doing so, this project also risks re-capitulating the closeted experience among queer women. Leaving women out of a dissertation about sexual minority experiences parallels the marginalization of women in LGBTQ spaces from past to present day, wherein queer spaces, events and media have been critiqued for being largely male-dominated and male-centric. Many LGBTQ spaces across the United States have responded to this criticism by becoming more inclusive of lesbian and bisexual women, and queer women themselves have accomplished considerable strides in carving out spaces and representation for themselves. Though I myself identify as a queer woman, I regret that my dissertation was not inclusive of their distinct voices. While perhaps I can reason that this project is male-centric in honor of my father, I do hope to pursue future research projects that raise women's voices up.

Additionally, after completing this project, I regretted that my research did not prioritize the racial and ethnic diversity of participants as much as I would have liked. Three participants recruited for this project identified as white, one as Hispanic, and one as biracial (Hispanic/White). Though the two participants who identified as Hispanic described how their ethnic identities contributed to their experiences of oppression, I wish I had delved deeper into this intersectionality during data collection. At the onset of this project, I sought to express the closet as an existential phenomenon that could apply to people across cultural identities. As such, during data collection and interpretation I identified existential themes of the closet that could resonate with all members of LGBTQ community, and perhaps all human beings in general. I still stand by this decision to some degree, because the existential is impactful for this project's mission of solidarity. Yet I believe that a delving deeper into the intersectional experience of the closet would have deepened my research findings—both the written description and the short film. This is especially true because in the short film "Illuminate," the main actor, Orlando, identifies as a bisexual Black man. Orlando said that he felt a deep resonance with the film storyboard and script as a bisexual Black man. His presence, together with the film's symbolism, do succeed in evoking certain experiences of intersectional sociopolitical trauma that felt very important to highlight. For instance, in one scene, Orlando creates a white mask to cover his black skin, symbolizing the need to "cover" both his sexual and racial identities in a society of heterosexism and white supremacy that strives to disparage both. In another scene, Orlando's body is shacked in chains, to symbolize the prohibition of self-expression as a sexual minority in a homophobic society, as well as mass incarceration and slavery as a Black man in the United States. These symbolic images, which emerged from the data collection process with participants, translated well onscreen for the film. They highlighted the intersectional sociopolitical trauma of being both Black and queer in an organic way that did not take further effort on my part as a filmmaker. However, other aspects of the research seemed amiss in

representing the closeted experience of queer people of color, so I had to improvise during film production in order to better represent the experience of queer people of color. For instance, while filming the coming-out scene for the film, I realized how it was important it was to show that Orlando could come out to and receive affirmation from another Black man, a member of his racial community. I thought about my father in these moments. What might "coming out" to his Indian community have felt like?—a community so foundational for his identity, yet which may have felt more terrifying to come out to than his White community. I also found it important for the film to highlight activists of color working towards both LGBTQ and racial justice. Again I wondered about my father in these moments. What was his intersectional experience of racism and homophobia like, and how did these different layers of oppression factor into his decision to remain mostly closeted? Finally, I wondered about myself as an Indian-American, queer woman—how do my own intersecting gender and ethnic identities influence my own experience as a sexual minority?

While this project barely skims the surface of such questions, I hope to pursue a future phenomenological research project that delves into them. It would be interesting to explore what "living-in-the-intersection" is like for LGBTQ+ people of color, and how they cultivate a sense of "home," "belonging," and "community" amidst this intersection.

Meet the "Illuminate" Cast and Crew

Actor James McAvoy said, "Filmmaking is a miracle of collaboration" (Rich, 2007). While many Ph.D. candidates' dissertation work is performed as a solitary process, producing this dissertation was one of the most collaborative experiences of my life, from start to finish. This dissertation would not have happened without the investment of the five beautiful research participants who shared their poignant stories of the closet. Moreover, this dissertation would not

have happened without the remarkable cast and crew of the film “Illuminate,” who shared their artistic gifts for a common pursuit of catharsis, healing, and justice. While Chapter 7 introduces the research participants and their stories, in this section I will introduce the talented cast and crew who contributed their time and talent to “Illuminate.” This dissertation is sincerely indebted to each of them, and it is essential to add their own voices to this work. The following are brief biographies of each of the core artists of “Illuminate,” as well as quotes about what working on this film meant to them personally.

Orlando Davis is the starring actor of “Illuminate.” Orlando is a graduating senior Actor at Carnegie Mellon University. Illuminate is his first official film credit. Orlando will be showcased in New York and LA respectively to agents and managers in the beginning of 2018. Orlando says about the film: “Illuminate is a story of reflection and resistance, and for me, recently having come out as bisexual, it was a reality that needed to be addressed. This film gave me some of the greatest challenges I have experienced as a performer. Telling such a personal story while also bringing honor and respect to those who crafted it was key. Thank you so much to PFCollective and the amazing cast for being so supportive and giving me the incredible opportunity to tell this journey of great empathy and self-love."

L.H. Gonzalez, a 2015 U.S. Presidential Scholar in the Arts, is a queer Afro-Latino spoken word artist, songwriter, and performer. Jersey born and New York raised, Gonzalez got his start acting in the Public Theater's musical adaptations of The Winter's Tale and The Tempest before discovering his love for poetry. Fueled by his rage following the 2016 presidential election, Gonzalez began writing his sophomore year at Carnegie Mellon University, where he recently teamed up with six Puerto Rican colleagues to organize humanitarian missions to Puerto Rico. Together they have raised over $200k to charter four planes to the island, evacuate 296 critical care patients, and deliver 76,500 lbs. of supplies. Gonzalez uses his poetry to help fundraise and raise awareness for the island. His work can be found online, where he uses his poems' text as scripts for self-directed short films and music videos. His soon to be released collaboration with director Ariel Zucker, *papi runs,* recently won Best Music Video at Studio City Film Festival. He recently brought the true story of his two younger brothers to the stage in his new LGBTQ-themed musical, *pato, pato, maricón*, which debuted at Carnegie Mellon this past winter in their annual PLAYGROUND festival. Other film credits include: *Youth in Oregon, Dinner with Jeffrey,* and *CRSHD*. To see his poetry videos and find out how you can help his Puerto Rico campaign, check out his Instagram (@lh.gonzalez), Facebook (@lhgonzalezpoetry), and YouTube (@LHgonzalez) channels. Of "Illuminate," he says: "This is a beautiful story that I loved being a part of and felt I have a responsibility to tell. As a gay man with not only a homosexual brother but a heterosexual brother who has been teased because of who his older brothers are, I have realized storytelling is the most effective if not, only vehicle that can combat hate and ignorance. The sharing of perspective is all we really need."

Lee Lytle is a supporting actor in "Illuminate." Lee returned to Pittsburgh after earning her MA in Acting for Screen at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in London and her BFA from NYU – where she and Nisha met! Lee writes: "Helping Nisha realize this project is especially meaningful in a year made grotesque by vitriol and violence, because it demonstrates to some of our most vulnerable that they are heard, loved, respected, and not alone. Thank you, Nisha, for this beautiful experience." Lee's self-produced theater and film acting and writing work also aim to beautify and illuminate, and she's always seeking future collaborators. www.leelytle.com

Jacob Wasson is a supporting actor in "Illuminate." Jacob is originally from Wichita, Kansas, and he is currently pursuing his B.F.A in Musical Theatre at Point Park University. His previous credits include: *Hello Dolly!, Billy Elliot, Jesus Christ Superstar (Phillip), Oklahoma!,* and more with Music Theatre Wichita. Jacob writes: "Endless love to my family for their support and drive, and Nisha for this incredible story and even more incredible opportunity. Working on this project was so great because Nisha's direction, love, and passion was so great. The honesty that connected her to this piece was felt and reflected in every cast member from day one."

Monisha B. Schwartz is a supporting actor in "Illuminate." She is a Pittsburgh-based actress who can be seen in many major studio and independent productions. Monisha graduated from the University of Michigan's School of Engineering and worked as a Production Planner before deciding to pursue a full-time career in acting. Since then, Monisha has appeared on both television and the big screen, including recent movies American Pastoral and Fast and Furious 8, as well as David Fincher's critically acclaimed Netflix show, Mindhunter. Monisha says: "Working on Illuminate was a fantastic experience for me. It's important for us as a society to do what we can to help those who are oppressed or persecuted. This movie feels especially timely given how difficult it can sometimes be to have an open and civil discourse in a society that seems to be constantly changing and at odds with itself. We as a society need to be courageous, whether it is speaking up for ourselves or for others who are being oppressed. No one in this world should feel alone, regardless of sexuality. I hope those who watch Illuminate feel empowered to speak up for those who don't have as loud of a voice."

Isaiah Noreiga is a supporting actor in "Illuminate." Isaiah identifies as a Black disabled self-advocate who works to re-imagine and re-build the mental health industrial complex. Isaiah is a doctoral candidate in Clinical-Community Psychology (Psy.D.) at Point Park University. He also serves by mentoring the youth,

coaching soccer, and collaborating with several grassroots organizations throughout the city of Pittsburgh. Isaiah said about his participation in the film "Illuminate": "Thank you so much Nisha. This was such an amazing experience and I am so grateful to be a part of this project."

Joseph Carreno is the co-cinematographer of "Illuminate." Joe has over ten years experience in art direction and design at advertising agencies such as BBDO NY, McCann Erickson, Uniworld Group, and Dicks Sporting Goods. He has produced global creative for brands and clients such as Ford Motor Company, Colgate-Palmolive, United States Marine Corps, 3Musketeers, MasterCard, General Mills, U.S. ARMY, Mitsubishi, etc. Joe has been an active participant to increase diversity, awareness and inclusion across the media landscape. Joe worked tirelessly on almost all aspects of this film with me, helping execute the cinematography to a beautiful quality standard. He says of the film: "I am proud. Working with such a powerful subject matter is a challenge but it's also a blessing. Daily, lives are touched and torched around the world. People lie in silence, lie in pain. This film is about the duality that is present amongst us all. In one way or another, we're reminded of what we're afraid of and maybe even what we ourselves may be too afraid to admit. The raw and authentic performance, brought to life by our wonderful cast, shows moments of uncertainty, hurt, joy, brilliance, and love. Illuminate's director weaves a story that is beautiful. It connects with me and is something I am extremely proud to have been a part of. It has been a blessing."

Lesley Flanigan generously provided her music for "Illuminate" soundtrack. Lesley is a friend of the family and an experimental electronic musician in New York City. Inspired by the physicality of sound, she builds her own instruments using minimal electronics, microphones and speakers. Performing these instruments alongside traditional instrumentation that often includes her own voice, she creates a kind of physical electronic music that embraces both the transparency and residue of process — sculpting sound from a palette of noise and subtle imperfections. Her work has been presented at venues and festivals internationally, including Sonar (Barcelona), The Pritzker Pavilion at Millennium Park (Chicago), the Guggenheim Museum (New York), The Kitchen (New York), ISSUE Project Room (Brooklyn), The Stone (New York), TransitioMX (Mexico City), CMKY Festival (Boulder), the Roskilde Museum of Contemporary Art (Denmark) and KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin. Lesley said about contributing her music for "Illuminate": "It means so much to me that you are moved by my music and I'm happy to have you use it in your film. Your dad would be so proud."

WILL

The Phenomenological Film Collective

While working on this dissertation alongside such talented artists, I fell in love with the "collaborative miracle" of filmmaking. To make a poetic film alongside a team of such passionate people, as well as to transform sociopolitical trauma into artistic beauty, sparked a transcendent, peak experience for me that I had not yet encountered in life. I realized that this dissertation cannot be the last phenomenological film I produce; rather, it must be the first of many.

As such, I am positioning "Illuminate" as the first film produced by the Phenomenological Film Collective (PFCollective), a filmmaking collective I have founded which creates social advocacy films. PFCollective's mission is to create beautiful works of cinematography that illuminate lived experience to inspire empathy, compassion, and solidarity. PFCollective's approach to social advocacy filmmaking is unique in that it relies on my cinematic-phenomenological research method to achieve such aims. The filmmakers at PFCollective will utilize this innovative research method to produce beautiful cinematography that communicates rich insight into the lived experience of various sociocultural phenomena. We will conduct cinematic-phenomenological research in order to produce short films that convey deep, intimate, experiential understanding about sociocultural issues. The ultimate goal of the Phenomenological Film Collective is to envelop viewers in the lifeworld of our short films, such that they re-emerge with a deeper connection to humanity and desire to make a difference in our world.

Throughout my career, I hope to not only pursue future cinematic-phenomenological research projects myself, but also invite others to collaborate with me in doing so—fellow filmmakers, artists, colleagues, students, researchers, and participants who share concern for social justice, healing, and beauty. I foresee PFCollective entailing a six-step process to film production.

Step one entails paying attention. Cinematic-phenomenologists are encouraged to notice a particular sociocultural phenomenon in our everyday life that perplexes us, wounds us,

and demands that we open our eyes. Perhaps it is a phenomenon that we have experienced ourselves, or witnessed loved ones or fellow citizens live through it.

Step two entails becoming curious. Cinematic-phenomenologists will ask questions: what more is there to learn about this sociocultural phenomenon? What deeper meanings and insights are hiding in its shadows, which our film can help bring into the light?

Step three entails collecting stories. We will recruit and interview research participants who have experienced this particular sociocultural phenomenon, and are willing to share the gift of their stories. We will read their narratives, engage in intimate conversation, and collaborate with them artistically and psychologically for our joint pursuit towards human insight and social transformation.

Step four entails illuminating insights. Cinematic-phenomenologists will dwell in the depths of participants' stories. During this reflective incubation process, we will identify existential themes, symbolic imagery, and psychological and aesthetic insights that deepen our understanding of the phenomenon under inquiry.

Step five entails producing the film. We will proceed with a traditional filmmaking process of storyboarding, production and post-production. We will conceptualize and produce a film that brings insights and meanings about our research topic to life via symbolic cinematography. In all our films, cinematography will be used to induce visceral empathy or compassion among viewers, such that the film immerses them in the lived experience of the sociocultural phenomenon.

Finally, *step six* entails spreading awareness. Cinematic-phenomenologists will promote our films across the digital landscape to raise critical consciousness about sociopolitical issues and evoke beauty, compassion, and hope, amidst our collective quest for a more just and loving world.

Final Remarks

I write this dissertation for my fellow citizens. As the current sociopolitical order crumbles all around us, we must hold onto hope that progress awaits around the corner—that from these tragic ashes, a new kind of world will be born. Yet I cannot envision such a world manifesting unless we truly begin to take care of one another. Unless we fight for not just our own but one another's *truths* and *freedoms*. Unless we learn what it truly means to *love* across difference, wounds, and histories of violence. Unless we make a pledge to bestow our neighbors with *hope* when despair threatens to drown them. Unless we commit to *empowering* one another, raising each other UP, prioritizing voices that have been silenced for too long—which sometimes might mean quieting our own voice. I write this dissertation as a rally-cry for my fellow colleagues, friends and family to organize around a platform of existential rights amidst this long road ahead towards a saner society for all.

And yet, I write this dissertation for you. For though I yearn for progress, a complicated grief persists. I will always fight for your liberation, and this work is one gesture of that. Yet I will always mourn the fact that my work is much too late. That progress is much too late. That your own story of the closet did not end as mine did. That the world did not permit you to become free while alive. I will always be sorry for that. I write this dissertation as a mourning song for you.

I hope that you are free, now. <3

Research as vocation is against forgetting. In the afterlife of the image, where my ancestors lingered as the weight and wait of history, their story asks to be re-membered. (Romanyshyn, 2008, p. 54)

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Appendix A: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE:	Illuminating the Trauma of the LGB Closet: An Emancipatory Cinematic-Phenomenological Research Study
CO-INVESTIGATORS:	Nisha Gupta, Ph.D. candidate Department of Psychology, Duquesne University Dr. Will W. Adams, Associate Professor of Psychology Department of Psychology, Duquesne University 238 Rockwell Hall, Pittsburgh, PA 15282 412-xxx-xxxx
ADVISOR:	Dr. Will W. Adams, Associate Professor of Psychology Department of Psychology, Duquesne University 238 Rockwell Hall, Pittsburgh, PA 15282 412-xxx-xxxx
SOURCE OF SUPPORT:	This project is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology at Duquesne University
PURPOSE:	You are being asked to take part in a research study and social advocacy film project about what it feels like to be in the closet as a lesbian, gay, or bisexual individual—particularly the psychological and emotional pain that being closeted can cause. My overall goal for this project is to raise public awareness of the potential trauma that homophobic social norms can inflict upon gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. To fulfill this objective, I will produce a short film that uses symbolic imagery to express the pain of being in the closet, as described to me by research participants. Please note that no actual audio or video footage of participants will be included in the film. Rather, the film will be produced in an abstract, experimental style which will incorporate symbolic and metaphoric imagery, inspired by participants' stories. I am recruiting participants with the following criteria (1) your age is 18 or over; (2) you identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; (3) you have experienced being in the closet at some point in your life; and (4) being in the closet caused some emotional and psychological suffering for you. The research

criteria also seeks to ensure that you have come out to at least one person in your life prior to being interviewed for this project, to be sensitive to the initial process of coming out.

Your participation in this study would include two requests. First, you would be asked to write a description of a painful personal experience of being in the closet—approximately a page or so—and send it to me, either by email, snail mail or in-person, depending on your preference for secure delivery (please note that email cannot guarantee 100% secure and confidential delivery). Second, you would be asked to meet with me in person for a 60-90 minute interview, during which we would talk further about your written description, focusing especially on feelings and images that are associated with your experience of the closet. When scheduling our interview, we can agree upon a suitable private location in which this conversation can take place (i.e. the Duquesne Psychology Clinic or your private place of residence).

In using your written and interview data to inform my research findings, I will make sure that no information is shared that would allow anyone to identify you personally. My research findings will take two forms. First, I will write a general description of what being in the closet feels like for a sexual minority. Second, I will transform this written description into a short film, through a process of interpretation called "cinematic-phenomenology". The cinematic components of this short film will be influenced by our conversation during the interview.

<u>Again, please note that neither your voice nor your image will be incorporated into this film's production.</u> The film's artistic style will be abstract and symbolic (i.e. metaphoric images), rather than a real-life documentary, to ensure that your identity remains anonymous and protected. I will shoot these symbolic images with a camcorder as a separate step, after our interviews.

I will send you a storyboard of the film prior to film production, and request your input, feedback, and approval before entering the actual filmmaking process.

Once the film has been produced, I will publish it along with the written analysis on a public website, with the goal of inciting empathy and advocacy among everyday citizens of society . I will also publish it in academic journals, to help deepen psychologists' understanding about the impact of LGBT oppression on mental health.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

This project involves producing a short film that symbolically expresses participants' personal descriptions of being in the closet, which will be shared online for public viewership. A risk may be that you feel exposed by my artistic expression of your experience. However, precautions will be taken to maintain your anonymity in the film and written material, by removing identifying data such as name, address, institutional affiliation, and place of work. During film production, I may use creative license to adapt and tweak information in order to further protect participants' professional and personal identities. Additionally, <u>the film's artistic style will be abstract/symbolic rather than documentary format, further ensuring anonymity.</u>

An additional risk is that in talking about your experience of being in the closet, feelings that might arise that are painful for you. Should the interview process evoke a desire or need for further psychological support during the interview, several referrals for available local therapists will also be offered to you.

Participating in this project includes several benefits. It will give you an opportunity to talk about your experience of being in the closet and how it has affected you with a compassionate person who is committed to LGBT activism and psychological healing. Additionally, by contributing your story and feelings, you will help to create a social advocacy film that will help psychologists, as well as the wider society, gain deeper understanding and empathy for what it is like to be a sexual minority who has had to keep their sexual identity closeted for a period of time due to societal oppression. Your participation in the film will help to dismantle harmful prejudices and assumptions regarding the experience of being in the closet as an LGB person. You will help create a film that will contribute to a rich history of the LGBT community's use of the creative arts to incite social change.

COMPENSATION:

There will be no compensation for your participation in this project, and participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your name will never appear on the website [www.illuminatethecloset.com], nor in the published research analysis intended for an academic audience. The written analysis and short film will be stripped of identifying data [name, address, institutional affiliation, place of work, voice). All consent forms, written material and audio recordings of

interviews will be stored in a password-protected computer in the researcher's home, and will be destroyed three years after completion of this project.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: You have the right to withdraw your consent at any point in the data collection process. If you choose to withdraw, I will destroy any data collected by you, and will not include your contributions to the final film. However, once the film has been produced, I will not be able to go back and remove contributions from participants.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: A summary of the written results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request. The short film will also be sent to you for early viewership, prior to public dissemination.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT: I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent during the data collection process, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call Nisha Gupta at xxx-xxx-xxxx, Dr. Will Adams at 412-xxx-xxxx and Dr. David Delmonico, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board, at 412-xxx-xxxx or irb@duq.edu.

______________________________ ______________
Participant's Signature Date

______________________________ ______________
Researcher's Signature Date

Appendix B: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT FLYER (IRB-APPROVED)

Have you experienced suffering while being in the closet as an LGB person… and would you like to share your story for a social advocacy film project?

If you identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, if you are over 18, and if you have experienced being in the closet, please consider being interviewed for a research study and social advocacy film project about **the emotional/psychological pain of being in the closet as a sexual minority.**

This social advocacy film project seeks to raise awareness of the psychological impact of homophobia on human beings, particularly the closeted experience. It is birthed in response to the LGBT-hate crime in Orlando, the discriminatory LGBT laws in North Carolina, the Section 377 penal code to recriminalize homosexuality in India, as well as an entire history of oppression towards the global LGBT community. My film seeks to make visible the invisible pain of the closet, to dismantle harmful prejudices and assumptions of the experience of being in the closet, and to garner greater empathy, advocacy and solidarity towards the LGBT community.

I plan to interview participants about their personal experiences of being in the closet, particularly painful experiences. Then, inspired by participants' stories, I will produce a short film that uses symbolic and metaphoric imagery to express what it feels of being in the closet as an LGB person.

Please note that the film will not incorporate any participants' actual voices or images. It will be produced in an abstract/symbolic style rather than in documentary format to ensure anonymity. No participant will be identifiable by the film.

If you or someone you know is interested in sharing your story for this social advocacy project, or if you have any questions about it, please contact me by email or phone:

Nisha Gupta; guptan@duq.edu; xxx-xxx-xxxx

Thank you for your consideration.

Appendix C: SAMPLE WRITTEN ANECDOTE (MANUEL)

I am pansexual. A few years ago I would've be incapable of saying that publically and at that time I wouldn't have even known what to call it. And I couple years back I would've also tried my best to affirm my masculinity so that no one coulda questioned that I was a MAN. But now, gender is just… meh… I would just say "gender is made up and it's a social construct that has conditioned me into the ways I verbally, emotionally, and physically present", so yeah… gender is complicated. Like I said before, I would've never said anything like this a couple years back. I woulda been too proud, too stubborn, and too ignorant.

A couple years ago, I was an awful person to myself and to the people around me. I was filled with self-loathing and every day I existed was a struggle because I was living in denial. I thought I had a disease and all I knew and wanted to do was to combat it and all of the persuasions that came with it. A couple years ago, I was a 17-year-old straight cis boy and I was damn proud of it. Now, all of those memories are just painful shadows that'll never stop following me. One in particular has stuck with me for a while.

I was with a few of my newly found friends (all straight jocks) and we had just run from a party and like most nights at that age I was wasted.

Just for some context, I had found some love in alcohol and it was real good at helping me avoid my realities and to forget my pains. I hated my body, I hated myself, and I hated who I knew I could become if I didn't keep my impulses in check. I could comfortably say that by my senior year of high school that I was a full-blown alcoholic. I wanted to destroy my body.

Anyways, the party… So, after running we all ended up at this park next to the high school. We knew some girls from school were there, so of course that was our next destination. At this time, my main objective on an ordinary night out with my friends was to get plastered and to end up hooking up with any "chick". Like I had planned, I ended up making out with this girl from one of my classes who I had only talked to like twice. In my mind it was all *Success * "another one down", some performativity masculine bullshit like that. ANYTHING to reaffirm that I loved "chicks" and that I was ONLY a "lady killer".

After stumbling my way back through the bushes to the group everyone started oohing and snickering. I got exactly what I wanted, I got the recognition and I got the reaffirmation. Then, I noticed somebody on one of the park benches who had also come from the party, but he was even more wasted than me. Honestly, I can't even remember the kid's name, but amongst our friend group he was only "those girl's gay friend". This kid was completely out of the closet and he was never ashamed of who he was. On the inside it made me furious. It made me jealous and it made me confused and most importantly it made me remember the fact that I needed to suppress and shun my own sexuality.

In that moment an extreme anger came over me, and I walked right towards the "f*cking f*ggot". I demanded, "What the fuck are you doing here". He didn't reply, he was way to drunk to even lift his head to talk at that point (and he probably also wouldn't even want to if he could've). I yelled the same thing at him and each and every time he didn't reply I threw more homophobic slurs into my demands. By this time, his girlfriends had already told me to calm down and to back up, but I had already declared that my reason for being pissed at him was that "he thought he was too good to talk

to me". And of course that wasn't the real reason I was insistently going after him, but it gave me an okay excuse.

Eventually the group at the park was split into two, those who were telling me to calm down and those who were only riling me up more. Obviously, the ones who were on my side were the jocky, white assholes. All I can remember about that park itself was the green rubber coated bench the "f*ggot" was sitting on and the darkness of the night sky that surrounded us. The park was unlit and with the amount of alcohol in my body I could only feel my feet digging into the woodchips while my head spun with blurry vision.

With all that I had invested into that moment I had decided that it was time to punish the "f*ggot", to punish every ounce of sin and corruption in his body. I needed to teach him a lesson for even putting his sexuality in my mind. For every punch I had landed on his body I had probably done four times as much to myself when I got home later that night. I hated myself for having the "impure" thoughts that I did and I even hated myself for hating myself. It was as if the blood that came from his face when I struck it was the same that I needed to rid myself of. I felt I needed to cleanse my body, my mind, my soul, and anything or any person that surrounded it. If I coulda just drained it outta my body, every last drip, then I could finally start living my life.

What I had done to that boy's body isn't only the hatred I possessed for *him*, but it was also the self-hatred that had been instilled into me by my family, friends, and "loved ones". Self-hatred is a powerful weapon and it doesn't only harm the person who bears it. Self-hatred isn't only taken out on one's self and it doesn't only end in the beating of a "f*ggot". Self-hatred can become the laws that oppress others for their human nature and it can be the inspiration for a lynching, an active shooter, or even a war. Self-hatred and the suppression of somebody's sexuality or sexual identity doesn't make for a clean kill, it enables a massacre of innocent minds and bodies.

APPENDIX D: SAMPLE EXCERPT OF FOCUSING EXERCISE (BEN)

Nisha: So this is your experience of being in the closet that you had written. (reads anecdote).

Nisha: So that was your experience of being in the closet. And we will focus on it in a few minutes, but first we will quickly segway into the body scan exercise I was telling you about. I encourage you to close your eyes or lower your gaze, just try to shift into your body in general. And maybe just allow this opportunity to slow down, and take a moment to sink into being quiet in your body. And now maybe gently bring awareness to your breath. And notice breathing in and out. You don't need to change your breath. Just be aware of each breath coming in and out. And maybe now we'll begin to notice other sensations in your body starting with your feet. Just notice how your feet feel within your shoes and against the floor. Notice all sensations that might be there: cold, warmth, tingling, heaviness. And now notice your back against the chair or couch. Just notice what it feels like to have your back supported by the couch. Notice your hands, what they feel like resting there. If they are tense, tight, relaxed. And now I invite you to turn your attention inwards. Just kind of notice the inner sensations of your body, go inward in your body. Check inside your throat area first. What does it feel like in there?

Ben: You want me to answer?

Nisha: No you can keep it to yourself for now, but just check in. Try to be aware. And then check down in your chest area. What it feels like within your chest right now. And again, check in silently with yourself. Whatever sensations might be there. And then finally move down to your belly area. Just scan inwards and notice what it feels like inside of there.

And now I'll encourage you to bring to mind your memory of the closet that I had just read out loud. And just kind of try to feel your way into it. I encourage you to just hold in mind and in your body, and see if you can kind of locate in your body where that experience might be living right now. If there is a certain part of your body or sensations in your body where it is taking up residence and living right now. And take your time. And whatever feeling in your body comes, just kind of greet that feeling that you're having. And be gentle with it, and as you're paying attention to your body, perhaps there is a word that comes close to describing what you are feeling. I encourage you to locate how you might describe how you're feeling in your body. Whenever you're ready you can share it with me.

Ben: Almost feels like, like the majority of my body is really warm. But my legs are kind of just regular. Kind of just above the waist warm.

Nisha: Above the waist warm. And the warmth that you're describing, is it pleasant, unpleasant, is it hot…?

Ben: It's hot. It's not necessarily pleasant. Kind of like how on a really cold day, and you're all bundled up, you have like a hat, gloves, scarf, all that stuff. And then you walk into somebody's really really really warm house. And it takes you a minute to, you know, figure out, where they keep those things. And you still have all those layers on and you're kind of uncomfortably warm. Does that make sense?

Nisha: Mhmmm. You're feeling uncomfortably warm in the environment right now. Does it feel like scorching, like a burning sensation?

Ben: No, more or less like a persistent heat. Like not increasing or decreasing it. Just kind of like the same. But still uncomfortable.

Nisha: How do you make sense of that heat? In light of the description of the closet. What might be there?

Ben: Possibly like, as you got to the end and you read the part like, regretting not saying something to her. Like maybe I'm kind of angry.

Nisha: So there's an anger.

Ben: And not just like an anger, like angry at myself, but also just angry that I had to put on that façade in general.

Nisha: Mmhmm. Yeah. When you say the word anger, just kind of say that word in your head and check in with your body. See if there might be other feelings where that word lives.

Ben: I guess in my um, like in my jaw too. Like kind of like I'm clamping down on my teeth. But not gritting them. Just kind of like, my mouth is firmly shut.

Nisha: Mhmm. Is it like its being forced to clamp down? Or you're doing it yourself? What is it…?

Ben: I do it myself. Um, its just like where I immediately associate the word anger. So as I was sitting here the whole time as you were reading it and I was being in tune with my body, um, I noticed that like, like it just got tighter and tighter. It wasn't uncontrollable, I knew that I could open my mouth if I wanted to. It was just kind of, reminded me of, you know. When you have like a little sister or a son or a daughter. And they do something wrong. And you get angry, and you like clamp down on your teeth.

Nisha: Clamp down, mmhmm. Is it like, is it also a clamping down like you feel like you can't talk? You shouldn't talk? You shouldn't express the anger, kind of? Like, resisting?

Ben: Kind of. I guess moreso in fear of what happens after I unclench.

Nisha: mmhmm. Yeah. Hm. What do you think it would need, like the clenched jaw, to feel less fearful of expressing itself.

Ben: Like something given? Or…

Nisha: Yeah. Check in with that clenched—clamping down on your teeth, and see what it would need.

Ben: Um, well obviously I guess to talk. Just gets my jaw unclamped. So there's air passing through. But what I thought of immediately when you had said that is like laughter. So if you're in a good

hearty laugh, your mouth is completely adjacent basically. So its like the complete opposite of it being tightly shut.

Nisha: Mmhmm. When you say laughter, do you notice a shift in your body at all?

Ben: I don't feel as hot, like in my stomach area.

Nisha: The hotness is going away. Check in, inwards, with your threat, down to your chest, and then your stomach… and then see what sensation might be there right now.

Ben: I guess, not so much tingly, but not very, not all the way numb. You know that feeling like you've been out like all day, whether you've been out all day, whether at work and then you've had to do something after work, and you've been out for a while. And you finally get home and you eat something and you go to lay down, and as you like stretch out, like that feeling that your body has. Its kind of not numb, or not tingly, but a mixture of the two.

Nisha: mmhmm. Is there an image that goes with that feeling?

Ben: maybe like a sinking.

Nisha: A sinking.

Ben: But not necessarily in a bad way sinking. Like you know how you nuzzle into the couch or into the bed. You can like decompose yourself, or decompress yourself. And the vision, kind, the image kind of switched from when my body was hot, to like a red… like not necessarily fire, cuz it wasn't like, burning hot, into like a blue, maybe, like calm waters. But hearing the wind outside. Persuaded that association I think, it sounded like water.

Nisha: Yeah. And you said the red wasn't necessarily as hot as fire. But what image would that have had?

Ben: As you said, not as hot as fire, I thought of like the color of a brick. And then I kind of saw a brick wall. So you know, the color of a brick is not necessarily hot red. it's kind of like a dull red. I guess I'm trying to describe as best as I can.

Nisha: Yeah, you were experiencing red like a brick wall before. And now you are experiencing this blue, calm waters a bit more. A very different feeling too—a brick wall versus blue calm waters, and the wind outside. I encourage you to just check in one more time with your body as a whole, is there any other sensation that's coming up that we didn't talk about that you want to explore?

Ben: Every now and again, I feel like, I guess my feet kind of antsy. So I'll tap them. It's kind of like a compulsion, I guess.

Nisha: They get antsy. Because they feel uncomfortable? Because they want to move, or…?

Ben: Because they want to move, yeah.

Nisha: Why do you think that's happening in light of your description of the closet? Your kind of feet are antsy and wanting to move?

Ben: I guess maybe like a dissatisfaction for complacency.

Nisha: Can you tell me more what you mean by that?

Ben: So as I'm kind of sitting here focusing on my body, that obviously diverts attention to it. So like sitting here, I end up having to move something. So I, I guess, get tired of sitting still. And I guess symbolically, that might kind of mean… you know, being dissatisfied with the feeling of being in the closet. Like you know, not being myself.

Nisha: mmhmm. And not being yourself, does it feel like your body experiences that as not being able to move? Kind of, being held back from movement?

Ben: Yeah. I guess that's why I feel the compulsion to move like in the present.

Nisha: Mmhmm. Yeah. You can move them around as much as you want right now. Well you've said a lot, and we'll work with everything you said. But I do encourage you to just wrap your attention again around your whole body, everything that it showed to you. And check in and see if you're ready to leave it, shift your attention away, and maybe thank it for what its shown you.

Ben: One thing that I wanted to say too is that it feels weird to have my eyes shut. Because usually I'm a big hand gesturer. And with my eyes shut I feel like I don't hand gesture as much. And that feels weird to me, not to talk with my hands.

Nisha: Yeah. What does it feel like to have your hands still? If you check in with them, as they are still right now. What's the feeling that comes up?

Ben: I guess just stiffness.

Nisha: stiffness. Stiff like cardboard, stiff like a brick…

Ben: Stiff like a lock. Because I've sat here for the majority of time with my fingers interwoven. And I almost feel like I'm not gesturing because I can't see the gestures. If that is relevant at all.

Nisha: What did you mean by a lock, too, tell me more about that as an image?

Ben: I immediately kind of see the locker locks… like the combination locks. For one, 'cause I've always kind of liked those. I don't know why. And whenever I had seen the image of the lock, whenever I thought of the fingers. I didn't see it locking anything. I just kind of seen it with like, a black empty backdrop. So it was literally just the lock, just the image of the lock came in.

Nisha: Well that's a very powerful image. Yeah. Maybe check in one more time, is there anything else that needs your attention. And we'll come back to everything you've talked about as well. But if there's anything else.

Ben: I guess my face kind of feels like flat. Almost as if though I have like a flat affect. Which is kind of the very opposite of me. I talk with my face just as much as I talk with my hands. And when I kind of see that, or encapsulate in an image, I see my face but without its features. So you know, I picture my head, and my hair and everything. But without my eyes, my eyebrows, my nose. Kind of like a blank slated mask.

Nisha: is it sad, scary? What does that image bring up for you?

Ben: More just like empty. It doesn't strike me as euphoric or dysphoric. And its not really like my skintone either. It's kind of just like, pale white. Porcelain white.

Nisha: Might there be a message there? If you could kind of check in with that image? And see if it would have some kind of message. Something it would want us to know from its point of view. What might that be?

Ben: I guess maybe that, you know, we tend to associate identity with a face. So to feel as if… you know you see this image of yourself not having your face, kind of takes away from it.

Nisha: Mhmm. Yeah. And I guess, again then, what would it need?

Ben: Its features.

Nisha: Its features, yeah. Well I see your features. You are not a blank face. You have a lot of color on your face and all of your features are there, and your identity is very intact. Um, and I also kind of want to welcome you to thank your body for showing everything it did—some of it being hard, I'm sure. But it did show you so much. And, um, just let everything that you talked about know that we're going to revisit it. And when you're ready, try to shift your attention into the room. And maybe listen to the sounds of the room, the sounds outside the window.

Ben: Can I open my eyes?

Nisha: Yup whenever you're ready.

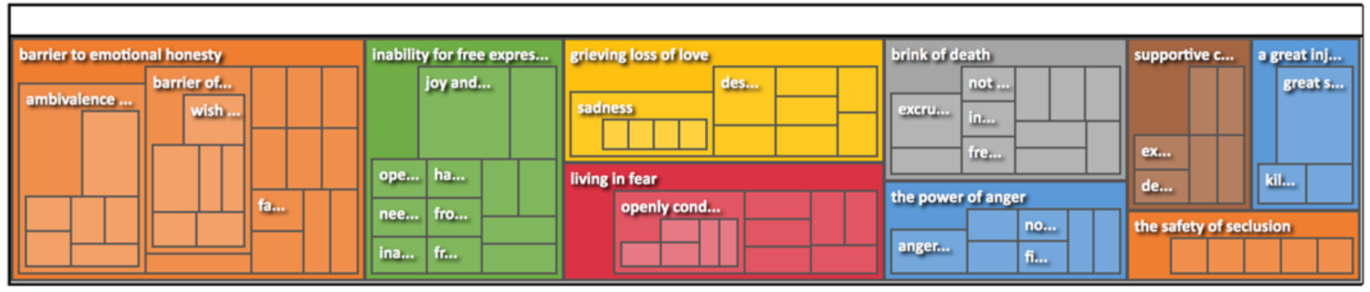
Appendix E: SAMPLE EXCERPT OF CODED INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT (ANDRES)

Interview Transcript Excerpt	Coded Meaning Units
Nisha: Feeling prohibited.	
Andres: Yeah. That's probably like… I think that's the biggest thing for me.	Prohibited from self-expression
Nisha: In what way is that the biggest thing?	
Andres: 'Cause that actually lives with me today. Like even today, which is strange to me 'cause I thought moving to a big city would be less scary. But maybe its like… you know how they say minorities kind of have a life – PTSD kind of thing.	Closet as ever-present Living in fear Minority trauma
Nisha: Yeah, mmhmm.	
Andres: For example the other day, I didn't realize I was still experiencing these things… I was walking and I passed by a large group of construction workers. And I immediately got scared of doing it, just passing by them. Because I was wearing a lot of ornaments, or whatever, accessories, and tight pants. And both consciously I know they are probably not going to do anything to be in the light of day in the city. But at the same time, I experienced that as a child. And that is still very true to me now. Like sometimes I don't dress a certain way or act a certain way in certain areas to avoid, um, being attacked or being criticized or making someone say terrible gestures to me. Where, at least the spoken doesn't affect me very emotionally anymore. But like, violence is a real thing. And we could see that today like with the Orlando shooting. And I guess I didn't realize that until the other day, like I still live in an experience of fear. Because of my expression and being able to be my friend. It happens in the city, but especially when I leave the city, like my boyfriend and I are really scared that, if we have this car, and we might stay in this area full of like Trump, pro-Trump stickers or whatever. We're like, whoooaaaa,	Fearing others Self-expression Memories of assault Restricting self-expression Protecting against assault Vigilance against violence Living in fear

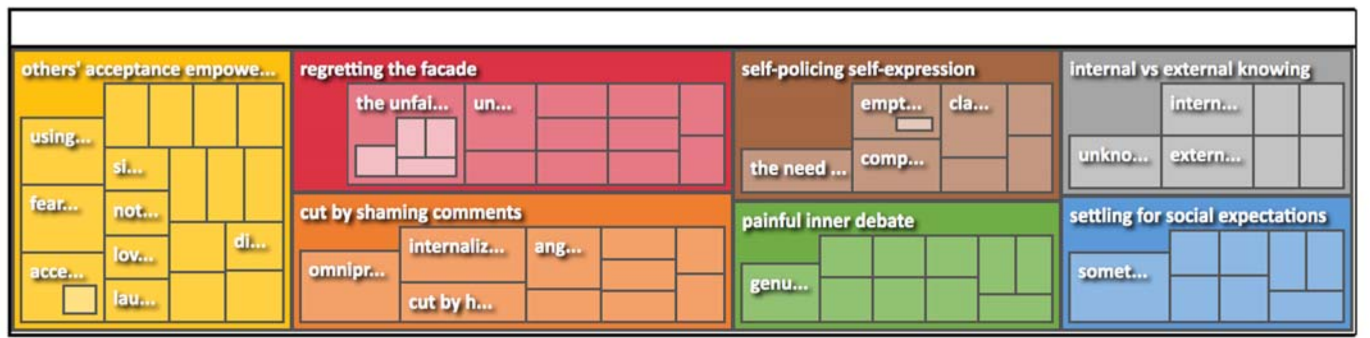
we are Gay and Hispanics here. Like, we're gonna die.	Intersectional racial/LGBTQ fear of assault
Nisha: Yeah. Do you feel that… like is that an embodied feeling too… the terror of that?	
Andres: The experience I felt when it was the construction worker thing, it was. Like I even felt my body like cringing, and I just wanted to run, or walk really quickly, have that experience happen really quickly to avoid whatever could happen. Um, and other times it's more heady, like oh this could happen. And that will be the end.	Embodied experience of fear
Nisha: Just kind of in the back of your mind.	
Andres: Yeah. And like, I really didn't realize that until I moved here…I thought that moving to the city would change that, and I guess it didn't.	Ubiquity of the closet / fear
Nisha: You're surprised that you're still carrying that fear the way you do.	
Andres: Yeah, and that I still restrict myself. And that I still don't always present my partner as my partner. Or like, and I do catch myself sometimes being like not wanting to hold my partner in certain places, because of like, fear.	Restricting self-expression Restricting movement / embodied expression Living in fear
Nisha: MMhmm. Yeah.	
Andres: So like out of everything I wrote, I think that's the most real to me, even today.	Living in fear

Appendix F: Individual Participants' Coded Themes (via NVivo Software)

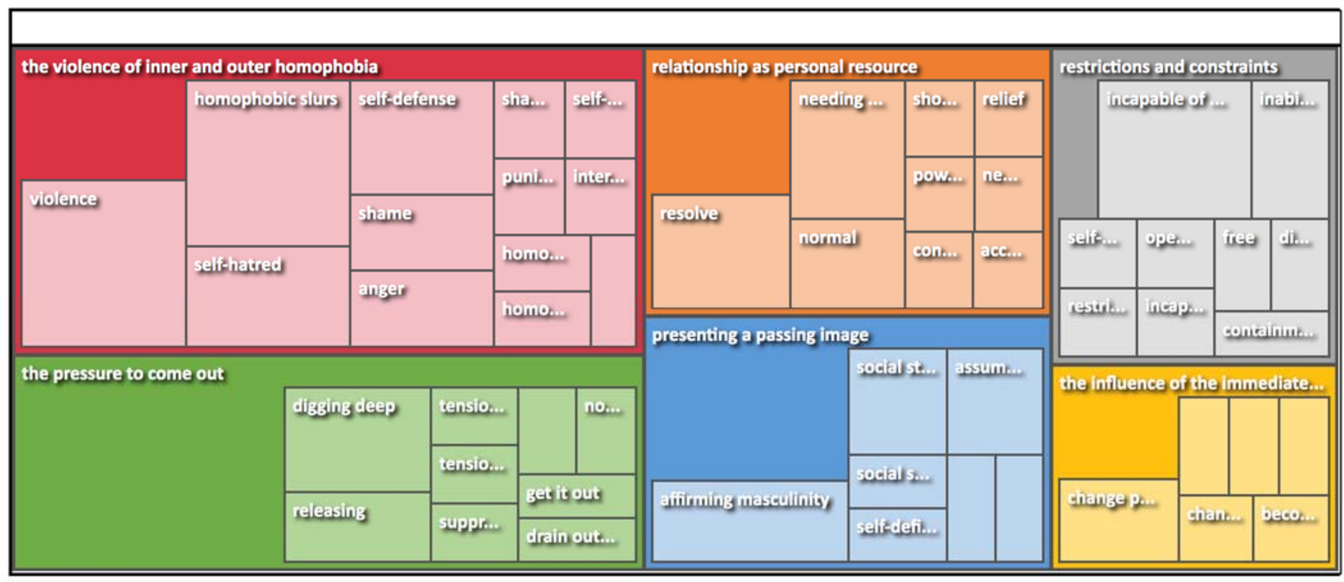
Andres' Themes



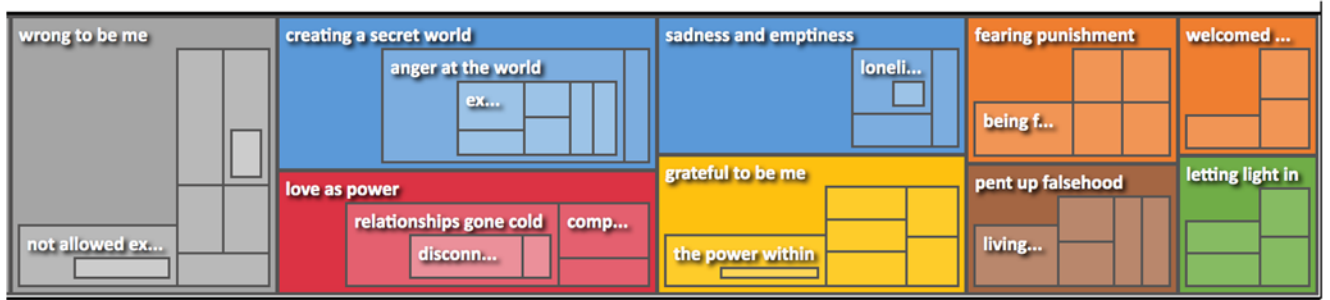
Ben's Themes



Manuel's Themes



Rodney's Themes



Appendix G: CASTING CALL FLYER FOR "ILLUMINATE" SHORT FILM

SHORT FILM CASTING CALL

Nisha Gupta, multimedia artist and PhD candidate in clinical psychology at Duquesne University, is seeking:

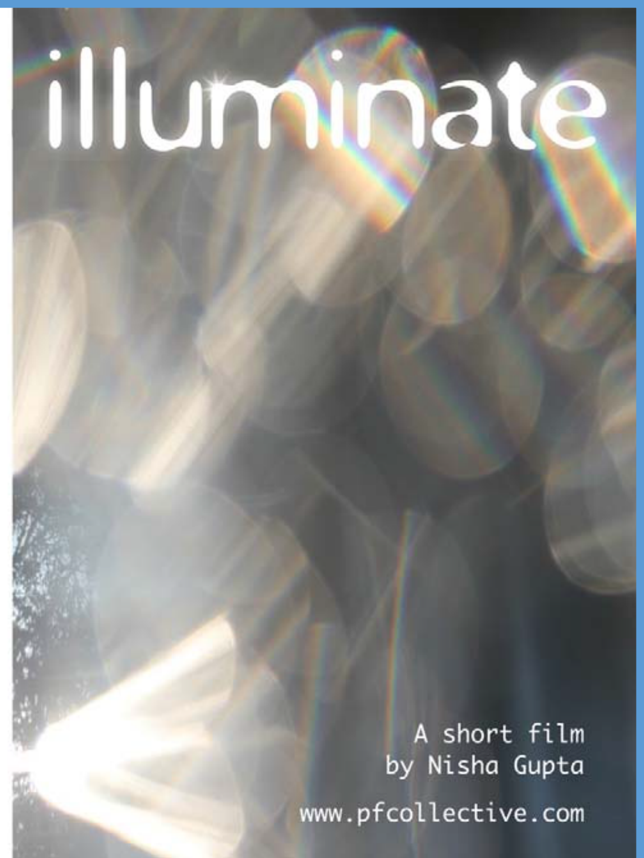
1 male MAIN ACTOR (18-26 or looks that age, any race/ethnicity)
2 male EXTRAS (18-26 or looks that age, any race/ethnicity)
1 female EXTRA (18-26 or looks that age, any race/ethnicity)

SHORT FILM DESCRIPTION: "ILLUMINATE" will use poetic and symbolic cinematography to bring to life the felt sense of being in the closet as a sexual minority. The film's symbolic imagery is inspired by extensive interviews with research participants who identify as sexual minorities about their painful experience of being in the closet. The aim of this film is to evoke empathy among viewers about what it feels to be in the closet, thereby propelling empathy, advocacy, and solidarity towards the LGBTQ community.

- Main actor will commit to 5 days of filming in May and June, in and around Pittsburgh. Scheduling is flexible, filming will include Pride Parade on June 12th.
- Extras will commit to 2 days of filming in May and June, in and around Pittsburgh. Scheduling is flexible, filming includes Pride Parade on June 12th
- Actors will be provided food, IMDB credit & footage for their reels.
- No dialogue; acting includes facial expressions and bodily gestures
- All positions will be paid a modest daily rate.

Contact Nisha at **guptan@duq.edu** or if interested in contributing your talents. All roles seek to be filled by mid-April.

For more info on filmmaking process, check out: www.pfcollective.com



Appendix H: SAMPLE ACTOR'S CONTRACT FOR "ILLUMINATE" SHORT FILM

Orlando Davis

PF Collective
Nisha Gupta and Joseph Carreno
www.pfcollective.com

April 1, 2017

Dear Orlando,

This letter confirms agreement that you will take the part of the male lead in the short film "ILLUMINATE" (the "Film") This is the working title and the final name of the film may change. As you know, this is a low budget production and we are keen to ensure that everyone understands the basis upon which the Film is being made. If there is anything about this letter that you do not understand or you wish us to clarify, please do not hesitate to contact us.

1) You agree to be available to work during the filming period ("the Shoot") from A**pril 1st 2017 to June 18th 2017**.

2) You agree that the filming will take place in the following locations: **Pittsburgh and around Pittsburgh, PA**

3) You agree to give over any rights you may have in the finished film to **PF Collective (Nisha Gupta & Joseph Carreno).** This will allow us to distribute the film in any and every way we can, including online and social media to promote widespread LGBTQ-advocacy.

4) We will pay a fee of **$X a day** for your performance in this Film, for a total of approximately 6 days filming. The fee will be provided to you via check on the final day of filming.

5) We will do our best to ensure your health, safety and welfare during the Shoot.

6) During longer days of filming (more than 3 hours), we will provide you with food and refreshments throughout the Shoot.

7) We will provide you with an electronic file of the finished Film within 1 month of the completion of all post production, which you are welcome to use for your reel, IMDB, etc.

______________________________	______________________________
Signed by actor	Signed on behalf of the company
______________________________	______________________________
Date	Date