

**EFFORTS OF BIFURCATION¹ AND LIBERATION:
DECONSTRUCTING THE STORY OF A TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY LESBIAN,
PART ONE**

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Abstract

This manuscript takes as its centerpiece fragments of the author's personal story of growing up as a closeted lesbian in school, in the Fortune 500, in the community, and a number of years attempting to integrate her lesbian identity into her professional persona – outside of the closet. This manuscript makes an attempt at a “duality search” (Boje, 2001, p. 23), deconstructing the story as it examines the bifurcation between personal and public, and in this case more exactly, professional and sexual orientation identities. The tension between closeted outsider and the prevailing expectations for promising “insiders” in organizational settings is also viewed in this paper through two related frames, both of which draw from lesbian feminist theory. The first is the concept of the Borderlands, as articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). The second is Adrienne Rich's (1979, 1994) work and perspective on lying.

This two-part paper takes as its centerpiece fragments of the author's personal story of 22 years as a closeted lesbian in the Fortune 500 and 4 years attempting to integrate her lesbian identity into her professional/public persona. This paper undertakes a “duality search” (Boje, 2001, p. 23) in its deconstruction of the story as it examines the bifurcated dance of choices between personal and public, or in this case more exactly, professional and sexual orientation identities (McNaught, 1993).

I have been telling fragments of my story for 25 years, primarily to sympathetic listeners, often to women and often to homosexuals. Lately I feel prompted to move beyond the telling, beyond the complaint, to reflection and analysis. Using Boje's (2001) “guidelines for deconstruction” (p. 21), I have attempted to undertake that task here. In addition to Boje's guidelines, the work of two lesbians prompt and influence this process. The first is the concept of the Borderlands, as articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). The second is Adrienne Rich's work and specifically her perspective on lying (1979) and compulsory heterosexuality (1994).

¹ The term bifurcation used in the title of this paper is intended to embrace two meanings. The first and primary interpretation the author intends is the act of splitting into two branches, linked at a node, but existing independently of one another. The second interpretation draws on Poincaré's use of the term to “describe the emergence of multiple potential stable solutions” (retrieved from: www.soulwork.net/sw_articles_eng/chaos.htm) in the context of chaos theory.

Rather than a traditional review of the selected literature separate from the work itself, here ideas from the literature are linked more organically with the insights that emerge from the process of the narrative deconstruction and accompanying implications for organizations. I begin with a discussion of method and then move to discussion of each of the eight steps as they unfolded in the process. Part One of the paper takes us through the first three steps – those that are focused on an examination of what is in the text. Part Two of the paper will explicate the unfolding of the remaining five steps – those that explore what is not in the text, what is missing, silenced, or implicit between and behind the lines of the text. I close each part of the paper with a few notes on the process and a reflection on the outcomes I experienced from undertaking it on my own story.

Method

This work accepts as its starting point the assumption often taken up by narrative theorists (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2006; Ochs & Capps, 2001; Riessman, 1993; White & Epston, 1990) and social constructionists (Gergen, 1999) that we lead storied lives and that the way we story ourselves is not a reflection of, but a shaping of our lived experiences. In the work that follows, I apply Boje's (2001) guidelines for deconstruction to fragments of my own story. These fragments are themselves small stories. I have told them many times in a huge variety of contexts in an effort make and express meaning about my experiences as a lesbian. In the deconstruction that follows, they are sometimes considered alone, in various combinations, and sometimes as the entire landscape they create as a unified piece.

I have chosen Boje's (2001) process for deconstruction in large measure due to the appeal of the discreet steps and especially of his eighth step, restoring, which in many ways distinguishes his process from others in its optimism about the collaborative relationship we can have with living stories (Tyler, 2007). The first three of Boje's eight steps in support of deconstructing stories, which are included in Part One, are (a) making a duality search, (b) reinterpreting the hierarchy looking at how one term in the duality dominates the other, and (c) finding the rebel voice(s) by denying the authority of the one voice. The remaining steps, which will be covered in Part Two, are (d) telling the other side of the story by reversing it, (e) denying the plot by turning it around, (f) finding the exception, (g) tracing between the lines, and (h) resituating the story, restore it (Boje, 2001). In the work that follows, each of these steps is introduced prior to a discussion of its implementation.

When Boje (2001) talks about deconstruction, his focus is primarily, though not solely, on deconstructing dominant stories, stories that marginalize, stories that oppress, suppress, repress, reduce in one way or many, the voice, experience and meaning of "the other." So I wondered: what happens when "the other" deconstructs the version of her own story of otherness that she tells. Will it, in the spirit of dualism, turn inside out to offer the old view of the oppressor's story? Or will it become a new version of the oppressor's story? Or will it break free from the shackles of dualism to become/reveal some other story, something else altogether?

My first thought had been to ask a colleague whose lens is feminist post-structuralism to deconstruct the story with me/for me, in a process that I imagined us negotiating. But as I reread my fragments in preparation for my request, I realized that I was not yet willing to turn "my

story” (which of course is not only my story, but belongs also to all the voices in it, heard and unheard – including those I see as oppressors, including those I oppress) over to the hands of another person. I was not yet willing to let it go so entirely, and I decided that I would, instead, attempt the deconstruction of my own story. I have come a long way from this story, I reasoned. I can look back on it, I assured myself, with some degree of perspective, even objectivity. I became excited at the prospect of this form of auto-deconstruction. What, I wondered, would I learn from deconstructing my own story, in my voice, feeling more unfettered, more liberated from the closet, than I have ever felt before? What, if anything, might the process reveal that could matter to others?

I had typed the story fragments out in chronological order beginning in my childhood and ending with recent fragments drawn from the past 2 years. I sat down with these fragments and Boje’s (2001) guidelines and began to dig into the tasks as he articulates them. When I felt resistance, often in my body, to exploring the underbelly of the story, to challenging the way I have always told it, I found that I became a weakened (and weekend) digger. I slowed the process down. I put it aside, thinking of other articles I could write that were less “risky.” I resisted digging past and through my sense of foreboding about what the result would be.

Moreover, I found myself trapped in the timeline, looking at/for causality, and even catching myself in the act of inventing it. I was trying to make the story make sense in a way that, in my actual experience, it does not make sense. I was trying to make it rational and coherent when in fact it is not. Until attempting this process, I have never tried to make the story coherent for my listener(s), because the story feels incoherent to me. I experience it as dis-integrative, and certainly unfinished. There is nothing neat, round, or tidy about it. I cannot ensure that the first fragment in the chronology is my first relevant experience, only that for now it is the first one I remember. Because there are fragments missing in my account here (even fragments I do not know though they too are part of my story), the search for causality is senseless. Prior to this process, I had never really tried to explain, explicate, or in any way deeply examine any fragment of the story – not for my benefit or for the benefit of others. I have simply told them as stories, small stories that some may characterize as anecdotes or vignettes. These story fragments are elicited frequently in the context of other conversations. Sometimes people who have heard them before invite me to tell them again in a setting with new listeners. I do not express these fragments in a set order in these oral situations. Still I felt compelled to organize them into a chronology prior to their deconstruction.

So I had two problems. The first was my resistance to probe beneath the story I had already constructed about my story. The second was that I was stuck in the timeline that corresponded with my growing up. After reflecting on these problems at some length, I made two changes to the process that altered its shape significantly.

Challenging My Resistance

I know that storytelling itself is both a personal and a social process (Tyler, 2004, 2007), and when I reminded myself that this was the case, it finally occurred to me that this deconstruction should also be done socially, and not only in my own head. Further, I see the deconstruction process as analytical but also as reflective and personal, and some of it, I believe,

can *only* be done quietly, as a solo process. As a result of this thinking, I conducted this process in a messy split of recorded conversations with a friend and colleague (who is a storyteller rather than a theorist), and quiet, personal reflection and writing. Together, my colleague and I used Boje's (2001) guidelines as the catalyst for recorded conversations about the story fragments. She would ask me probing questions that would result in me turning them over, sideways, and ultimately inside out to learn more about what was there. To proceed with the deconstruction process, each time we "concluded" a step, I would sit in reflection, then listen to the recording. Finally, I documented the outcomes from the step in a journal, which eventually morphed into the text in this article.

I used the deconstruction steps as the organizing schema for this article, so you will read about the steps as they unfolded for me. You will read about the discoveries I made, ranging as I suppose they variously do from naïve to surprising, as they occurred for me. The messy split began to feel organized on a tactical level, which was a relief, but the real insight was the stuff of energetic emotion and cognition. The process felt long and involved. It resulted in a paper that was challenging to write, and I hope it is sufficiently clear to engage you as a reader. It resulted in an experience that included pleasure and pain shared with my colleague, as well as the private exultation of intimate insight and the lonely licking of wounds.

Breaking Out of Chronologies' Trap

To address the problem of the linearity of the story fragments, I printed them out in the chronological order I had typed at the outset of the process. Then, I cut them up with scissors. I cut them up with Gertrude Stein's (1935) notion of the role of sentence and paragraphing in narrative firmly fixed in my head and heart:

Narrative has been the telling of anything because there has been always has been a feeling that something followed another thing that there was succession in happening.

In a kind of way what has made the Old Testament such permanently good reading is that really in a way in the Old Testament writing there really was not any such thing there was not really any succession of anything and really in the Old Testament there is really no sentence existing and no paragraphing, think about this thing, think if you have not really been knowing this thing and then let us go on telling about what paragraphs and sentences have been what prose and poetry has been. (pp. 18-19)

This dismissal of the tyranny of retrospective paragraphing, and Stein's (1935) idea that "completion is completion, a thing done is a thing done and so it has in it no quality of ending or beginning" (p. 42), were fundamental to my decision to return the fragments to their natural, organic (oral) state. Freed from the Aristotelian notions of causality and beginnings, middles and ends (Boje, 2001), I was able to roam through the fragments in each of Boje's steps in a more liberated way. I could shuffle the fragments, reading and re-reading to see what emerged from different juxtapositions in the spirit of what Levy (2006) contends is "an entire way of viewing the world, representing the power that comes from aggregating content from a variety of sources

and playing it back in an order that renders irrelevant the intended ordering” (p. 229). Having the fragments disconnected from one another allowed not only for the “unintended ordering” of randomness, but for alternative intended orderings, by themes, by context or setting, by the type of characters in the key supporting roles, and so forth. And if I wanted, I could even reinstate the former (but not original) chronology. I could play with my story fragments now in ways that on some level rekindled their native, emergent nature. This ability to play made me braver. Brave enough, even, to write this article.

The Story Fragments

To begin, here are some fragments of my story, out of “order” in the way that they sometimes crop up in conversations without context or synchronization. I have been telling them this way, off and on (in and out) for most of my life.

When a lover moved in, we told everyone that it was a financial arrangement: I need the money for the mortgage, she needs a place to live. On Mondays when people asked me about my weekend, I told them about the movie Txxx and I saw or the music we heard. But I take to pronoun switching, and Txxx becomes conveniently, conversationally, and temporarily a man. No one asks to meet him, or suggests I bring him to the next company outing. He never comes along, and neither does Txxx. The unintended pun of the “outing” is unappreciated by all but me.

In my new company, my boss Dxxx tells me about the parties with his wife’s friends – artists, designers, all sorts of ethnicities, races and sexual persuasions. He says how much better they are than the parties we have at the firm. I saw what he was doing: He was letting me know that he “knew,” and that it was alright. He never asked. With the best of intentions, he enabled the secret.

In this company, I make a firm resolve: no relationships at work. I am a vice president now, in a Fortune 500 firm. No more secret relationships at the office. I was in charge of succession planning for the entire company. This, I declared to the whole world, was why I would not socialize with the people at work. There was no way of knowing, I said, if people were only nice to curry favor. I could stay objective if no one came to my house for dinner. My social life had to brew outside of the company. It had to be separate, because of the succession plan.

But there was one guy, Mxxx, who became my “friend at work.” Dxxx hired Mxxx right after he hired me. When I met Mxxx, my “gaydar” tingled. But he was married with three kids, and he was clearly happy with his life, so my gaydar settled back down. He told me once that men hit on him a lot, and that he found it flattering. And after Dxxx died and I quit, Mxxx told me a story about a conversation he had with Dxxx when he was newly hired. Dxxx had told Mxxx that the company was buzzing because Dxxx, new himself, was hiring “too many homosexuals,” meaning Mxxx and me. Too many, in a company of 20,000. Mxxx’s wife and kids threw them off the scent where he was concerned, but I had no such cover. Mxxx was surprised to learn that Dxxx never had that same conversation with me.

When I took a teaching job at a university, I thought, “This is the place where I can be fully me, where I can come to work whole”. This is a place that will care more about my intellect than my sexual orientation.” And they do, but the university is a system and there is tenure to consider. There is a limit to their generosity.

I wanted to participate in a program that was featuring minority faculty. I went to see the administrator about getting involved, and she reminded me that her focus was on minorities. I reminded her that I am lesbian. “Oh,” said, “that. You’re the wrong kind of minority. I mean the real minorities. These,” she said, holding up a list, “the ones on the federal list.”

When I submit a draft of my personal narrative for a tenure review, I am counseled to remove the phrase “as a lesbian,” on the basis that it may distract reviewer’s attention from my academic accomplishments.

When I left corporate work, I started a small business with my partner, Lxxx. This, I thought, this will set me free. But Lxxx was Amish and we were writing books about the Amish, and Lxxx said, “You know, Jo, we can’t be out, not with the Amish, or they won’t work with me.” So the secret stayed with us.

When Lxxx was diagnosed with cancer, we were scared. This was big. People die from this. We were facing this huge illness and we had no money coming in. So here’s one thing I thought: “At least I don’t have to “come out” in the Fortune 500. At least I’m already gone.” At the hospital, we were outed by her illness, and when she died, none of it seemed to matter.

I was working in a big city overseas when I met Vxxx. She was a manager too, in the same firm. She had never been in a relationship with a woman. She wanted to keep it secret. She felt paranoid. When we would go out together after work we would leave separately and take separate trains, meeting up again far from the office. If we would take a cab between our houses, she would ask me to lie down in the seat as we went by the office, or she would lie down herself, so no one would see us together. “You know,” I said, “our friendship is plausible.” Our secret hurt.

When Vxxx was diagnosed with mental illness, the head of HR got involved. He was my boss. He called me into his office. “Your friends with Vxxx, aren’t you? I need you to be my mole. Be a dear, and find a few things out for me. Let me know what’s going on.” I leave his office rattled. Who pays me? Who do I love? I never do tell the HR head anything, but Vxxx breaks up with me when her therapist tells her that it is her relationship with me that is causing her illness.

My company funded my doctorate degree in New York City. I started the program thinking, “This is a liberal institution three hours and a world away from corporate. Here I can finally see what it feels like to be fully ‘out.’” I thought I could separate this world of school from the world of work. The first friends I made there discouraged me from coming out in class and in my coursework. “It could have a negative impact,” they said. “It could cause you problems.” They meant well, and I heeded their advice. By the time my partner was diagnosed with cancer, I was an adjunct professor in New York. I called my department chair to say that I had to be with Lxxx,

and I couldn't teach. She didn't hesitate with her support, and though she'd never met Lxxx (since she had been a secret), she sent a card to her at the hospital.

Before she died, Lxxx said, "some people believe that keeping secrets makes you sick." She wondered if our bifurcated life had contributed to her illness. Lxxx and I made a promise then, that when she was well, we would live a whole and truthful life. We would leave the closet to the coats and the linens.

In college, my roommates and I were talking about some of the cliques on campus. "Oh," she said, "there's a whole group of lesbians in the nursing program. They're horrible. You have to keep your eye on them you know." You know. You know what I mean.

Back in the States with a new company, I was swept away by Axxx. She worked in my new company. I should have known better, but who ever does? She was younger and she still believed the secret was more exciting. So we kept it. She liked it that way. By now, for me, the secret came at a cost. Keeping it drained away energy that could have been channeled into my work, into poetry, into anything. Keeping the secret consumed my creativity.

I was attending a Unitarian Universalist church. "Here, I thought, is the place where I can be fully me. Homosexuality is no big deal for these people." When the congregation decided to go through the community process to become a "welcoming congregation" the minister was threatened and major benefactors stopped contributing to capital campaigns.

After my first lover, I kept every one of my affairs secret. That was the way I knew. When I finally left California to come back east, I left alone. I took a job as a training manager at an elevator company in New England. They sent all their new managers to sexual harassment training. After one day of training where we sat with the men, they split the genders apart. We learned how to know when we were being harassed by men. The last day was devoted to making sure that we didn't do anything that was suggestive to the men. I couldn't explain that, really, for me, this was not likely to be a problem. That it would be more productive for me leave the training early, to go back to work. It seemed too hard to explain. And scary. So I stayed in class and learned not to rub the men's shoulders or to pat them on the knee, not to show too much cleavage or stand too close. Keeping the secret was not exciting, but it seemed easier. It felt safer. I was one of the girls.

In 1963, Kxxx Wxxx was my kindergarten teacher. She wanted us to call her Lady Kxxx and we did. I loved kindergarten at Lady Kxxx's. There were kids there, not like up in the sheep pasture where my father built our house. Lady Kxxx liked boys. One day I got to kindergarten and learned that it was "Boys' Day." Only the boys would get to play the new games and learn to make puppets out of paper. In a corner of the room Lady Kxxx's helper Mrs. Bxxx showed my best friend and me how to make the puppets. Just as we were making the final folds, Lady Kxxx yelled at her that it was Boys' Day, and that we were not boys. Mrs. Bxxx left the room then, and we didn't see her for the rest of the day.

When it was time for the Apollo space launch, Lady Kxxx opened the door to her living room, which we had never seen before. She said we could watch the launch on her TV, but when we

crowded into the room, she said, “No only the boys can come in the room. Only boys can be astronauts. The girls can watch from the doorway. We had to crane our necks to see, stretching long, and holding our arms around the shoulders of the other girls to squeeze them in for a look.

When my Mom picked me up, she asked me why I was so mad. I told her about Boys Day and Apollo and she said she’d talk to Lady Kxxx. Lady Kxxx assured my mother that there would be a Girls’ Day, soon but there never was. It was the first time that I had a sense that boys were different, better, and I didn’t believe it.

The classes I teach at University are peppered with students who, for whatever reasons, are homophobic. I can live with students not taking my classes because they don’t want to read so much or write so often, but I’m sad when they miss out on the benefits of my classes because they don’t agree with what they call my “lifestyle.” And I can’t afford to have them channel their distaste for it through their evaluations of my teaching. As a new professor I struggle with issues of authenticity. Maybe after I get tenure I’ll be free. Maybe then.

My first female lover was my roommate in California. It began as a financial arrangement, since neither of us could afford an apartment on our own. We were both newly employed at Hewlett-Packard. It was 1982. The heyday of Silicon Valley. San Francisco was the city of free love. But Palo Alto was an hour and a world away and she said to me, “Don’t tell anyone. We can keep it a secret. It’s more exciting that way. Really, it’s better.” I had no idea about these things, and I believed her. I believed it was better.

No one knew about us. Not our friends. Not my colleagues. We went to work in the same building every day. We would swap pronouns and she would occasionally go on dates with men. “We call it cover,” she said. “It wouldn’t be good if it got out about us at work. It’s really much safer this way.” Safer.

When she gave me a round- house kick and dislocated my collarbone there was no one to tell. I went into work from the emergency room. “Biking,” I told everyone. “Really it was a lucky fall.” And everyone believed me - why wouldn’t they? “Coulda been a lot worse,” I would add. This part was true. And everyone agreed.

When we sold our condo and she moved back to the Midwest, no one gave her departure a second thought. People came and went every day in Silicon Valley. It was the land of motion – shifting earth, shifting populations. No one suspected that for me our parting was less about her leaving, more about me staying behind. Being safer. Alone, I began to think that being secret, keeping a secret was, somehow, not better.

When I was eight, I wanted Sxxx to be my boyfriend. I was a girl who liked girls. I was a girl with a boy’s name. Maybe I was supposed to be a boy? I didn’t want to be a boy. But if girls liked boys, then I wasn’t quite a girl, even though I wasn’t a boy. I was somewhere in between. But where in between?

In my classes at grad school I learned about the oppression of organizational discourse, and I began to try to enter queer language in to the discourse of my own organization – the one paying

my tuition. There was a qualified lesbian on the shop floor who was passed over for promotion by her homophobic plant manager because she was too out. She decided that it would be useful to tell her story in our first-line manager training. It became discussable. Managers started using words like lesbian and gay instead of dyke and faggot.

Once I wove that story into a professional development workshop I was giving at an ivy-league university. At the break a student approached me. "Let's face it," she said. "As a dyke, you had a stake in it, right? Be honest. You wouldn't have bothered if she were overlooked because of race." I told her I would like to think that I would have bothered, but the student didn't want an answer. She just wanted to accuse me of being a dyke.

Because it was shorter and easier, my friend Alison went by Al. Because it was my name, I went by Jo. We liked it that we both had boys' names and we had fun lowering our voices and greeting each other in the hall like the football players did. When we got to the regional high school there were 2000 kids. Kids from everywhere. Al caught up with me just before gym class during the first week. "Just so you know, I heard there's a girl here who likes other girls. Be careful." Be careful.

I became a professional storyteller, and as I got more involved in the storytelling community, I began to think, "Here is the place that I will be free to be who I am, fully and unequivocally." But the storytelling community is mainly interested in stories about conventional family and old-fashioned fun. They don't want to hear lesbian stories, and they certainly don't want to hear about homosexuals who die.

There are perhaps more fragments here than we need, and here we by no means have the whole catalog from my half-century of living. You can see that I have not told you about my parents who I love deeply, or my willingness to turn down a job I really wanted when the climate seemed unwelcoming, or being harassed in Aruba, or about my nephews, or about things that were happening that I didn't realize were happening, which leaves me unable to tell you about them. You can see that there is a lot left out of here: a lot of story kept in me, and a lot of story kept out of me. These are the fragments that I frequently tell, as I frequently tell them, that I used in the process of deconstruction suggested by Boje (2001). There are 17 fragments in all, coincidentally a prime number, something in between no story and all the story, so it is a starting point.

The Duality Search

Boje's (2001) first step is to search for dualities in the story. Searching for the dualities felt easy, like detective work. "Aha!" I would think. "There's one, just there. And here's another." Some of them I found on my own, others only in conversation. This search felt like an accessible entry into the process and left me cheerfully optimistic about what would follow. Here are the dualities that I spotted in the fragments.

- Closet/Public
- Girl/Boy

- He/She (pronouns)
- *Roommate/Lover*
- *Employee/Individual*
- *Executive/Lesbian*
- *Professional/Dyke*
- Safety/Risk
- Secret/Known
- Silence/Truth

And there are, to be sure, others I do not see. Perhaps you have noticed them, and can point them out. Maybe I will notice others later and be able to comment on them then.

I see that some of these, which I have italicized, are not very classical dualities in that they do not represent far opposites. These were harder to spot on paper and were detected/clarified/defined in conversation with my colleague. I think of them as “loose” dualities. That is, they do not represent ends of a spectrum that are extreme and exclusive. As binaries they are rather distorted I think, but now that I see them in the fragments they most certainly feel to me as though they are perched far apart on a tense continuum. For example, in the fragments, people who are my roommates share expenses but not my bed. A roommate might be anyone, not necessarily even someone I would have as a friend. Roommates are expedient. Lovers are people who I choose, though perhaps not always with sufficient care, and they are complicated, which is an opposite of expediency.

And of course employees are always individuals, but here the tension is between the individuality that I feel permitted to express as an employee, and that which I feel I must withhold in the interest of *remaining* an employee. This tension was exacerbated when I reached an executive level. At this level I was more in the public eye of the universe of employees who comprised my organization. I was more visible and therefore subject to scrutiny because, as a VP of organization development, I held a job with the potential to affect the people who judge me. Because I was lodged securely in the closet the whole time I was employed in the Fortune 500, my status as a lesbian was a subject of speculation and side-bar gossip, but was not otherwise “discussable.” Ironically, it was only when I was no longer a corporate “insider,” not until I was running my own consulting practice, that I was publicly labeled a “dyke.” The intention of the workshop participant was to insult me, to accuse me, to apply a slur to me, to insinuate that being a dyke rendered me somehow unprofessional. It is in this fragment on the workshop conversation that the genesis of safety/freedom duality lies.

The other dualities, un-italicized, seem more like true, qualitative opposites to me with plenty of shades between each end. Still, I see that even these only seem opposite based on my experience of them, based on the choices that I have made. For example, in fact secrets *are* known at least to the holder of them. Perhaps there are other words that could be better choices. In the case of secret/known, for example, perhaps secret/*public* is a better choice. And silence feels like the opposite of truth based on my reading of Adrienne Rich’s (1979) work *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*. In the absence of reading Rich, the opposite of silence might have been for me noise, or volume or chatter. As I begin to make this sort of observation, I interpret the move as an entrée to the next step in Boje’s (2001) guidelines.

Reinterpret the Hierarchy

In the second step of his guidelines, Boje (2001) recommends undertaking a hierarchy analysis by tracing “where the rhetoric does not live up to its own expectations...show[ing] how the narrative constructs a hierarchy by privileging one term over the other” (p. 24). In this step the idea is to look beyond opposition into the ambiguity and interpenetrations of the term, to see where the duality breaks down and opposition becomes cloudy.

In my list of sometimes distorted binaries from step one, the terms on the left are terms most closely associated with my time in the closet. If we list these terms on the left without their partners we get: closet, girl, he, roommate, employee, executive, professional, safety, secret, silence.

The closet feels like an essentialized place that holds one end of all the dualities listed here. There is a myth that the closet is a good and safe place and that being “publicly” homosexual is the act that is risky and dangerous. This is not so simply and entirely true. The closet is rife with danger. So too is declaring oneself freely as a lesbian. The dangers of being in or out are only different. The sense of safety (or freedom) in either tends toward mirage. These are not dualities, in any case, where one side is positive and the other negative. Rather, both these decisions – to stay in or be out – are decisions prompted by, made necessary by, the dominant forces that insist on marginalizing queers. Heterosexuals appear to have no equivalent choices required of them on the basis of their sexual orientation (but they may be making choices about being in or out of a different closet, e.g., one associated with mental illness, or criminality).

In the Lady Kxxx story fragment, “girl” is associated with “not boy” and therefore, in the social structure of my kindergarten, is not as worthy as the only ones who (in 1964) could be astronauts. To complicate matters, in my story “girl” is also associated with “not girl” because the idea that I could like girls *and* be a girl was for many years one on which I had no linguistic grasp. So to hold both of these simultaneously seemed impossible to the child version of me. In the absence of alternatives, in the absence of knowledge of the word lesbian, I followed the lead of my friends, trying to be a girl *by* liking boys and wrestling internally with the notion that that I must be neither girl nor boy, despite the physical evidence. If I were neither girl nor boy, then my own self was “up for grabs.” Learning about Centaurs and the Minotaur in elementary school was small comfort because though they were part man, they were not part woman. Even the possibility of mermaids failed to console me, though it prompted me to excel at my swimming lessons. Until I discovered the word “lesbian” in my early teens, for me there was no “between-ness” that would actually legitimize my existence. There was no space for me to stand on the boundary separating girl and boy.

The use of the pronoun “he” is associated in the fragments with not only acceptance (which does not appear on the list though it is implied), but with safety (which does appear further down the list). For me, safety is associated with, or even dependent on, social acceptance in all of the settings with which I have experience. The use of the pronoun “he” in reference to an un-named and ambiguous companion in stories about my weekend seemed the price of admission into social circles where homophobia, or at least heterosexism, appeared as a prevalent cultural element. In my own experience, this included the predominately male circles

of middle and senior managers. Pronoun switching (substituting “he” for “she”) made it possible for me to be a part of those circles, and though we cannot be entirely sure of this, the men were likely relieved to have their own suspicions about my sexual orientation (and/or their own stereotypical images of the implications of having a power-hungry dyke in their midst) evaporate in the context of hearing from me about this boyfriend or that.

Of course, substituting pronouns, roommate for lover, and executive for lesbian left me with absolutely no sense of what these managers, my colleagues, *might* have done if I had spoken to them as clearly and honestly about my life, as they spoke about theirs. I cannot say who *might* have offered support of some kind had I only spoken the truth, named my companion, identified my roommate as my lover and bravely used the pronoun “she.” To experiment with this would have been to reveal my self as some thing, some one, beyond, above or different from an “employee” of the organization. I would have emerged in the organization as an “individual” with dimensions, a life, beyond my employment, my role and title or professional identity.

I am reminded here of Luckmann’s (1978) suggestion that...

the life-round of modern man is not of one piece. It does not unfold within one but within a variety of small ‘worlds’ which often are unconnected with each other...which, in many instances he is able to leave at will...at least theoretically (p. 282).

These worlds, she goes on to suggest, “belong to different ‘jurisdictions’ and different realms of meaning...the small lifeworlds never claim the total individual” (p. 282). To reveal myself would have been to move these worlds to an overlapping position, to juxtapose or even integrate the realms, to ask one world to claim all of me, to ask one world to allow me to claim all of myself. I will never know how this request, this invitation to accept all of me at once, would have been received by the Fortune 500. I will never know what effect it would have had on me or how it might have changed the nature of my contribution to the organization and the people who comprised it. Speaking honestly would have also dissolved the need for speculation about my sexual orientation by those with the time and inclination to pursue such matters of the imagination. This would have provided others with more choices about how to react, and I might – we all might – have been better for it. Of course, this is just as speculative now as was my colleagues’ conjecture about my sexual orientation in the absence of a definitive declaration on my part.

The decision to “come out,” though it is on some level a daily decision, is ultimately an irreversible one. There is no “going back in,” no reclaiming the secret – though people may wish that you would, ostensibly for your own protection, to keep you safe. Their concern is misguided because they do not know your closet. They do not know the unique monsters who also call it home. For my entire time in corporate I chose what felt to me like the safest dimension of the unsafe binaries: the secret, the silence. I do not have the capacity to judge this choice in my story. I do have the capacity to regret it and to be grateful for it, both in the same moment.

The executive/lesbian binary supports the unfortunately popular notion that the way women become executives is to sleep with men or to adopt their behaviors. This latter idea of manliness is often connected with the stereotypes of lesbians as somehow less feminine, less

female, than their straight counterparts. My perspective from the closet was that I would *never* become an executive if I were known to be a lesbian and that having gained that status, I would lose it if I were ever discovered. Reinterpreting this relationship, out lesbians can find themselves oddly positioned on a new common plane with the straight men who are their colleagues because women are one established area of shared interest, but that is true for many heterosexual women as well.

What strikes me is the parallel between these opposing characteristics of executive/lesbian and the binary of professional/dyke that emerges in one of the fragments. In the story of the lesbian who is passed over for promotion, my lesbianism sensitized me to the injustice of this and, it is likely, is what prompted my astute young employee to bring the story to my attention. It was this awareness, combined with my authority as an executive in the organization and my schooling regarding the power of language that prompted me to respond in ways that I considered professional, not to mention moral and ethical. The accusation by a stranger, a woman from outside the organization, that I only pursued this course of action on the basis that I myself was a dyke, and was therefore not behaving as an objective professional, startled me. On the contrary, calling a stranger a “dyke” in a public workshop at an Ivy League university fails to conform to my personal standards of professionalism – even if I am a lesbian. It is exactly my own desire to be treated professionally, regardless of my sexual orientation, which is the source of my operational definition of what constitutes professional behavior. Replying to my accuser civilly, from outside the closet, is more closely aligned to what I have come to expect from myself as a professional.

The final three binaries, safety/risk, secret/known, and silence/truth are overlapping and repeating concerns in the story fragments. An objective reader deconstructing the fragments might not have made the distinction between these three, but for me they hold a sort of recursive relationship that is important, and that becomes stranger in those story fragments where I am moving out of the closet. My efforts to liberate myself, to live an integrated approach, in my daily interactions as I conduct my business, may feel freeing, but this freedom is risky. It leaves me unsafe from the homophobia of students, colleagues, clients and potential business partners. In some of the fragments there is a simple divide. Secrets are exciting and secrets keep you safe. But we also see that this tradeoff between safety and risk is an odd interpretation of freedom. When you are in the closet you are always at risk of being “outed,” but you are somewhat less at risk of being met in the parking lot by people with baseball bats, or of being lashed to a fence, beaten and left to die. Once you are out of the closet, you are no longer at risk of being outed, having taken control of that process, but your queer public persona now puts you in harm’s way. When you are in the closet, you have only clues as to who your allies are. When you are out of the closet they make themselves known to you, but so do your enemies – often in ways that are devastating.

So the popular notion of coming out of the closet as liberation is too simple. As I move from the closet to disclosure, from silence, which Rich (1979) clarifies for us as a form of lying, to truth, the restrictions of the closet do not disappear. The restrictions only change their form. They shift from “inside” restrictions, ones that I impose on myself in the interest of bifurcating to keep the secret, to threats from the outside, threats from the secret being known that are beyond my control. These uncontrollable, outside threats appear in the midst of my attempts to integrate

the personal and professional, the public and the private, the inside story with the outside story. So the notion that there is safety in staying “in” holds complexity that for me is equivalent but different from the complexity that arises from the risk of being out. I run the risk, for example, of being asked to go back in. I run the risk, now that I am public with my minority status, of being told that I am the “wrong kind of minority.”

Still, the effort that goes into bifurcation, splitting ourselves into two of Luckmann’s (1978) small worlds so that there is no overlap, holds its own risks. These are the same sort of risks associated with the general keeping of secrets, which my partner Lxxx thought may have contributed to her cancer and by extension to her death. So there is the risk of someone opening the closet just accidentally, without malice or even intent, and discovering you there, in your “safe” place, and there is the risk that the secrets will overtake you, will make you ill, or kill you.

I begin in this step to feel that I am chasing my tail, trying to reverse a hierarchy that is nonlinear, curvaceous with dark tunnels, steep climbs, and wild descents that end with a scream and splash. The hierarchy is not hierarchical. It can be further distorted, but mostly I cannot find a way to reverse it in the classical sense of turning it inside-out or upside-down. I begin to rebel a bit against the process and decide that Boje’s third step, looking at rebel voices, is in order now.

Rebel Voices

In stories told in the voice of oppressors, told from the perspective of dominance, it is easy enough to eliminate, or at least bury, the marginalized and oppressed voices and perspectives. The marginalized voices are suppressed by the dominant narrative and do not have a role in that crafted rendition of the story. They are not heard, nor even implied. The fragments here are stories told from the view of the oppressed, from a lesbian who is silenced by the dominant forces at work in the organizations and the broader cultural milieu in which she lives, but her voice, her crafted rendition of the story does not suppress the dominant voice. On the contrary, in these fragments these dominant voices are always heard directly. They are never absent. Sometimes they shout, sometimes they whisper. They are at the very least, implied through the marginalized protagonists’ interactions, actions and reactions, implied by the voice of the oppressed. They are not silenced. Remove the dominant voices, and there would be no story. *Everything* in the stories from the margins is in relationship to the dominant forces. Remove the dominant voice, and the stories collapse on themselves like the sticks of a Jenga tower ready to be rebuilt into some new structure.

There is a story of overarching cultural oppression which manifests inside corporations, schools, and social organizations. It is inescapable. The oppressor/oppression is automatically heard when the oppressed tells her story. She cannot shut it out. *I* can not shut it out. I do not have the same lever of dominance that the organizations pull to shut out and shut down her/my version of the truth when it tells its own version of the story. *The oppressor is not absent from any story.* Its role and voice in the dominant story are obvious, but its clear presence, its inextricability, its ubiquity, its articulation are so strong, that even when the oppressed intends to be the prime protagonist, she is not. In the dominant story, the oppressed can be made to disappear – easily, seemingly without effort, simply by turning the gaze away from the margins.

The dominant story fills *the* gaze of the oppressed. It does not matter where she turns her eyes, or how many times she blinks.

In other contexts, *my* voice is a rebel voice. Telling my own story is a form of rebellion, telling it here and deconstructing it myself is a form of taking power that reveals the influence of the dominant forces in my schooling, my professional, and my social lives. When I tell it, I also silence the voices of others, even those who are like me, so that my particular voice can be heard. My lovers do not have a voice here. They are oppressed like me, and I further suppress them in my own version of the story. Alison Oxxx in my high school does not have a voice. She does not express her own fear here, either a fear of being identified as a lesbian (whether or not she actually is), or of a lesbian encounter. She simply makes a statement, and I report it to examine its affect on me.

Those who might, as we speculated in step two, have supported a decision by me to come out in the work have no voice. For example, my boss Dxxx has no voice in this story, nor does my colleague Mxxx. This deconstruction process has led me to think of them as “unexercised advocates.” I mean by this that they are unable to be anything but silent advocates in the absence of my own authenticity about my sexual orientation in the context of my work in company. Though they appear in the fragments, we never hear from them. We do not know their motivation. I cannot tell you for certain where they would have stood, what they would have said or done. My story about them is that they were aware and sympathetic, and I can only guess that they were trying to sort out a way of expressing support without painting me – or them - into a corner. We were doing a dance designed to protect each other. Advocates need voice. Silenced advocates cannot advocate very easily. I did not feel protected. As agents of the dominant culture it is not likely that they needed any protection from me.

Lady Kxxx is part of the establishment that oppresses me. She provides my first felt experience with discrimination. My story does not give her a voice here, but as an oppressor she makes her presence known. I suspect you have an image of her in your mind’s eye based on teachers you have known. Your visual image of her may be clearer than your visual image of me – if you even have one – even though I am in every fragment and she is only in one. Despite her “bit part” in the story, her position seems clear – boys matter more. Yet we cannot be sure what motivated her because we do not hear from her. We do not know her particular story, so it may be that our/my assumptions about her are as unfair now as was her treatment of the girls in her school 40-plus years ago.

These fragments told from the marginalized perspective are an accusing narrative, and the dominant voices want to leap to their own defense. In my conversations and reflections during this deconstruction, they worm their way into the exchange. I hold them back, experiment with suppressing them as my own voice has been suppressed, but their will is strong. They are, after all, used to having their way.

“Lady Kxxx was a product of her time,” they suggest. “The minister stood her ground, right? The UU church has a reputation for supporting the GLBT community and she came through despite the threats.” Or “Hey, at least your company had sexual harassment training. At least they were looking out for women. That’s progressive, right?” Or “You knew you were safe,

because Dxxx let you know. You knew he would protect you. It was you who decided that keeping it a secret was part of the deal.” And even, “Look, keeping your secret let you have the upper hand. Look, you made it all the way to VP and you were a lesbian that whole time. The joke’s on them, right?”

I counter these voices that the joke is not on “them.” The joke is on all of us. I kept my secret with all my will, and people still spent time gossiping about my sexual orientation. When you keep it a secret, it takes your own energy and theirs – the dominant energy – as speculation courses through the grapevine, the veins and arteries of the organization’s communication system. As a young professional, I was raised to understand the role of organization development to be a role grounded in social capital, in relationships, most fundamentally in the willingness of others to collaborate with me as an organization development practitioner. In the fragments, there is a narrative I constructed about how I could not foster friendships inside the organization because I could not jeopardize the integrity of the succession plan. Similarly, I adopted a professional narrative that if the employees working for an organization in our conservative region knew I was a lesbian, they would be less willing to collaborate, less willing to entertain my ideas for change. This would in turn affect my ability to be successful. If I were not successful, then the company could fire me, not because I was a lesbian, but for legitimate reasons, for failure to reach the goals that depended on a fabric of shared ideas and mutual enthusiasm for change, a fabric of relationships.

Even in the safety of this deconstruction process I found myself still defending me, defending my *self*, defending the decisions I made and the actions I took in the context of the time and space in which the fragments occur. I again consider, for example, the woman who accused me of supporting the lesbian who was passed over for promotion. She accused me of using that event to sculpt the discourse of the organization only on the basis of my own status as a “dyke”, which she meant to use as a slur. In this deconstruction process, I hear myself say, “I should be grateful that she was willing to make her views known. At least she came to talk to me about it. Small steps for small feet.” I hear myself say that every conversation represents progress, even if the conversation is not a dialogue. I see this event from 7 years ago as a bizarre sort of “gift” from this woman, and I find myself grateful to her that she held this conversation “off to one side,” at a break and not in the full group. This is me feeling grateful that I was slandered *in private*. This is how I have been conditioned to accept lashings by members of the dominant community – to accept with gratitude that the cuts were not deeper. It is only in course of the deconstruction (and holding my current perspective from outside the closet) that I find myself wishing she had entered her objection into the public discourse of our workshop for exploration by the group. And I find myself speculating that it is only the “now me” who can wish for that. It is only in the course of this process that I realize I feel lucky that she did not raise it when I was not yet fully equipped to deal with it in a public setting, indeed a professional setting. And then, I am back to feeling grateful to her.

Interim Observations

As we come to the close of part one (always aware that, as my grandmother was fond of telling my excited grandfather, there is nothing so insignificant in life as the score at half-time), it

seems reasonable to attempt an interim summary of where we have been, what we have seen, and what might seem to matter at this point.

To begin we looked at my story, fragments appearing as flat narratives on the page, straying from their chronology like cats, and absented from context. The text that conveys my story, and is on some level of my choosing, was subjected to my own deconstruction, done both socially with a collegial inquirer and privately in reflection. In the process of working through the first three steps of an eight step process (Boje, 2001) you the reader have accompanied me on the synthesis of a journey in which the text was explored for meanings, both intended and unintended. We have combed through for dualities present in the text and found both strict and “loose” binaries, many related to the tension associated with the closet. In the second step we experimented with reinterpreting the hierarchy represented by the binaries, extending them until they began to fracture and crumble. This reinterpretation revealed that the hierarchy is supported by assumptions that are not linear or stable, such as the presumed safety of the closet and the liberation of stepping out of it. It is in this process that the concept of bifurcation across (at least) two “small worlds” (Luckmann, 1978, p. 282) is invoked by the story. The bifurcation process I undertook in my living story (in the absence of any such language) emerges in the context of the organization in which I worked, and my attempts to preserve my status as a rising executive. The bifurcation, which in retrospect seems so fragile, seemed at the time the story was unfolding to be impenetrable. Indeed it seemed the only available and reasonable “choice” that would permit me to remain in the particular, corporate, small world, infused as it was with the dominant culture of the organization.

It is the voice of this dominant culture that is so pervasive in the third step of the deconstruction covered here: examining the rebel voices in the story. Because the deconstruction is being undertaken on a story from the margins we might expect the dominant story to be the rebel voice, and we might expect it to be fighting my efforts to silence it as I move onto center stage as the protagonist of my own story. This is not the case. The dominant voice is emboldened by my story. My story invokes the very voice that in my story, and even in the deconstruction of it, throws up barriers to constrain my actions and silences my words.

What can we conclude from these three initial steps that might matter in practice? Already we see the deconstruction revealing over and over the energy that invested in keeping an ostensible “secret” a secret, and we see the irony of that investment in the cruel returns of fear, and shutting down, shutting out, hiding with, and hiding from. There is no victory here. The toll of being a young executive in the Fortune 500 is already huge. Thirty-somethings cast into these roles are stretched into learning the art and science (and luck and irrationality) of finessing relationships, walking metaphorical high-wires in search of a mythical balances (Boje & Tyler, 2008). To be female in this milieu with only men as models was, in my experience, an added layer of complexity. When I consider the amount of energy siphoned off by the process of giving safe harbor to a secret that I believed could topple me, I am astounded I was promoted past first line manager. I now understand for the first time why I had to take six weeks of medical leave (an un-included fragment) when, as an expatriate, the added pressures of being a “foreigner from corporate” were added to the mix, and the scrutiny to which I had become accustomed went into overdrive. I want to reach out to that young woman who I was and tell her it is not worth the trouble, not worth the anxiety, not worth what I now see as a sacrifice, but I know that even at

this point I have no guarantees that the alternative would be anything but a different, and not necessarily easier, path.

A half-time point to consider, perhaps one that will tide us over until Part Two in the next issue, is the idea that organizations are being cheated by the apparent efficiencies of Luckmann's (1978) small, separate worlds. Maintaining their isolation from each other is a mechanistic process born of industrialization and scientific management stemming from Taylor's division of labor and the birth of the organizational man. It requires energy and produces heat. In the absence of fuel, the small worlds may unexpectedly collapse into each other, and in the presence of fuel there is the possibility that they may spontaneously combust. Either way they may harm the inhabitants of those worlds, without warning.

In Part Two, we'll build on these three opening steps of Boje's (2001) process to look between, behind, and around the lines of text in the story fragments, continuing the deconstruction process, going wider and deeper in our exploration of the story and its implications in organizational settings.

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