Listening to the Voices of Queer Youth: The Dramaturgical Process as Identity Exploration

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Performers, directors, and designers dream of reviews like this one, published by Web Behrens in July 2003: “Once in a great while you see a show so powerful you wish it would run forever so everyone could enjoy it. More than that, you would, if possible, make the show required viewing” (Behrens, 2003). What was Web Behrens reviewing when he wrote this? The latest professional production of Hamlet with classically trained actors? Hardly. His high praise was for Up Until Now, the fifth annual production of the About Face Youth Theatre (AFYT), a company comprised entirely of adolescents who told each other the stories of their lives, adapted those stories into scripted scenes, and performed these scenes for Web Behrens and thousands of other Chicago theatergoers. These young people whose stories and performances comprise AFYT shared more than the typical anxieties of adolescence; About Face Theatre is a national voice of gay and lesbian theatre, and its youth theatre program (AFYT) is dedicated to working with adolescents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ).

I spent the 2002 and 2003 seasons with AFYT as a participant observer with the goal of understanding their artistic process and how this process provided a venue for LGBTQ youth who are often stigmatized in mainstream institutions to explore, understand, and represent positive identities. Like the youth described here, my sense of who I am helped to shape my role in AFYT and the story I am able to tell in this chapter. As a performer myself, I have always known the power of storytelling and performance as literacy practices
that facilitate the trying on and presentation of identities. As a woman who has always identified as straight, I never had to manage the challenges that the youth of AFYT faced every day; it is only through their experiences, relayed through stories, interviews, and journal entries, that I am able to understand how storytelling and performance helps LGBTQ youth in trying on and presenting socially stigmatized identities. Finally, as an academic, I am interested in demonstrating this connection in a principled way. Like many of the authors in this volume, I am committed to identifying, understanding, and creating literacy-based environments that promote positive social change for disenfranchised youth.

In my time with AFYT I observed their season from the initial storytelling workshops to the final performance, captured the stories youth told of their lives and the means by which they adapted those stories into scenes for performance, and interviewed youth and staff throughout this process. In this chapter, I will introduce you to eight of the more than 60 youth who participated in AFYT during the 2002 and 2003 seasons. These youth are as diverse in their backgrounds and interests as they are united in identifying as members of the LGBTQ youth community. In this chapter, you will hear from:

- Adele is a 19-year-old Caucasian female. She is a college sophomore who moved to Chicago from New Jersey. She identifies as bisexual.
- Maria is a 16-year-old Latina and a high school sophomore who identifies as bisexual.
- Jane is an 18-year-old African American transgender male-to-female. She is a high school dropout who was employed intermittently throughout the AFYT season.
- Gillian is a 19-year-old Caucasian female. She is a college freshman who identifies as lesbian.
- Jesus is a 19-year-old Latino. He is a college sophomore; he identifies as gay.
- Robert is a 17-year-old high school senior. He is an illegal Jamaican immigrant living with a host family. Robert identifies as gay.
- Barry is a 19-year-old high school graduate who is pursuing a career in acting. Barry identifies as gay.
- Cari is a 13-year-old 8th grader. She is a Caucasian female, who identifies as lesbian.

Cari's story, the five-year journey of a girl who came out at 9 years old, became the central theme for the 2003 production. *Up Until Now* chronicled five years in the life of AFYT and the accompanying changes in LGBTQ youth culture
from 1998–2003. Cari was adapted into the character of Sydney, a 14-year-old boy who served as the narrator of the play and the central figure with whom the audience is asked to identify. As a representative of the AFYT community and the LGBTQ youth community more broadly, Sydney describes his journey to the audience as he arrives at the present time:

This is the year I turned 14. And my waiting is over. I guess, you know, historically it’s kind of a new thing that someone who is nine and a half years old would say out loud, “I like boys” and his dad would say, “okay.” But it really did happen...I think I’m still trying to figure out what else I am. Besides gay...And I feel myself changing. And I’m figuring out my life story...And I don’t need to wait anymore, for my life to start somewhere else, somewhere down the line, you know? I just have to live it.

About Face Youth Theatre, Up Until Now, July 2003

Context for the Study

Across the world, performance arts-based programs for youth are recognized as spaces that promote the development of a positive sense of self. The National Youth Arts Programme in Ireland describes how, “the forms and materials of arts and cultural activity are particularly conducive to enacting many of the personal and social processes which characterize adolescence and young adulthood” (National Youth Arts Programme, n.d.). Here in the United States, performance arts-based organizations are receiving attention as spaces for youth that promote identity exploration (e.g., McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman, 1994) and language development (e.g. Heath, 1998, 2004; Worthman, 2002), particularly for youth who may feel alienated from mainstream institutions. In this chapter, I go inside the work of one of these organizations to describe the “dramaturgical process,” the telling, adapting, and performing of personal narratives, and discuss how adolescents who feel stigmatized in mainstream institutions use this process to develop a positive sense of self. While many youth face stigmatization in developing initial public identities (Goffman, 1963), for marginalized groups, this stigmatization may prove difficult to surmount. This is especially true for LGBTQ youth because they often do not share this social stigma with their parents and families, eliminating familial support as a tool for managing stigma. In the pages that follow, I will discuss the ways in which each of the telling, adapting, and performing of personal stories affords LGBTQ youth the opportunity to explore, adopt, and present positive identities.

The About Face Youth Theatre (AFYT) is an organization that engages LGBTQ youth in the dramaturgical process, a cycle of conceiving, scripting,
and staging a performance (Wiley & Feiner, 2001) that has been documented as a powerful, legitimate, and sophisticated literacy practice (Heath, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, 2004; Mandell & Wolf, 2003; Worthman, 2002). Those who study youth-created, autobiographical theatre have described the power participation in this activity has to engage and transform participating youth (e.g. Taylor, 2003; Vincent, 2005; Worthman, 2002), particularly as an inroad to social action. In their work with youth and the dramaturgical process, Wiley and Feiner (2001) found this process to be a powerful “opportunit[y] for marginalized or oppressed [youth] to represent themselves and the world around them as a means of asserting their own identity” (p. 122). Here, I describe how LGBTQ youth are given the opportunity to represent themselves and assert their own identities through three stages of the AFYT dramaturgical process.

**LGBTQ Youth and Identity Development**

While LGBTQ youth are becoming increasingly visible in the United States, visibility does not guarantee acceptance or provide a road map for how to successfully navigate adolescence and adulthood as a member of a stigmatized group. LGBTQ youth struggle with fundamental issues of self-presentation, many of which grow out of external assumptions made about how youth *should* be, including:

- The assumption that all youth are heterosexual (Herdt, 1989; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Maynard & Purvis, 1995);
- The assumption that all youth who identify as LGBTQ should take on the typical, media-presented “gay” identity (Halverson, 2005a, 2005b); and
- The assumption that youth who label themselves “bisexual” are simply those who cannot decide what they want to be (e.g. Angelides, 2001; Fox, 1995; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005; Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1995).

Against this backdrop of external assumptions, opportunities to take on positive and nuanced identities are crucial for youth who identify as LGBTQ.

**About Face Youth Theatre and Their Work**

The About Face Youth Theatre (AFYT) is an organization for youth who identify as LGBTQ where youth tell, adapt, and perform the stories of their
lives. At the time of the study, AFYT framed their work in terms of the following mission:

To foster positive youth development for at-risk youth, to promote civic dialogue about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth issues, and to educate students and teachers about issues facing LGBTQ youth in schools, with an eye to reducing school violence and fostering safer, more nurturing learning environments for all young people (About Face Youth Theatre, 2003).

I worked with AFYT throughout the 2002 and 2003 seasons. AFYT began each season with a weekly workshop series, meeting with a cohort of 25–40 youth, ages 14–20, once a week for 14 weeks. Each workshop had a different theme, chosen by adult and youth leaders. The purpose of these workshops was to provide a safe space where youth could tell the stories of their lives to other queer youth and adult mentors. If youth were more comfortable with anonymity, they were given the opportunity to submit their stories through the AFYT website or via email. Throughout the workshop series, youth and adult leaders met regularly to synthesize the story material gathered at the workshops into themes, which eventually become the organizing framework for their public performance. Through group discussions, writers’ workshops, and individual work with material, AFYT developed scripts based directly on the workshop stories as well as stories submitted electronically outside the workshops sessions. The four weeks following the workshop series involved an extensive rehearsal process where the preliminary script was adapted and shaped into a play, as workshop participants took up the stories of their cohorts and “became” the lives of others for the purpose of sharing these stories with a public audience. The culminating event was a four-week run of this play with six performances per week.

**AFYT and the Dramaturgical Process**

There were three sequential stages of the AFYT dramaturgical process—telling, adapting, and performing stories. During each portion of this process, participants were able to express the challenges they face as members of a stigmatized group. Since the ultimate purpose of this dramaturgical work was to create an external representation of their experiences that could be shared with an outside (and potentially unfamiliar) audience, each step along the way functioned to help individuals both express what was unique about them and to situate that uniqueness within the context of a broader cohort of LGBTQ youth. Labov (1997) captures this tension between the unique features of a person’s narrative and the features of that same narrative which makes it recognizable to others as the “reportability paradox.” The “reportable events” are
those that make the story unique to the teller, worth telling. A true story, however, must also be “credible”; others must be able to recognize the story as familiar enough to make it believable. It is precisely this tension, representing that which is unique to the teller and that which makes the story believable and palatable to others, where youth explore identities. In telling stories, youth describe the specific circumstances of their lives and in the process highlight broader struggles of the LGBTQ youth community. In adapting stories, adapters work to maintain the reportable events of the original storyteller while trying to convey a broader message to a future audience about the LGBTQ youth community. And in performing stories, youth have the opportunity to try on and empathize with others’ experiences and to see their experiences represented for public consumption. In the sections that follow, I will describe each portion of the dramaturgical process in more detail, using the voices of LGBTQ youth themselves to highlight the role of the reportability paradox in identity exploration.

Data Collection and Analysis

In my two years with AFYT, I collected and analyzed a large corpus of data, all of which helped me to understand the relationship between the dramaturgical process and the issues of identity development that this group of LGBTQ youth faced. I collected audio recordings of the stories told during workshop sessions and performances of these stories that had been improvised during workshop sessions and performed for other members of the group. I also collected audio recordings of the “script development sessions,” meetings of small groups of youth and staff that occurred in the month following the conclusion of the workshop series where they chose and adapted individual stories or groups of stories into scripted scenes. I conducted interviews with youth throughout the process, both individually and in groups, at multiple points during the workshop series, the script development process, the rehearsal process, and the performances. While the audio recordings allowed me to document the stories as originally told and to trace the development of stories over time, interviews with youth functioned to trace perceptions of their changing relationship to their stories over time. By simultaneously tracing the narratives and youths’ responses to these narratives, I was able to triangulate the stories’ evolutions with what youth say about their experiences across the same time period. Finally, I took field notes throughout the process. These field notes provide a context for the telling, adapting, and performing of stories and allow me to paint a fuller picture of the context in which these activities took place.
I used three primary methods of data analysis, which I will mention briefly here and discuss in more detail as necessary throughout the chapter. To analyze the content of the stories as they were originally told, and particularly whether and how they approached issues of identity through these stories, I engaged in descriptive narrative analysis (e.g., Gee, 1991; Schiffrin, 1996). This form of narrative analysis allows researchers to build theories about social phenomena through an understanding of the stories people tell of their lives. Schiffrin (1996) identified the parameters of social and cultural identity that have thus far been explored through personal story which include ethnicity, social class, gender, age, and region. In my work, I include sexuality as a relevant parameter of social and cultural identity—one that is under-examined, particularly in adolescents. Additionally, I engaged in a structural narrative analysis (e.g., Labov, 1997; Schiffrin, 1996) of stories that were adapted into scripted scenes and performed in order to map changes in these same stories over time. Finally, I conducted a conversational discourse analysis (e.g., Johnstone, 2001; Schiffrin, 1994; Wood & Kroger, 2000) of all of the script development sessions where youth were engaged in adapting their peers’ stories for performance.

Telling Stories

Through interviews with AFYT youth and a close exploration of the storytelling piece of the AFYT dramaturgical process, I identified challenges youth face in the development of a LGBTQ identity and how these challenges were explored through story. While youth discussed multiple challenges to the development of positive LGBTQ identities in adolescence (Halverson, 2005a), stereotypes and assumptions about homosexuality (their own and others’) figured prominently in AFYT interviews, stories, group discussions, and informal conversations. Gilbert Herdt (1989; Herdt & Boxer, 1993) identified the “assumption of heterosexuality,” the idea that all youth are assumed (and assume themselves) to be straight, as a key developmental challenge for LGBTQ youth. While I found that AFYT youth also struggled with the assumption of heterosexuality, more often AFYT youth placed the assumptions of homosexuality that they faced at the forefront. In my interviews with them, youth felt strongly that there exist certain stereotypes about queer youth that are as daunting a challenge to face as dispelling the assumption that all adolescents are heterosexual. As Jane, a transgendered youth noted, the assumption she seems to be fighting is that she fit into a gay stereotype: “I’ve actually had someone say, ‘um, you know, you need to be more gay.’” These ideas were car-
ried over from the interviews I conducted with both groups of youth to the stories youth told and the cohort themes that were developed as a result (Halverson, 2005a).

Assumptions about homosexuality also emerged through the dramaturgical process as a key theme for the 2003 cohort of AFYT youth. As a method of vetting the large corpus of stories told throughout the 14-week workshop series into a manageable number of scenes for performance, AFYT youth and staff held a series of “script summits.” In these summits, participants produced thematic charts representing their understanding of emergent themes from the stories told by AFYT youth. These themes then formed the basis by which stories were chosen to be adapted for performance. Therefore, these initial theme-based documents, which contained both broad themes and the stories that fell into these categories, provided a strong link between issues the 2003 AFYT community viewed as important and how they chose to represent the themes through specific stories. As part of my data analysis, I also built a thematic conceptual matrix (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to systematically investigate the links between the themes identified by AFYT in the script summits and the themes that emerged from my interviews with youth. “Assumptions of homosexuality” was one of these key crossover ideas, resulting in a convergence of thematic content between interviews I conducted with AFYT youth, the stories they told during workshop sessions and script summit themes. Narratives often serve as occasions to construct, explore, try on, and wrestle with identities (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Heath, 2000b) and while the interviews showed that they wrestled with issues associated with taking on an LGBTQ identity, the stories demonstrate how youth perceived these challenges as playing out in their lives.

One of the stories to appear in the 2003 AFYT production, Up Until Now that highlights some of these assumptions of homosexuality is “Bi, Interrupted,” written by Adele at home after one of the AFYT workshops and submitted by email. This story typifies the “assumptions of homosexuality” category that emerged as important to AFYT youth in interviews and storytelling. By “typifies,” I mean that the story has a clear, direct connection to the category, it was mentioned across the script summits, and it appeared in the final production. Adele initially titled her story “Being Bisexual In A Gay/Straight World,” in response to having told a prior story about her heterosexual relationship (Adele identifies as bisexual) during an AFYT workshop that was subsequently not chosen by her small group to be adapted and performed for everyone. “Being Bisexual” was both her chance to retell this original story in order to give it some permanence in the AFYT community and to reflect on how it was received by AFYT members.
“Being Bisexual” involved two nested stories. In the primary story, Adele relays the events of an evening she spent with her boyfriend. They go to a restaurant and engage in a deep discussion about religion. After their discussion, he tells her he loves her, to which she replies, “I could stare at you forever.” She tells her audience that this simple love story is one of the best nights she has ever experienced. Adele couches this story within a meta-narrative, where she offers reasons why this story “belongs” in the AFYT context and why she feels it was not accepted when she told it during the workshop. She describes her relationship with her boyfriend as “the queerest relationship I’ve ever been in,” despite it being traditionally heterosexual. She concludes, however that “maybe heterosexual stories do not belong here” though she feels confident that her story is truly a queer love story.

Adele’s story draws a remarkable parallel between the documented way in which bisexual identity is often relegated to a non-identity and Adele’s feeling that her own story was similarly relegated in AFYT. She chose to recreate the story in the private world of her personal computer after it was initially rejected in the public, “story game” context. Adele resisted the rejection of her bisexual identity by foregrounding the parallel about acceptance/rejection of alternative identities to highlight both her “queer relationship” and the way this story was treated in a primarily homosexual environment. As she says in her story:

In the past, I have generally dated women. Now I am finding that the journey of heterosexual monogamous dating is...interesting. While I, in no way, shape or form, have a perfect relationship with my boyfriend, I feel like I am quickly losing [sic] my place in the bisexual section of the queer community.

The strained connection between bi- and homosexuality illustrated by Adele’s story is reflected in early research on the coming-out process. Bisexuality was seen as, “a steppingstone on the way to homosexual identity...but was not considered an end in itself” (Rust, 1993, p. 51). Researchers who have since studied queer youth identity development, however, have noted that bisexuality is an independent sexual identity with its own developmental path (Fox, 1995; Ryan & Futterman, 1998) and that youth who identify as bisexual struggle with issues different from their straight and homosexual peers (Herdt, 1989; Rust, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1995). Pallotta-Chiarolli (2005) identifies the challenge of taking on a bisexual identity as being outside both hetero- and homo-normative constructs while simultaneously being able to “pass” as either one. This results in the under-representation of bisexual youth, rendering them invisible in both sectors. Rust (1993) comments on the primary challenge of identifying as bisexual: “Because bisexuality is still not considered an
authentic form of sexuality in popular discourse, few perceive bisexual identity as a valid, permanent option” (p. 70). Therefore youth who identify as bisexual are often left feeling isolated even in a community that is accepting of “queer” sexual identities and may be explicitly designed to help youth manage these identities. Adele’s story shows her personal bisexual identity struggle; by writing about her experience as a framing device for her love story, she can explore the idea that bisexuality is not accepted as a valid sexual identity in the straight community or in the queer community. However, in rewriting the story for submission to the AFYT staff, Adele is challenging this assumption and taking on a personal exploration of her sexual identity. In the coda to her story, Adele clearly expresses the lack of acceptance she feels in the LGBTQ youth community:

...That’s my story. I didn’t know if I could bring it up here. Or if it would get picked for the play. Because it’s straight. Sort of. But I think that’s what it’s like to be bisexual in the queer community. It’s like—oh, that’s nice, you have a boyfriend, but we have other—more queer issues to talk about, you don’t count. Which, by all means is perfectly fine. Maybe my heterosexual stories do not belong here.

Tracing the themes of the stories from the interviews, to the script submits, and down into the give-and-take of the storytelling process can be a risky and ephemeral task. It might be objected that a given story can only provide a fleeting impression of the kinds of deep personal or interpersonal task involved in LGBTQ identity development. While I do not argue that this brief analysis of Adele’s story captures the developmental process, I do believe that her story provides an illustration of what the process looks like in situ. Through the telling of her story, Adele struggles publicly with what it means to be bisexual and simultaneously brings bisexuality to the forefront as a valid, positive way to identify in the world.

Adapting Stories

Working with others’ narratives by adapting them into scripted scenes for performance gives participating youth the opportunity to collaboratively build an identity that can then be shared with an outside audience (e.g., Heath, 2004; Wiley & Feiner, 2001; Worthman, 2002). Wiley and Feiner (2001) describe the way that youth “deliberate and collaborate to arrive at agreed-upon ways of representing their lives and the world around them. As they negotiate their play making, they are also negotiating and renegotiating their community identity and culture” (p. 125). Participating in the adaptation process means engaging in a “reading to write” (Flower et al., 1990; Spivey & King, 1994) lit-
eracy practice. For the youth of AFYT specifically, this “reading to write” process afforded them opportunity to directly address the challenges associated with LGBTQ youth identity development.

To illustrate the adaptation process, I take the example of a series of stories originally told by Maria, who self-identified as bisexual. Over the course of the AFYT storytelling process, she told three different stories, all of which focused on her relationship with another young woman, Linda, who identified as a lesbian. When it was adapted and scripted, these stories collectively came to be called Roach. Each of Maria’s stories revealed different details about her relationship with Linda, and the three youth who worked on adapting her stories, Jesus, Adele, and Gillian, struggled with how to represent these details, their relative importance, and what the different narratives revealed about what the overarching story of Maria’s relationship was about.

Jesus, Adele, and Gillian worked to create LGBTQ youth characters that defy stereotypes, characters that convey more nuanced portraits of people who are not straight (dispelling the assumption of heterosexuality) but also do not fit the stereotype of “gay” youth (dispelling assumptions about homosexuality). Conducting a conversational discourse analysis (e.g., Wood & Kroger, 2000) of their adaptation process of Roach revealed two main findings:

1. Sexual identity is a necessary feature of AFYT characters, whether or not the original stories are explicitly about sexual identity and/or sexual behavior; and
2. Creating these characters helped them to build a positive sense of their own sexual identity that becomes reified when it is shared with an outside audience.

In this case, Adele, Jesus, and Gillian negotiated the way they wanted to represent this story, and more broadly the way they wanted to represent queer youth for their potential audience. Since the “Roach” play will be a representation of the AFYT community, decisions about how to create the characters that will stand for them are precisely the decisions about community identity and culture that Wiley and Feiner (2001) describe.

Incorporating Issues of Sexual Identity

In developing the script for Roach, issues of sexual identity are not apparent on the surface; Maria’s account of her relationship with Linda does not explicitly include any mention of their sexual identities or any sexual behavior they may have engaged in. However, there was considerable talk about
whether to include references to sexual identity throughout the script development process. As Gillian, Adele, and Jesus worked with Maria and Linda’s characters, they made decisions about how to frame the adapted scene in order to convey the main thrust of the story. Gillian, for example, wanted Roach to tell Maria’s story as a recollection of past events—a reflection on what has already happened. She argued for the creation of a psychiatrist character, using evidence from Maria’s original stories to build a case for the psychiatrist character to serve as a framing device for the scene. One piece of evidence she gave is that Maria talks, in her stories, about being bisexual, which spurred the following exchange:

Gillian: That the psychiatrist like, [Maria]’s pouring her heart out about how she feels and how like, like, and then it’s like the struggle of, like I’m really attracted to her but I’m bis[exual] and I don’t know if I want her as my girlfriend, and all this stuff

Adele: Was she attracted? Does it say anywhere in here

Gillian: It does. Yeah, towards the end it does.

Adele: Where is it?

In this exchange, which happened at the beginning of their scripting session, Gillian foregrounded Maria’s sexual identity, even though Maria did not explicitly make her sexual identity or a sexual relationship with Linda the focus of her original narratives. The importance of exploring sexual identity in the AFYT community led Gillian to incorporate it into her adaptation process. Additionally, the notion that a psychiatrist would perceive her bisexuality as deviant behavior in the same category as getting drunk or acting out in class (other key events in Maria’s original narrative) highlights the isolation that Gillian perceived queer youth often feel in traditional institutions and the particularly liminal nature of a bisexual identity. Bringing this sense of isolation into the public forum opened the window for audience members to empathize with Maria, which could serve as a springboard for discussions about the way queer youth are treated by figures of authority in institutional settings.

As the adaptation session progressed, Adele and Jesus further discussed incorporating issues of sexual identity more explicitly into the script. Their exchanges about incorporating issues of sexual identity led them to struggle with how to portray characters that identify as “lesbian” or “bisexual” without incorporating sexual activity into the story. Jesus and Adele spent some time debating whether to include overt references to the girls’ sexuality as they show the development of their relationship over time. Jesus advocated for the direct
inclusion of references to their sexual identity into the script. In trying to figure out how to show that these two women are growing closer, he says:

I wanted to include something like, that means...we could have them do queer things...[They could say], 'and we were women and that was okay.' Cuz remember [Maria] was kind of like, she was not sure if she was with her just because she was gay.

His desire to include this aspect of their relationship marks the importance of including Maria and Linda’s sexual identity in the play. While this play is not “about” a sexual relationship, nor is it about two adolescents engaging in sexual activity, AFYT as an organization is “about” sexual identity. Dispelling the “assumption of heterosexuality” Adele engages with Jesus’ direct approach, acknowledging the relevance and importance of Maria’s “being gay.” Adele even suggests that they name the young women’s sexual identities in external narration.

In creating a character that is bisexual but not involved in a sexual relationship, the adaptation process helped Jesus create a more nuanced portrayal of gay youth, one that presents queer youth as more than the same-sex sexual behavior that the label often conjures up. By explicitly discussing how to portray Maria’s sexuality in the play, the adaptation process facilitated Jesus and Adele’s efforts to explore assumptions of heterosexuality and homosexuality for youth. Creating these characters gave Jesus, Adele, and the rest of the participating youth the opportunity to dispel assumptions about homosexuality (and heterosexuality) that many audience members may bring with them to the theatre.

Exploring Personal Identity Through Adaptation

The discussion of how to portray a bisexual character in a nuanced way was particularly relevant for Adele who struggled with her own bisexual identity while in a heterosexual relationship. As I described earlier in the chapter, Adele documented her own struggles with her LGBTQ identity in her story, “Being Bisexual In A Gay/Straight World.” Adele struggled with wanting to fit into the queer youth community, but as a bisexual who had dated men, she felt that her stories were “not gay enough.” The lack of acceptance that Adele felt and her desire to bring bisexuality from a non-identity into a nuanced, real character seemed to motivate the adaptation decisions she made in working with Jesus on Roach as evidenced by the initial description of Linda that Adele wrote:

And after a minute of stillness, Linda enters. Linda is not like other students. She is, she has, she dresses differently, and has a certain air about her. Confidence. She
might even be a little butch. I could see her being a little butch, like almost? But not like, butch, butch.

Adele suggested describing the Linda character as “a little butch.” This physical description was meant to imply that Linda is a lesbian, as the word “butch” refers to the way some lesbians present themselves to the outside world. She qualifies this statement though, saying, “I could see her being a little butch, like almost? But not like, butch, butch.” Adele was perhaps concerned that her statement would imply too much of a stereotypical presentation of the character, so she tried to modify it by using phrases like, “a little butch,” “almost,” and “not like, butch, butch.” Here, Adele struggled to find a nuanced way to present Linda as a lesbian without confirming a stereotype.

Adele’s desire to portray a female character as “a little butch” seemed to convey her feelings about her own sexual identity. Adele wanted to be a part of the queer community, but as she commented in a journal entry: “It seemed like I just didn’t fit in, as always. My stories were not gay enough for the show” (Adele, 8/3/03). While she self-identified as part of the queer community, she often felt “not gay enough” to be fully accepted. In creating a character who is “a little butch...but not like, butch, butch,” Adele reflects her desire for more nuanced sexual identities within the queer youth community. This allowed her to struggle with her liminal identity in the queer community and to validate that identity by creating a character that shares her traits. Adele created a positive sense of self by creating a character that would be sanctioned by the AFYT community and presented to a public audience as valid. Her ideas about bisexuality are incorporated into the script through the creation of these characters, resulting in a multivoiced story that represented both Maria’s and Adele’s perspectives.

AFYT’s focus on LGBTQ youth emphasized issues of sexual identity across all stories, regardless of their content. Adele, Jesus, and Gillian struggled with how to include issues of sexual identity into a scene that is not explicitly about a sexual relationship or sexual activity but is about gay characters. This struggle allows these youth to explore assumptions about heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality that often impede the development of a viable social identity (Coté & Levine, 2002) for queer youth. By creating characters who are gay but not stereotypically so, these youth have the opportunity to explore a more nuanced version of sexual identity, one that is important to but not the only facet of an individual’s persona.

The adaptations created by AFYT youth are also important for potential audience members who may, for the first time, see validated versions of themselves or a family member or a friend on stage. By allowing youth to partici-
pate in the adaptation process, they can create characters that take sexual identity to be an important part of who they are, without it being the only characteristic that defines them. In doing so, they can show an outside audience that the queer youth community is as complex and nuanced as any other youth community, creating positive character types for youth who may be struggling to find these role models, and other outsiders who may have a one-sided view of queer youth.

Performing Stories

In my work with the performance aspect of the AFYT dramaturgical process, I found that performing autobiographical narratives is a powerful experience both for the youth whose stories are being performed and for the youth performing them, that often results in explorations of the issues involved in LGBTQ identity. In earlier work I provide a more detailed analysis of how youth who performed stories, taking on the roles of other AFYT members, their friends, families, and other authority figures allowed these youth to “explore possible selves,” to try on different personas without having to face the consequences of fully adopting this role in the outside world (Halverson 2005a, 2005b; Rosenfeld, 2003). Here I will focus on how the performance of narratives affected the original tellers of these stories and how the transformation of their stories from narrative of personal experience to publicly performed scene facilitated their struggle with personal and LGBTQ youth community identities.

At the crux of the relationship between original storyteller and the resultant publicly performed piece lies the “reportability paradox” I described earlier in this chapter. As Labov (1997) describes, there is an inherent tension between the elements of a story that make it unique to a teller and those elements that make it recognizable and understandable to an outside audience. Specifically, a “most reportable event,” is the event of the narrative that makes it unique, the reason the story deserves attention. Most reportable events, however, are very specific to the teller and may require more effort on the part of the teller to maintain an attentive audience. Every personal narrative contains a “most reportable event,” the event that makes the story worth telling. Labov (1997) defines a “most reportable event” and summarizes the function it serves in a personal narrative:

A most reportable event is the event that is less common than any other in the narrative and has the greatest effect upon the needs and desires of the participants in
the narrative [is evaluated most strongly]. A narrative of personal experience is essentially a narrative of the most reportable event in it (p. 406).

Using Labov’s analytic framework to breakdown narratives of personal experience and their subsequently scripted versions, I was able to demonstrate how, as the story moves from an oral narrative to a scripted performance, the story moves from a high degree of reportability to a high degree of credibility (Halverson, 2005b). This is a necessary transition, one that the youth themselves acknowledge.

Many AFYT youth who had their stories performed publicly reflected on the transition their stories made from unique, deeply personal experiences to more universal, anonymous scenes in a play. They described this experience as relinquishing control of these events, a psychological “letting go.” Robert, a Jamaican immigrant who was forced to leave his country due to the country’s ban on homosexuality, described the experience of seeing his story performed: “[AFYT] made me put my story out there and got detached from it. And they made me grow and they made me leave the past behind and get on with the future” (Robert, 7/27/02). This description of how it felt to see his story performed is representative of how many AFYT youth I interviewed described their experiences with seeing their autobiographical narratives on stage.

While not all youth who had their stories performed were able to construct this transition as a wholly positive personal experience, they did acknowledge a strong tension between wanting their highly personal experiences to stay intact and the feeling of having audiences respond positively to the more credible performance narratives. In journal entries that Adele wrote during the time of my study, she reflected on how she felt about the transition her story, “Bi, Interrupted,” made from highly reportable to highly credible:

I guess

I guess that even though the story is so fabricated from the original truth, there is still something there—I guess

my love is there

my love that I never thought I’d have or be able to give. And his love is there. The honesty of the moment, even in an invented situation, is what makes it a universally touching scene as well as one that gets to me every time. I wonder if it’s like that for the other people in AFYT who have their stories told. They’re all such personal stories being chiseled and sculpted into something so different from what once was (Adele, 7/22/03).
Cari, the youngest-ever member of the AFYT cohort (she was 13 at the time the 2003 workshops began) experienced a long psychological transition as her story was “chiseled and sculpted into something so different from what it once was.” In Cari’s original story, many of its details were unique to her and painted a picture of a young adolescent who did not behave according to most definitions of “young adolescent.” Her story chronicled her experiences coming out as a lesbian at nine years old and struggling to be accepted by the LGBTQ youth community (even trying to get into AFYT). These details of her life are, in Cari’s opinion, what made her story unique and worth telling. However, the end result is not an individual telling a story to another individual, but a play whose audience is broad and unknown. Therefore, the character of Sidney, based on Cari’s story but not depicting Cari specifically, moved away from the details of Cari’s life and towards the life of a young adolescent who was likely more familiar to audience members. Lines were specifically created for the Sidney character in order to represent a typical, young adolescent: “This is the year *Queer as Folk* debuts in America and everyone has an opinion about it. Except me. I’m just in sixth grade, so I don’t watch it” (AFYT, 2003). Often times in interviews, when I asked her how she felt the character of Sidney was progressing, she referred to these specific lines from the play to demonstrate the ways in which the character had been generalized and stereotyped, leaving out the reportability of her story:

I hate the line, ‘6th graders don’t really discuss things, much less organize?’ Ok. I did! So, can we talk about that? The point? Is that I wasn’t like that. So why did you write my character, like, the point is that I had opinions about marriage and I had opinions about everything in the show, and like, I had something to bring to the table (Cari, 7/30/03).

Despite the struggles and disagreements that Cari, Adele, and other AFYT youth had with how the adaptation of their personal stories eliminated that which was unique about them, many of these youth came to understand the value of creating more generic, credible characters for outside audiences who may not have been as familiar with or sympathetic to the experiences of LGBTQ adolescents. Cari, for example, developed a broader sense of the purposes that different representational media serve in storytelling. Throughout the AFYT process, she had been eager to tell her story, to explain that her real life was much different from, and much more sophisticated than that of her alter-ego character. In her personal interactions she was able to explain this difference by communicating one-on-one with listeners, providing them with the reportable details of her life. The theatrical medium, on the other hand, did not serve this same purpose. The public performances of her story served to share with a broad audience the story of a young person struggling with
queer identity at a young age. Cari highlighted this difference during my final interview with her, coming to terms with the differences between her story and the character’s:

I guess it’s just like, it has influenced peoples’ lives and so it doesn’t really make a difference, like, cuz I mean if they really want to I could sit down and tell them my life story and they could have a different view (Cari, 8/17/03).

Adele, who also saw part of herself in the Sidney character created to represent Cari, agreed on the function this hybrid character serves in the play. In a journal entry written during the run of performances, Adele discussed a written story she had submitted to the staff about the profound effect AFYT had on her life. The final line of her story reads like this: “When this novel of my life nears it’s [sic] conclusion, my thanks to about face [sic] will be on my dedication page” (Adele, 8/3/03). This line appears verbatim at the end of the play; spoken by the Sidney character as he talks about the effect AFYT has had on his life. In this same journal entry, Adele reflects on the strong presence of her voice in the character of Sidney: “I am in no way bitter about the dedication line being given to the Sidney character. I do not want credit for my love of the program. But I’m glad it’s in there—regardless of it’s [sic] context” (Adele, 8/3/03).

An additional outcome for youth who had their story adapted for performance was the opportunity to reflect on what was left out of this more credible telling of their story. These details, which may have seemed insignificant at the time of the initial telling, or may have been absent altogether, surfaced as valuable to the teller when they see their story portrayed with these details missing. In interviews, Cari talked at length about how seeing her story portrayed as the Sidney character has caused her to think of the events in her life differently:

Going through this I remembered things! That like, aren’t in the story… Just like, I started remembering like, things that I had done and like, it was just, really weird to like, realize that like, there were things in my life that like, happened that would be important? But that aren’t in it? And so, I guess it’s just made me like, see my life in a different light and it’s like, oh maybe that was important (Cari, 8/17/03).

Several other youth whose stories were performed also spoke about remembering details that had once been innocuous but now seemed important to the integrity of their stories. Adele, in reflecting on her story, talked about finding her pride in her own sexual identification. The character created to represent her seemed ashamed of her bisexuality, causing Adele to reflect on how unlike her this is and how being proud of being bisexual is a part of who she is. Barry also reflected on the way one of his stories, “Close to
Home,” caused him to think differently about his relationship to his community and family. Barry reflected in an interview that his family is not as present in this story as he feels they should be. His decision to hide his sexuality and to not deal with issues of HIV and AIDS is directly related to his fear of being cast out by his family. His original story did not reflect this and therefore neither does the scene in the play. Watching this scene night after night has caused Barry to reflect on the important role his family serves in his life.

While each of these three youth is given the opportunity to reflect on the specifics of their stories, Cari, in particular, sees herself in opposition to a public, more generic character based on her life. In doing so, she was able to reflect on what is unique about her story, even highlighting details that may not have seemed important or unique before. By strengthening her resolve in what is unique about her story, she solidifies the connection between her stories and the way she presents herself in the world—and learns that these stories are both compelling and unique.

Discussion

In this chapter I have argued that the dramaturgical process, that is the telling, adapting, and performing of personal stories, is a powerful mechanism for exploring, understanding, and trying on identities. I was particularly interested in how this process addressed the challenges LGBTQ youth faced in taking on positive identities in adolescence, as these youth often lack familial and institutional support as they come out as members of the queer community. Through interviews with and stories told by youth who participated in the About Face Youth Theatre program, I found that there were challenges unique to LGBTQ youth. In this chapter I described specifically the challenge of managing assumptions about homosexuality both from within the LGBTQ youth community and from outsiders. All of the youth presented in this chapter struggled in some way with how notions (theirs' and others') of what it means to be a “queer youth” collided with their personal life stories. In telling, adapting, and performing these stories AFYT youth had the opportunity to push against, and in some cases reconcile, this tension, helping them to achieve a “viable social identity,” one that merged the way they see themselves, the way others see them, and the way they fit into the communities around them (Coté and Levine, 2002).

For Adele, the retelling of a romantic night with her boyfriend couched in a meta-story about the way her seemingly heterosexual story was treated by the
AFYT community gave her the opportunity to struggle with her liminal identity—not quite a member of the queer community but certainly not a member of the straight community. She both claimed the liminal nature of bisexuality and demanded that others explore the validity of treating bisexuality as neither here nor there—a sentiment that is reflected in her original telling, in the public performance of this scene, and in Adele’s personal reflections on the message of her story for viewers, gay and straight:

All I can say is that I’m glad [the director] didn’t destroy the core of the story and make it say something other than its intended message—which was love is blind. Yes, I’m bisexual, yes I dated a guy—but why does that matter? I loved him. And he loved me.

Adele also had the opportunity to represent the complexity of characters who identify as bisexual when she adapted Maria’s story, “Roach,” into a scripted scene. As she, Jesus, and Gillian worked through the process of transforming a series of oral narratives into one scene they talked often about how to incorporate the sexual identity of the characters into the play without conflating sexual activity and sexuality. During their scripting session, Jesus argued for the inclusion of dialogue that was not from the original narratives that marked Maria and her friend Linda as two women who are attracted to women but not engaged in a sexual relationship: “And we were both women, and that’s okay...We don’t need to explain it, it just is...Something like, I wanted some descriptive terms like, ‘understanding’ or something.”

Through this adaptation process, personal narratives were often co-opted as the most reportable events of these stories were replaced with more credible, universal versions. While this shift from reportability to credibility initially upset storytellers, the end result was a psychological letting go of traumatic life events, an understanding of the function credible characters can serve in conveying complex ideas about alternative identities, and an opportunity to reflect on what was left out of the public performances—leaving the teller with a clearer vision of that which they see as unique in themselves.

Each portion of the dramaturgical process and, as is evidenced by Adele’s journey, the process as a whole allowed the youth of AFYT to engage in detypification, the redefining of a social category such that it is no longer based on stereotypical assumptions (Jenness, 1992). Jenness argues that detypification is necessary, though not sufficient, for lesbian youth to engage in positive self-identification. She goes on to argue that detypification is sparked by a traumatic or crisis event. While these types of events, such as personal violence that results from public sexual identity disclosure, may in fact cause detypification, it is not a necessary precursor for youth who are already facing multiple
crisis events in adolescence. In fact, the use of personal stories of sexual identity allows youth to engage in the kind of detypification that Jenness (1992) calls for, without the crisis event. At each stage of the dramaturgical process, AFYT participants face the tension between their highly reportable, unique, personal experiences, and the more generic experiences and resultant representations of this LGBTQ youth community. When they tell their stories they are situated in the context of a group who have likely had similar experiences. When they adapt others’ stories, they are faced with the tension of maintaining that which is unique to the story and creating a scripted scene that is representative of broader themes important to LGBTQ youth communities. Finally, when they perform stories, original tellers come to understand the difference between their original stories and the performed representations and performers have the opportunity to explore multiple, possible selves that help to develop detypified understandings of what LGBTQ youth can be.

Notes

1. All names given in this chapter are pseudonyms.
2. Other prominent international programs include: Carclew Youth Arts Centre (Australia); National Association for Youth Drama (Ireland); National Association of Youth Theatres (England).

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