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Tales of a Fighting Bobcat: An “Auto-archaeology” of Gay Identity Formation and Maintenance

Ragan Fox

This essay lays the methodological foundation for a form of autoethnography that I describe as “auto-archaeology.” Auto-archaeology specifies a process by which an autoethnographer relies on institutional artifacts to interpret how a network of power relations affects individual identity formation and maintenance. In this essay, I reference artifacts from high school to demonstrate how institutional structures and discourses constrain and enable heterosexual and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender (LGBTQ) identities. I then consider three key ways that educational structures may better combat institutionalized homophobia.

Keywords: Archaeology; Autoethnography; Foucault; Gay and Lesbian; High School

Being there¹: September 10, 1990. I sit across from Mrs. Pryor,² my ninth grade guidance counselor, and try my best to explain why I want to be moved into a new English class. Her thin, red lips force a smile that spans the lower half of her chubby, pink face. She listens to me complain about the problems I endure in my fifth period class.

“Everyone in the class hates me!” I screech in a mid-puberty voice.

“I’m sure nobody hates you, Ragan. I can’t be expected to change schedules for every student who comes into my office and doesn’t like a class.”

“You don’t understand what I’m saying. They call me names and throw stuff at me. The other day, Marc Gonzales called me ‘faggot’ and punched me three times.”

“And your teacher ignores the violence,” she asks in an incredulous tone. One of her eyebrows arches up, while the other sinks closer to her eye.
“Well, Marc hit me before class started, so Mrs. Beene wasn’t even in the room; and the others throw stuff at me and call me names when she isn’t looking.”

“Ragan, I’m not going to change your schedule. You can either tell Mrs. Beene about your problems, or we can call the students into the assistant principal’s office and have a group meeting with them.”

“If I do either of those things, the problems will only get worse! Please help me!”

“It’s the beginning of the semester. I have a line of students waiting to see me. I’m happy to help with either of the solutions I’ve mapped out for you, but I refuse to change your schedule.”

I hang my head low as I leave Mrs. Pryor’s office. I need an advocate, a person who empathizes with my struggle. Mrs. Pryor does not seem to understand that I endure something categorically different than run-of-the-mill bullying. My peers target me, because they think I am gay. How will I survive four years at Cy-Fair High School, “home of the fighting bobcat”? I use the term “survive” in its most literal sense. I have spent more than a few nights contemplating how likely I am to make it to senior year. Will I graduate? Attend college? Turn 21? Have a career? First, I have to make it through fifth period English and the terrible halls of screams, scowls, and punches that lead me there.

**Being here.** I wish students at my high school had a gay mentor. Chauncey argues that gay teachers positively change how students interact with and conceive of lesbian and gay people. I agree with Chauncey’s sentiments and hopeful outlook. I am currently an assistant professor of communication at a college in California. Teaching in the midst of the Prop. 8-era has re-affirmed my dedication to gay pedagogy. I include units on queer theory and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) history in each of the classes that I instruct. I am always shocked (but never surprised) to discover, upon entering a class, how little my students know about gay and lesbian history. Most have never heard of Stonewall, Harvey Milk, and ACT UP. I say that I am “shocked but never surprised” because I ripened on a similar vine. Students at Cy-Fair High School were never exposed to gay history. School board officials, teachers, and parents treated gay themes as if the topics were viral knowledge, or information that might expose students to the “homosexual lifestyle,” infect them with homosexuality, and then expand to the surrounding populace. To break down stereotypes of gay people, Cy-Fair needed a positive gay presence. Openly gay teachers and administrators were, unfortunately, nowhere to be found. Gay teachers challenge the unfounded and unfortunate myth that gay people seek to seduce children. Their presence transforms the “social imaginary of gay teacher as child molester into gay teacher as cultural worker” (Pryor 69).

Conversely, a lack of identifiable LGBTQ role models in high school settings dehumanizes gay people and, by extension, validates a hidden curriculum of anti-gay bullying. Gay autobiographical performers have dramatized the implications of this dangerous and homophobic state of affairs. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook recalls an instance of schoolyard violence in which older boys repeatedly jumped on and broke small bones in his feet. The horrific bout of violence occurred because his classmates
wanted him to admit that he was queer. Performance artists have also relied on first-person narratives to illustrate the positive impact of LGBTQ teachers. In his solo production “Stretch Marks,” Tim Miller describes his relationship with a Chicana German teacher named Fraulein Rodriguez, a lesbian woman who provided him with a gay-affirmative example of sexual “irregularity.”

Like performance artists, gay autoethnographers are uniquely positioned to interrogate how educational systems constrain and enable young, gay identities. Artifacts from high school may be used to enrich narration and other forms of autoethnographic reflection. The method of investigation is akin to an archaeological dig, where a close examination of “archaeological traces” (Brogden 854) reveals how one gay identity was performatively rendered in high school. Educational artifacts are “sites/sights of identity negotiation. They are sites of both my learning and my learning to teach” (855).

I am fortunate to have “packrats” for parents. My father and stepmother collected many significant documents from my childhood and stored them in large Rubbermaid containers. After my father died and my stepmother Joyce mailed me the files, I spent days sorting through old report cards, disciplinary write-ups, and high school photos. In this study, I reference high school artifacts to illuminate how the educational system affects gay identity formation and maintenance. I also consider the ways in which my gay identity performed an interventionist role at Cy-Fair High School. I then contemplate the theoretical and methodological implications of performing an “auto-archaeology.”

The Role of Artifacts in Autoethnography

Artifacts play a generative role in autoethnographic practices. Lace Marie Brogden connects artifacts to autoethnographic memory. “Art-I/f/act-ology,” according to Brogden, characterizes how the “autoethnographic I” (Ellis) is positioned between “art” and “act” (858). She references her childhood report cards to demonstrate how “artifacts of schooling are used to normalize curriculum” (860). “Autoethnography,” Brogden explains, “can be used to sift through and over archaeological digs of curriculum as lived, using artful writing for critical reflection” (860).

I characterize this form of autoethnography as auto-archaeology for two reasons. First, the term archaeology is a citational reference to Michel Foucault’s critical studies of disciplinary structures. For Foucault, archaeologies explain principles of ordering and exclusion in discursive systems. Archaeologies also demonstrate how a particular structure of relations constrains and enables identity (Foucault Order 218). In this study, I consider how a specific educational system describes, categorizes, and excludes gay students. Additionally, I rely on artifacts from Cy-Fair to investigate how the school’s discursive structures inhibit and promote different identity positions.

Discourse plays a performative role in gay identity construction and maintenance. The performative implications of heterosexist disciplinary structures and the artifacts that they produce merit consideration. The archaeological frame demonstrates how disciplinary mechanisms grease up the performative machine. Referencing a range of
artifacts, I argue that power is not in a fixed position (Foucault *Discipline*) but distributed and circulated throughout Cy-Fair. Power, at the “home of the fighting bobcat,” pulses through various institutional arteries. High schools, like Cy-Fair, overwhelmingly subject organizational members to a “hidden curriculum” (Lee and Gropper), or heterosexist agenda, that ignores gay themes in history, encourages teachers and administrators to ignore bullying of LGBTQ students (Douglas et al.), and forces LGBTQ educators to remain in the sexual “closet” (Atkinson). Many gay-identified teachers “fail to advocate for gay and questioning youth because they fear showing support for these students places their jobs in jeopardy” (Mayo 1).

The numerous and horrific implications of institutionalized homophobia call for immediate intervention. When compared to their heterosexual peers, gay and lesbian youth are significantly more likely to think about and attempt suicide (Silenzio et al.). Many young gay individuals also experience a form of “soul murder” (Yep 22). Yep suggests that heteronormative powers of regulation are “socially endorsed and culturally accepted” ways of policing LGBTQ youth and negatively affecting their emotional development (22). Building upon Foucault’s studies of sexuality, Biddulph argues that gay and lesbian youth “may find themselves at odds with the public persona of schools” because educational institutions are greatly influenced by discourses that “identify homosexuality as a pathology,” “present childhood as a time of innocence,” and “advocate the need to protect children in schools from ‘contaminating’ sexual knowledge” (16–17). Like many high schools, Cy-Fair functions as a primary site of socialization, where heterosexuality is taught to be the only viable option. Reflecting on the time I spent at Cy-Fair, I consider some of the ways in which the school, as an architectural structure and community, disciplined my gay body.

Archaeological metaphors foreground the role that artifacts play in helping researchers interpret cultural practices. The “sociotechnic artifacts” (Kipfer 18) that I display and discuss in this essay act as synecdochial traces that represent more widespread cultural attitudes about gay people. Some of the artifacts that I rediscovered in my father’s Rubbermaid boxes also reveal how, in moments of improvisation and ingenuity, I responded to and resisted the grammars of compulsory heterosexuality. I therefore question how the presence of my gay body affected a specific “network of power relations” (Foucault *History* 95): Cy-Fair High School.

I turn to autoethnography to address the aforementioned themes, because the method underscores the partiality of truth claims. The artifacts that I feature in this essay are not meant to metonymically reference the experience of all gay teenagers, nor do they completely represent my individual experiences. The artifacts do, however, say something important and heuristically provocative about the culture from which they were taken. Foucault argues that any given discursive formation is “caught up in a system of references”; it is merely one uttering star in a constellation, a “node within a network” (*Archaeology* 23). Similarly, my “fairy” tale is but one of millions.

I am drawn to autoethnography because the research method “privileges stories over analysis” (Ellis and Bochner 745). As a gay scholar, I depend on personal narratives about gay life to enrich a history of gay culture that has been denied to me throughout most of my education. Michael Warner eloquently speaks to this
conundrum when he posits that LGBTQ people do not have the “institutions for common memory and generational transmission around which straight culture is built” (51). Stories shared in autoethnographic accounts offer a puzzle piece of LGBTQ history, or an important fragment in the greater mosaic of gay culture. Autoethnography, for many LGBTQ scholars, constitutes a method of research and a necessary documentation of lived experiences that might otherwise remain untold.

In the following section, I report the findings of my “auto-archaeology.” I first interpret artifacts that reveal some of the ways in which my young, gay body was disciplined at Cy-Fair. I then focus on artifacts that exhibit the interventionist role gay students may play in high school settings.

**Disciplinary Artifacts**

Several of the artifacts that I rediscovered in the Rubbermaid boxes document how my gay body was disciplined at Cy-Fair. I employ the term “disciplinary” in two ways. First, “discipline” implies that bodies are made docile by specific structures that coerce and supervise individuals. Cy-Fair High School constitutes an “enclosure,” or a “protected place of disciplinary monotony” (Foucault *Discipline* 141). Artifacts from the institution paint a picture of the school’s disciplinary structures, both official and unofficial.

Next, I utilize the term to highlight the educational context of this essay. Cy-Fair, like most educational settings, is a learning environment comprised of multiple disciplines. Disciplines provide students and educators with a sense of place and purpose. Fields of academic activity also aid individuals’ identity construction and maintenance. Disciplinary affiliation is as embodied as it is ideological. If, for example, administrators establish policies that give student athletes broader access to gyms and weight rooms, one might rightfully expect them to develop more muscle mass. Disciplines also produce “ideological bodies” that provide a “generative conceptual metaphor for critiquing how schools reproduce gender, ethnic, and economic injustice by schooling bodies” (Pineau 42).

The first disciplinary artifact that I analyze is a map of Cy-Fair. The map pictorially represents how individual bodies in the school are partitioned. “Partitioning” describes divisions and distributions of disciplinary space. “Each individual has his own place;” Foucault argues, “and each place its individual” (*Discipline* 143). Using performance theory and personal narrative, I interpret my tactical maneuvering through the school’s architecture as an embodied response to institutionalized homophobia. I then reference an application to Houston’s High School for the Performing and Visual Arts to chronicle one of my escape attempts.

**A Blueprint of Homophobia**

**Being there: January 14, 1991.** Navigating the halls of Cy-Fair is no simple task for a gay bobcat. At the start of each semester, I have to map out intricate paths to get me from class to class. Some routes are littered with spitballs, shoves, and screams of
“Queer!” and “Fairy!” Other roads are quiet, even friendly. To get from second period science to third period debate, I avoid the large, pillar-laden hallway that cuts through the center of the school. Fewer students walk outside and take the south corridor to move from the southwest end of campus to the center of the school. The path takes longer to traverse, but I feel safer walking this route. Each semester, I utilize a calculus to determine the desirability of individual paths from one class to the next. Homophobia divided by time and distance.

I am particularly frightened by the northern sector of the school. The north end of Cy-Fair is home to gymnasiums, weight rooms, tennis courts, the stadium, metal and wood shops, the farming and agriculture departments, and parking for student athletes (see Figure 1). The school’s northern sector represents paradox for me, a young, gay bobcat. Hallways in this section of the school are filled, pectoral-to-abdominal, with boys featured in my daydreams and sexual fantasies, boys who call me horrible names. I know the illogicality of wishing to lick the lips that spit the word “Faggot!” in my face. The salty scent of sweaty boys lingers in the air, coaxing me to enter the northern quadrant of Cy-Fair, to validate the impulses of my body; but the threat of clenched fists and gay jokes repel me. Like gay studies scholar Patrick Horrigan, I live the unenviable life of a young, gay teen who is overwhelmed by my physical attraction to pretty, muscular boys who call me “faggot” (13).

A few months ago, a boy in my science class hit me four times in the chest. I was initially shocked and outraged by his violation of my body. Weeks later, I sat on my bed and began to fantasize about how his bulbous biceps stretch the sleeves of his cotton shirts. I arched my chest into empty air, hoping to recapture the feel of his hand on my underdeveloped pectoral muscles. I want to feel the force of his masculinity inside me, in places his fist failed to hit the last time our flesh became enmeshed. I have spent more than a few hours in Physical Science hoping he would find it in his heart to hit me again. I flinch whenever he walks into a room, because I am afraid my fantasy will become a reality. When push comes to shove, I do not want to be pushed and shoved. How do I reconcile being attracted to a boy who is mean to me? Am I attracted to this beautiful hunk of meat because he hits me? Is my desire the result of post-traumatic stress? I avoid the northern portion of the school because I am afraid of the lived experience of violence.

I have spent the last fourteen days avoiding the long, narrow, and dangerous hall that takes young bobcats from the cafeteria, past the auxiliary and performance gyms, to room 9008, the location of my sixth period health class. Students at Cy-Fair are required to take one semester of health before they complete their sophomore year. I dread health class, in part, because it is comprised of freshmen and sophomores. The boys and girls a year ahead of me are particularly cruel and homophobic.

When the bell for sixth period rings and young men and women rush into their respective classrooms, I feel a sense of relief. I can walk the halls of the school without much threat of having my head thrown into a locker. For fourteen days, I have skipped health and walked the halls of the school, like a stray. I know that I will eventually be caught. Sooner or later, I will be called into the assistant principal’s office and asked why I have not been attending health class. During bouts of truancy,
I sometimes sit in a bathroom stall, smoke Marlboro Lights, and contemplate how I will answer the question. Is “frightened” a compelling excuse? I hate to admit that my peers frighten me. The confession only bolsters the idea that I am less of a man.

Days later, one of the assistant principals calls me into his office, where I claim to have “no reason” for skipping class. I spend a week in on-campus suspension. Four weeks into the spring semester, I make my first appearance in room 9008. The teacher, Ms. Wood, looks utterly perplexed by my late arrival.

“We’re four weeks into the semester. Where have you been?” she asks.

“I’ve had some personal problems,” I explain.
“Personal problems, huh? Well, Ragan, the class has already taken the first exam and you've missed two essays. At this point, I really don't see a way for you to pass the class; but go ahead and take a seat.”

I sit down and am shocked when nobody in the class picks on me. Weeks go by, and nary a jock, cowboy, or sophomore says a single nasty word to me. My expectations have been defeated in the most glorious and unexpected of ways.

Cy-Fair’s overall environment of homophobia structures my projected expectations of individual classes and their respective inhabitants. Institutionalized homophobia at the school helps to govern my internal process of “narratization” (Allison), which, in this context, describes a phenomenological act in which expected homophobia paralyzes me with fear and is used to justify foolhardy decisions, like skipping class. In other words, I pull from past homophobic experiences at the school to narratize future suffering. This dance between lived experience and anticipation is an enactment of gay-related “soul murder” (Yep 22).

I earn a thirty-six percent in the first six-week period of the class. The grade is a symbolic rendering of my own self-sabotage. The “F” also symbolizes how Cy-Fair, as a dynamic structure of relations, fails some of its gay students. Cy-Fair’s lessons in homophobia are as diverse as they are plentiful. The absence of gay themes in course materials, for instance, suggests that LGBTQ people and their concerns should remain invisible.

In health class we watch numerous “after-school specials” that theatrically depict subject matter relevant to adolescence. One film chronicles the sad tale of Tori, a high school junior with a bad haircut and eating disorder. Another 30-minute movie features a beautiful cheerleader named Heather, who is date raped by her hunky boyfriend. Students in room 9008 also watch films that portray the dangers of drug use. We all laugh at Carrie’s Story, a fictive narrative that follows Carrie, a glassy-eyed waif who gouges out her eyes after “dropping” half a “hit” of LSD and having sex with her stoner boyfriend. “Rats are chewing behind my eyes!” Carrie screams before she raises her fists to her face and the screen goes black. Most of the movies contain overt displays of heterosexuality, even in its most graphic and violent forms (e.g., rape). When heterosexuality is not explicitly stated, “textual essentialism” incites students to assume that “all characters in a film are straight unless labeled, coded, or otherwise proven to be queer” (Doty 3). The only mention of gay people in our health course book, or any of Cy-Fair’s textbooks, causally links gay men to the AIDS pandemic. The connection sets the groundwork for a dangerous game of “performative metaphysics,” in which homophobia is reinforced by discourses that assume gay men are HIV+ and responsible for the spread of HIV and AIDS (Fox 9). Including gay themes might help LGBTQ students feel less isolated, challenge scary and stereotypical images of gay and lesbian people, and “send a message to straight students about the school’s stance on homophobic and sexist teasing” (Pascoe 172).

I rarely pay much attention to the films we watch in health class. Hackneyed, filmic representations of puberty, heterosexual sex, and STDs seem irrelevant to me. I do not care to understand the dynamics of how penises fit into vaginas; but I am taught this knowledge in painstaking detail. I am forced to learn about fleshy terrains that my
fingers and tongue will never explore. Ms. Wood teaches us about the clitoris. She always qualifies the term “clitoris” with “the female,” like, “The female clitoris is shaped like a button”; and “The female clitoris functions to induce sexual pleasure.” Ms. Wood’s superfluous gendering of language tickles my funny bone. I fight the urge to ask her, “What about male clitoris? Is the male clitoris shaped like a button or a bow?”

Exclusive teachings of heterosexuality leave me hungry to learn about the complex dynamics of my sexuality. How do gay men have sex? How do lesbians make love? Given so many of my peers’ intent and relentless focus on my perceived sexuality, I know that other students at Cy-Fair have an appetite for the same knowledge. Interest in LGBTQ people cannot be contained by absent themes in curriculum and “closeted” educators and administrators. Taboo treatments of “homosexuality” only spark the curiosity of Cy-Fair’s student population. Silence → spark. Absence → spark. When I walk to room 9008, I feel burned by the ember of millions of flickering neurons.

“Faggot!” Spark.

“Wanna’ suck my dick, gay boy?” Spark.

“Hey, flamer!” Spark.

Foucault speaks to the paradoxical phenomenon of sexual repression, arguing that, “What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret” (History 35). There is no escaping the failed mechanics of repressing non-normative sexuality. What of my escape, though? I regularly spend class time thinking about how I might escape Cy-Fair.

A Failed Attempt at Escape

Houston’s High School for the Performing and Visual Arts (HSPVA) looks like it may be my one viable chance to escape Cy-Fair. Located in the Montrose area, Houston’s gay district, HSPVA promises to be a more welcoming environment for me, a lanky-legged, skinny-boned gay boy.

This will be my second time to audition for the school. When I was in junior high, my parents anticipated that I might encounter difficulties at Cy-Fair. Dad and Joyce proved to be fierce advocates of my attending the creative arts school in Montrose. The year before I became a bobcat, I auditioned for the performing arts school’s theatre program. Memorized monologues, improvisation activities, and cold readings comprised the HSPVA audition.

At the end of the day, the man in charge of the tryout handed each of us a monologue for cold readings. Boys and girls were assigned gender-appropriate selections from popular plays. When I looked down at my script, I was horrified to discover that I was holding the wrong text. Boys and girls were then asked to stand on opposite ends of the stage. One of the girls at the audition beckoned me to join her with a sweet, “Come on, Ragan!”

“Everyone here thinks I’m a girl,” I thought to myself. Two choices appeared before me. I could either run out of the room, or prove my acting chops and perform my incorrectly assigned cold reading better than any of the girls at the audition. I bit my
lower lip, brushed long hairs away from eyes, and opted for the latter. If people cast me in the role of girl, I would perform that role to the best of my ability. After 10 minutes of rehearsing, I took the stage, performed the cold reading, and then waited for the audition to conclude.

As I exited the auditorium, one of the men conducting the tryout requested that I return to the stage. I nervously rushed back to the table, where I was asked to clarify a confusing bit of information on my application. The man pointed his index finger to the center of my audition form and asked, “This is a mistake, right?” My eyes followed the trajectory of his finger to where I had marked my gender as “male.” Fight or flight instincts took control of my body: drops of sweat began to bead over my upper lip; my heart pounded with increasing severity; and I could feel blood sink from my face to my chest.

“Are you okay?” the man questioned. “You look a little pale.”
“1- I’m, uh—I’m fine. Yes, I must have made a mistake. Female. Right. Of course.”
“Thank you for your time, Ragan. You did a fantastic job. You should hear back from us in a month or two.”

A month later, Joyce, my stepmother, ran into the house and informed me that a letter from HSPVA had arrived in the mail. I let the envelope sit on my desk for a week before I built up the courage to tear it open. The letter informed me that the heads of the theatre department were impressed by my audition and wanted me to return to the school for a callback audition.

“That’s wonderful news,” Joyce squealed in her distinctive Long Island accent. “Honey, you don’t look okay. Aren’t you excited?”
“I don’t think I’m going to go to the callback.”
“Why? What happened at your audition? Your father and I didn’t want to press the issue, but we sensed something was wrong when we picked you up from the school.”
“I’m fine. I’ve given the decision a lot of thought, and I want to go to Cy-Fair.”

**Being there: December 9, 1990.** My first semester as a “fighting bobcat” has taught me that, when I did not attend my callback audition for the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, I made the wrong decision. I am desperate to escape from the brick and cement confines of Cy-Fair.

One semester at Cy-Fair and I have endured my share of teen-provoked torture. Every single day, at least one of my peers calls me “Faggot!” as he or she passes me in the hallway or sits behind me in class. My life has been threatened. A skinhead girl in her senior year named Gia almost beat me up during lunch. Her provocation garnered a huge audience of our peers. Bobcats circled the two of us as she pushed me against a locker, raised a fist in the air, and then spit in my face. A barbershop quartet of boys in the crowd chanted, “Ragan’s a fag! Ragan’s a fag!” More people joined in, and soon the quartet grew to a choir. I was horrified. Embarrassed. Incisors ripped into my lower lip, as I clamped my mouth shut and conjured every bit of my being to fight the tears that tried their best to feast on the stale, hot air around us. Minutes later, almost everyone in the crowd laughed and sang, “—fag! Ragan’s a fag! Ragan’s a fag!”
I would rather have everyone at HSPVA think that I am a girl than have all the students at Cy-Fair think I am gay and hate me for what they assume about my sexuality. If I audition for HSPVA this year, I doubt that I will encounter the same gender-related confusion. Sick of my peers’ taunts, I decide to cut my long, golden hair and abandon gender-ambiguous clothing. I am, as Foucault might suggest, coerced by the “normal,” a primary “principle of coercion” in standardized education (Discipline 184).

When applications for the magnet school became available in November, I quickly completed one and had school officials from Cy-Fair fill out recommendation forms. A month later and like an echo from last year, Joyce runs into our suburban home and tells me that I have received mail from the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. The envelope seems too thick to be a date-of-audition notice. I rip into the packet and find my completed application, along with a quarter-page message that reads, “Please note: We are not accepting applications until January, 1991.” I toss the notice to the side and flip to “Form C” of my application. “Form C” is the document that Mrs. Pryor, my high school guidance counselor, filled out. One month ago, I gave her the application and a signed-and-stamped envelope, along with specific instructions to complete “Form C” and mail the document to HSPVA. The minute I flip to “Form C” (see Figure 2), a jagged, heavy rock forms in my stomach. Many of the evaluation boxes have been checked “weak” and “acceptable,” which seem light years away from “superior” and “truly exceptional.” Under the rubric, Mrs. Pryor indicates that I have “unusual personal problems,” specifying that, “Ragan has experienced problems with his peers. He feels they single him out and pick on him.”

I “feel” they single me out and pick on me? What does “feel” mean? Does Mrs. Pryor think that all the abuse I endure at school is a project of my imagination? I tear the application in half, and throw it on the ground. The artifact exemplifies the normalizing judgment of the educational setting in which I am embedded. “Form C” typifies disciplinary examinations that make it “possible to qualify, to classify and to punish” (Foucault, Discipline 184). With ten check marks and two sentences, Mrs. Pryor may have “sealed my fate.” The evaluation form that I have torn in half illustrates the grasp of disciplinary power. Comparing written evaluations of individuals to biographical tales, Foucault writes that, “This turning of real lives into writing is no longer a procedure of heroization; it functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection” (Discipline 192).

Tears glaze my eyes. I wait for my father, the man with all the correct answers, to return home. When I hear his car pull into the garage, I run downstairs to greet him. Joyce called him hours before and updated him on the events that transpired today. He walks through the door, places his briefcase on a chair, and wraps his long arms around my shoulders.

“Son,” he says, “I’ve given a lot of thought to your predicament. I’m going to call Mrs. Pryor tomorrow and have a word with her. I don’t want you to be upset. She’s a busy lady, who provided what she believed to be honest answers to questions that were posed to her. We have to help her understand why you encounter problems. If she understands
the ‘why’ and not just the ‘what’ of your predicament, she’ll probably reconsider her answers and spend more time finding the right words to describe you.”

**Being here.** In 1991, I participated in my second audition for the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. I was not asked for a callback audition, nor was I admitted into the school. I have had almost 20 years to re-evaluate and reinterpret my failed attempt at escape from Cy-Fair. I have taught at various institutions and studied the

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**Figure 2** Form “C” of my HSPVA application.
unique communication practices of gay men. Nearly 20 years after I tried to escape from Cy-Fair, I have a more complete understanding of how student evaluation processes work. When asked to evaluate students for graduate school or internship positions, I tend to feel constrained by the types of questions posed. Many questions on an evaluation may minimize or completely ignore why a student may be suited for a particular program.

“Form C” is a compelling artifact, because the document synecdochically represents how the abuse of gay students may be officially documented in high school settings. Mrs. Pryor’s evaluation never contextualizes my conduct, nor does the form explain how a creative arts school located in the gay district of Houston might be a healthy environment for a student like me. I do not fault my guidance counselor for her words. She, like many high school educators and administrators, did not appear equipped to hear or respond to the unique needs and concerns of LGBTQ students.

Most of my teachers at Cy-Fair seemed to think that I was the cause of my bullying. School officials urged me to cut my hair, “tone down” my feminine mannerisms, and do my best to “blend in” with the crowd. When gay students tell school officials about bullying, they are routinely asked to change their behavior, style of dress, and way of being (Prettyman). This systemic response to homophobia and bullying shifts the blame of physical and mental abuse onto the object of suffering. The communicative and performative act suggests that LGBTQ youth do not have a right to be safe at school. These reactions to homophobia may also explain why education experts argue that many “gay, lesbian, and bisexual students hesitate to seek support from school professionals” (Elze 227; Nairn and Smith).

Luckily for me, I was a resourceful, creative kid, who was determined to celebrate my individual identity and fit in with the bobcat pack. The following section of my auto-archaeology chronicles the last two years that I spent at Cy-Fair. I rely on artifacts of affirmation to “flesh out” the performance-related survival strategies I utilized to earn the respect of my peers, teachers, and administrators, and eventually graduate from the institution.

**Artifacts of Affirmation**

In the summer of 1991, I rented a movie that changed my life: *Listen to Me*, starring Kirk Cameron and Jami Gertz. The movie follows the lives of two underwhelming college debaters, who fall in love while debating the merits of abortion. Cameron and Gertz advance to the final round of the national tournament, where they debate a snotty team from Harvard and are judged by all the presiding members of the US Supreme Court. (A typical final round at the National Debate Tournament!) When, in her concluding speech, Jami Gertz’s character Monica threw down her note cards and shared the tale of her abortion, I instantly wanted to become a member of Cy-Fair’s debate club. I also decided to begin auditioning for plays at the school.

By my senior year, I won leads in several of the theatre department’s productions and served as the captain of the speech and debate team. Morning announcements at the
school regularly featured my name. A rotating list of Cy-Fair’s assistant principals announced when I qualified for state in a speech event. They also read my name when we advanced in one-act play competitions. The more involved I became in extracurricular activities, the less I was bullied. I remember overhearing one of my peers say to a friend, “Did you see Ragan in Into the Woods? He may be gay, but he sure is funny.”

Figures 3 and 4 evidence my personal growth. Figure 3 is a copy of my ninth-grade report card. The document includes several failing grades and inconsistent evaluations of my conduct, ranging from “unsatisfactory” and “improvement needed” to “occasional infraction” and “excellent.” My senior year report card (Figure 4) features exceptional grades and a unanimous endorsement of my superb conduct. The significant improvement I made is largely due to my involvement in theatre, speech, and debate. I never discussed my sexual inclinations with any of the teachers who oversaw me in speech and drama classes, but I suspect my performance teachers were more adequately prepared to interpret and respond to my young, gay identity.

Like many gay teens, I embedded myself in the homosocial space of theatre, because it was a safe space where I could explore identity-related possibilities. Nobody batted an eye when I dressed in drag for a cabaret performance. At speech competitions, I performed monologues from Torch Song Trilogy, and even advanced to the final round of dramatic interpretation portraying Jean Brodie from The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie! Performance environments affirmed and cultivated my identity. Like my friend and mentor Frederick Corey, “My fascination with the theatre was a search for identity. I used the theatre as I explored the question any teen might ask—Who am I?” (249). Nearly 20 years later, my heart breaks for gay teens who do not find a safe space in high school, especially when they attend institutions that castigate LGBTQ students for having the audacity to be.

**Being there: September 22, 1993.** Today students nominate people for homecoming king and queen. Six of us contemplate why we should participate in the futile task of nominations. “The same sort of people get nominated every year,” I complain.

![Figure 3](image-url)  
*Figure 3 My ninth-grade report card.*
Jennifer Brumfield’s parents had ‘Homecoming Court, 1993’ tattooed on her ass the day she was born.” The six of us roll our eyes and giggle.

“Wouldn’t it be cool if some of the theatre and speech people could be nominees,” my best friend Bradley asks.

The question sparks a fire in all our eyes. Sitting on the wooden stage of the school’s theatre, we concoct a plan to poach two homecoming court seats.

“We’ll get all the theatre, speech, and debate people to nominate one boy and one girl,” my friend Cori proposes. “We’ll ask them to nominate Ragan for king and Kara Racer for queen.”

Kara Racer is one of the toughest, coolest girls in the theatre department. A large tattoo of Jim Morrison’s face wraps around her meaty, left leg. The words “Lizard King” are etched into the flesh above Morrison’s crown. Kara’s long, chestnut forelock seems to perpetually hang over her kind, blurry eyes. The savory scent of marijuana fills the room whenever she enters.

“Bradley, ask Kara if she’s interested in turning this school on its fuh-cking head. Ragan, are you in?”

Blood rushes to my face. High school movie homecoming and prom scenes race through my mind. Cori’s request is one of performative disruption. I would be like Stephen King’s Carrie, but in on the joke. Cy-Fair’s flaming queen could be king for a day! “I’m in,” I exclaim.

Seconds after Bradley returns to the stage to inform us that Kara has agreed to our plan, we make our way into the main theatre classroom, where we engage in a game of pass-it-on: “We want two theatre people on this year’s homecoming court. Nominate Kara for queen and Ragan for king. Pass it on.”

Two weeks later, I stand in the snack bar area of the cafeteria and help physically and mentally disabled students with their adapted version of physical education. I wish I could say that I agreed to the position because I had a generous, open heart; but, in the interest of being earnest, my fear of changing rooms and athletics paved my way to PE for special needs children.
The first ten minutes of class are devoted to school announcements. Ms. Christian's Texas twang booms from the school's speakers. Ms. Christian is, by far, my favorite of Cy-Fair's eight assistant principals. She wears her blonde hair in a teased up-do, reminiscent of yellow cotton candy. All of her dresses and blouses include gigantic, fluffy shoulder pads. Whenever I need a place to cry, Ms. Christian offers the softest shoulder.

After announcing that chicken-fried steak would be the main course at the lunch line, Ms. Christian cheerfully says, "We'd like to take a minute to congratulate members of the 1993 homecoming court. Boy nominees include Josh Davis, Dana Decoster, Clint Feese, Ragan Fox, Mike Miller, and Ryan Knight (see Figure 5). Girl nominees are Carol Alleman, Becki Barney, Jennifer Brumfield, Elisha Drewry, Kara Racer, and Claudia Sierra."

The adult PE teacher designated to oversee our activities prompts the group to clap for me. Although my nomination is an intervention (Kershaw; Román), Ms. Christian's announcement makes me feel affirmed by my peers and powerful. My friends and I have the wherewithal to disrupt chains of iteration that place normative performances of gender and sexuality at the center of the school. Individual pictures of homecoming court members sit at the center of the school bulletin board; nominees sit center stage at the homecoming pep rally; they will be ushered into the center of the football field during halftime. I realize that several people at Cy-Fair interpret the theatre nominations as a joke, but many others seem to enjoy how we have thrown a cog into the performative machine. Our nominations might be conceptualized as "antirhetoric," that is, a rhetoric that always simultaneously promotes and disavows itself—renouncing its intent even as it amuses audiences and advances agendas" (Gilbert 12).

**Figure 5** Cy-Fair High School's 1993 homecoming king nominees.
The nominations also function as an act of “rhetorical marginality” (hooks 153; Gilbert), meaning individuals marginalized within a specific context (e.g., Cy-Fair) use their marginality as a site of tactical resistance. It matters that the nominations are an improvisational performance that begin in the theatre department. My nomination, in particular, disrupts the school’s repetitive display of heterosexuality. My presence on a homecoming float alters the signification of Cy-Fair, both as a public place and institution of education. Placing my gay body at the center of a celebration of the school’s ethos is, in itself, an educational, performative act.

Being here. On the night of homecoming, Jodie Smith, the school principal, placed the king’s crown on Ryan Knight’s head. My bid for homecoming king proved unsuccessful by conventional standards; but, as Schriver and Nudd remind performer activists, intervention productivity defies the simple logic of the “success”/“failure” dyad. Intervention success is better measured by a continuum that “moves from a simple awareness that some type of disruption has occurred to effective media coverage to a fundamental change in current policy” (Schriver and Nudd 203). I am confident that my homecoming court disruption incited people at Cy-Fair to think about the performative ramifications of who and what the school celebrates in its ceremonies. In the spring of 1994, Kara and I were named “Most Unique” at prom. The distinction was, for me, a symbol of affirmation and appreciation. What a long, rewarding journey I had at Cy-Fair!

I conclude my analysis with a discussion of resistance and hope, because the artifacts of defiance that I found in my files indicate that, even in the darkest, most homophobic corners of Texas, light may emerge for gay teens and men and women who are perceived to be gay. Performance may empower students who endure experiences similar to the ones I review in this essay. Because they are not employees and their time in high school is limited, many gay students are uniquely positioned to challenge heterosexism. By engaging in playful, performative acts, brave LGBTQ students may alter the signification of their high schools. Diana Fisher connects tactical moments of gay performance to transformation of place, when she explains that:

Here, space is created, used, and customized by active “poachers” who remake it to be what they need at any given moment and according to each situation. Inhabited by those who have no “place,” space is an opportunistic site filled with tactical movements that can subvert and divert the dominant [social] order. (182)

This game of resistance involves a complex calculus of risks and benefits. One need look no further than the recent murder of a fifteen-year-old, gay California high school student named Lawrence “Larry” King to understand the dangers inherent in resistant acts performed by gay students. Brandon McInerney, another student at King’s high school, killed Lawrence King. McInerney regularly taunted King for his effeminate behavior (“Lawrence King”). Two days before McInerney shot him in the head, King reportedly asked him to be his Valentine. I feel so fortunate that I did not share King’s fate; but I know that, in many important ways, we traveled similar roads.
Bobcat Fight Never Dies

Every school in the Cypress Fairbanks Independent School District has an official slogan. Cy-Fair’s catchphrase is, “Bobcat fight never dies.” Fifteen years after graduating from the institution, I see truth in its motto. High school students internalize the disciplinary structures of their respective institutions. My experiences at Cy-Fair shape how I perceive and interpret my identity, heterosexual people, and communication between gay and straight individuals. Discourses that I learned at the “home of the fighting bobcat” continue to live through the repetition of my communicative acts.

Reflecting on my experiences as a Cy-Fair student and college professor, I propose two key ways that schools may address institutionalized homophobia. First, school officials should revoke policies, both explicitly stated and implied, that punish LGBTQ faculty and administrators for disclosing their sexual identities. If administration and faculty promote LGBTQ visibility and mentoring, high schools might become safer environments for gay people and others who are perceived to be gay.

Second, steps should be taken to include gay themes in course content. Making room for LGBTQ-inclusive curricula requires rethinking the current constitution of literary, historical, and scientific canons. LGBTQ history, for example, is regularly treated as knowledge that is unique and only relevant to lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and transgendered people. Gay history is not the exclusive purview of LGBTQ people.

Increased acceptance of homosexual people in the 1920s, the Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement, the Stonewall riots of 1969, Harvey Milk, ACT UP protests of the 1980s and 1990s, and the current struggle for marriage equality are events and people significant to world and US history. Omitting LGBTQ themes perpetuates a dangerous cooptation of universalizing logic. Specifically, absence of gay-affirmative work suggests that its presence might contaminate children. This logic simultaneously ignores the existence of LGBTQ men and women in western culture and the vast “scope of institutions whose programmatic undertaking is to prevent the development of gay people” (Sedgwick 42). As a result, high schools are “structured by an implicit, trans-individual Western project or fantasy of eradicating [gay] identity” (41). Absence of LGBTQ themes in high school curricula erases positive contributions of LGBTQ people and, by extension, suggests that gay high school students, faculty, and administrators should remain unseen and unheard. Teaching students that gay people exist does not indoctrinate youth or negatively alter the sexual identities of children. Acts of gay erasure are pedagogically unethical and bolster institutional policies that ignore the specific needs and concerns of LGBTQ students, faculty, administrators, and staff members. Administrators and faculty members should also review current institutional artifacts (e.g., forms) and address how the documents might unfairly characterize the unique struggles of gay students.

The current study also contributes to methodological conversations about how autoethnography relates to applied research. In 2004, Bud Goodall wrote a compelling piece in the Journal of Applied Communication Research, in which he questioned why so few autoethnographic essays have been published in applied...
research journals. One possible answer to Goodall’s question involves what many may perceive to be the research method’s frequent lack of clarity. I have read far too many autoethnographic essays where authors provide murky, oversimplified definitions of autoethnography or bury their discussion of method in endnotes, without providing nuanced explanations of how they recalled, collected, and analyzed personal experiences. The form of autoethnography featured in this essay specifies a process by which interpretive scholars rely on organizational documents to make explicit connections between personal history, institutional structures, and communication theory.

As autoethnography continues to grow in popularity, scholars will extend its vocabulary, forms, and practices. Auto-archaeology exemplifies one way in which autoethnographic research practices may be elucidated. Auto-archaeologies unite autoethnography and Foucault’s theories of discourse. The practice entails a systematic consideration of how the structures and discourses of institutions produce and maintain specific subjectivities. By foregrounding the role of artifacts in autoethnographic recollection, I hope to demystify a methodological process that often proves confusing and complex.

I have displayed how Cy-Fair’s map, official documents, report cards, and pictures constrained and enabled my identity and communication with my peers. The artifacts helped me navigate my way through a history I once believed I would never care to repeat. Through this act of repetition, I hope to impact the current trajectory of gay-related pedagogy. Narratives, after all, do more than account for the past, they narratize, or serve as a “blueprint” (Fox) for future possibilities.

Epilogue

In November of 2009 and only weeks after I was notified this essay was accepted for publication, I learned that Jayron Martin, a sixteen-year-old, African-American student in the Cy-Fair school district, was beaten with a metal pipe by one of his schoolmates. “You’re not gonna’ be gay anymore,” screamed the pipe-wielding kid. It took a neighbor with a shotgun to end the horrific act of violence. The day of the bashing, the openly gay student told school administrators, teachers, and his bus driver that his peer had repeatedly threatened to gay-bash him. Despite the fact that everyone knew he would have to ride the same school bus as the kid making threats, nobody at the school took any substantive step to intervene and protect Martin (Zubowski). I mention Jayron’s story to illuminate the enduring topicality of the concerns addressed in this autoethnographic account.

Notes

[1] To help distinguish between reconstructed moments of the past presented in situ (“being there”) and instances of scholarly reflection (“being here”), I borrow Tami Spry’s “being there”/“being here” sequencing from her essay “Performing Autoethnography.”
organization is an adaptation of Geertz’s celebrated distinction of “being there” and “being here.”

[2] To ensure the anonymity of my peers and educators, pseudonyms have been used throughout the essay.

[3] In Epistemology of the Closet, Eve Sedgwick uses “minoritizing” and “universalizing” as an “alternative (though not an equivalent) to essentialist [and] constructivist” (40). Sedgwick intends her terminology to highlight how essentialism uniquely complicates the lives of gay people.

References


