Understanding How I'm the Problem: Autoethnographic Reflections on Falling into Straight Allyship

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Abstract

What does it feel like to be a novice ally navigating the inevitable tensions between privilege and solidarity? This self-study reflects on allyship from the perspective of a straight cisgender academic who participated in a collaborative arts-based musical drama project celebrating neuroqueer identity. It explores the challenges of belonging and anxiety, the role of a supportive, welcoming community, and the moral complexities of 'standing with' rather than 'standing for' marginalized groups. A thematic analysis highlights the importance of humility, relationship-building and agency as these emerge within the context of participatory action research (PAR). The paper closes with suggestions for further critical reflection and ongoing challenges. Rather than presenting 'good allyship' as a static achievement, the essay maps how an ally's agency is co-constructed in relation and continuously under development.

Keywords: creative arts-based methods (CAE), straight allyship, critical autoethnography, positionality, critical agency

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Standing With, Not Standing For: An Ally's Point of Departure

If we are being sincere, allyship is hard. This difficulty may explain why allyship has become a critical area of inquiry in social justice research, especially within LGBTQ2SIA+ scholarship (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022). Allies are members of the dominant class who work against systemic and localized forms of oppression alongside members of the 'insider group' (DiStefano et al., 2000; Jackson & Hardiman, 1988; Washington & Evans, 1991). Allyship can be a powerful means of social transformation, but it also entails complex power dynamics and thus calls for reflexivity and humility among allies who may unintentionally reproduce dominant cultural norms (Shelton, 2019; Yep, 2021). Straight allyship remains a growing research area, yet few autoethnographic accounts by straight allies reflect on their motivations and experiences (Grzanka et al., 2015; Vicars & Van Toledo, 2021).

My road to allyship started with a personal crisis of meaning. After attaining tenure, I felt surprisingly stuck and unsure about the future of my scholarship, amid significant change at the university. Despite achieving this significant milestone, I felt tired and disconnected from the academic community. Once I had secured a permanent position in the university that I had so long coveted, how would I know if it mattered? As a white, straight, cisgendered, neurodiverse professor, I had long been drawn to critical adult education and arts-based research. However, my academic work no longer felt as if it mattered to me or to the world at large, really.

Around this time, a friend and colleague approached me to collaborate on the *Blackout* project. This arts-based, community-focused, student-led musical drama explores and celebrates neuro-queer identity. The musical emerged in response to anti-Pride protests in local high schools during 2022, which saw an unlikely alliance of opponents to pro-LGBTQ2SIA+ voices, creating a hostile climate for members of the trans and queer communities. My participation in *Blackout* introduced me to the complex dynamics of allyship, challenged my own conceptions of identity, and helped me to understand how a cisgendered straight ally might 'stand with' rather than merely 'stand for' non-hegemonic communities.

Accordingly, what follows is an autoethnographic account of the challenges arising from my complex positioning as an ally and how I came to understand my own limitations and develop agency. My intended audience comprises other potential allies, including those in the early stages of allyship who may be trying to make sense of the role. I draw on relational ethics and the work of the French Existentialist Gabriel Marcel (1948, 1949) to conceptualize the moral tensions inherent in allyship. I also aim to show how the 'good ally' narrative can serve as a subtle form of self-protection, and how relational accountability can redirect that impulse toward shared work. Towards this end, I discuss themes of anxiety, disillusionment, and hope, culminating in an exploration of how community-based artistic collaborations can foster more impactful and meaningful academic work. In short, I aim to explore the question: What does responsible critical agency look like for an ally?

Theoretical Framework: Reflexivity, Care, and the Problem/Mystery Distinction

There is a long tradition of scholarship examining the nature of allyship within the broader ambit of social justice education (Broido, 2000; Jackson & Hardiman, 1988; Washington & Evans, 1991), and LGBTQ2SIA+ scholarship in particular (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022; Clark, 2010;

Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995; Fingerhut, 2011; Yep, 2021). This scholarship recognizes the importance of creating strategic alliances and forming communities that move beyond superficial inclusivity (Vicars & Van Toledo, 2021). Allyship has been promoted as a powerful means of transforming institutional spaces and cultivating positive social change by supporting advocacy efforts for greater rights, participating in public expressions of solidarity, and spreading awareness. Indeed, more broadly, research indicates that creating accepting spaces where LGBTQ2SIA+ individuals can feel safe and belong is an important part of reshaping attitudes within the broader community (Vicars & Van Toledo, 2021). Unfortunately, to date, within education, the experiences of straight allies remain a relatively under-researched area (Clark, 2010; Grzanka et al., 2015; Ji, 2007; Vicars & Van Toledo, 2021).

Research has focused on the limitations of allyship and the need to avoid surface-level formulations. It also recognizes the importance of intra-group differences within both allies and LGBTQ2SIA+ populations (Forbes & Ueno, 2020). More importantly, scholar-activists aim to foster deeper engagement rather than a transactional approach that fails to produce meaningful transformation (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022; Edwards, 2006; Yep, 2021). The academic literature also highlights the importance of a relational sense of identity, which understands identities as in process and part of a greater effort at progressive 'worldmaking' (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Allies are rightly urged to be careful that their efforts do not unintentionally reproduce heteronormative norms (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Yep, 2021). Others have noted that allyship is highly complex and contextual, and that allies may often experience doubt, underscoring the need for more nuanced views of ally identity and development (Russell & Curtin, 2016; Shelton, 2019).

Intersectionality, while adding to our understanding, can also increase the likelihood of misunderstanding and misrecognition when allies assume that they 'get it' solely based on partial overlap in experiences with a disenfranchised group (Forbes & Ueno, 2020; Rosqvist et al., 2020). Issues related to allyship and representation become even more fraught within the broader ambit of Participatory Action Research (PAR), which explores neuroqueer identity (Walker & Raymaker, 2021). Research on neuroqueer issues is a relatively new yet growing field, and it is imperative to examine the complex interplay among marginalized identities (Egner, 2019; Rutkowski & Cepeda, 2021).

Allyship is also closely related to an ethics of care discourse (Held, 2006; Noddings, 1984) and, more broadly, to relational ethics (Bergum & Dossetor, 2005). This way of thinking about right action emphasizes the importance of context, interdependence, empathy, and understanding how these ideals play out in relation to power dynamics (Bishop, 2015). In such a framework, other human beings should not simply be reduced to a stand-in for an ideal or merely serve a transactional role; instead, they should be encountered through mutual dialogue and respect (Held, 2006; Noddings, 1984). Seen more broadly, allyship becomes an intimate gesture, the act of standing with another while recognizing the relational exchange of care through presence, words, and action. In the context of allyship, the risk is not simply 'ignorance' but a mode of engagement that reduces identity to a solvable object rather than an encounter with communities whose testimonies exceed the ally's capacity to understand.

Two concepts from the French existentialist philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1948, 1949) help me frame the moral complexities I encountered as a novice ally. The first is his distinction between problems and mysteries. Problems invite instrumental rationality and control, while mysteries require presence and commitment. The second is Marcel's distinction between observation and testimony: observation can remain detached, whereas testimony requires the commitment of the

self and makes the speaker accountable in relation (Marcel, 1948, 1949). For novice allies, the task is not to become an expert witness who speaks over others, but to become a reliable participant who can listen and remain present without attempting to control or impose a single story.

Methodology: Autoethnography and Thematic Analysis

Autoethnography refers to writing about the self (Ellis, 2004). As a critical research methodology, it uses writing to examine narrative experience as a means of understanding individual experience and to explore those insights, constructing knowledge about the self and the world (Bochner, 2012). Critical autoethnography does not view the self as a source of possible bias or as an objective standpoint from which to view the world; rather, researchers who use this methodology believe that the self is multifaceted and relational. Writing serves as both method and analysis, allowing researchers to critically construct meaning from lived experience as it unfolds. Autoethnography allows us to use writing to examine our experiences and the complex, sometimes counterintuitive ways in which humans construct ideas that inform how we engage with one another and with culture (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Holman Jones et al., 2013; Leavy, 2020).

In this case, my research question about the nature and meaning of allyship prompted narrative reflections and vignettes. The goal was not to 'prove' allyship, but to trace recurring tensions as I entered the work and tried to find my footing. How do I make sense of my experience as a white cisgender male academic trying to come to terms with the meaning of allyship in a neuroqueer community-based project? I wrote these narratives as situated accounts of embodied moments of uncertainty and my attempts to find belonging, and then returned to the texts to try to identify recurring patterns. These narratives were analyzed to generate broad categories, which were then synthesized into core themes through comparative analysis. These themes, detailed below, are offered as my interpretation of my experiences, rather than as generalized findings that make definitive statements about the nature and meaning of straight allyship.

The *Blackout* Project: Learning through Discomfort

Vignette 1: First Encounters

Never underestimate serendipity. I came to the *Blackout* project through a longtime friend and colleague, Sarah. During one of our many conversations on campus, she asked whether I would be interested in meeting some people at her house to discuss a potential collaboration with community partners on neurodiversity and LGBTQ2SIA+ identity. She thought I would be a good fit since the project was arts-based and focused on critical approaches to neurodiversity.

I was immediately intrigued, but expressed some concerns. *What could I possibly contribute?* Sarah assured me that they wanted the perspective of a straight, cisgender person on the project, especially one who was neurodiverse. I trusted Sarah's judgment, but I still could not shake my unease. As we spoke, I peered awkwardly down an empty hallway. I imagined a garish sign at the end, flashing in large neon letters: "Allies wanted. Apply within."

"Just come and see," she said. And so, I reluctantly agreed.

Our first meeting was at Sarah's home, which was warm and inviting with plants that created a laid-back atmosphere. I felt like I had entered a cozy, chic bungalow in Northern California, except for the unseasonally cool temperatures and grey skies. Two dogs immediately greeted me at the door, in a scurry of tails and fur. There was also a cat, 'Shadow,' who soon was purring, stretched out across my lap. "O.k., so far so good," I thought as I petted the cat.

Although I knew Sarah and everyone seemed relaxed, I felt nervous. Could they tell? I wondered. I noticed one of my black socks was darker than the other and hoped no one else did. I scouted out the most inconspicuous chair, plopping down as if I had just found the one solid piece of ice in the middle of a thawing river. What if I said the wrong thing or got my acronyms mixed up? What if I seemed too staid or old or straight? I worried about my ADHD taking over, causing me to interrupt people with off-topic ideas. "Pull yourself together!" I told myself. I was regressing, the knot in my back tightening. I had a flashback to another time, when I was putting the finishing touches on the liner notes for a mix tape before handing it over to a high school crush. What would they think?

It helped that they already knew each other, except for me, of course. I tried to listen and resist interrupting. I was also acutely aware that I was the only cisgender person with a predominantly heteronormative frame of reference. Even though everyone knew Sarah, I worried I might be perceived as an outsider, the literal "odd man out," or that they might wonder why I was there. As I listened to each person introduce themselves, I was struck by their warmth, humour, and positivity, which were so different from those of many of my academic colleagues, who often seemed less genuinely happy to be in a collaborative space.

When it was my turn to say a little about myself, I shared about my ADHD and struggles with depression, and I acknowledged feeling uncertain about my role as a straight person in the project. I felt a little like the new kid at summer camp, squeezing my hands together gingerly, hoping I would not be the last one left when it came time to pick teams. I looked eagerly at the assembled smiling faces, trying not to make a gaffe that would have everyone make a collective gasp of horror, before I was politely asked to return the cat and leave.

Despite my awkward internal monologue, none of this happened. I saw some affirming nods, the odd laugh, and, most importantly, there were fabulous cookies. Shadow so far had proven to be a model companion. Gradually, the group put me at ease.

I connected with one of the community educators, and we talked about art, drama, and the writing process. She was like a screenwriter-turned-Broadway performer who had known me since fifth grade. She was the community lead for the musical drama. She ran her own performing arts school, creating a welcoming space for kids who felt out of place in more conventional educational settings. Another teacher at the school, who had been with the group since she had been a student there, was passionate about planning the production. Witnessing their collegiality was inspiring, and I was equally impressed by how concerned they were about working with kids to co-create a play that faithfully reflected real-life dynamics.

Another member of the group, a teacher with a background in both music and psychology, was especially mindful about resisting the temptation to sloganize or oversimplify LGBTQ2SIA+ identity. He seemed to glide effortlessly between the worlds of academia and performance art like a champion goalie sliding deftly from side to side. In true ADHD fashion, I also noticed he had great hair, perhaps not a surprising observation, given my own advancing male-pattern baldness. In my head, I wryly imagined an infomercial in which I played the untreated control, and he was the final cutaway for the stand-alone miracle cure.

As a teacher, he was keenly aware that educational institutions often implement well-intentioned interventions that fall short. However, this was not theoretical; he lived it every day. It was apparent why Sarah was drawn to this group. They were all willing to tackle difficult problems and had confidence in their ability to effect change. I cupped my hands more tightly

around my warm cup of coffee, feeling happy and hopeful. These were cool, interesting people. Eventually, maybe some of that would rub off on me like glitter backstage at an elementary school concert.

Despite my internal insecurities, I knew that, deep down, I had connected and been recognized in turn, despite our differences. I left that day excited about not only the project but also, for the first time in a long time, about my work. I did not have to spend the rest of my life in an *institution*; the very word made me feel as if my tongue were coated in dry sand. Our encounter broadened our view of education. We did not have to spend our time branding ourselves, nor did we have to pretend that we knew everything. Instead, we could leverage our positions to empower others to grow and lay claim to a space for the critical imagination. I began to see this project as a break from the university, where differences did not shut people out but opened up new forms of connection. I left Sarah's house that day, surprised and, more importantly, a little more hopeful.

Vignette 2: Stage Pedagogy

The first showing of the musical at the LSPU Hall, a historic downtown St. John's theatre, was a turning point for me because it made the project's stakes publicly visible. There was a professional-looking playbill, and the Dean and Associate Dean of our Faculty came to watch. People were smiling and making small talk with the drama coaches and the artistic director. The place was filled with a bustling energy. I was anxious, even though I knew the script and the music were good, *really good*. It was the thrill of anticipation.

As the lights came up and the audience's attention fell on the silhouetted figures onstage, I felt the rush of being so close to something so public-facing. Along with the rest of the crowd, I laughed and felt my eyes brim with emotion. Although there was distance, I felt close to the actor's eager, upturned faces, filled with intensity. It was my initiation into a new form of cultural work, and it was exhilarating. The play featured many great songs, peppered with pop-culture references, witty and full of verve. The script evoked the fundamental need for love and recognition, even as the search for those things leaves us vulnerable to the rawness of human emotion. There were betrayals and unexpected alliances, as a trans-kid sided with bullies, and there was always an underlying threat of violence. Yet, throughout, the protagonists displayed a stubborn, stumbling, utterly brilliant courage.

After the show and the applause, as the noisy crowd slowly filtered out of the hall, I overheard a young couple discussing the play's ending. In this final scene, the principal enters and delivers a preachy, staid message about everyone just needing to get along. A stock figure offering tired old platitudes. The couple seemed invested in the scene, and it reminded me of our own animated conversations about the motivations of different characters. Suddenly, I was struck by how wide a net a work of art could cast. I had never experienced anything like this in the academic world. The whole endeavour had opened up a moral space, without being didactic, where people could feel the hurts of others, where someone else's wrong became translated into the language of their own love and pain. This was exactly what the project aimed to do: highlight the complex richness of our inner lives and the importance of resisting the temptation of easy solutions.

In the weeks that followed, much happened. Another outstanding, bright, and sensitive graduate student joined our team. I had some unused grant funds that I allocated to the project, and we soon secured two additional community partnership grants. This led us to create a lab for participatory action-based research on neuroqueer issues, which we called the ECHO lab (Equity Collective for Hope and Opportunity). More recently, another exceptional teacher with academic

expertise in gender and digital critical literacy joined our team, raising exciting avenues for future work. Over time, I began to reimagine my academic work through the lens of participatory, arts-based action research. Working with Sarah and the community educators introduced a new dimension to my academic work, one rooted in humility and solidarity. I had gotten over myself, but also into myself, and what I found was not all bad, though there were a lot of corners that needed to be swept clean.

Reflection and Themes

My narrative vignettes trace how I entered the work through a relationship and shared neurodiversity, and how, in my case, action often preceded understanding of my new role. Through my critical autoethnography, I identified recurring tensions that resurfaced as I sought to find my footing, which I explore in the following thematic reflections.

I. Entry points: The Desire for Belonging and Legitimacy

I did not seek out this role; instead, it found me through a relationship (Broido, 2000; Shelton, 2019). In my case, allyship was enabled by the support, kindness, and understanding of LGBTQ2SIA+ community members who welcomed me. Nevertheless, I experienced myself simultaneously as an insider and an outsider in these new spaces. Being neurodivergent, I experienced a growing sense of belonging and excitement about the possibility of meaningful contribution. Yet, I remained acutely aware of my positioning within the dominant straight male culture. Although I understood the concept of straight privilege, that "members of dominant social groups […] benefit from *unearned privileges* given in the form of *unearned entitlements*" (Edwards, 2006, p. 40, emphasis in original), I still did not fully grasp how these entitlements function from the vantage point of those who are excluded. Only after joining the *Blackout* project did I begin to appreciate these harms more concretely.

My engagement with *Blackout* marked a shift in how I understand allyship, from an abstract commitment to a practice enacted with others. Communities don't just provide context for solidarity; they define and enact its very meaning, even though "allyship remains a process with little to no consensus, and sometimes with conflicting goals," whether those are political or more intensely personal (Forbes & Ueno, 2020, p. 173). Although, as a critical scholar, I had implicitly understood this, my new role helped me to appreciate the importance of communities as sites of struggle more viscerally. Reflecting on these experiences, Patricia Leavy's (2020) work on arts-based research resonated strongly with me. As she observes, "Arts-based researchers are not 'discovering' new research tools, they are carving them. With the tools they sculpt, so too a space opens within the research community" (p. 3).

It was important to me, as an ally, to recognize how my positioning as a straight male simultaneously confers unearned advantages and closes off certain forms of understanding. However, my LGBTQ2SIA+ friends helped me understand that my privilege was not all that I was, nor all that I could be. While privilege entails social responsibility (Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995), it need not define the totality of one's identity or potential contribution. Oppressive dominant norms exact real, concrete costs on all members of society, including oppressors, whose humanity is diminished by their moral complicity (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Ji, 2007).

In today's troubled world, establishing communities in which the ideas and experiences of historically marginalized groups can be shared through dramatic storytelling constitutes a vital form of praxis. In the words of one scholar, "LGBTQ worldmaking is an aspirational project—

one that is in ongoing contestation, transgression, change, and transformation of heteronormative culture and its institutions" (Yep, 2021, p. 76).

In my case, the entry point also posed a risk: because the group felt meaningful and welcoming, I could conflate my sense of belonging with ethical legitimacy. The warmth I experienced could become a form of reassurance that I was "doing it right", potentially obscuring the ongoing work allyship required. Instead, I realized, the work itself, not the feeling of acceptance, had to be my measure of accountability.

II. When the Stakes Become Real: Proximity and Responsibility

What makes an ideal like solidarity real? How can we see what is ubiquitous and taken for granted as "normal"? Unfortunately, the cruelty and hatred of straight culture are often invisible to those who share heteronormative identities (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Yet, as friendships developed with my collaborators, I came to care more about their personal experiences than about abstract political commitments. As Bochner (2012) notes, "there may be no better way to come to terms with how we want to live and what we can understand and say about how others live than to listen and converse with their stories" (p. 162). Bishop (2015) frames this well within the allyship context:

> When learning to see yourself as an oppressor, the experience is by definition hidden from you, because part of the process of becoming a member of an oppressor group is to be cut off from the ability to identify with the experience of the oppressed. It is this lack of empathy, this denial that anyone is hurt, that makes oppression possible. (pp. 156-157)

This is why *Blackout* is meaningful. It is art that examines social issues at the local and individual scales. It uses the imagination to help people see issues on an intimate level. Written and performed by community members, it also seeks to give voice to the tensions and contradictions within the community. It underscores that communities are not monolithic and that it is equally important not to view the experiences of individuals from underrepresented groups as merely a series of problems. Although these problems are real, there are also positives, including optimism and lives lived with courage and authenticity. Like the young adults in Vicars and Van Toledo's (2021) study, whose actions were "grounded in and affected by the participants' relational interactions" (p. 8), or as found by others (DiStefano et al., 2000; Knepp, 2022), friendship can be an important motivator for engaging in solidarity work.

Adopting a relational lens also changes the meaning of action. Here, collaborative action entails standing with and co-creating, rather than operating within a framework of dominance and possession. It also requires humility, especially as allies become immersed in relationships where the human reality of struggle unfolds and allyship becomes integrated into the fabric of their lives (Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995). Here, the ally is aware of the separateness of the other's identity and experience, yet remains committed to being fully present and to deep listening. This capacity to recognize both connection and difference, and to be in a relationship without collapsing the other's experience into one's own, is at the heart of ethical engagement. Mutual trust develops when both sides recognize the need to avoid reducing people to types or group members, but rather to recognize them as real human beings with distinct identities and histories (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022). In our case, our shared interest in a single project, *Blackout,* gave rise to a "collective-action group identity" (2011, p. 390). The theme of 'proximity and responsibility' helps describe what made my invitation consequential, as abstract ideals become real-life responsibilities. This is where the stakes of 'showing up' become real.

III. Embracing Vulnerability: Moving Beyond the "Good Ally" Role

If we problematize our desire for belonging and our default mode of operating in the world, where does that leave us as developing allies, even ones who recognize the importance of proximity and responsibility? Acknowledging one's privilege is only the beginning. The more difficult work involves moving beyond the desire to be seen as a 'good ally,' sitting with discomfort and accepting one's position as a perpetual novice. This entails seeing yourself as someone who will inevitably make mistakes and must depend on the patience and grace of the very communities you hope to support. While I sometimes experienced trepidation, that doubt could be 'generative' (Shelton, 2019), pushing me to experiment with new ways of thinking about myself and my role in spaces where I lacked control. Although, as a novice ally, it is all too easy to focus on problems, I am gradually moving away from a spectator role toward standing alongside community members.

Allies often have feelings of doubt and failure. However, these emotions can reshape ally identity and move beyond a dichotomous conception of allyship, where "one either was or was not an effective ally" (Shelton, 2019, p. 602). One crucial realization emerged. My fixation on a simple insider-outsider framework kept me from being authentically present. While I recognized my straight privilege, I also feared that my positioning as an ally was not active or strong enough, or that I was an imposter. I worried that as a straight white man, I could never be entirely accepted. In this sense, my experience echoed the aspirational identity work described in Edwards' (2006) or Suyemoto & Hochman's (2021) models, as I began to see allyship as an ongoing, iterative process.

Instead of feeling terrible about my positioning, I began to listen to my LGBTQ2SIA+ friends and colleagues and to see my role in a new light. Like the participants in Grzanka et al.'s (2015) study, I began to realize that "being an ally is less a pre-scripted role to be taken on and more of a nascent identity formation crosscut by [many]…intersecting dimensions" (p. 176). Yet I also recognized a troubling pattern. My constant self-reflection could become a form of avoidance. I talked about agency and humility, but remained at some level reluctant to move forward, perhaps because doing so meant accepting my ongoing discomfort. While being reflexive was important, what value did reflexivity have if it led to disengagement and paralysis? As some scholars have noted, allyship requires a complex and tenuous form of 'identity choreography,' an ongoing effort to navigate the demands of authentic activism while safeguarding against inadvertently reproducing heteronormativity (Grzanka et al., 2015). In practice, the question becomes less about achieving the right stance and more about whether I am willing to stay in the work when it is awkward and uncertain.

My self-assessment revealed that I am a novice, predominantly passive ally (Edwards, 2006). While this admission concerns me, I recognize the importance of resisting two temptations. Either seeing my novice status as a failure and withdrawing, or, conversely, using it to assuage guilt by presenting myself as an unproblematic 'good example' (Clark, 2010). Instead, I came to see that my agency as an ally arose from my willingness to try to unlearn dominant conceptions of heteronormativity. In other words, there was power in being in process. I also recognized that my unease would not go away, and that there was no easy solution except to work through my anxiety with the help of those who welcomed my allyship. Following Knepp (2022), I realized that "it may be conceptually important to consider allyhood as a development process instead of a static state" (p. 135).

Synthesis: Co-Constructed Agency and the Shift towards the Enigma of Identity

Although I recognized myself as a novice ally and the importance of viewing learning as a form of agency, I still felt that my positioning as a straight ally was fraught with tension.

These three themes: *entry points*, *proximity and responsibility*, and *vulnerable learning*, helped me understand my experience. However, they did not resolve a deeper moral question: *What does it mean to act responsibly when one's very position carries the risk of harm?*

As one scholar points out, even "the very decision to 'move over' or retreat can occur only from a position of privilege" (Alcoff, 1991, p. 24). Even if I do acknowledge my privilege, this does not absolve me of the ongoing responsibility to interrogate my motives and my participation in oppressive structures (Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995; Russell, 2011).

Some concepts that help me make sense of my role can be found in the work of the French existentialist Gabriel Marcel (1949), namely his distinction between a problem and a mystery. Marcel argued that problems are issues the subject can observe from a distance and solve through instrumental rationality. In contrast, a mystery is something in which the subject is implicated and must be encountered; it requires commitment and engagement, whereas relying solely on instrumental logic reduces and objectifies a complex, enigmatic reality. As Marcel (1949) noted, "A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. But a mystery is something in which I am myself involved" (p. 117). The subject cannot stand outside a mystery; they must encounter it through commitment and by being present to others' experience. Identity and the nature of human subjective experience are such mysteries; for an ally to treat identity as a problem risks objectifying and trivializing a deeper human reality.

Marcel (1949) made another important distinction relevant to the present topic related to observation and testimony. Observation, Marcel (1949) notes, is impersonal and factual. A subject may carry it out, but it is detached and functional. The observing 'I' is interchangeable, and it makes no difference who performs the act, apart from any quality or characteristic that would impair the quality of the observation. Witnessing, in contrast, is a relational practice that requires commitment. When we speak of what we witness, it matters profoundly who the witness is since testimony is intimately tied to the subject's identity and positionality. As Marcel (1948) writes, "the witness always conceives of himself (sic) as standing in the presence of someone" (p. 102). "My testimony…commits my entire being as a person who is answerable for my assertions and for myself" (p. 103).

Reading Marcel, an ally stands in a peculiar position, caught in a third space between observing and witnessing, continually at risk of conflating social problems with the fundamental enigma of human identity. An ally must retain a respectful attitude towards the space of testimony. And yet, they may nonetheless be invited into that space by those invested, or they may otherwise have some relational connection to a particular community, especially given the intersectional nature of identity (Bishop, 2015). In a sense, entering the space requires reverence and humility, which are prerequisites for genuine engagement. However, this willingness to be open to the unknown and the uncertain can be an important impetus for gaining knowledge (Shelton, 2019).

Marcel's work provided the conceptual framing that helped me understand a shift in my thinking. I stopped seeing the project as something I could stand outside and assess, and instead came to see it as something I had to encounter through specific relationships and what people

entrusted to me. As Linda Alcoff (1991) wrote, there are moments when I still cannot help but ask myself, "Is my greatest contribution to move over and get out of the way?" (p. 8). Over time, though, I have come to see the difference between knowing some*thing* propositionally and understanding some*one* through deep listening and perspective-taking. It was one thing to know trans and queer people experience bigotry and hatred, and quite another to hear a young teacher share how he endures offhand remarks from students nearly every day he substitutes. That seemed so profoundly wrong and hurtful. I also marvelled at his dignity and strength, especially since he was more concerned about the students who had to hear homophobic comments from another teacher than about his own harmful experience.

Equally remarkable was a young community educator who battled depression yet turned her struggles into a play about mental health that she shared with students, becoming a force for positive change. Hearing these experiences made me realize that, as a straight male, I never have to declare my sexual identity or even think about it because the world is structured around my norms (Berlant & Warner, 1998). I listened to people who could not get married because of the laws in their home country, who could not hold hands in certain neighbourhoods for fear of assault, developing a background awareness of these types of threats because of past experiences of bigotry or hatred. It struck me how deeply wrong this is, yet it also showed me how music and drama can bring these realities to life by creating moments of insight and empathy.

Over time, I came to understand allyship as a form of relational witnessing. Belonging and personal connection are important factors that contribute to the emergence of an ally identity (Vicars & Van Toledo, 2021). However, this relationality must be grounded in authentic presence and taking responsibility (Bishop, 2015). Allies "bear witness" by committing to relationships within real-life communities. The challenge, and the ongoing tension, is that allies constantly face the temptation to reduce lived human experience into a simple problem to be solved, rather than a relationship requiring authentic commitment. These moments of connection helped me understand that engagement and relationship-building are core to the process of becoming and learning as a novice ally.

Backstage Praxis and the Limits of the Good Ally Story

Where does this leave me? As I complete this autoethnographic reflection, I am acutely aware of the risk that my reflective narrative might inadvertently center my experience in ways that reproduce the very dynamics I seek to resist. Clark (2010) warns against allies who end up "centring whiteness and straightness" to become "position[ed] as 'good' examples of white, straight people" (p. 707), and I recognize that my essay flirts with this danger. Ultimately, I have come to realize that allyship involves co-constructed agency. An ally cannot take sole credit for success, as if it were simply the product of their own merit or hard work, especially given that the success of allyship depends heavily on the interaction between the ally and the insider group (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022).

It is well known that LGBTQ2SIA+ people are at increased risk of verbal and physical abuse and violence (Shelton, 2019), and since *Blackout* began, violence against LGBTQ2SIA+ people has intensified in many places (Chang, 2025; Flowers & Trotta, 2025). This authoritarian backlash is built upon cruelty, especially toward members of the queer and trans communities (Pengelly, 2023). Historically, education has been central to this struggle, and it remains so today (Clark, 2010; Griffin & Ouellett, 2003). Collectively, these developments have raised the stakes

for allies. The question becomes uncomfortably concrete: Will we show up when visibility entails costs to do work that is not glamorous or self-exonerating?

Fortunately, public-facing projects like *Blackout* offer a vital space for reimagining social reality and cultivating shared empathy. I find myself turning towards imagination, feeling, and intuition, recalling Cixous's (2005) interminable question, "Of what secret lights are we made?/Of what densities?" (p. 7). The question exemplifies the refusal of easy answers, instead relying on encounters with mystery to guide us away from hatred and towards discovery and possibility.

More fundamentally, I have learned that an ally's identity is not a "static identity experience or achievement" (Suyemoto & Hochman, 2021, p. 114). Growth is always the primary aim of allyship, but this also implies that the process of becoming an effective ally is never complete (McDonald et al., 2023; Suyemoto & Hochman, 2021). Allies will inevitably make mistakes and will need to constantly revisit their preconceptions, even as they try to remain mindful of the risk of self-congratulation or settling for token displays of commitment (Catalano & Christiaens, 2022; Gelberg & Chojnacki, 1995).

While this account traces my development through key insights, these realizations nonetheless remain, despite my efforts, partial and aspirational. I have revisited them many times and in many different ways, making progress in some areas, but losing momentum in others (Suyemoto & Hochman, 2021). The three themes I have identified: belonging and legitimacy, when the stakes become real, and embracing vulnerability, are not completed stages but ongoing challenges that I endeavour to navigate. As I have described, my self-reflection has marked a shift from treating allyship as an implementable solution to encountering it as a moral relation that implicates me fully as a human being.

Ultimately, this account offers no easy resolution, only an acknowledgement of the ongoing demands of allyship and the necessity of commitment. I remain a novice ally, aware of both my privilege and my desire for solidarity. I realize that responsible allyship is not about achieving a final state of being a 'good ally' but showing up consistently for the unglamorous, uncertain work of standing with communities of difference. It means accepting that I am part of the problem since I am structurally positioned within systems of oppression, while also recognizing that this positioning can be leveraged to support change. The question of what responsible critical agency looks like for an ally is never fully resolved. But perhaps the question itself, revisited continually, will help keep me accountable to the relationships and communities that make the work meaningful. In many ways, we do not feel the pain we cause, which is why, all too often, it goes on unchecked. My entry into allyship made me feel less like a spokesperson and more like a learner with daunting new responsibilities. From here, perhaps, I can engage in my backstage praxis, one eye on the unfinished action, the other on my fraught positioning, trusting that what we notice, we can slowly begin to change.

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