Musical Theater as Performative Autoethnography: A Critique of LGBTQIA+ Representation in School Curricula

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Abstract

The complexity of identity and experiences of the researcher are explored through Spry's (2011) performative autoethnography methodology, challenging the social and political norms that effect sexuality and gender-diverse students and the representation of LGBTQIA+ voices in school curricula. The present study uses musical theater repertoire that depicts characters that are part of the LGBTQIA+ community as a catalyst for reflection upon the researcher's lived experiences. This multimedia performance-based research allows the reader-audience to experience the data as a narrative through a text script, recorded live performance videos, and/or mastered audio that includes prose, verse, lyrics, and monologues. Topics addressed include discovering sexuality, coming out, wrestling with faith, accepting identity, performing LGBTQIA+ musical repertoire, and working with students of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. The researcher found that performative autoethnography was a transformative and educative experience, and

autoethnographic methods can be used to help marginalized people find voice and empowerment.

Introduction

When I was in school during the late 20th century, the gay American talk show host Ellen Degeneres was pretending to be straight on her network television sitcom. At the time, there were no out, gay characters comparable to those in the popular United States television series *Will and Grace,*[1] which debuted in 1998 and was rebooted in 2017. Queer celebrities like Rosie O'Donnell, Neil Patrick Harris, and George Takei were ambiguously non-sexual. I had no role models to show me that being queer was acceptable. While popular culture and media icons including musicians, athletes, actors, and authors have become champions diverging from heteronormative identities, many educational institutions have been slow to adopt policies that discourage discrimination toward queer individuals (Miller, Mayo, & Lugg, 2017). Young people in the United States of America and other contemporary societies face the persistent issue of the under-representation or misrepresentation of LGBTQIA+[2] people in school curricula. It is possible to help LGBTQIA+ students better understand themselves, explore their communities' histories, and feel empowered by incorporating inclusive practices that allow and even encourage students to perform music and theater that represents sexuality-diverse and gender-diverse individuals, shares LGBTQIA+ voices, and tells queer peoples' stories. This article explores how performative autoethnography that uses musical theater repertoire and performance can challenge the social and political norms that oppressed me as an LGBTQIA+ person throughout my education and in academia.

A Present and Persistent Problem Facing LGBTQIA+ Students

LGBTQIA+ students in United States schools feel less valued, respected, and safe than their heterosexual, cisgender[3] peers (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). One example of this injustice is

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[1] *Will and Grace* was a sitcom from the United States of America that ran for 8 seasons during the turn of the century. It has been credited for being the first show on network television featuring the lifestyle of openly gay characters as main characters (Myers, 2016). In 2017, it returned to the National Broadcasting Channel after being dormant for 10 years.

[2] While there are various permutations of the acronym that represents sexuality-diverse and gender-diverse individuals, this article uses LGBTQIA+, which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*+, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual. The plus acknowledges the inclusivity of the acronym to include any sexuality-diverse or gender-diversity person not mentioned above. The asterisk and plus in trans*+ (Miller, 2016) is an inclusive *and* expansive gesture that takes note that gender is fluid and includes but is not limited to "(a)gender, cross-dresser, bi-gender, genderfluid, gender**k, genderless, genderqueer, non-binary, non-gender, third gender, trans man, trans woman, transgender, transsexual, and two-spirit" (p. 2). When discussing other literature, I use the acronym designated by the author.

[3] Cisgender refers to someone who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth.

demonstrated through how male students in middle and high school who participate in music or theater had a 69% greater risk of face-to-face victimization or bullying by their peers than their non-arts-participating colleagues (Elpus & Carter, 2016). Moreover, female students are not immune to teasing from their peers. Data from Rawlings and Espelage (2019) led to the assertion that there may not be a significant gendered difference in the homophobic bullying of music education students. Furthermore, 80% of transgender students reported feeling unsafe at school due to their gender expression (Kosciew, Greytak, Bartklewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). Educators should also consider how the intersections of identities like race (Carter, 2013) or faith (Taylor & Zeke, 2017) can further confound the pressures LGBTQIA+ students face. Sexuality-diverse and gender-diverse students of color have additional stresses that negatively influence their health and wellbeing, and only 11% of LGBTQ+ students of color in the USA believe that their race or ethnicity is regarded as positive (Kahn, Johnson, Lee, & Miranda, 2018). Many LGBTQIA+ people experience tumultuous experiences regarding their faith, and 15-19% no longer identified with their former faith after self-identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Sherkat, 2002), a finding that was consistent with Dahl and Galliher (2009) among their study of LGBQQ students, the Qs representing queer and questioning individuals.

The research above paints a bleak picture of the LGBTQIA+ student experience in US K-12 education. However, it is imperative to consider how educators might focus on the empowerment of LGBTQIA+ youth, rather than their victimization (Mayo, 2014, 2017). While schools can seem like lonely, unsafe, and scary places for LGBTQIA+ students, musical and theatrical experiences may offer spaces where sexuality and gender diversity can be explored and celebrated through rehearsal and performance (McBride, 2017; Pascoe, 2011). As a performer, I have found that musical theater has afforded me opportunities to explore issues regarding my sexuality and gender identity. As a result of the performance-based research presented in this article, I have concluded that research and pedagogical development is needed to better understand how musical and theatrical performance might be used to provide LGBTQIA+ students with empowering and educative experiences in the classroom and on stage.

LGBTQIA+ Research in Music Education

Authors like Bergonzi (2009), Allsup and Shieh (2012), and Palkki (2016) have challenged music educators to be aware of LGBTQIA+ issues as well as be mindful of their colleagues and students who identify as sexuality-diverse and gender-diverse individuals. Researchers have found that gay and lesbian pre-service music teachers experiences with student teaching were heavily influenced by school climate and cooperating teacher support (Paparo & Sweet, 2014; Sweet & Paparo, 2011). Inquiry regarding intersectionality has also been explored; Carter (2013) wrote about how sexuality and race have a profound effect on music students in

Historically Black Colleges and Universities while Taylor & Zeke (2017) discussed how religion and geographic location, particularly living in a rural community, play into LGBTQIA+ musicians' identities. McBride (2016) explored how gay choral directors negotiated gender roles within their classrooms.

A growing body of literature has emerged regarding trans*+ issues in music education. Research has been published inquiring about the K-12 school experiences of transgender youth (Nichols, 2011; Palkki, 2016), the music making experiences in and out of school for non-binary individuals (Kruse, 2016), gender transition experiences while in college and student teaching (Bartolome, 2016), and the educational and social implications of conferences that serve to teach about trans*+ singing voice (Cayari, 2019).

A content analysis of three symposia on LGBTQ+ studies in music education by Bergonzi, Carter, and Garrett (2016) identified prominent topics of interest for researchers in music education: coming out; negotiating the closet; in-service music teacher preparation; gender and sexuality diversity in schools; and gender performance, identity, and expression. They found nearly 40% of the studies presented at these symposia were case studies, a method which can allow for researchers to "branch out in exploratory ways to map areas of inquiry that are underdeveloped or unexamined" (Barrett, 2014, p. 130). To add to this body of literature, I explored my lived experiences growing up in music education and how my identity as a musician, educator, and researcher intersected with my sexuality, religious affiliations, and activism for marginalized communities. I chose to adapt Tami Spry's (2011) methodology of performative autoethnography to critically reflect and problematize the way society has affected my identity, context, and experiences.

Method: Autoethnography and Musical Performance as a Venue for Social Change

LGBTQIA+ individuals are marginalized within schools and music education, and Talbot (2017) insisted that as educators, "we must account for access and power, examining both the personalized individual experiences of marginalization and privilege and consider theoretically the broader structural components that contribute to these experiences" (p. 6). Therefore, I used performative autoethnography (Spry, 2011) as a method to better understanding my personal marginalization and privilege throughout my life as a queer music student, educator, and researcher.

Autoethnography is one of many author-centric, reflective approaches in academic research that utilize 'my story'-like methods to explore LGBTQIA+ issues. Examples of LGBTQIA+ auto-research styles include but are not limited to ethnodramas (Saldaña, 2005), monologues (Hughes & Román, 1998), memoirs (Miller & Rodriguez, 2016), and theoretical critique (Talbot, 2017). Autoethnographies, mostly text-based, have allowed music education

researchers to inquire about topics such as race and class (Kruse, 2015; Thompson, 2015; Thornton, 2017), pedagogy (Gouzouasis et al., 2014; Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015; Harrison, 2012), performance style (Ng, 2011), and research methodologies and ethics (Nichols, 2016). manovski's (2014) autoethnography combined narrative, verse, and visual art work to chronicle his life as a person who did not always conform to the norms of his musical contexts. The medium I chose to pursue was the dramatic stage because musical theater has been integral to my identity as a student, performer and educator. Like many of my music education readers, my love for what I teach started with performing. It is my desire to see research in music education incorporate high quality performance with rigorous methodology, and this endeavor is an example of how autoethnography link those two things.

The dominant narrative of the music used in most classrooms and ensembles privilege heteronormativity (Bergonzi, 2009) and the lyrics and historical narratives accompanying the repertoire most use to teach are cisgender/gender binary in nature (Palkki & Caldwell, 2018). Tami Spry (2011) proposed that performative autoethnography "interrupts dominant narratives .... by offering a performance that breaks normative patternized [sic] behaviours and remakes stories that transgress dominant power relations" (p. 57). Furthermore, Saldaña (2005) insisted that "*Theatre's primary goal is to entertain — to entertain ideas as it entertains its spectators*" (p. 14, italics in original). With those two quotes in mind, I aimed through this study to create an entertaining and informative experience for my audiences and readers that was also sound in its scholarship. Thus, autoethnography was a logical choice as my vehicle for challenging LGBTQIA+ discourse. My guiding question was: how might performing repertoire allow for me to strengthen and explore my identity as an LGBTQIA+ person? After better understanding my own identity, I considered how musical theater repertoire was used as a catalyst for my reflection on marginalization. These questions allowed me to contemplate how musical repertoire might be used to challenge social and political norms in educational institutions.

Performative Autoethnography

This performative autoethnography adapted the methodology developed by Spry (2011) in *Body, Paper, Stage*, a performance-based research method in which the researcher's lived experiences, or *body,* are the data; the iterative process of reflecting on and analyzing those experiences for writing a script is branded as *paper*; and an amalgamation of the experiences and interpretations are performed on *stage*. Performative autoethnography begets a narrative in which a researcher reflects upon their "personal and political intersections/engagements/negotiations with others in culture/history/society" (Spry, 2011, p. 53). This is done by identifying static, socially constructed norms such as lack of representation of LGBTQIA+ voices in music education curricula. This study seeks to interrupt the privileging and performance of norms in music education by critiquing the *status*

quo and power structures that support heteronormativity.

Body. Butler (1988), whose writings popularized the term *performative,* suggested in considering the theatrical stage, that "gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status" (p. 520). To apply performativity to a performance-based study, Spry (2006, 2011) asserted that a performative "I" disposition can help the researcher better understand their body's negotiation of self, other, and culture. Performative autoethnography "invites [the audience/reader] toward an examination of how we *co-performatively function* within a particular sociocultural/political/historical context to (re)make meaning that illustrates the complex dialogical negotiations between selves and others in cultural contexts" (p. 59). Furthermore, when at a performance, audiences experience the researcher's body and words as a thick description of their context and engagement within society.

Musical theater repertoire served as a catalyst for reflection upon my performativity as an LGBTQIA+ person in music education. I turned to (1) my *iTunes* library, (2) my collection of *Selected Songs* from piano/vocal scores, (3) *Google*, and (4) my former voice teacher and mentor for a list of repertoire that depicted LGBTQIA+ characters. As I listened to and sang through countless songs, I thought about what the songs meant to me. I identified the main topics of each song and reflected on how each could represent milestones in my life: discovering my sexuality, coming out, wrestling with faith, accepting myself, performing LGBTQIA+ music, and working with students of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. I focused on six songs that spanned 29 years of musical theater history.[4] Each song was selected because it corresponded to the topics listed above. Also, I found these selections to be aesthetically fulfilling. Interpreting, preparing, and memorizing the repertoire engrained the songs into my life. I went from a passive listener to the embodiment of what the songs were portraying.

Paper. Learning the repertoire served to discover, uncover, and recover my thoughts as I wrote prose and verse that were enmeshed with lyrics that evolved into monologues to perform between the songs. Like manovski (2014), I thought about "numerous stories from my own life in an effort to understand particular phenomena in my life" and then "chose

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[4] Songs included, in order of performance, "Crazytown" from *35mm:A Musical Exhibition* by Ryan Scott Oliver (2012); "Epiphany" from *Altar Boyz* by Gary Adler and Michael Patrick Walker (2007); "Role of a Lifetime" from *Bare: A Pop Opera* by Damon Intrabartolo (2008); "I Am What I Am" from *La Cage aux Folles* by Jerry Herman (1983); "I'll Cover You (Reprise)" from *Rent* by Jonathan Larson (1996); "Thirteen" and "Becoming a Man" from *13* by Jason Robert Brown (2009).

stories that best represented and portrayed the emergent themes and recrafted them into a narrative. . . [to] communicate the larger issues and developments that emerged from my experience" (p. xv). Five compositional elements (Spry, 2011, p. 127) were considered when creating the script. First, I sought to understand my sociocultural context by examining the societal and political expectations, norms, power systems, values, and beliefs I experienced in US K-12 school and academic institutions. Second, critical self-reflection challenged me to look inward at my image, behaviors, choices, and motivations. Third, self-other interactions were considered as I examined my role within social groups, how my interactions with others affected societal and political norms, and the patterns that came from my interactions with others. Fourth, how my body was/is read by society was examined as I identified areas in which I was privileged or marginalized; this also included the physical and emotional ramifications of my situatedness as LGBTQIA+ within performance and music education. Finally, an ethical mindset was established as I wrote the script to make sure I represented not only myself truthfully, but also other people who influenced my story.

Stage. Bringing the script to the stage involves the creation and execution of an aesthetic performance that presents the script in a way that affords the audience a heuristic experience (Spry, 2011). I spent many practice sessions crying over the music; the lyrics became part of my body/self, mind, script, and story. I did not experience a linear progression regarding body, paper, and stage, but a process that resembled a braid that interwove the three phases. For example, the composition of the script affected my life and intensified or diminished certain moments I had experienced in my body/self. Public performances provided insight for this article (another form of paper) and fueled further reflection of data and writing. This iterative interconnectedness exemplifies how autoethnography goes beyond simply story telling.

The Evolution of Who Am I? I Am What I Am!

When I first created the script for this autoethnography, I thought it would never change. However, as I performed it in different venues for various audiences with multiple casts and recordings, I saw an evolution that exemplified the *body* exploration Spry (2011) discussed. Each performance changed me and the piece was no longer simply a performative autoethnography that exemplified what Butler (1988) might have considered an identity exercise that responded to the societal pressures to which I was subjected. This research also became a *transformative* autoethnography that changed my fundamental being, thoughts, and world view. To help the reader see how this autoethnography evolved, Figure 1 below presents a timeline from the study's inspiration in 2015 to when it was published as this article in 2019.

A History of *Who Am I? I Am What I Am!*

2015
November – Call for papers was announced for the LGBTQ Studies and Music Education Symposium III at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
December – Christopher [the author] proposed a session, *Finding voice, musical theater, and LGBTQ+ repertoire: A performative autoethnography*, which was accepted by the program committee.

2016
January – Christopher conducted the research and wrote the original script. Rehearsals with accompanist began for the first performance.
February – A cast of four singers and a pianist (three current students and two former fellow performers) were assembled for the performance at the symposium.
May – The first performance entitled *Finding My Voice* was presented in front of conference attendees, family, and friends.

2017
April – Christopher applied for and was awarded an ASPIRE grant from the College of Liberal Arts at Purdue University that funded the recording of the 2017 live-recorded video performance, a mastered audio version, and accompaniment track for future shows.
May – Christopher performed excerpts at the *International Congress for Qualitative Inquiry*.
October – Show was renamed *Who Am I? I Am What I Am!* and the 2017 live performance was recorded at Purdue.
November – Christopher was awarded a CREATE grant from the College of Liberal Arts at Purdue University to travel to universities across the US and perform a one-person version of the show.

2018
January – Christopher and musicians worked with *Wave Upon Wave Recording Studio* in Champaign, IL to record an audio version and accompaniment tracks.
March – Christopher performed *Who Am I? I Am What I Am!* for the first time as a one-person show with a talk-back at Western University in Ontario, Canada. Christopher also presented excerpts at the National Association for Music Education conference titled *Coming Out To My Profession*.
October – The 2018 live performance of *Who Am I? I Am What I Am!* was recorded by a three-person camera crew at Purdue and featured an expanded accompaniment ensemble and professional choreographers.
September-February – A 2018-2019 tour started in September at the University of Illinois and continued in October at University of Massachusetts-Amherst and University of Connecticut. It continued in February, and the show was performed at Columbia University (New York), New York University, University of West Virginia, and Gettysburg College (Pennsylvania). Each of these locations included a performance, talk-back session, and workshop on using music as a catalyst for social change.

2019
April – Christopher performed in Europe at the *Research in Music Education Conference* in Bath, UK.
June – Multimedia article published in *International Journal of Education and the Arts*.

Figure 1. Timeline for the evolution of the present study

The Limits and Lenses of Autoethnography

Questions during talk-back sessions after public performances led to conversations about validity. I must remind my audience and readers that this research tells the story of an individual. The study of any case is not grounds for generalization across a population (Stake, 1995). However, evocative autoethnographies are told so the audience can take the story of the researcher and translate the applicable implications to their lives (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

Qualitative researchers seek to validate or triangulate the experiences of their participants (Creswell, 2011). Is there any informant as trustworthy as the one that experienced the data in their own body? Autoethnography should aim to share the lived experiences and epiphanies of the researcher-participant. Ultimately, Spry (2006) asserted that "a performer's fundamental interest is the dialogue that takes place between self and the text in rehearsal, and between persona and the audience in performance" (p. 185). With that, I share my story.

Results

The reader/audience can experience the data for this study through one or more multimedia formats. If you prefer to experience the data like it would be found in a traditional research article, continue forward without clicking on any of the links. If you would prefer to read the original script of this performance-based research, <u>you may read the script following this article</u>, which paid careful attention to the spatiality of text and theatrical aesthetic. You may watch either of the performances recorded at my home institution of Purdue University, West Lafayette from the <u>2017 cast</u>, an unedited recording of a stage performance featuring an ensemble of a soloist, eight singers, and a pianist, or the <u>2018 cast</u>, which featured a larger company including an instrumental combo that spliced together three camera feeds by a video director and producer. Finally, you could listen to a <u>mastered audio version</u>[5] of the presentation, complete with sound effects, musical theater repertoire, and dramatic reading. The text below addresses how I was introduced to the repertoire, synopses of the songs within the context of the musicals, and reflections of my body/self. Each song was a catalyst for challenging the norms of society and how my sexuality affected my educational context.

Discovering My Sexuality in "Crazytown"

Introduction. I was introduced to *35mm: A Musical Exhibition* (Oliver, 2012) while serving as a teaching assistant for a course on singing in musical theater. I was asked to rehearse and direct the ensemble number "Crazytown." Because of my reputation as a director who does

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[5] Streaming media is linked to the title of each song and the reflections in the headers throughout so readers/audiences can listen to the performance between/while reading sections of the data.

not shy away from conversations about sexuality and encourages discussion about the topic, I was identified as someone who was able to tackle risqué issues. I had directed *The Rocky Horror Show* the previous semester and was afforded the honor of producing this number tackling queer sexuality and identity.

Synopsis. The musical theater song cycle, *35mm: A Musical Exhibition,* features 15 songs, each inspired by photographic art. The photo that inspired "Crazytown" superimposed a person's face over itself; the face to right, stoic and bland, while the one on the left was screaming. The soloist tries to make sense of his sexuality through the stories of famous literary heroines: Alice in Wonderland, Dorothy in Oz, Lucy in Narnia, and Wendy in Neverland. The song begins with a disjunct chorus chanting non-sense. The soloist proclaims, "There's a hole inside my brain,"[6] and identifies himself as an "idol boy." The company and accompaniment provide a jerky and menacing cacophony of sounds as the soloist sings about running away, sexual fantasies, and the destruction of his world. His sexuality and gender expression are complex as he likens himself to Alice by chanting, "In the pocket of my dress, I've got an eight-inch copper key. Dunno the door it goes with but the fact is killing me. . . . I go door to door to door and woe is me." As he searches to understand his sexuality, he finds himself in "Crazytown."

Reflection on discovering my sexuality: <u>Trapped</u> & <u>On My Own</u>. When I was a young teen, I had no role models who told me that gay was okay. In my world, gay was non-existent. The media was silent in my sheltered suburban society. So, discovering my sexuality felt like nonsensical fantasy. Alice, Dorothy, Wendy, and Lucy were heroines whose experiences made more sense than the confusion inside my 14-year-old head. My world turned upside down when I stumbled across gay pornography on the Internet. Everything I knew about relationships was challenged when I realized two boys could connect sexually. The *click, click, click* of my computer mouse was the only thing to be heard in my livingroom that evening. I traveled to places a young teen should avoid. I sat exposed, seeing, consuming, and discovering images I did not know were possible. In a fantasy world of pornographic ecstasy, I found my sexuality. It was intriguing, raw, and uncensored. I do not remember what brought me to those first websites on my America Online (AOL) Internet browser, but I was left to discover, explore, and accept (or deny) my sexuality on my own. My sex education was provided by disembodied screen names on AOL chat rooms and message boards.

I learned at a very young age how to live a double life: a gay life that was manifested on the Internet, and a straight – actually, the correct word would be normative – life in which I

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[6] All quotations in the data section are taken from the song in the heading of each reflection.

avoided all references to sexuality. I was lonely when I started high school. My virtual life gave me a connection to others, but I craved face-to-face interactions. Consequently, I turned to God and faith to provide camaraderie. I never heard anyone in my church talk negatively about two boys who loved each other. But then again, I never heard anyone talk about it at all.

Sexuality and Religion Led Me to an "Epiphany"

Introduction. I was elated to discover *Altar Boyz* (Adler & Walker, 2007) while I was a K-12 Christian school music teacher. The musical was about a Catholic boy band. I developed an obsession with the show and saw it 10 times in a four-month period, often organizing informal trips with students' families. My school had a policy prohibiting homosexuality for both faculty and students, so I was not out. However, since *Altar Boyz* did not have an explicitly out gay character, it was easy to get students and parents to come see the show with me.

Synopsis. *Altar Boyz* tells the story of five young men who received the calling to be musical pop stars representing God as they traveled the nation trying to reduce the number of burdened souls in the audience by singing about the Christian Gospels. Near the end of the show, Mark, an effeminate and flamboyant character, has an "epiphany" as he tells the audience how he was picked on in grade school for being different. He then begins his song, "I look into your eyes, and I see the pain you hold inside. Aren't you tired of the lies you tell so you can hide?" Mark continues, "You won't truly be you until you can say, 'I … Am…'" The song has a grand pause, and the audience expects Mark to say, "Gay." Instead, the song launches into a four-minute declaration of faith.

Reflection on declaring my spirituality: <u>Of Course</u> & <u>My Two Masters</u>. This song overwhelmed me the first time I heard it. I sat in the theater with my students waiting for the character to tell us his big secret. Yet, Mark sang, "I . . . am . . . a Catholic." This prompted me to ask myself some reflective questions: was I pretending or genuine, alone or surrounded, certain or confused, hiding or exposed? I was unaware of the pain, the hatred, the struggle, the heartache, the prejudice, the uncertainty, and the incompatibility of my sexuality and faith. The binaries became more prominent in my mind: the more I loved God, the more I hated my sexuality; right and wrong; sin and piety; Christian and gay.

The dissonance between my faith and sexuality started many years prior. I came out to my youth leader as gay when I was 16 years old. She said, "You know, God wants more for you than that." My response was, "Of course, I do." She told me that God had a wife picked out just for me. Of course, He did. She reassured me that she would never give up on me. Of course, she would not. Everything in my life became "of course, of course, of course." But I no longer felt alone. The love of people from my church replaced the disembodied texts. I had a community and an identity where I was celebrated as a person, spirit, and musician. I

declared, "I am a [Christian]. Yes, I am. God doesn't make mistakes, and he made me." This is how I was meant to be.

But living a double life was no easy way to live. The acceptance of my faith led to the questioning of my sexuality. The words of Jesus rang loudly in my ears, "No one can serve two masters." While I declared to be a Christian, I continued to lead a gay existence online. The two identities creating turmoil in my heart. For years, I suppressed my feelings towards other men. I tried dating a few women, but those situations always ended up with me hurting their feelings after the first date. When I eventually accepted my sexuality, I had an existential crisis and doubted my faith.

Trying to Perform the "Role of a Lifetime"

Introduction. While teaching at a rural high school, I was in a community theater production of *Hairspray*. Three of my cast mates and I would hang out in a car after rehearsal and belt showtunes. My friends were obsessed with a musical called *Bare: A Pop Opera* (Intrabartolo, 2008). After hearing two young men sing a love song, I knew I had to learn the entire soundtrack.

Synopsis. Peter and Jason have been roommates at their Catholic boarding school for years. Their relationship becomes complicated during their senior year. The two best friends are hiding that their friendship goes beyond being strictly platonic. Jason, the popular kid in school, feels pressure from Peter who wants to tell his mother about their relationship. After Jason pushes him away in the middle of the hallway, Peter laments about how both he and especially Jason are playing the "Role of a Lifetime."

Reflections on living a double life: <u>Expectations</u> & <u>Finding My Voice</u>. As a devout Christian, who worked at a Christian school, led Christian worship, and had plenty of Christian friends, I prayed day after day that God would take away my attraction towards other men. Guilt and shame overshadowed my search for piety and holiness. The struggle made me feel like I was taking spiritual steps downward into the abyss of hell. "You learn to play the straight man. Your lines become routine, never really saying what you mean. But I know this scene will change." These lyrics could have been taken directly from my journal. At least, I hoped it would change. When considering my faith and my sexuality, all I felt was confusion and uncertainty. All I heard was silence.

My virtual support group gave way to the "days of silent fear and the nights of lonely prayer, 'God I need your guidance. Tell me what it means to live a life where nothing's as it seems.'" My life was full of suppression, denial, and anxiety. I could not speak about sexuality at school: not at the Christian school, not at the public schools. I had to live up to the expectations of others and attain the dream: "White picket fences and a dog, a trophy bride,

and children." But, "what happens when the music stops? In the silence, will [I] stay? One day [I may] realize that these feelings aren't going away." I was constantly bending, ending, pretending, and overextending. "Thoughts battle[d] words over deeds, a war with such casualties!". The denial of my heart's desire eroded my soul. Yet, as I accepted who I was, I questioned if my faith and my sexuality were compatible in my life. The scales that weighed the ties to my two masters eventually tipped. I walked away from my faith and found serenity in accepting myself as a gay man.

Accepting Myself and Realizing "I Am What I Am"

Introduction. It was difficult deciding which repertoire would best serve my reflections, script, and personal growth. All the other songs in this project had been a part of my life in deep, meaningful ways. However, the other songs accentuated the queer experience as one of isolation, alienation, and loss. I emailed a mentor to ask for help finding a song about acceptance and empowerment. She sent me a list of six songs. "I Am What I Am" (Herman, 1983) stood out because of its lyrics and musical form. I never would have guessed it would become my most empowering song.

Synopsis. Albin, also known as a drag queen named Zaza, is the headliner at the nightclub *La Cage aux Folles*. Albin has filled a motherly role for Jean-Michel, the biological son of their partner Georges. Jean-Michel wants to introduce his fiancée to Georges and hopes that Albin will peacefully abstain from being present. When the news is broken to Albin, the anticipated reaction is rage and fury. Instead, Albin clears the stage and sings a soliloquy to his lover stating, "I Am What I Am!".

Reflecting on accepting myself for who I am: <u>What Am I?</u>, <u>A Part of Me</u>, & <u>Not Just Pixels</u>. It was easy to accept myself as a gay performer. I could even accept myself as a gay educator, but I struggled to find my voice as a gay researcher. While attending a conference, I met a fellow music education graduate student who identified as a queer woman. We had many things in common including a fear of pursuing LGBTQIA+ issues in academia because we did not want to be known as "*gay* researchers," whatever that meant. But being around her and others like us made me realize I was not alone. I found a community of gay researchers, musicians, and educators who told stories that were similar to my experiences. I slowly realized how much I stifled my own voice. I had to ask myself: Who am I? What am I? What voice do I want to present to others? I had to come to grips with who and what I am. But, no one ever told me what "I am" before.

What am I?: "I bang my own drum. I deal my own deck." My "life is a sham." I was searching and seeking for my voice. "It's my world that I want to take a little pride in. My world, and it's not a place I have to hide in. . . . I am what I am." I am musician, educator, and

researcher. I'm a gay researcher. I'm a gay researcher who writes about gay issues. But I hate coming out. I do not like labels. To put my sexuality so explicitly on paper in a journal article is terrifying. The lyrics from the song became a mantra for me: "I am what I am." I used to believe that gay research would trump the rest of my work. When writing, I sought to minimize my *personal* voice so that the voice of an academic author could shine through. However, the experiences in my body through this research have shown how my voice is part of my work, whether I am writing about LGBTQIA+ issues or not. It is my voice. It is who I am. What am I? I need to constantly remember, "[My] life is a sham till [I] can shout out loud, 'I am what I am!'"

Realizing my Dream through "I'll Cover You (Reprise)"

Introduction. I was 16 years old and my cousin invited me to see *Rent* (Larson, 1996). As soon as he invited me, I got the Original Broadway Cast recording and delved into a world I did not really understand. A week later, we arrived at the theater at 6AM, and we waited for 12 hours to purchase $20 front row student rush tickets. When the show started, the flashing lights, the heart wrenching drama, and the powerful music mesmerized me. It was the first time I saw two men kiss outside of the internet. It helped me realize that gay relationships were not just pixels on a computer screen.

Synopsis. Tom Collins, a gay man living with AIDS, is mugged and left beaten on the street. A bucket drummer named Angel finds him and offers to bandage his wounds. Collins is apprehensive because he has autoimmune deficiency syndrome. Collins's confession of his status is met with nonchalance, because Angel is also HIV positive. The two fall in love and dream of moving across the country to open up their own restaurant. Unfortunately, their relationship is short-lived as Angel succumbs to the virus. At Angel's funeral Collins sings a reprise of their love song from the first act.

Reflection on portraying someone like me: <u>On Stage</u> & <u>Realizations</u>. Ten years after I saw *Rent* with my cousin, I was cast as Tom Collins in a community theater production of *Rent*. It was my first gay role. I was finally able to be on stage playing someone like me. I asked myself again: What am I? I'm an actor. I'm a gay actor. I'm a gay actor who portrays gay characters. My character sang, "I've longed to discover something as true as this is." I stood on stage weeping, utterly broken for thousands to see. I had never been able to express myself the way I felt carrying my lover's dead body across stage night after night, feeling the hurt and sorrow of goodbye over and over again. Pain overtook me and the character I portrayed, but I had never felt so free. I had never felt so fulfilled.
By conducting this study, I realized how portraying Tom Collins helped me understand moments of my history. Learning the repertoire and evolving my character provided a venue for me to freely express myself and explore my context and experiences. While I was

preparing to take the stage as Tom Collins, I was told of a local high school theater troupe that was performing the student version of *Rent.* At the time, I vehemently opposed the idea of high school students presenting theater that focused on LGBTQIA+ issues. It was not their place. They were not ready for the complex and sensitive issues my adult friends and I were tackling less than two miles away. They knew nothing of HIV, death, and the struggle for sexual rights.

Yet now, as I look back, I realize I was wrong. These students had the opportunity not to be silenced. They were allowed to see that relationships do not always look like Maria and Tony, Link Larkin and Tracy Turnblad, or even the dysfunctional Sweeney Todd and Ms. Lovett. A brave educator and his students went out on a limb to explore the stories of Collins, Angel, Roger, Mimi, Mark, Maureen, and Joanne.

"Becoming a Man" and What it feels like to be "Thirteen"

Introduction. The music of Jason Robert Brown captured my heart when I was a junior in undergraduate college. I discovered his music at a children's choir camp for which I was a counselor. His music became a deeper part of my life when I performed a set of his compositions for my senior recital, a task that was outside the box for my small Christian College. After losing track of his career, I wanted to catch up a decade later by acquiring his soundtracks. That is when I discovered *13* (Brown, 2009).

Synopsis. *13* is a musical about a party celebrating the bar mitzva of Evan Goldman. In the first musical montage, Evan laments about how it feels to be a "Thirteen" year-old and how awkward it is "Becoming a Man." While these two songs do not portray an LGBTQIA+ character and are not written by someone from that community, they provided the opportunity for me to re-imagine what it felt like being a student navigating adolescence and young adulthood.

Reflecting on being 13 and becoming a man: <u>Scary Wild Ride</u>. I have always advocated for my sexuality-diverse and gender-diverse students. Yet, as a practitioner, I did little to share the voices of LGBTQIA+ characters with them. I was afraid I would get in trouble. I thought that I would be forced to come out in my own classroom. However, through preparing this performative research, I have realized that I grew up without a voice to express my sexuality. As a young teacher, I stifled not only my own voice, but the voices of my students. As I made my journey, I felt alone, left to fend for myself, with no examples of what it meant to be a gay man. Now, I believe educators should share repertoire portraying a variety of sexual identities that can help their students grapple with issues as they find their own voices and develop understandings that are sensitive to all people.

In growing up, there are no rules; there are no rights or wrongs. I imagine one of my students singing the lyrics of this song:

> I'm becoming a man. I don't know what 'a man' really means. The rulebook grows, but no one knows what all the rules allow. No one tells all us scared in-betweens just how we should be strong, be good, with so much pressure now!

When I was growing up, I remember thinking, "One day it gets better. One day it makes sense. One day I'll stop talking in the friggin' future tense. One day . . . it'll all be great, and I can't wait!". What a scary thing it is to become an adult. It was a shame I lived through adolescence with no one to help me along the way. It was a scary, wild ride. This research moves me to make sure that students in today's education system have role models and educators who can help them realize that they are worthy. They can be empowered! They can be who they are, regardless of their gender identity or sexuality!

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

A Transformative Journey through Reflexive Musical Practices

The interaction between body, paper, and stage was transformative in my life. Choosing repertoire as a catalyst for reflection on my educational context was my first step, which led to deeper reflection of lyrics as I committed the songs to memory, and they became part of my language and mind. I could not escape them as they attached themselves to me. As I poured over my script, it became solidified in my heart, mind, and soul; I began to understand myself more. I realized how I ignored the ways I was marginalized while growing up. I then unconsciously imposed this learned oppression on myself as a young educator, thus perpetuating that oppression onto my students. I did not realize I was marginalized or oppressed. I simply accepted my situation and moved forward the best I could. This autoethnography helped me find agency in reflecting, writing, and telling my story.

I was able to connect this research to how I felt the first time I was on stage portraying a gay character. Performing on stage as a gay character was pivotal in accepting myself as a gay man and musician. By reexperiencing those moments on stage, I was able to accept myself as a gay researcher who writes about LGBTQIA+ issues. The performative-I persona I developed compels me to divulge my identity on stage so that I can tell others about the experiences of my body/self and hope they can extrapolate something of value.

Autoethnography's Many Uses

Autoethnography could be used to allow researchers, educators, and students to explore core elements of their lived experiences. Educators could teach autoethnographic methods in their classrooms to help students find their voices, challenge oppressions, and problematize the

dominant narratives in society and politics. Arts educators and the students we teach can take steps toward changing the dominant narratives that alienate by reflecting on sociocultural contexts, self-other interactions, their body/self within society, and ethicsthrough the development of critical self-reflection skills. Studies should be conducted to see how students construct meaning, deal with pain, overcome oppression, and prepare for future actions inspired by their autoethnographies. Allowing students to use repertoire they select or compose to be a catalyst for self-reflection may develop a sense of autonomy and ownership over their performance practices. I hope to continue using musical theater repertoire to dis/un/re/cover my lived experiences regarding gender roles, heteronormativity, and race. Performative autoethnography could also be adapted to incorporate instrumental music, song writing, and interpretive dance. One joy of the stage is that it is so versatile.

A Need for More Voices

This interdisciplinary research used qualitative methods that resulted in data disseminated through musical and theatrical performance. When people experience this project in a performance venue, they are challenged by seeing my story come to life through physical bodies and voices that compel them to hear, experience, and feel. With the lack of representation of sexuality-diverse and gender-diverse individuals in school curricula, often relegated by educational policy, more theory and research on how to appropriately resolve this problem is necessary. Practical examples need to be developed for the classroom. This project challenges professors, administrators, and other educational professionals to consider how sexuality affects LGBTQIA+ individuals in their classrooms and encourages them to appropriately represent this population in their curricula. This performative autoethnography embodies music written by and performed by LGBTQIA+ people and afforded me a venue for exploration and musical performance that served as a transformative agent. This process can and should be encouraged for students in educational and performance settings. LGBTQIA+ repertoire can empower audiences, but its influence extends to performers as they explore the experiences of people from diverse sexuality and gender identities. It is my hope that those who are influential in the formation of educational policy, curricula, and instruction insist that the LGBTQIA+ community is not left out of students' learning experiences. This is to say that sexuality-diverse and gender-diverse people should be appropriately represented and seen as integral parts of our society and communities.

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