



# “What are you, gay?” Positioning in monologues written and performed by members of a gay-straight alliance

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## ABSTRACT

We use Positioning Theory to examine monologues written and performed by LGBTQ youth and allies. The paper considers how youth positioned themselves in relation to grand narratives concerning gender and sexuality. Through analysis of representational, interactional (Wortham, 2001), and other forms of positioning, we show how youth powerfully spoke back to these grand narratives while creating meaning relevant to identity construction. We analyze two types of stories—stories of activism and of silencing/rejection—and demonstrate how youth resisted the first-order positioning of them as straight; re-defined the nature of “activism”; and enacted the carnivalesque as described by Bakhtin. We consider implications of the findings for educators working to support LGBTQ youth.

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## 1. Introduction

*“See, I have friends who kick around the word fag like it’s a fucking football and even though I know I could respect their right to take it back I can feel the history of centuries of hate thought and hate speech raining down on me, where, I swear, I can feel the blows fall on Matthew Shepherd and Brandon Teena and Lateisha Green as their attackers shout the word in time with the wailing of their fists—but I say nothing.” – Anne*

*“The truth is I can’t hide who I am. There’s no way for me to pretend to be straight or act straight; I’ll always be one of those people who you look at or hear talk and suddenly a flash of a slot machine is in your head and all three spaces are coming up ‘Fruit, Fruit, Fruit.’” – Atticus/Addy*

Anne and Atticus shared their stories as members of a gay-straight alliance (GSA), called “Prism,” at Pine Hills University (all names are pseudonyms). Prism members crafted a performance they called “Fantastic People Talking,” modeled after *The Vagina Monologues* (Ensler, 1998). As part of the event, held in 2009 and 2010, a subset of Prism members wrote and performed monologues and skits about their experiences as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning), allies, and members of other marginalized groups. Participants shared stories about coming out, about almost coming out, about rejection and acceptance. They told stories about falling in love and about hiding love—from parents, from friends, from drill mates in ROTC (U.S. military Reserve Officers’ Training Corps). They told stories about building community and changing minds—their own, and those of others.

The examination of such stories is significant, for “autobiographical accounts and personal narratives can offer ways to explore the multiplicity and complexity of social identities of a [narrator] and allow the narrator to represent themselves

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to the hearer or reader in ways that reveal an ongoing process of identity construction” (Rodriguez & Polat, 2012, p. 364). These monologues provide a glimpse into the ways the youth used language and narrative to position themselves and others through writing, performances, and around reconstruction of past events. The students’ narratives, and the positioning acts within them, help educators better understand the dynamics that mark both the ways in which the youth were marginalized, and the ways in which they resisted that marginalization.

The monologues also demonstrate how youth invoked and resisted various cultural or “grand” narratives—the overarching narratives that guide our behavior, expectations, and beliefs in culturally-specific ways. Consider, for example, how cultural narratives regarding an individual’s ability to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” guide behavior, expectations, and beliefs. Grand narratives may be based in individual stories (e.g., J.D. Rockefeller, or the tales of Horatio Alger), but they also take on broader cultural significance. Grand narratives<sup>2</sup> “give our lives meaning. . . All cultural identities. . . are informed by particular stories” (McLaren, 1993, p. 203). But even as such narratives construct and represent, they can also exclude or constrain particular identities and ways of being. In this paper, we will examine the narratives shared through students’ monologues, asking: How did youth position themselves and others in their narratives? How did they represent how they are positioned by others? What grand narratives were invoked, resisted or otherwise made evident through this positioning?

## 2. Perspectives on narrative

### 2.1. Narratives and position, representation, and interaction

Wortham (2001) posits that when people share narratives, they position themselves both *representationally* and *interactionally*. Wortham (2001) argues that researchers examining personal narrative have traditionally focused on representational positioning: the ways “narrative can shape the self of the narrator by *describing* him or her as a certain type of person”—a type of person that the narrator might then be more likely to embody (p. xi). Yet researchers have paid less attention to the interactional power of narratives. Wortham writes, “In telling a story, the narrator adopts a certain interactional position—and in acting like that kind of person becomes more like that kind of person” (p. 9). For example, in the narratives examined here, some youths *represented* themselves as activists within their stories. They also, though, positioned themselves as activists *interactionally* as they publicly shared their stories in an activist-oriented event. This interactional positioning would also involve the actions that led up to that moment: the activist work required to form the GSA sponsoring the event; the preparation for the event; the writing and re-writing of the narratives.

Analysis of autobiographical narratives, Wortham (2001) contends, should examine both the representational and the interactional ways in which narrators position themselves. He also argues that the power of “autobiographical narratives often comes from the complex relations *across* the represented and enacted worlds” created by narrators (p. 13). In part, the power of narratives lies in *parallelism* across these two worlds—the parallelism, for example, between representing oneself as an activist and interactionally positioning oneself into that role.

Interactional positioning helps to highlight the dialogic elements of narrative—in particular, how speakers position themselves or others in storytelling events. Bakhtin (as cited in Morris, 1994) has noted that the word is only half our own. We carry within any utterance the echoes of previous dialogic interactions and voices, lending discourse its *multivoicedness*. Speakers’ responses are shaped by their interpretations of and responses to the utterances of others—those with whom they are speaking, but also those with whom they have spoken before, or even those from a broader social community. “Fantastic People Talking” provided an interesting intersection to examine how youth represented and enacted the self through various subject positions. The positions in their talk represented, constructed, and enacted their voices as gay or marginalized youth, but their narratives also resounded with the voices of others.

In addition to perspectives from Wortham and Bakhtin, we were also influenced in our study by Positioning Theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Whereas Wortham speaks of the roles that participants may represent in autobiographical narratives, positioning theorists focus not on role, but on subject positions, and on the rights, duties, and obligations inherent in and shaped by social interaction (McVee, 2011). We see Positioning Theory as complementary to Wortham’s approach to the study of narrative since both perspectives focus on moment-by-moment discourse interactions and how narrators represent and construct the self in relationship to others. Such perspectives hold, as Maher and Tetreault note, that “People are defined not in terms of fixed identities, but by their locations within shifting networks of relationships, which can be analyzed and changed” (as cited in Misawa, 2010, p. 26). In addition, positioning theorists have identified numerous types of positioning that can assist with analysis of narratives but also in theorizing identity construction. For example, in educational settings a number of published studies examine positioning in contexts beyond moment-by-moment spoken interactions between speakers to consider positioning in student writing, in researcher-participant relationships, and in the choice and use of names imbued with cultural meaning (cf. Keegan, Abdullah-Fischer, & McVee, 2011). In addition, positioning theorists have applied Positioning Theory to explorations of historical data,

<sup>2</sup> Our use of the term “grand narratives” is derived from Lyotard’s (1984) description of large-scale theories or narratives that “legitimate” (xxiii) certain types of knowledge. Our use of this term draws from Lyotard’s definition: the grand narratives that we describe “legitimate” certain types of knowledge, assumptions, behaviors, and ways of being. We use the terms “grand narrative” and “metanarrative” interchangeably, although we recognize that others may not.

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