Identifying the Advocate in Me: An Undergraduate Autoethnography Exploring the Personal Identity of Activist Versus Advocate

Aiden Ciaffaglione

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IDENTIFYING THE ADVOCATE IN ME:
AN UNDERGRADUATE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY EXPLORING THE PERSONAL
IDENTITY OF ACTIVIST VERSUS ADVOCATE

by
Aiden Ciaffaglione

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ABSTRACT

“Identifying the Advocate in ME: An Undergraduate Autoethnography Exploring the Personal Identity of Activist Versus Advocate” explores and redefines the social definition of “activists” and “advocates” through an autoethnographic lens of personal growth and identity formation. Stemming from my previous research into the University of Maine 1974 Gay Symposium, I reflect on my undergraduate academic ecology composed of leadership roles, course work, and extracurricular involvement in order to understand my identity development as a queer advocate. I incorporate previous scholarship around social movements, emotion work, and the role of activists in social change to develop a “Social Movement Identification” typology that allows individuals to identify themselves within a social movement. Additionally, I argue that autoethnography is a critical research technique that should be further utilized by queer scholars, as society seeks to accurately understand the experiences of marginalized communities.

I conclude this thesis by discussing a more sustainable model for maintaining social movement membership and engagement. Specifically, I look at the ways that burnout, emotion work, and the COVID-19 global pandemic have contributed to the decline in activism and advocacy seen amongst several communities. Furthermore, I discuss the ways that the typology presented can allow people to find their place in any social movement and call on social movement actors to value all contributions made by their fellow activists and advocates.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother April and grandmother Diana. I would not be the person I am today without their love, courage, and strength throughout the years. Thank you for always believing in me and for pushing me to live unapologetically. You both exemplify what it means to be a strong and fearless woman.
I would like to thank my advisor, Jennie Woodard, for guiding me through this thesis writing journey and being a source of support throughout my undergraduate career. I am incredibly thankful to have learned from you the past three years and look up to you as a mentor. Jennie always puts her students first and provides a nurturing environment so that we can live our truth. Thank you for being so down to Earth and compassionate throughout my undergraduate career. It is because of Jennie that I know my future lays within education and that I will continue to inform scholarship through my lived experiences.

I would also like to thank my co-advisor, Amber Tierney, for sparking my interest in Sociology. Without her I would not have found my passion for studying social movements and social injustice. She has served as an inspiration for my work and made such an impact within our UMaine sociology community, even if her presence was short lived.

Last, I would like to thank my family, friends, mentors, professors, and the queer allies I have encountered at UMaine for helping me to find my voice within our community. I would not be exploring my role as an advocate had you not placed your faith in me as a leader and allowed me the space to grow. I never imagined making it to this stage of my life and it’s because of everyone in my life that I can continue to survive and thrive.
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INTRODUCTION

Queer is a term that is highly contested within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex, and A-romantic/sexual (LGBTQIA+) community. For older activists and community members, queer evokes historical experiences with violence and feelings of grief. Historically queer has been designated as a slur commonly used when perpetuating physical and emotional violence against individuals who do not identify within the heteronormative identities of society. Queer has been used to other and degrade the existence of LGBTQIA+ individuals for decades, but over time the term has been reclaimed as a statement of power for the queer community. By reclaiming this term, the queer community has been able to unite under an all-encompassing term that resists the oppressive forces of various social institutions. For younger LGBTQIA+ communities, queer symbolizes the fluidity or ambiguousness of identity. This feeling of ambiguity provides a place of comfort for people who contemplate their identification within the LGBTQIA+ community and those who do not want to accept such rigid definitions of their identity. I personally find comfort in the ambiguousness of “queer” because I am continuously trying to understand my authentic identity. Queer allows me the space to explore the ways I cross and defy identity boundaries, while providing an all-encompassing term for my experiences. Within this paper, I utilize the term “queer” as a way to recognize all identities within the LGBTQIA+ community.

For me, queer is a way of expressing one’s ambiguous identities that differ from social norms. Using myself as an example, I have gone through multiple gender transitions and questioning phases of my sexuality. Recently, I have become more confident identifying as a non-binary individual, which for me means that my gender
does not fall within the socially constructed binary of man and woman. I am also pansexual, meaning that my partner’s gender or other identities do not influence my attraction towards them. While this may seem simple in plain text, I find that explaining these definitions and answering people’s questions about my lived experiences is emotionally taxing. Referring to my identities as “queer” relieves this emotional exhaustion by allowing me to tell someone that I do not identify with the social norms of cisgender and heterosexual without having to further explain or defend my existence. I also find that queer provides a comforting umbrella over the community by recognizing the oppression that all LGBTQIA+ individuals face. This type of recognition helps to unite all queer individuals, so that we can work together when fighting against oppressive forces. While this is my perspective on the term “queer”, it should not be taken as the only definition because many people within my community have different outlooks and experiences with the term. Given these perspectives, this thesis will use “Queer” as an umbrella term that encompasses the experiences and identities of people within the LGBTQIA+ community. This term is meant to stand in as a fluid identity that represents an individual's rejection and identification outside the social norms of their culture.

Along with the contested label of “queer”, the term “activist” has been redefined by multiple marginalized communities. As individuals of marginalized communities and their allies envision a more inclusive world for all identities, they put dreams into action by civilly protesting, publicly announcing their alliances, and bringing awareness to the injustice within our society in hope of making radical change.

While people within a community may share common goals or ideas, there is an underlying system of gate keeping that restricts which individuals can be seen as
activists. Activism is no longer seen as supporting a cause or pushing a specific agenda. These actions are instead seen as the starting place for people to get involved in a movement. As social injustice becomes more accessible through social media platforms, more than ever, there is this sense of “performative activism”. Performative Activism is the concept of doing activism for personal social gain rather than the benefit of a movement. The idea behind this is that people are spreading the words or ideas of a social movement, but are not using their power, privilege, or action to directly make change. While it is important to share the messages of a movement, individuals that conduct performative activism are commonly sharing these messages in order to receive recognition from their peers. This recognition usually involves their peers identifying the individual as a moral or “good” person because they support organizations that have opinions that align with their peers. The goal of this thesis is to understand the sociological theories behind social movements, the ways we define activists in social movements, and how the people behind the scenes of any social movement make a valuable contribution to social change. This latter group of people I will identify as “Advocates”. While I utilize the current scholarship within the fields of Sociology and Gender Studies to better understand the question of what it means to be an activist, I will also employ an autoethnographic method to reflect on my experiences as a queer individual coming to understand their role as a queer advocate.

Was I really Straight?: Finding my Queer Identity and Love for Activism

Before college, I would have argued that activists create real social change by taking personal issues to the public through protests and broadcasted gatherings. Over the past four years of my undergraduate career, I have come to understand that being an
activist does not always have to involve public presence, rather it can be activism through
education or just having more mindful conversations with individuals who might now
understand your experience. This ideological development originated from the
experiences and coursework I had in my undergraduate career. However, upon further
reflection I now recognize that my preferred forms of activism started to develop around
my junior year of high school.

Growing up, I lived in a conservative community of people who did not celebrate
queerness or any form of difference. They found ways to enforce social norms and
ensured that all students were given the same heteronormative and whitewashed
education. While I now have a stronger connection to my queer identity and community,
I was not exposed to queer culture until my sophomore year of high school. This
exposure did not come from my classwork. I became friends with three students that
happened to be sitting next to me in a World History class. Before this class, I had never
really talked to these individuals or saw them in the hallways. For context, there were
about 2,500 students in our high school every day so picking any one out of a crowd
unless you talk to them daily was incredibly difficult. When I walked into the class on the
first day, I noticed the three of them sitting next to each other, leaning over their desks
talking as if no one else was in the room. At the time, there was something about them
that just felt so exciting, lively, and authentic, which made me want to be a part of their
group. I was quick to introduce myself and start making jokes with them until class
started. Our friendship grew throughout the year as we would sit together in the cafeteria
before school started, text during class, met up during break periods, and facetime after
school. We would talk for hours about our interests, the gossip in our grade, One
Direction or other music of the time, and our struggles with mental health. It was not until a few months into our friendship that they all came out to me as queer; specifically, they identified within the Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender communities. At the time, I heard the terms used in passing, but had no concept of what they meant except that they were not accepted or visible within our town.

Over time, these individuals opened me up to a world of vocabulary and culture through queer spaces on social media platforms such as Tumblr. This exposure informed my own gender and sexuality identity development as I looked to other queer people for an understanding of my identity. I remember searching Tumblr for LGBT¹ support pages or forums where people discussed their experiences coming to terms with their identity. In retrospect, I might have rationalized these searches as a way to support and understand my new friends, but I think I was trying to understand myself and the feelings I had for years but never understood. I specifically remember reflecting on an experience I had in elementary school where one of my female identifying friends and I kissed as a way to determine whether or not we were good kissers, before we would eventually kiss boys. This came to mind as I read through these forums because it was not a meaningless experience to me. There was something about the idea of kissing another girl that made me happy even though kids around me made jokes about lesbians. While this experience was flowing through my mind, I also thought about the boys I had crushes on and the ways that I did not feel like other girls in my grade. These forums gave me a sense of

¹ During 2015, the term “LGBTQIA+” was not widely used since there was not a community wide recognition or understanding of identities such as Queer, Intersex, or Asexual. “LGBT” was a more common term I heard people utilizing within the queer community and it provided more results when searched on the internet.
comfort that I had not experienced in any class or social setting. They allowed me to
explore my feelings authentically and claim my own understanding of self. After a couple
months of exploration and questioning at the age of sixteen, I came out for the first time
as gender fluid and pansexual. This development furthered my involvement and
exploration of more queer identities and the history of the community.

Following my coming out, my friends encouraged me to join our school’s Gay
Straight Alliance (GSA), which I eventually petitioned to change the name to “The
Gender and Sexuality Alliance”. The afterschool club was run by an openly homosexual
cisgender white man and there were very few other students or faculty involved. It was as
if the club was shameful, and no one really looked to associate with us. It is important to
note that while this club was offered to students, it was not granted the same communal
respect or recognition of other groups. When I pushed for more community support as the
club president my junior and senior year, there were at most ten students involved. While
many of my straight-cisgendered classmates avoided this club, it was somewhere that I
genuinely found comfort and started to understand the importance of queer presence.
Many of the members used this space to discuss the harassment and struggles they faced
in the classrooms, while also discussing the queer culture that existed beyond our high
school. These grievances eventually led to a video titled “Breaking the Silence” where
members of our group anonymously told faculty their experiences with violence in our
school. Messages within the video ranged from harmful slurs being used in the
classroom, to physical violence, and sexual harassment (Figure 1.1) This was my first
experience being a part of a production that would create change in our community and
the students without our group empowered me to explore other ways to help students like me within our school.

Figure 1.1: Breaking the Silence Video Example

As previously mentioned, I eventually got more involved by serving as the GSA president for two years where I pushed for pronoun education, gender inclusive restrooms, and providing an inclusive sex education to students. I was also introduced to the Connecticut Chapter of the formerly known Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), where I advocated with other K-12 students for statewide LGBTQIA+ inclusion. These groups provided me the space to publicly address
transgender issues within our education system and allowed me to call on public representatives, so that they were held accountable for the violence within our schools (Figure 1.2).

![Figure 1.2: Transgender Rights Protest in New Haven, Connecticut](image)

While my identity as an activist started in high school, it continues to evolve similar to my queer identity as I learn more about the history and culture of the queer community. Towards the end of my senior year of high school, I noticed that I was experiencing a lack of motivation and energy from all the public speaking, protests, social media posts, and public gatherings that I was planning. This burnout made me feel as though my time as an activist was already over and that I needed to find a more sustainable passion elsewhere. This was a mindset that I carried with me as I applied to the University of Maine to pursue a bachelor’s degree in Psychology. My hope was to find a career that would make my parents proud, but I also wanted to support my community without
having to be an activist per say. While my intentions were to change the field of psychology, I found myself being more interested in the coursework that focused on identity development, social justice, social norms, queer identities, and systems of oppression. It was as if the part of myself that I cut off before college grew back stronger than ever with a new purpose. This new purpose was using my voice and education to inform others. I found that providing resources, pushing for administrative change, and educating people on my community’s culture was my new form of activism. Later in this thesis, I will discuss the struggles I had claiming the identity of “activist” due to the people around me claiming that policy changes and education were not active enough to identify as “activism”. However, overtime through coursework and various leadership experiences I recognized that these background forms of activism are “advocacy”. As I will explore in the Social Movement Identification Typology chapter, “Advocacy” is more about sustaining a movement and its goals through policy, education, and awareness. While I came into my undergraduate career ignoring my past identity as an activist, I now recognize that my activism never really stopped or died out. Rather it developed with me as I learned more about queer culture and found my place within the queer movement. As I write this thesis, I do not claim the identity of queer activist anymore, rather I have come to understand my identity as a queer advocate. The following questions have guided me towards a more complete understanding of this identity development and how it might apply it to other individual’s role identification within their specific social movements.

What is real activism? Is activism exclusively protesting and coordinating public events to gather supporters? Does publishing your public support or pushing for
administrative change have no impact on social change? If this is the case, how do we classify individuals pushing for inclusive education and public policy? Does one’s identity within a social movement go beyond the collective identity to an individual identity? How do forms of activism and identity intersect to form one’s identity within a movement? How does this individual level identity influence a person’s involvement in a social movement now and in the future? With these questions in mind, it is my goal to develop a conversation around more sustainable forms of activism and the ways that each individual within a social movement can contribute to social change by identifying with their role in the movement.
CHAPTER 1

METHODOLOGY

This research topic originated from my investigation of the University of Maine (UMaine) 1974 Gay Symposium. The research involved reviewing administrative letters, news articles, radio broadcasting, and letters from community members that focused on the communal acceptance or rejection of the first openly homosexual\(^2\) conference on UMaine’s campus. There were approximately fifty-four letters against the event, ten letters of support, and sixty local news articles collected for this research project. The archival materials were provided to me by Fogler Library’s Special Collections department. The results from this research project were influential to the methodologies within this paper because it not only drove me to the question of “what does it mean to be an activist?” but it also pushed me to reflect on my role as a queer advocate within a university that had experiences with widespread homophobia. The investigation of the archival materials also yielded the following results:

1. The Gay Symposium was hosted by the newly founded Wilde Stein Queer Straight Alliance and focused on providing queer community members with the resources they needed to live as their identity.

\(^2\) This term is utilized instead of “LGBTQIA+” since the queer students presented within my research were referred to as the “homosexual club” or “homosexuals” by the larger community at that time.
2. The University of Maine Board of Trustees approved the funding of the Gay Symposium, which created communal uproar over the idea of the university funding a homosexual event.

3. The majority of letter writers were against the funding of the event and protested against the university by denying them alumni donations.

4. Many arguments against the event included religious reasoning and stated that such an event was immoral.

5. University President Howard Neville sent and responded to several administrative letters that focused on stalling the planning process of this conference in hopes of maintaining alumni funding.

   After concluding the research project, I began to look into the definition of what it means to be an activist, forms of activism, historical examples of queer activism, the definition of advocacy, and autoethnography as a form of queer scholarship. This research sparked my interest in these topics because it was the first time I had read about historical queer activism on my campus. While completing the research I was the president of our queer straight alliance “Wilde Stein”, which informed my interest in the historical comparison of the campus need for engagement and activism within the queer community. Specifically, I felt as though the queer activism on our campus was not as present as it once was, and I questioned whether it disappeared or if people were finding other means of activism. With this in mind, I searched for scholarly articles and books on search engines such as Google Scholar and the Fogler Library OneSearch database by utilizing the following terms:
These terms yielded a literature review with hundreds of scholarly sources that provided case studies of queer activism and the ways that personal experiences inform sociology and gender studies scholarship. While many of the articles focused on queer activists, the content alluded to a larger issue of finding individual identity within the collective identity of a movement. Specifically, I noticed that there was a gap in discussions around how the individual places themself or identifies with their role in a collective group or social movement. To better understand what has been published in order to fill this gap, I sorted through resources by reviewing abstracts, finding the key terms listed above, and reviewed the central points of each author’s argument. Based on the main themes I read, I started to piece together my argument for this paper and organized the sources by author, source title, year, and key points that would be insightful for this thesis.

The research I present within this thesis all share a few qualities; first, they focus on how personal experiences can inform scholarship. Second, they reflect the trends
in activism amongst marginalized communities, starting with the Civil Rights era, and how the sociological idea of “performativity” influences the experiences of activists. Finally, they describe how advocacy differs from activism, the ways in which education and policy serve as a form of activism, and sustainable models of activism.

One of the few limitations I had while looking for sources include finding articles with similar definitions of terms such as “queer” and “activist”. While reading through articles, I found that many authors used the terms interchangeably or they did not have the same characteristics to define activist work. As I mentioned earlier in this thesis, the term queer is still contested within the LGBTQIA+ community which caused a difference in definition amongst newer and more experienced scholars. Additionally, there were many articles written by authors from different cultural settings. With this research, I tried to keep the resources within a western perspective and culture since that was where I experienced many of the short narratives within this thesis. While I thought that this scope would be easy to maintain, I struggled to find author’s or narratives that were similar to my experiences. There were a couple articles I read and genuinely connected with, but I realized they were from experiences in other countries such as Africa. While these experiences were informative for me as a scholar, I did not feel that our cultural experiences could be analyzed under a similar lens. Similarly, to this, I found that there were very few examples of queer writers utilizing an autoethnographic model for their writing that I could reference for my paper. While I recognized that autoethnography was underutilized and overlooked within scholarship, I hoped that there might be personal stories in other people’s scholarship even if they were not autoethnographic.
Unfortunately, I had few examples of queer autoethnography and had to adopt my own form of writing based off other autoethnographic work, such as the theses of former honors students. Last, I found that it was difficult to recall all the emotions and details of certain events mentioned in my personal narratives. While autoethnography has been a rewarding experience for me as a queer studies student, reliving the struggles and addressing the ways they made me feel while living through a global pandemic was a very emotionally involved process. I recognize the value that these stories have and appreciate the opportunity to share them. However, recalling these experiences in their entirety without any reference points such as journal entries, required me to dig into emotions on command in a short timeframe. If I were going to write an autoethnography similar to this in the future, I would try to utilize more direct or recent examples to ensure that I had every emotion and event fully analyzed. I would also try to incorporate my reflections of events as they naturally occurred rather than trying to force myself to reflect and relive experiences.

After my literature review, I went through all of the souvenirs I had collected over the past four years from events, important moments, and emotional experiences I had, in hopes of evoking memories to include in my personal narratives. Once I collected all of my data, I reviewed a previous autoethnography written by Kimberly Crowley, a former UMaine Honors thesis student, titled “The Personal is Poetic: A Case for Poetry Therapy”. In her work, Crowley writes her thesis by providing contents of her literature review and then follows each section with a personal narrative that connects her experiences to the previous scholarship she read. For the sake of this thesis, I will be exploring a similar model where I discuss the topics at hand based on the literature
review I conducted, and I will describe my experiences as an advocate in hopes of adding to the preexisting scholarship. The personal narratives will be written in a traditional autoethnographic style, which will be further defined in the following chapter.

I will conclude this thesis by reflecting on the scholarship that exists around activism and advocacy to determine which form of social change is more sustainable for long-term and increased communal involvement. Furthermore, I will argue that education and policy changes are crucial facets of social change that fall under the advocacy umbrella.

**Limitations**

While this thesis has been conducted thoroughly over a year long period, it is important to recognize the areas that could be further improved if this work were to be reproduced or expanded upon in the future. I want to first acknowledge that while my work is meant to be disruptive, original, and authentic, this is by no means the first queer autoethnography to be written. This thesis has been an informative experience for myself as I try to find new ways to write scholarship and navigate ways that I can inform literature with a queer undergraduate perspective. While this has been informative and groundbreaking for my own experiences in scholarship, I am not the first person to utilize autoethnography as a way to incorporate or elevate queer narratives in literature. For example, Z Nicolazzo wrote an autoethnography titled *In Search of Her: An Autoethnographic Search For Self in Virtual Landscapes*, where they ask a similar question of who is responsible for labeling or identifying queer identity in a heteronormative society? It is also worth noting that Nicolazzo utilizes their personal
experiences within a higher education institution to understand their place in the queer community (Nicolazzo 2019). This narrative along with my own pushes readers to reflect on who is writing major scholarship and reinforcing social norms. With this in mind, one of the limitations encountered while writing this autoethnography was the fact that I was writing within a hegemonic structure. While many of the authors before me disrupted the hegemonic narratives in scholarship by utilizing autoethnography, the structure we write within still reinforces a certain level of objectivity and a model when creating scholarship. For example, within this thesis there are traumatic experiences described with very little emotion and situations are expressed in a more professional way, rather than raw feelings. I provide a more professional reflection of my feelings because I felt that my experiences or perspectives would be devalued since they were not as objective as previous scholars. Additionally, my upbringing involved people telling me not to get too emotional and to be rational with my thoughts. These ideas continue to influence my work as I limit the amount of expression I put into scholarship and I reflect on the injustices facing my community with more professional perspectives. This has been a limitation within this thesis because I have held back or rejected certain ideas simply because I think they will be perceived as too radical for our time or too emotional to be holistic for the queer experience. The refraining from being raw with my thoughts and emotions also creates another limitation which is that my autoethnography is not emotionally accurate. There are multiple stories within this thesis where my emotions are not fully shared out of worry of rejection or retaliation by the organizations I reference. This further connects to the idea of hegemonic structures influencing the work I am writing because instead of providing a direct disruption to the narratives I am seeing; I
shape my thoughts and arguments so that they will be accepted by dominant discourse. This creates barriers for me as I navigate newer ideology and language for describing the phenomena that are occurring within my community. Overall, I feel that this thesis was limited in its ability to be completely disruptive as I was working within the confines of an academic institution and I was not fully expressive of the emotions I experienced within certain situations. Furthermore, while this is not the first time that autoethnography is being utilized for queer narratives and there are limitations to this thesis, my goal is to take my experiences as an undergraduate student and make a valuable argument for the use of autoethnography when studying marginalized identities.
CHAPTER 2

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS A TOOL FOR SCHOLARSHIP

Introduction to Autoethnography

While autoethnography is not a new form of scholarship, it is underutilized and underappreciated by many disciplines. Autoethnography was first described as “the practice of cultural members giving an account of the culture” (Matthes et al. 2017). While the definition of autoethnography has expanded since its first debut, the major focus of the technique is to study a culture or identity through the experience and writing of someone from that community. By doing so the researcher no longer has to objectively watch subjects within a culture, rather they have more realistic and raw data based on people’s lived experiences. Matthes et al. continue their definition by outlining some of the common practices of autoethnographers,

“When we do autobiography—or write about the self—we often call on memory and hindsight to reflect on past experiences; talk with others about the past; examine texts such as photographs, personal journals, and recordings; and may even consult with relevant news stories, blogs, and other archives related to life events” (Matthes et al 2017).

Building off the previous definition of autoethnography, it is clear that this practice allows writers to reflect on their past experiences and discuss some of the trends they have noticed in their community, while also connecting it back to the trends in dominant scholarship. While some experiences may build upon current literature, the goal of autoethnography could include trying to speak against harmful depictions of certain communities and provide alternatives to dominant social conditions (Matthes et al 2017).
In her article, *Black Feminist Epistemology*, Patricia Hill Collins presents the idea of going against dominant discourse and representing one’s community in academia. Specifically, Collins explores the racism and sexism that exists within academic circles that has barred Black women from telling their authentic experiences because dominant research tells a different narrative, “Scholars, publishers, and other experts represent specific interests and credentialing processes, and their knowledge claims must satisfy the political and epistemological criteria of the contexts in which they reside” (Collins 2012). These ideas represent the necessity of autoethnography within academia because it allows members of a community to have an expressive outlet for their experiences with oppression, while also providing more perspectives on how to combat existing oppressive systems.

Collins goes on to discuss the importance of a culture or community telling their experience rather than having an outsider ask and answer their own questions about that community’s experiences,

“Moreover, specialized thought challenging notions of Black female inferiority is unlikely to be generated from within White-male controlled academic settings because both the kinds of questions asked and the answers to them would necessarily reflect a basic lack of familiarity with Black women’s realities…Believing they are already knowledgeable, many scholars staunchly defend controlling images of U.S. Black women as mammies, matriarchs, and jezebels, and allow these commonsense beliefs to permeate their scholarship” (Collins 2012).

Essentially, Collins is saying that society cannot expect accurate or objective research results about the experience of Black women from people outside that community, specifically white men. Since white men have controlled all previous records of Black culture they continued to create and perpetuate racist stereotypes. While the
argument presented in this article focuses on the lived experiences of Black women, it extends into research focusing on other marginalized communities.

As mentioned by Collins, scholarship has been dominated by white men, but for the purposes of this paper I would like to extend her idea to include white, heterosexual, and cisgender men. What I mean by this is that not only have the experiences of Black women been erased by white male scholars, but members of the LGBTQIA+ community have also had their community generalized in dominant research by white heterosexual people. For example, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century many psychologists studied homosexuality as if it were an underlying condition for a disease. Homosexuality was seen as a deviant from social norms which signaled to many psychologists that people who showed homosexual behaviors had a psychological impairment that needed correction (Baughey-Gill, 2017). This understanding of homosexual feelings or behaviors has contributed to decades of violence towards the queer community; including, but not limited to, verbal assault, conversion shock therapies, policies restricting individual rights, and social isolation. It was not until the early 1970’s that homosexuality was finally removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) after Gay Activists protested the inhumane treatment and representation of their community. While homosexuality was removed from the DSM, transgender experiences such as gender dysphoria, the psychological distress that one encounters when their gender identity and assigned sex do not align, remain in the DSM categorized as Gender Identity Disorder. This classification medicalizes the various experiences that transgender individuals experience, while also gatekeeping and normalizing the concept of being transgender.
An example of the medical field medicalizing the experiences of transgender individuals includes my own experience trying to gain access to a chest masculinization procedure. Chest masculinization, also known as a mastectomy, is the process where an individual has their breasts removed to make their chest flat and appear more masculine. This procedure is usually not covered by insurance companies unless deemed necessary by a medical professional and is often performed for people trying to prevent or remove breast cancer. When I first came out as gender fluid in high school, one of my friends that identified as transgender taught me about chest binding, which involves wrapping one’s chest or wear undergarments that actively flatten breasts to make a chest look more masculine without surgery. I started binding my chest with sports bras within a couple weeks of coming out and felt a sense of freedom being able to wear clothing without it being too tight from my chest, but I also felt like I was accurately presenting the fluid identity I claimed. For me, being gender fluid meant pushing the boundaries of masculinity, femininity, and gender norms at any given moment. I never felt like just a boy or just a girl, I was experiencing both identities together and interchangeably. One day I remember in particular was when I went to school with my hair tucked in a beanie, wore my dad’s black basketball shorts, a pair of black and pink Nike sneakers, and a band t-shirt while binding my chest. This day stands out to me as the start of my transition because on that day one of my friends commented on how androgynous I looked and said it was the most attractive I ever looked. This comment stuck out to me because it was the first time someone recognized and appreciated my authentic identity. From that day, I decided to keep binding my chest and about a year later started researching chest masculinization surgery for my partner at the time who identified as a transgender man.
This researched sparked my interest in getting the procedure done for myself as I struggled with the size, appearance, and femininity that came with a large chest. As I learned more about transgender identities and experiences during my senior year of high school, I became solidified in a non-binary identity. For me being non-binary meant that I did not identify as male or female, nor did I really find my gender expression existing within the binary at all. I felt that I was a person who enjoyed feminine and sometimes masculine things and my gender was not really central to my existence. With this realization, I also found that I had extreme discomfort with my chest because of how large it was and the way that it made people misgender me as a woman. I thought that chest masculinization would help me achieve the more androgynous presentation that I strived for, but the only thing in my way was getting the approval of doctors, so that my insurance would help cover the cost.

My process for chest masculinization started with me going to a therapist who asked me about my gender experiences, when I first came out, why I felt that I was transgender, and the ways that my family perceived this identity. All of this to verify that I was truly transgender and not going through a phase. However, my therapist did not support chest masculinization because she felt that it was only meant for transgender men and no other group of people. At that point in my transition, I was desperate to remove my chest as it burdened my mental health and I wanted to live freely. It felt as if my chest was the only thing holding me back from my authentic identity because strangers and even my family members would misgender me as female, since my chest was still noticeable even while I was binding. Along with the misgendering, my chest was very large, and overtime lost its elasticity from the constant flattening of my binder. These
physical changes led to my struggle with body dysmorphia and pushed me to relapse on my eating disorder multiple times. In order to gain access to chest masculinization during the last few months of my senior year of high school, I identified as a transgender man after identifying as non-binary for two years. This process required more than just a change in my identity, I had to throw away all the feminine clothes I had, appear more masculine in behaviors, and come out to everyone in my life so that I would finally be able to move along in the surgery process. After about a year of identifying as a man, my therapist diagnosed me with Gender Identity Disorder and agreed to refer me to an endocrinologist to start the process of hormone replacement therapy (HRT). HRT was required within this process so that my body, appearance, and voice all aligned with a male gender identity. This was the last part of the transition process before I would be referred to a plastic surgeon to discuss my chest masculinization. However, it is easier said than done because in order to make an appointment with a surgeon I had to take testosterone for two years to ensure my body was masculinized enough before surgery. This process caused me to lose hair, have my body completely reshape itself from the shape I once enjoyed, deepened my voice, developed facial hair, made me more aggressive, and caused me to struggle with an overwhelming libido. I hated the hormone aspect of transition because it took away a lot of my feminine qualities, but I knew it would be worth the struggle once I got surgery. Two years passed, I finally got a referral for top surgery going and into the appointment process. I thought I would be able to get surgery within the next couple of months, but I was completely wrong. Before the procedure I met with the surgeon to take pictures and diagram my body, following that I held on top my hope for a surgery date for another two years while I waited for an office
specialist to coordinate the insurance process and actually book the appointment. At the time I was nineteen years old, and I remember calling the office at least once a week, getting voicemail boxes, and playing an endless game of phone tag all while trying to complete schoolwork, being in student organizations, and working three jobs. The process was exhausting and by the second year of trying to get the procedure scheduled I had lost hope, until they called and finally processed everything. While insurance covered the cost, I still owed about $3,000 out-of-pocket, which I luckily earned from a summer job. I finally got the procedure done December 20th, 2019 and went through a grueling recovery process for about 5 months.

Once the surgery was done, I stopped taking hormones and watched as my body feminized itself once again by redistributing body fat, making my hair longer, and skin smoother. I started exploring more feminine clothing options within a couple months of the procedure and came out as non-binary again, asking that people switch to they series pronouns when referring to me. I provide the example above as one of the many common misconceptions that society has inherited from the problematic research of white, heterosexual, cisgender, and male academics. It is because of the scholarship that exists that doctors felt they had a stronger grasp on the experiences of transgender people and the right to cure them as if being transgender is a disease. My experience as a non-binary person could have been less exhausting and stressful if the doctors I worked with recognized the benefits of chest masculinization for non-binary people. This issue is something that is under discussed in academia even though my experience is one of the many that have occurred. Gender Identity Disorder restricted my ability to identify as non-binary and it made me feel like I had a problem that needed correcting when in
reality I just wanted to live authentically. Similar to Collins, I argue that one cannot truly understand a culture or identity without reading the experiences of individuals within that community. If the perspective I shared in this paper were shared openly in dominant scholarship, there might be more inclusive conversations on how to help transgender people holistically rather than sticking a one-size solution for all transgender people. For these reasons, I will further examine how autoethnography can be utilized as an academic tool for queer scholars in order to create more representative information about trends in queer experiences.

**Queering Autoethnography**

As previously stated, there is no way to understand the queer experience unless it is told from a queer person. The field of sociology has tried understanding the social importance of culture for decades and yet most of the research is presented from a secondary source, a researcher. In *Tragic Queer at the Urinal Stall, Who, Now, Is the Queerest One of All?*, Adams and Bolen present questions that are central to implementing autoethnography as a tool for queer academics,

> “Further, given the vulnerable, intimate, and taboo topics associated with queer theory, it can be difficult to do fieldwork, participant observation, and deep hanging out in natural settings related to these topics. For example, where do we go to participate in same-sex attraction, gender nonconformity, or heteronormativity? Where can we hang out to observe monogamy, barebacking, melancholy, or failure? Working with personal experience in autoethnography offers important access to these topics, as everyday life becomes an important site for data” (Adams and Bolen 2017).

Here Adams and Bolen argue that while researchers may try to remain objective when studying queer experiences, it’s nearly impossible to determine where someone could go to study these cultures, which could lead to further ethical problems rooted in
stereotypes. Autoethnography allows the public access to these genuine experiences without having to be completely objective. People outside of a community cannot answer these questions unless people from within this community write out their experience. Not only does this technique allow queer scholars to share their stories, but autoethnography increases the value of their experiences by contesting any misconceptions in current literature. Additionally, this technique not only gives room for openly queer individuals to tell their experiences, but it also allows people who feel they might fall within a community and do not claim an identity or people who do not have a label for their experiences yet to share their perspectives. This allows scholarship to be more informed on queer experiences and the different stages that people go through when trying to understand their identity.

In addition to the argument of queer people being the source for queer experiences, Stacy Jones and Tony Adams argue that autoethnography is crucial for queer studies because identity is fluid and constantly shifting. In *Autoethnography is a Queer Method*, Jones and Adams introduce the idea of identity being “achievement based” meaning that once someone claims an identity it can no longer fluctuate or be represented in a different way. An example of this could be a transgender man opting for masculine attire and going through hormone replacement therapy in order to appear more male, doing this he is achieving his identity as a man. Within this framework, Jones and Adams argue that queer experiences are restricted because rather than expressing one’s authentic identity they are stuck in a type of gender achievement. With this in mind, the authors state that autoethnography allows us to move away from an essentialist perspective on identity and move toward a more constructivist mindset,
“queer identity-as-achievement logic, however, works outside of essentialist and constructionist perspectives: It embraces the contextual achievement of being, and passing as, certain kinds of people…By considering autoethnography queer, we recognize that identities may not be singular, fixed or normal across all interactions. Identities constructed through a queering of autoethnography are relational: they shift and change. We are held accountable for being particular kinds of people by numerous seen and unseen forces, but our/these kinds are in constant need of attention, negation, and care” (Nash 2016).

Here, Jones and Adams argue that not only should researchers move away from the perspective of identity as being one static experience, but they argue that autoethnography allows for the constant attention needed within identity research to be fulfilled by people sharing their various experiences within a certain cultural context. It is clear that the current objectivity within academic research does not translate to the work within gender and identity studies because these fields of study emphasize the diverse and intersectional experiences of various identities. The essentialist and constructionist perspectives that are utilized within scholarship force queer individuals to take on one solid identity and live with the characteristics of that identity, there is no room for people who may align with certain characteristics but not others. Part of the queer experience is defying the cultural norms and seeing identity beyond the binaries or boundaries that a culture created. By changing the current research methods from constructionist to an autoethnographic model, the results of the studies represent a fluid and ever-changing human experience rather than focusing on a stagnant or outdated perception of the human identity development process. If sociologists or gender studies scholars hope to study and understand a specific community’s experiences or identity development, they must allow members of that community to write their own experiences. Without this contribution, research grounds itself in objectivity and generalizations of a community’s diverse experiences.
While it is apparent that autoethnography is resourceful for studying cultures, many academic circles argue that this method is too emotional and self-serving, rather than objective. In the introduction of *Queering Autoethnography*, Jones and Harris provide the concepts of “me-search” and “we-search”; simply put, “me-search” is when someone creates an autoethnography only exploring their experiences without connecting them to other scholars' similar experiences (Jones and Harris 2019). The authors argue that autoethnography should be centered around “we-search” because it is a collective community coming together to recognize trends in their experiences and speaking to a central experience or issue, rather than having it only be personal experiences.

The reason I provide these definitions is to recognize the different ways that individuals may approach autoethnography and since there have been examples of “me-search” in past publications, individuals with the privilege to determine what is “scholarly” have generalized all autoethnographies to become too personal. Similar to Jones and Adams, I argue that the only appropriate way to understand a community at a specific moment in time is to allow them to write their own story. The goal of autoethnography is not always to confirm current scholarship; similar to identity, our scholarship should be flexible and centered around development rather than being right. Queer as a term pushes our social norms to think beyond what currently exists and how fluid human identities can be, while autoethnography pushes academia to look beyond traditional research methods and make room for contesting data.

With all of this in mind, I will utilize autoethnography as a way to not only highlight current scholarship around activism and advocacy, but also provide new perspectives of how people can place themselves within a social movement. My goal
with this autoethnography is to allow readers to see the ways that their identity within a social movement can develop over time and expand the ways in which people view activism, in order to create a more inclusive perspective. This reflection will allow me to develop the Social Movement Identification Typology, which emphasizes the ways that people inside and outside of a social movement influence social change. I will also reflect on how my education and cultural exposure through leadership experiences allowed me to recognize the gaps in current literature around the idea of what it means to be “an activist”.

Personal Narrative and Commentary

*I Am Frankenstein’s Monster: Finding My Lived Experiences in the Classics*

During my second year at the University of Maine, I was assigned to read Mary Shelley’s classic *Frankenstein* for my honors civilizations class. We started reading the book right around Halloween, so I was pretty excited to actually read the book while getting ready for the season because my prior experience with the book was limited. From what I understood Frankenstein’s monster represented Halloween simply because of all the monster images that are used during the holiday. While my excitement originally came from the Halloween spirit, I found myself more focused on the ways that Shelley alluded to the human experience and the ways science has allowed us to manipulate our natural bodies. This pushed me to reflect on the “naturalness” of my body as I was planning to change the appearance of my chest. I could not help but feel a sense of queerness within the text; specifically, the concept of manipulating a body to get the perfect image and the experience of social rejection from not being a “normal” body. The
experiences of the Monster resonated with me as a queer individual because similar to the monster all I wanted was to be accepted by others and the only way I could gain acceptance was by passing as male, in order to surgically reshape my chest. This type of surgical enhancement also parallels the creation story of the Monster because Victor takes various human remains and brings them together to create life through various surgical procedures. While these changes created the social rejection that the Monster faces, he tries to connect with the humans around him by showing the ways his body is technically human or normal even if surgically enhanced. After reading the book, I wrote a creative piece based on the novel from the Monster’s perspective, specifically focusing on the part when Victor brings the monster to life. Within this part of the story, Victor sees the monster come to life after spending years trying to create the life he wanted but runs in fear of how hideous the monster is, which causes the monster to run after him and eventually murder Victor’s best friend and new wife. When writing from the perspective of the Monster, I focused on how his creation was similar to the birth of a child while Victor stood in as the parent that has longed to have children. Once the Monster came alive, I wrote his character as being confused and innocent looking for a genuine connection or guidance. When the Monster hears Victor calling him hideous and runs away, the Monster is left in the dark like a child feeling abandoned by his parents. Eventually the monster tries to go after his father but realizes that Victor will never love him because he is not the child he wanted, meaning he does not fit the beauty standards that Victor hoped for, thus causing a gap in the affection the Monster receives. While this story was written as a form of rejection based on beauty, I felt that the story reflected the coming out process where someone is reborn as their true self and they have to see how
the people in their life will react, especially their parents. When I was reading the book, I felt empathy for the Monster even after he murders other characters because all of his pain came from a place of social rejection, the latter of which is something very common within the queer community.

I shared these experiences with my peers, and it led to a class conversation about queer identity and the lack of engagement that we had with queer culture in our civilization’s classes. I remember feeling a sense of enlightenment as my professor told me about queer theory, a field of academia that is dedicated to understanding queer experiences within literature and the ways people can disrupt literature through queer narratives. I remember sitting in class reflecting on the ways in which Shelley’s work not only disrupted the genre she wrote in, but the way her work alluded to my own experiences. These conversations led to the class reading Susan Stryker’s *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix*. Stryker’s work was incredibly influential on me, I remember highlighting several lines and writing “YES!” next to every statement that spoke to my experience with the text, specifically at the beginning of her monologue when she stated,

“The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster’s as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist” (Stryker 2011).

This quote was not only monumental for affirming the feelings I had when interpreting the text, but it also provided a direct example of how my experiences
contribute to queer theory. This was the first article I read in my undergraduate career that provided me with an example of how I could take my underrepresented experiences and present them in an academic setting. By doing this, I allow others to get a look into the thoughts and feelings I have with certain texts that might not be written elsewhere, which is exactly what Stryker does in this article. She takes her experiences with alienation and connects it to the Monster’s rage in order to highlight a feeling of rage that the transgender community feels at large due to social rejection. This was the first time I saw my community represented in an academic setting and while it impacted my interests as a scholar, it was just as impactful on my peers. Unfortunately, when going through these readings, our class is only granted a week to attempt to dissect the texts and their deeper meanings, so there were definitely areas of conversation we missed out on when reflecting on queer experiences. At the very least, however, I think my classmates and I walked away with a stronger understanding of how personal experiences can inform scholarship and allow people outside of a community to see in on some of the personal struggles that marginalized communities encounter. The reason I reflect on this experience when arguing for autoethnography in queer scholarship is due to the fact that my story telling provided my peers with a first-hand glance into the experiences and feelings of transgender people. While my experiences were only a small piece of a larger community, many students felt like they had found a deeper understanding of the pain that gender dysphoria causes and how gender confirmation surgeries can negatively impact transgender people. This was the first time that I felt like my experience was being heard, understood, and represented in an academic space. Not only was I able to speak to the troubles that occur when you are transgender, but I found a way to show how
the experiences of transition are not as relieving as people portray in media. While we only had a short amount of time to discuss texts and the underlying themes, I am glad that I presented my interpretation of the text even if it was not a popular theme recognized within the text because it gave my peers the space to discuss and underrepresented topics within our curriculum. Queer theory was not integrated into many of the texts we read, but the structure of our class allowed students to explore the important elements they took from the stories and reflect on how the human experience was presented within each of them. We were encouraged to think beyond what was being written and share our perspectives in hopes of getting a more holistic analysis of the text and the meaning it can carry outside of the common analyses. For these reasons, sharing experiences is a critical part of the human experience. The only way we can truly relate to one another is by hearing about each other’s experiences. While this may lead to more emotional works being produced, these feelings serve as authentic data that could relate to hundreds of other experiences, thus creating cultural trends.

Similar to the previous arguments of Collins, my work has been shot down by individuals that have privilege in academic circles because my data is too personal. The term “me-search” strikes a nerve for me because it feels as though scholarship is only objective and that I do not have a place in creating scholarship until I mold my perspectives into the current heteronormative frameworks. During the development stages of this project, I knew I wanted my personal experiences as a queer student and advocate to be recognized as experiences shared by my community. I have had exposure to individuals who also felt their experiences do not have a place in academia, but I strongly believe that research and data driven by people within a certain community is
more telling than research collected by bystanders. My hope with this thesis is to pave the way for more queer scholars to reflect on their experiences and compare it to the narratives being written on behalf of the queer community by heterosexual and cisgender individuals. This thesis is not meant to confirm previous data or open up a debate around the credibility of autoethnography or my story. This work is my experience as a person who has come to not only understand the oppressive structures that exist to reinforce social norms, but to also acknowledge the experiences I had when developing my identity as a queer advocate. I recognize the academic privilege I possess for being able to speak for my community and do not wish for my experiences to overshadow others. Rather I want this to be a declaration of my community’s existence in academia, so that we may continue to create works based on our experiences and have them validated at face value. Simply put, if you wish to hear a queer perspective, why would you not want to hear it from a queer person?
CHAPTER 3:

PERFORMATIVITY THEORY & QUEER ACTIVISM

Defining Queer Activism

On the Grounds and on our TVs: Defining Activism

The term “activist” is commonly used as a synonym for “advocate” and while these terms are used interchangeably, the social definition of these terms is more complex than the ways they are conceptualized. In the article ‘I'm not an activist, though I've done a lot of it’: Doing Activism, Being Activist and the ‘Perfect Standard’ in a Contemporary Movement, Chris Bobel explores what it means to be an activist, the ways that individuals take ownership of the label “activist” and alludes to the idea of the “perfect activist”. In this article, Bobel utilizes the following characterization when defining what it means to be an activist: “an activist is someone who cares enough about some issue that they are prepared to incur significant costs and act to achieve their goals” (Bobel 2007). An important aspect of this definition is Bobel’s use of the term “significant costs”. While Bobel does not go into detail about what significant costs can encompass, as I will explore in the next section, activism involves physically doing things for others or a movement. This expectation can take a toll on the individual emotionally, physically, and financially as they are constantly dedicating energy to social change. This definition also encompasses the variety of experiences that activists have within a movement. While this
is the definition Bobel provides, social movement theorists have also argued that the term “activist” acts as a collective identity for individuals with similar experiences or struggles and that an activist community rises out of said struggles. In *Collective Identity and Social Movements*, Polletta and Jasper explore social movements with a focus on how people within movements choose to participate based on a collective identity that they share with others, “If people choose to participate because doing so accords with who they are, the forms of protest they choose are also influenced by collective identities...They reflect what we believe, what we are comfortable with, what we like, who we are” (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Based on the works of McAdam, these theorists are arguing that people within a certain identity experience similar grievances or forms of oppression which mobilize them as a group to create social change. While Polletta and Jasper’s definition is more focused on what causes people to mobilize for change, their concept of activist is not far from that of Bobel because they both recognize the emotional drive and connection an individual must have to an issue in order to be involved.

When explaining the roles and responsibilities of activists, Polletta and Jasper describe activists as individuals that represent their group to a public audience, protest to declare their community’s presence and demands, and represent a form of civic engagement (Polletta and Jasper 2001). However, in Bobel’s article, he points to the fact that doing these types of actions does not mean that someone automatically takes on the label of “activist.” Instead, he makes a distinction between “doing activism” and “being an activist” (Bobel 2007). When describing the action of “doing activism” Bobel cites an example of women within the “Menstrual Activism” community that create products,
material resources, and staging actions that are committed raising awareness or challenging the status quo of menstruation (Polletta and Jasper 2001). With this example, Bobel acknowledges that activism is the physical actions that people take to push forward social change, but he also realizes that not everyone wants to take on the title of “activist”. Bobel claims that just because these women are raising awareness and pushing forward social change, does not mean that they label themselves as activists. Instead, the women saw a need for change in their community and found ways to help.

Bobel creates a division between “doing activism” and “being an activist” by citing Viktor Geca’s identity formation theory. This identity formation theory states that people do not inherently approach identity through relationships or group membership. Geca argues that our identities are anchored in certain values that give our lives meaning and direction (Bobel 2007). Through this definition, one can see that taking on the label of activist means that they are taking on the values of that identity and shaping their life to meet the direction of their activist community. With this in mind, Bobel asks why people take on the label of activist while others are hesitant. He discovers a few trends within literature including the hierarchy that is developed within social movements, the idea of activists being a “perfect model”, and the devaluing of one’s work. The hierarchy that Bobel refers to comes from the collective belief that in order to be an activist someone needs to be highly educated on the topic to the point where they are eloquent enough to present their community’s demands to the wider public. This plays into the idea of being a “perfect activist” because people do not believe that they fit the socially desired mold of “activist”, nor do they think they would have the time to commit to the values assigned to the identity (Bobel 2007). Part of this activist model involves being in
the public eye through social media or television. There is an underlying assumption that in order to be an activist one must be willing to be in the public’s eye with boots on the ground, protesting for their cause. These shared assumptions directly lead to people devaluing their work and not seeing it as impactful enough to be considered activism. This mindset thus keeps people from doing other activist type work since they do not see the value of their efforts in the movement. In short, the term “activist” can be applied to a collective identity held by a group of people, the work that people do to mobilize a movement, or it can be claimed as a personal identity that carries values and life direction. With this in mind, I will expand the definition of “activist” to be queer specific and develop a distinction between activist and advocate.

*What makes ‘Queer Activism’ Queer?: Defining Queer Activism*

While I recognize the collective identities that exist within the queer community, my conceptualization of activism aligns with the definitions provided by Bobel. Specifically, I am concerned with how we define “doing queer activism” versus “being a queer activist”. When specifying the “queer” nature of activism or advocacy, I want to implement the definition of “queer studies” that Jack Halberstam utilizes in *The Queer Art of Failure*, “Queer studies offers us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of an elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems” (Halberstam 1983). Additionally, Halberstam goes on to state that queerness is inherently a failure within our culture because it does not fit the heteronormative mold, “the queer body and queer social worlds become the evidence of that failure, while heterosexuality is rooted in a logic of achievement, fulfillment, and success(ion)” (Halberstam 1983). I utilize these quotes as a way to gauge our social understanding of queerness and the disruption that being queer
creates within social settings, especially academia. Additionally, with being a failure within social norms, it is expected that the individuals who identify as queer activists will disrupt the norms of how social justice is conducted through creativity and innovation. An example of this idea could include the ACT UP activism that occurred during the AIDS epidemic because activists needed to create an “in your face” form of activism to gain public attention and support which had not been common for the time. For the remainder of this thesis, I define queer activism as one’s active participation in the disruption of heteronormative, cisnormative, and other hegemonic ideologies in order to create a queer inclusive society. This form of disruption is through public staging, media coverage, civil and violent protest, and other forms of public address. With this definition, it is important to recognize the social interactions and disruptive values that an activist takes on when claiming this identity. These interactions and values not only guide the queer activist’s career, but also impact the physical and emotional well-being of the individual. Furthermore, I will explore the ways in which identifying as a queer activist can impact the individual and the effectiveness of their actions.

**Sociological Theory of Performativity and Queer Activism**

*Exploring Emotion Work and The Corrective Process*

The identity of the queer activist not only requires an individual to take on the values of the queer community, but it pushes them to interact with people outside of their community and promote said values. When promoting the values of the queer community, the queer activist is expected to represent their community in a positive way per social standards. This expectation requires them to conduct themselves and their
emotions in a way that is perceived as socially acceptable. The need to have one’s emotions perceived as socially comes from Arlie Hochshild in her article *Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure* when she describes the practice of “emotion work” as “the act of evoking or shaping, as well as suppressing, feeling in oneself” (Hochschild 1979). Hochschild argues that individuals make themselves feel certain ways based on social expectations and these emotions arise based on the socialization of certain scenarios carrying specific emotional value. An example that Hoschild provides within her work is someone who is the star halfback in high school and the individual struggles to hype themselves up before their games because of the stressful situations going on in their personal life. The athlete reflects on the fact that people have referred to them as a star athlete and they feel a social expectation to be hyped before a game, but they genuinely feel bored and unaroused. In order to compensate for this lack of feeling, they try different techniques to make themselves scared of the opponents to increase adrenaline or find ways to look nervous before a game, so no one suspects their lack of emotion. Ultimately the player feels no desire to be on the field and would prefer being in the stands, the individual sees this as a socially deviant feeling and tries to make up for the lack of feeling by presenting themselves in a certain way to others.

If an activist does not conform to the emotion “rules” similar to the athlete in the previous example, then they run the risk of social ridicule which will make them feel a sense of guilt for not conforming. Extending Hoschild’s work to queer activism, an example of a queer activist conducting emotion work can include a scenario where a school administration decided to implement a gender neutral bathroom for their students, which they would expect that queer students would respond with relief and excitement.
While this the expectation for a response, a queer individual may feel outraged or irritated because they feel their administration is celebrating themselves for providing the bare minimum for their students. Rather than show that frustration, the student will pretend to be excited and celebrate the “accomplishment” because they do not want to run the risk of having the bathroom taken away or revoking administrative support in general if they do not seem appreciative of the administration's work.

In the provided scenario, the queer student is exemplifying emotion work because while they might have some genuine feelings to express, they suppress or control them to fit the expected emotional response in order to avoid conflict. While this suppression may be beneficial for the administration, the student is left to experience their grief in private without their voice being heard. Erving Goffman builds off of Hochshild’s concept of “emotion work” through his concept of the “corrective process,” which states that we not only need to conform to the emotional rules in situations, but we need to alter our behaviors when we do not conform in order to maintain social relationships (Goffman 1955). The idea that Goffman presents here is essentially an apology model where someone can avoid social ridicule for not following social expectations in a given situation by identifying and correcting what they did wrong. This apology model or corrective process involves showing that what was done was meaningless or unintentional, offering some form of compensation to the individual that they hurt, and receiving an acceptance of their apology from that individual so that the offender can cease their condolences. In context with the previous example, if the student did show their grievances with the administrator then the administrator may take offense to their feedback and threaten to take away the bathroom. In a state of panic and worry for other
queer student’s well-being, that student might start to apologize and explain themselves, but ultimately end up praising the administrator’s minimal effort as a form of compensation for offending them, until they move on from the topic or the administrator accepts the student’s apology. While these emotional expectations are rooted within our cultural scripts, the process of apologizing for one’s genuine feelings at the cost of offending someone’s pride is exhausting. While the administrators think they are the students biggest ally, it is clear that their actions were self-serving to an extent and that they had no other plans to support their students. This puts the student in an uncomfortable situation because while they might want to voice concerns that they have with the administration, the power dynamic and social expectations require them to stay silent which makes their existence in the school feel conditional.

In *Exploring the Managed Heart*, Hochschild explores the idea of work or the physical and emotional labor that someone puts into their position. Specifically, Hochshild examines the emotional and physical work that flight attendants put into creating a positive flight experience for all passengers; she specifically focuses on the expectation for flight attendants to always be bubbly, ready to serve travelers, always on their feet, and customer focused. This example connects back to Goffman’s concept of face-work because the flight attendants are conducting themselves in a way that is socially expected; however, Hochshild’s argument varies from Goffman since she focuses on how people struggle to create boundaries between themselves and their jobs, so they are constantly performing and facing burnout (Hochshild 1983). Burnout is a familiar experience to many activist communities; for example, due to the assassination of prominent social justice advocates in the 1970’s, many Civil Rights era activists
experienced burnout because they lost some of the strongest voices of resistance to violence (Rhoads 1998). Burnout is not only influenced by devastation, but it can be experienced after the long periods of emotional and physical work that activism requires. Most commonly, activists are plagued with the task of having to commend allies for their minimal efforts or performative activism. An example of this happened during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests were allies posted black squares on social media platforms to show their solidarity with the movement. While this may have seemed like a form of activism to many, Black Lives Matter activists, such as Anna Bediones (@atothebed) utilized social media platforms such as Twitter to call attention to the harm that these black squares were causing for the Black Lives Matters hashtag. In a tweet Bediones stated, “my initial thought is it feels dangerous... because once you click on the BLM (Black Lives Matter) hashtag you’re directed to an overflow of black images, instead of other more useful content people could look at for information” (Bediones 2020). This argument was shared amongst activist communities as people pointed to the fact that white people could utilize their platforms to elevate Black voices and promote resources to create communal awareness, rather than posting a black square that does not serve the community positively. Not only are activists expected to present themselves and their community in positive ways, but they must also regulate and correct the behaviors of the people who state their support for their community. In this example, the activists did go against the theory of emotion work by speaking out against the valueless forms of activism, rather than utilizing emotion work to celebrate the minimal contributions people were making. While this emotion work was evaded by these activists, it is important to consider the fact that the Black Lives Matter movement has been an on-going force for
social change for years beyond this one event. With this prolonged period of activism, it is expected that activists will face burnout from the constant work and promotion of the movement. Burnout can cause people to feel hopeless or frustrated with the lack of change or the performativity that comes from their allies. This can eventually lead to the rejection of emotion work because they physically do not have the energy to continue celebrating useless attempts for change. It is because of this constant work and effort that many communities are burning out or do not have as many people claiming the identity of activists.

Personal Narrative and Commentary

_Aiden the Activist: Reflecting on my experiences with Queer Activism_

My personal reflection with the identity of “queer activist” started during high school when I was hosting events, leading queer organizations, and participating in protests that focused on providing K-12 queer students with an inclusive education experience. When I first joined the Gender and Sexuality Alliance at my high school, I had very limited knowledge of activism being a career path, nor did I pay attention to social movements that were occurring. In hindsight, I believe my lack of attention to social movements around the globe and the queer community was due to the fact that I did not live in those countries or yet identify within the LGBTQ+ community, and therefore felt no personal responsibility to support either movements. However, this perspective changed as I started to form my queer identity and took a human rights course my junior year of high school that focused on issues across the globe and the ways that activists pushed their community’s agendas. The majority of this class focused on the
public figures and projects that activist communities were pursuing in order to make social change, which led to my understanding of activism being a form of service that is only successful if it receives public acknowledgement. It was because of this understanding that I started hosting queer inclusive events within my school and community, attended protests or public gathering, and shared resources on social media that focused on queer inclusion. Along with my knowledge expansion, my desire to serve as an activist was reinforced by my human rights teacher. My teacher not only provided me with all the information I needed to gain a holistic picture of what it means to be an activist, but she always supported my perspectives and goals as a leader in my school. This support pushed me to explore the different roles I could serve within the queer movement, while also giving me the courage I needed to fight for administrative changes within our school.

Having read the work of Hochshild and Goffman for this thesis, I started to realize the amount of emotional work that I put into this “activist” identity. While I spent hours putting together events or speeches, I now know that being in the public eye meant that I would serve as one of the few representations of queerness in my community. This responsibility required me to alter the ways that I carried and presented myself to others because I feared that any socially rejected responses or thoughts could drastically impact the support that my community received from institutions. Having this expectation placed on my shoulders made me feel as though I was constantly in a fishbowl. I tried to shape myself to be the perfect representation for my community, administrators and community members watched me struggle from every angle ready to critique my abilities. During this time, I was also a Resident Assistant (RA) within my dorm, so not only was
balancing the responsibility of being the “campus queer”, but I also had to take on the responsibility of positively representing the Residence Life Department. This additional responsibility just increased the number of spectators and intensified the fishbowl feeling. All of this made me feel as though everyone watching had a hook in the bowl waiting to catch me slip up, so that I could be yanked out and ridiculed. The feeling was incredibly suffocating to the point where I remember coming home from meetings and classes on the edge of a breakdown, trying to hold it all in until I closed the door of my bedroom behind me. My dorm room was the only place I could put a curtain around my fishbowl. It felt as though I had nowhere to hide or anyone to turn to because any false move or venting my feelings to anyone with a minute amount of authority would risk getting me in trouble, thus misrepresenting my community.

When I reflected on Hochshild’s emotion work theory and the corrective process that Goffman presents, I immediately recalled my time as the Wilde Stein Queer Straight Alliance President at UMaine during my sophomore year. An event that required the most emotion work at my own expense was the Transgender Day of Remembrance event. I was responsible for putting together a vigil for all the transgender people we lost due to violent hate crimes. This event was one of the more demanding events I was expected to hold because I was trying to put on this event as a 19-year-old college student. Again, this event occurred during my third semester in college, meaning I was just starting to get a grasp on classes, finding my social circles, handling my homesickness as an out of state student, and coping with the imposter syndrome that comes with being in a new place. Not only was I just starting to understand the campus community and college life at this point, but I was also in the process of understanding my gender identity and grappling
with the process of accessing chest masculinization surgery. To make matters worse I was expected to represent and pay respects to members of my community in a socially acceptable way for the university’s image. For this event, I was in charge of purchasing supplies, inviting community speakers, reading off a list of names, and gave a speech about the impact that gender-based violence has on my community. While this is an exhaustive list of my responsibilities, the expectations placed on my role by the institution were incredibly taxing on top of being a student publicly mourning for their community. While hosting this event, I was expected to remain positive and calm while also being somber and reverent. Towards the end of the event, an administrator came up to me and stated that the event seemed successful since so many people came together for it, but what they failed to acknowledge was that, for us, this was not just another campus event. This was a vigil for the people my community lost to violence.

Throughout the event, I felt myself utilizing emotion work to not only make it seem like I appreciated the university hosting an event of this nature for communal recognition, but I also needed to make the institutional members feel a sense of pride by allowing them to say that they helped me put the event together. In a university newspaper article following the event, I was quoted saying that the administration was incredibly helpful with putting the event together, but truth be told I had very limited support and a few of the administrators I invited to attend cancelled at the last minute. Putting this event together not only tested my patience as a student leader, but it made me realize the ways in which an institution could shape my ability to serve my community. I was not allowed to talk against the departments or university because I would face the risk of losing my job, but on top of that I was expected to provide resources and events
within a university image supporting model. It was during this time that I lost a sense of direction and authenticity as an activist, I became a university approved version of myself and lost touch with the values I once had as a queer activist.

*Aiden the Activist No More: Burnout and Finding New Methods for Social Change*

I am not a queer activist. While I might have once identified as an activist, the experiences I listed within this section alone were enough to change my interest in staying in the public eye when advocating for my community. It was during my junior year of college that I started to explore new avenues of activism that did not expect me to host events on behalf of the university or remove the authenticity from my leadership style. Coming into college I was enrolled as a Psychology major not really knowing what the major would have in store for me. I did not have to take general education classes like my peers because of my enrollment in the Honor college, but there were some classes outside of my major that were prerequisites for higher level psychology classes. One of these required classes was WGS 101, the Introduction to Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. I took this class online the summer before my sophomore year and fell in love with the topics as they highlighted issues of gender inequality and queer culture that I was not exposed to in my previous experiences as an activist. As I started to explore these topics I found authors such as the previously mentioned Susan Stryker, who provided a model of how to incorporate my experiences into scholarship and sparked my interest in Gender Studies. During the fall of my Junior year, I changed my major to Sociology and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies in hope of finding a disruptive narrative within education for queer scholarship. These aspirations allowed me to understand education as
a form of activism by expanding my cultural competency and allowing me to experience the ways that education can empower generations of activists.

As I continue to grow my understanding of activism and variables that impact activist burnout, I have come to realize that I would not be doing activist communities justice if I did not discuss the burnout that COVID-19 has placed on people. The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the ways that people conduct activism, by restricting group gatherings and limiting a community’s ability to protest. With this change, many activists found it difficult to bring people together or energize them enough to continue pursuing social change. In order to continue public consciousness raising several communities moved towards social media as a form of outreach. For example, during the summer months of 2020, social media websites were being overpopulated with resources and information about various social change initiatives. Following the murder of George Floyd, there were millions of activists utilizing their platforms to spread awareness and call on people to bring their attention to the racism that occurs within the United States. These resources populated social media to the point where it felt like a 24/7 news coverage and people struggled to keep up or post all the resources. For many, social media went from being a place to share life events to a public forum for sharing information about racism, social injustices, and the values people should carry. While this change has benefited social movement coverage, the non-stop resource sharing culture that has developed within social justice circles has led to widespread burnout. There was limited room for people to break away from these forms of posts. Not only were they acknowledging injustice in their daily lives, but they also had the issues present on platforms that usually act as breaks from daily realities. Additionally, while people might
have wanted to withdraw social media altogether, they knew they would risk losing the limited connections they have with their families and community. Social media has been a place for people to keep up to date about the status of their children’s school, the community’s response to COVID-19, and any life updates of family members. It might seem better to just completely withdraw from social media, but the reality is that there are more things on social media that people need for social interaction beyond social justice resources. This lack of break led many activists, myself included, to delete social media or withdraw from activism altogether.

Part of being an activist is engaging with the public and receiving the social reward of recognition for your efforts. However, there are many times, such as the climate of COVID-19, where activists remove themselves from the public eye or feel they are not able to support the movement. Having lived through the pandemic as a college student and someone who is passionate about social change, I can confidently say that the restrictions and developments within social activism have informed my identity as an activist. Just last year, I was attending Take Back the Night events to bring awareness to sexual assault and making my support known by physically being at events, but now that these events have moved online, mere presence is not enough. While I tried to keep up with the non-stop sharing of community resources and attempted to provide information to the people who follow me on Instagram, it felt like I was feeding information into a saturated void. Even if I found a resource that others had not posted yet, I did not feel like I was making any direct changes, rather it felt as if people were having a competition for who could post the most. This pushed me to engage more with educational materials outside of social media and listen to the concerns of communities
around me, so that I could utilize my leadership positions to provide any aid possible. Rather than hoping change would come from sharing another Instagram post, I felt that there needed to be systemic and administrative changes in order to address the concerns of the communities around me.
CHAPTER 4

RECOGNIZING THE DIFFERENCE AND VALUE OF ADVOCACY

Defining Queer Advocacy

As mentioned in the previous section, the terms “activist” and “advocate” have become synonymous in most scholarship, causing the unique values of advocacy to be consumed into an umbrella category for social change. In a fact sheet published by the Alliance for Justice, the organization describes advocacy as the action of speaking for others and supporting or denying a cause on the behalf of others (Alliance for Justice 2008). Marcela Mellinger builds on this definition by stating that there are multiple forms of advocacy including administrative, legal, and community advocacy. Administrative Advocacy focuses on the ways that laws are carried out or interpreted by organizations, while Legal Advocacy focuses on how courts interpret and implement new laws or precedents (Cyr and Mellinger 2017). The defining characteristics of Community Advocacy involve challenging assumptions about vulnerable communities, developing resources to serve said community, changing social perceptions of the group, and making vulnerable voices heard by the public (Cyr and Mellinger 2017). This form of advocacy is central to the arguments presented within this thesis. It is important to note that advocacy is not a concept that is exclusive to social justice organizations, rather other fields including social workers, politicians, and scientists have explored the ways in which their disciplines act as advocates. For starters, in the article “Advocacy: A
Conceptualization for Social Work Practice” Sosin and Caulum discuss the ways that individual social workers take on the identity of “advocate” by carrying out advocacy attempts for their clients. They also present a typology that introduces the ways in which advocates engage with others, specifically their clients and the decision makers, in order to support or defend their clients (Sosin and Caulum 1983). Based on this definition, it is clear that the author’s view of advocacy as someone’s professional ability or career involves supporting, defending, and providing for clients in need of assistance.

In comparison to Sosin and Caulum’s view of advocacy, E. Christien Michael Parsons examines advocacy from the perspective of Conservation Scientists, specifically the way that activism varies from advocacy within the scientific community. Within his argument, Parson describes advocates as educational figures within the movement that provide the public with current scientific findings and ensure that the relevant officials receive research to make change. In addition to education, Parson’s argues that scientific advocates do the following,

“In practice, most environmental or conservation scientists advocate regularly, ranging from presenting their opinions in a class about the threats to biodiversity caused by a particular situation, to writing a scientific paper where the aim is to investigate conservation or environmental threats (i.e., an issue that has societal as well as environmental value), as well as giving recommendations for policy or management actions in the discussion section of said paper” (Parsons 2016).

With this in mind, the definition of “advocate” not only includes someone that defends or supports a community of people, but it also involves providing educational materials, development recommendations, and researching current trends of struggle within a community. While the scientific community and social workers act as advocates within their fields, the form of advocacy that people are commonly engaging with is political advocacy. Elizabeth Reid defines political advocacy as
“a wide range of individual and collective expression or action on a cause, idea, or policy. It may also refer to specific activities or organizations. Sometimes a distinction is made between advocacy on behalf of others and grassroots advocacy or civic and political participation” (Reid 2000).

Reid goes on to expand the previous author’s examples of advocacy by discussing how political activists focus on public opinions, constituent action or mobilization, lobbying, and election-related activity. By considering these three areas of advocacy, it is clear that while the context of advocacy varies for each community, there are overlapping goals and understandings of what it means to perform advocacy. Based on these examples of advocacy and for the purpose of this thesis, I define advocate as an individual that supports or defends a community of people, certain values, or vehicles for social change through less public means including education, consciousness raising, resource or policy development, research, and group mobilization. Furthermore, I define “Queer Advocacy” as an individual’s support or commitment to the queer community, its disruptive values. Queer advocates sustain queer culture through inclusive education, consciousness raising, resource and policy development, scholarship, and the mobilization of queer activists. Similar to Queer Activist I reiterate the disruptive nature of queer identities and voices in order to reform the heteronormative and cisnormative ideologies of society and its institutions. Furthermore, while both queer advocacy and activism aim to create a queer inclusive version of society, an individual’s involvement in either form of social change provides a different experience and diverse outcomes.

Comparing Advocacy and Activism

When analyzing the place of individuals within a social movement, it is important to recognize the various roles and effective forms of social change that they can pursue.

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As mentioned previously, activism involves being present in the public eye and doing things that involve engaging an audience. Activism is a more short-lived type of social change as it involves attending events or programs to show collective support; this type of social change usually ends when the protest ends. This form of social change is effective for bringing issues to public attention and representing the social urgency to create change; however, it may not always be the most effective way to create institutional change or engage everyone that supports a common cause. This is where advocacy comes in; since advocacy is not as publicly driven, it allows more policy and education-based individuals to contribute to movements that matter to them. It also provides a more long-term commitment of social change because it pushes the individual to not only educate themselves on the trends within an issue, but it pushes them to find ways to educate and work towards a more inclusive society. Based on the previous context of emotion work within activism, it is fair to assume that being an activist can be physically and emotionally exhausting for people who regularly participate in public demonstrations. While advocates might also face exhaustion and burnout similar to activists, advocates are not conducting emotion work in the public eye as much, rather they are finding ways to create institutional change and provide the information activists need in order to gather public attention. With these differences in mind, in the following chapter, I will dive into how people find and claim their individual identity as an activist or advocate within a movement and how some individuals may fall inside or outside the social change spectrum typology.
As I mentioned at the beginning of the previous section, I have come to identify and understand myself through the role of a queer advocate (not activist). During my sophomore year at UMaine, one of my professors approached me about bringing together a group of students that were dedicated to creating more queer inclusive spaces within academia, named Project Q. This group originated from our constant struggle to find queer centered texts within course curriculum and multiple students trying to find a way to incorporate queer theory within their own thesis projects. While this group originally started as a more social group, it became the place where I had my first experience advocating for queer inclusive education within curriculum, while also helping to develop a sustained topic within the Honor College.

Before joining Project Q, a professor I had noticed that I developed a fascination for AIDS epidemic activism, after a class discussion about historical accounts of queer activism and suggested that I watch the film *How to Survive a Plague*. The film depicted the ways that the AIDS crisis impacted queer communities in ways I had never experienced and made me realize the lack of queer representation in the historical timelines of many of my classes. I felt that as someone who was passionate about queer culture and inclusion within education, I needed to bring these struggles to the public eye. I felt that a personal memoir would be the best way to incorporate these stories, in order to better portray the experience to my peers. Desperate to learn more about the AIDS epidemic, I went on Amazon.com and typed in “AIDS epidemic activism” and in the
third row the book *Body Counts: A Memoir of Politics, Sex, AIDS, and Survival* by Sean Strub caught my attention. I was particularly drawn to the handwritten font on the cover and the vulnerability that Stub’s picture carried. I only read snippets of this book, but within the chapters I read I felt a loss of connection with my community. Within Strub’s narrative he describes the deep personal connections people within his community had when trying to combat AIDS and the family-like support that queer people lent one another. These experiences were incredibly different from the experiences I had on-campus and at various pride events. While reading his memoir, I could not think of any experience I had where I had a strong network of queer friends to support me, nor could I recall a time when I felt a strong need for a queer community presence on-campus.

Reflecting on these feelings, I was disheartened by the lack of connection amongst my community members and felt a stronger need to learn more about queer culture in hopes of spreading this knowledge to possibly create a stronger connection amongst my campus’s queer community.

While serving as a member of this committee I was able to suggest the book *Body Counts* as a new addition to the course curriculum for the students in following semesters. I originally chose this book because I felt that the timeline of texts we read for our classes completely skipped over the AIDS epidemic, which created a huge cultural shift, not only for the queer community, but for various public health, political, and social institutions. Additionally, I felt that the narrative or perspectives of queer authors were being left out in class conversations. There were very few texts where the author could be claimed as queer, but we were encouraged not to claim that identity for them based on cultural contexts. I was disappointed with this lack of representation and I worked with
my advisor to ensure that Body Counts would be added to the curriculum the following semester. I was relieved and excited to hear that the recommendation was adopted for students to read. I remember my advisor informing me in a one-on-one meeting and I felt a sense of pride knowing that I was able to create a place for my community within a curriculum. The following semester a few students in a course I facilitated were discussing the text and they claimed that this book was their first experience diving into the AIDS epidemic and that they found the text more engaging than previous ones offered. This feedback along with the change itself made me realize the value my voice carried. Throughout my childhood I remember hearing the cliche that all it takes is one person to make a change and for the first time I was that change. While this change may seem small to some, it felt incredibly validating to have students engage with and enjoy a text that accurately represents my community. Since the addition of Body Counts, the Honors College has adopted Tony Kushner’s Angels in America in its place, since Body Counts was too much to absorb within the one-week time frame given to each text. While this is not the original text I recommended, I am delighted knowing that the curriculum is going to continue having a place for the AIDS epidemic and queer culture. My goal with this addition to the curriculum was not to have my top choice be the book students read. Rather I wanted the college to recognize the value of queer voices within our curriculum and open up conversations about queer theory so that more students get the exposure or experiences I had when reading Frankenstein. Part of my role as an advocate has been creating space for more dialogues about marginalized identities and with this curriculum change, I simply wanted to see an effort made to support queer scholarship and students.
Throughout my undergraduate career, I have been introduced as an “activist” to others by the people who advise me. While I appreciated these introductions, I did not feel as though the work I was doing was active enough in the public to be considered activism. During my first semester at the University of Maine, I saw a recruitment flyer in my residence hall for students interested in leadership opportunities. At the time I did not really care what the organization was, but I knew I needed to jumpstart my undergraduate resume. The organization that I whimsically joined to boost my resume was the Residence Hall Association (RHA), a group of students looking to represent their residence hall buildings, host programs for students to attend, and better the residential life experience. As the representative for my building, I attended weekly meetings with the other representatives and also met with a council of students who represented all four of the Honors College residence halls. It was through these meetings and programs that I met several of my closest friends, but more importantly it gave me the space to develop my leadership style. During my spring semester freshman year, I attended the Northeast Affiliate of College and University Residence Halls (NEACURH) spring leadership conference at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) where I met students from across the North East region that were involved within their RHA chapters and looking to develop their leadership skills. The conference was full of student leaders like me that were looking to make a change within their community, and we all came from diverse backgrounds. While we all represented different universities, I found that everyone I
talked to had the mindset of creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all students. Part of the conference experience was a boardroom where the National Communication Coordinator’s (NCCs) from each school voted on policy and awards for the region. The boardroom for this conference took place in a large lecture hall that was very modern in appearance. There were multiple projection screens, auditorium seats with attached desks, and even outlets to plug in laptops; needless to say, it was more high-tech than my university. I remember walking into the boardroom space with my NCC feeling incredibly nervous about socializing and participating in the boardroom experience. Rather than attending various workshops and socials, I stayed by my NCC’s side the entire weekend for a feeling of comfort, but I was also drawn to the boardroom space. Within the boardroom, six college aged students sat at a long table with their computers preparing to take minutes and coordinate the business for the meeting. There was one person standing at the podium who was the Regional Director, and she started the meeting by pounding a gavel on the podium and beginning role call. As they called out each institution they asked if the NCC, RHA President, and National Residence Hall Honorary (NRHH) representatives were all present. When it got to our university we only had a NCC present and she proudly yelled “Here!”.

As mentioned, the boardroom space was a place where NCCs would vote on awards, give presentations on various regional topics, and vote on legislation for the regional policy books. While there were many other activities for me to participate in as a conference delegate, I felt a strong connection with the energy and activities in the boardroom. As the Regional Director called business to order, she explained that the meeting would follow a Robert’s Rules of Order format and that each piece of legislation
would start with a reading of the piece, followed by a proponent speech, a question-and-answer session, then a group discussion before a vote. Looking back on this experience, I can confidently say that my interest in being an advocate started in that boardroom. As institutions asked questions and made discussion points, I could not help but think about the ways these individuals not only represented their universities, but also the communities they identified within. For example, one of the pieces of legislation that was added in that space focused on making regional resources more accessible to individuals who are color blind. Several representatives in the boardroom thanked the writers for this amendment, but they were also critical about the intentions of the piece. Individuals discussed the fact that the regional board should also be looking to include students with sight impairments by making our resources screen reader friendly and utilizing font sizes or styles that were visually accessible. Several representatives discussed the struggles students on their campuses were having accessing regional resources and their own university’s resources. It was through honest and critical conversations that we were able to develop the legislation to be more representative of the region’s needs and interests. This was the first time I witnessed students utilizing their voices in a legislative space to create institutional change. They modeled to me what it means to use your voice to fight for the changes that need to be made at a systemic level even if it means you are standing along with your statements. This space represented what it means to advocate for a group of people while ensuring that all voices are heard, it was inspiring watching my peers bring up important issues within their communities and ways that we could better serve regional affiliates.
At the close of the conference, I remember talking to my advisor about all the ideas I took away from the boardroom space and she encouraged me to pursue them at our own university. Some of these ideas included rebuilding our executive board structure, developing a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) board member position, chartering our own NRHH chapter, hosting more diversity focused programs, collaborating with various student organizations, and rewriting our policy book to ensure it was representative of all students and had a DEI focus. I was energized and ready to make all the policy and logistical changes to our RHA, the advocacy presented to me within that boardroom space stuck with me throughout my undergraduate career as I attended several more conferences at a regional and national level. After attending the spring conference at WPI, I ran for the NCC position and won. I was thrilled to find my place within my community to make changes that would impact all of my peers. As I took on the NCC role my sophomore year, I met with the Director of Residence Life, the Dean of Student Life, and several student organization advisors in hopes of building relationships and getting feedback on the needs of our students. Within the first couple weeks of my term, I started drafting the DEI position for our executive board. When creating this position, I was mostly focused on making sure queer students felt included in all meeting spaces, that multiple cultures were being supported, and that our practices were not limiting or favoring any specific organizations on-campus. The person in the position was also responsible for ensuring that all our executive board members and representatives received diversity training each semester. At the end of the semester, I presented the legislation piece to our boardroom representatives, nervous that they might not see the value in the position, but after reviewing the piece the discussion was
incredibly positive. Several representatives stated that they felt the position should have been created years ago and that they are glad to see that our board is attempting to make DEI the forefront of our practices. This was one of the first changes I made within my RHA chapter and the support I received from my advisors and peers made me realize that I had the ability to change the ways people think about DEI simply by changing policies and practices that hinder marginalized communities' access to resources. I felt a sense of pride, but I also felt unstoppable. For the first time in my life, I was able to see the change I wanted because I made it happen. I took this energy and continued to apply it my junior year as I chartered our NRHH chapter, hosted the first NEACURH Spring Leadership Conference at UMaine, and ran for the Coordinating Officer for Recognition and Service (CORS) position on the regional board of directors within NEACURH. As I got more involved within NEACURH and the National Association of College and University Residence Halls (NACURH) I felt like I was becoming the advocate I was meant to be, simply put I was exposing myself to other leaders that were not afraid to call out the problematic practices of their university and the region. I watched the people around me push for the change they wanted to see in policy and practice which allowed me to develop my own identity within the region. For example, a large issue within our region is that most of our affiliates are predominantly white institutions, so finding student leaders that represent diverse backgrounds is difficult and often leads to a lack of resources for said communities. During my senior year while serving as the CORS, we welcomed a new member to our board that identified as a person of color. During our first few meetings she was incredibly vocal about the lack of DEI within our board’s conversations and the ways that we served our affiliates. She pushed us to think about
how our actions serve white students rather than students of color and the ways we could change our traditions to be more inclusive. There were multiple times where she stood alone in discussion with others going against her points because they felt it was unfair to have such high expectations of them. Watching her put herself in uncomfortable situations and represent the theory of emotion work, in order to bring light to the concerns of her community was inspiring to watch. She empowered me to engage with uncomfortable conversations about the needs of my community. I watched her create a social justice taskforce where she brought together affiliates looking to change regional policy and traditions to be more inclusive. I joined the taskforce to show my support, but I also wanted to be a part of the policy changing process as I felt my experiences with UMaine’s RHA chapter may help fuel some ideas for regional changes. Throughout my senior year, I have had the honor of working alongside her to think critically about the ways we can reshape the practices of our universities, region, and even NACURH. She has been an inspiration to me as I try to find better ways to advocate for my community.

Along with my involvement in NEACURH and NACURH, I found ways to advocate for my community through other leadership roles such as being a Resident Assistant (RA) and an intern. During my sophomore year at UMaine, I was a RA within a first-year residence hall serving upward to 300 students. This position was one of my first experiences with a full-time role and adjusting to the responsibilities of duty shifts, resource development, student wellness promotion, and community building was incredibly daunting. This role was a beneficial and challenging experience as I tried to support my residents as much as I could in a professional manner, but part of me wanted to also play the role of an older sibling to them. It was through this position that I was
able to develop my listening skills and really support my residents in any way possible, I would leave my door open and encourage them to come do homework or vent while they laid on my floor. I would try to support them in any way I could and when I noticed that a lot of students were going through similar struggles with mental health, relationships, and developing strong friendships, I pushed my supervisor to support me in creating a floor wide support group where residents could openly talk about their struggles. This group was known as “Soft Boy Sundays” and while my supervisor was hesitant at first, I found that it was one of my most attended programs. I offered students various resources for stress relief and even provided them with journals so that they could let out what they were feeling. This role pushed me to conceal my feelings in order to support the needs of my residents. As an RA, I was expected to always maintain a high-spirited attitude as if there were no struggles going on in my private life. My peers and supervisors continuously watched how I responded to conflict and the demands of my residents to ensure that my emotion work was up to department standards. Although the position came with emotional expectations, it was rewarding watching my residents understand that they are not alone in their struggles and develop self-care skills that they did not recognize before college. I provide this example to introduce another form of advocacy that I have come to recognize in college which is self-advocacy. While being an advocate often involves supporting a community, there is also a personal aspect that involves pushing for what you need in that moment. This was something that I tried to convey to my residents as many of them were burnt out and not taking care of their own needs before taking care of their community.
During this year, I also worked as an education and outreach intern for a local reproductive healthcare clinic, which emphasized this idea of self-advocacy by introducing me to the importance of consent, reproductive health rights, and providing resources to victims of sexual violence. My role as a RA and intern actually overlapped towards the end of the year when I developed a RA curriculum that emphasized the importance of reproductive health for students. Part of this resource development involved creating a resource document with the names and contact information of local organizations that support victims of sexual violence, important screenings that students should frequently receive to maintain sexual health, and various forms of contraceptives. From there I took the information and provided a mock bulletin board for RAs to adapt within their hallways for their residents to utilize (Figure 4.1). I remember during the month of April, walking around each residence hall to admire the ways that RAs took the content I provided and adapted it to their residents needs and interests. I felt a sense of pride and overwhelming excitement as I saw my advocacy flourish across campus and provide students with the information they needed to better themselves. This was one of the major projects I completed within the internship, but my supervisor along with these experiences taught me that being an advocate is about providing education to others in hopes of creating cultural awareness and change. Education is a critical part of personal development, but it also has the potential to inform the practices, policies, structure, and accessibility of an institution. With these experiences, I developed a love for resource creation and education, I found that for the first time in my life that direct change resulted from my efforts rather than just bringing attention to an issue through protest. There were times when my work went unrecognized, like during the development stages of my
bulletin board project, but in the end I was producing information that would inform activists and community members about important issues. I felt that my energy was not being wasted and that I was creating long term changes for the issues I cared about.

![Figure 4.1 RA Bulletin Board Template](image)

While I can now reflect on these experiences and claim them as acts of advocacy, I did not feel as though my advisor's label of “activist” fit my interests, but I did not have a word to identify the contributions I made to my community at the time. I acknowledged that I was making a difference in the community with some presence, but a lot of the work I was doing was focused on institutional change and maintaining communal support. During this time of dissonance, I came across the concept of “performative
activism” and often felt that I fell in that category because I was sharing resources or publishing my support for different communities on my social media, but I did not feel comfortable protesting or making signs anymore. I told myself that my “activism” was being a representation of my community in any professional settings and advocating for communities that are underrepresented in institutional settings. As I stepped into leadership roles, I found myself feeling more introverted in my forms of social change and while I was making small changes in my institution, I did not feel like it was enough work to be considered an “activist”. During the initial planning of this project, my advisors caught on to the fact that when I described others I used the word “activist”, when referring to myself I would switch to “advocate”. This disconnect in language made me further reflect on the ways I not only view myself, but the ways people identify themselves within their social movements. Now that I have taken on the label of advocate instead of activist, I am starting to realize the importance of institutional change and the ways that my work is just as valuable as those in marches. While I might not be on the front lines holding a sign, my place is behind the scenes providing education to those with the authority to make change for my community and making sure that community members have the educational and historical context they need to argue for our rights. While activists receive praise from the public because they are always found within the public eye, I receive my compensation and praise within my ability to make long-term, sustainable changes to queer and larger societal culture. Knowing that the work I am doing not only makes change for activists right now, but that it will continue to inform and educate the movement going forward is a fulfilling feeling. Being an advocate
has been a taxing and demanding experience, but the work and community I was able to build because of it made it so worth it.
While I agree with previous arguments in literature that focus on how the mobilization of communities lies within a collective identity and struggle, I believe that the individuals within the collective identity have their own individual identities that are developed through their engagement in a social movement. Though people within a social movement may have a collective identity or struggle they are fighting for, they take on an additional identity based on their role within a movement. These additional labels that I am presenting in this typology are Activist, Advocate, Participant, and Bystander. Activists are often the people seen at the front lines of a march or making public appearances on behalf of their community, while Advocates are behind the scenes working on institutional change in order to sustain a movement and culture. These two categories are the common labels that people utilize to place themselves within a movement. However, there is a lack of acknowledgement for the individuals who are working to find their place in a movement or wish to have no part at all. When looking at social change and movements, it’s critical to acknowledge that every person has a place within the movement even if they completely reject participation altogether. Simply put, saying that one does not belong to a group or does not subscribe themselves to their goals
directly makes them a part of the movement because they are acknowledging its existence and become part of the problem that the advocates or activists are trying to address.

To better understand this idea, Figure 5.1 outlines the spectrum that a person can place themselves within a social movement. Starting on the far ends of the spectrum there are the solidified categories of Activist and Advocate. An Activist involves being in the public sphere, participating in large scale events such as marches, and doing more boots on the groundwork for your movement. An Advocate on the other hand involves being the person behind the scenes that develops research, policies, educational materials, and represents their community in institutional settings. Advocates are usually the people who sustain the identity, culture, and momentum of movements by supporting the activists. When someone cannot place their identity within a movement and they are either trying to educate themselves more on the issues or occasionally participating in advocacy or activism, they are Participants. These individuals are often the people who will repost resources on social media because they support the message of a movement, but do not have the resources or confidence to claim a firmer identity in the movement. Last, the individuals who reject association with a movement or do not support the initiative of their community are Bystanders. While these individuals choose not to participate in the movement, it is important to recognize that they are still contributing to the movement by providing opposing perspectives and giving the movement attention.
Figure 5.1: Social Movement Personal Identity Spectrum

The goal of Figure 5.1 is to show the spectrum of identities and experiences that an individual may have within a social movement. Each point on the spectrum marks a more conceptualized identity recognized within a movement. The grey space is meant to identify the fluidity or changes that may occur for an individual’s identity over time. While the goal of this image is to conceptualize that various roles people play within social movements, I recognize that this type of linear map may be restricting and contribute to the social idea that there is only one way to define an identity. With this in mind, the diagram could be adapted into a spherical shape with multiple layers to represent the intersectionality or depth of identity. This could also include making bystanders its own identity sphere that intersects or keeps itself divided from the main activist and advocate identities. I provide this example to recognize that this is not the final way of visualizing one’s identity in a movement. Similar to sexuality or gender, one’s identity in a movement is complex and always evolving, so a linear identification scale might not fit the needs of an individual. I provide the linear scale as a starting place.
for understanding and discussing the multiple identities or roles that exist within a social movement. My goal here is to utilize a spectrum type design that is familiar within the queer community (i.e. the gender spectrum), so that individuals are able to conceptualize the diverse experiences and contributions of individuals within social movements.

*We’re All Actors in this Show: Conceptualizing Social Movement Roles as Identities*

To better conceptualize this idea, think of a theatrical production. The activists in this production are the actors, they are the people that the audience recognizes, and they are the ones putting energy into acting out a story for the audience to see. Advocates are the tech crew, while they might not be seen during a performance, their role is critical to the sustainment of the production as they provide sets, lights, sound, and other necessary resources to allow the production to occur. Participants can include individuals such as understudies of the production because they do not step foot on stage unless absolutely confident they have to, but they educate themselves on the needs of the performers and tech crew to ensure the show is fully supported. The audience of the production are the Bystanders, while they are attending or acknowledging the work of the cast and crew, they may become critical of the performance and the show’s messages. While they are not a part of the cast or crew, they play a role in making the show happen and providing feedback that could strengthen future performances. This concept not only applies to individual identities within a movement, but it can also place someone based on their interest in certain movement initiatives. For example, within the queer community, younger queer individuals have advocated for gender neutrality and the use of the term “queer” as an umbrella term. However, some older queer people are not fully on board because the use of more fluid terminology could erase the experiences of binary
transgender individuals and bring up traumatic experiences with the term “queer”. While older queer individuals might participate in activism or advocacy for the queer movement, they might view themselves as bystander within this initiative because they do not support the idea nor are they trying to push it forward.

The goal of this typology is to recognize the various ways that people contribute to social movements and place themselves inside of a movement. While this is a more defined model, it is non-exhaustive and can be further explore by future scholars. My hope is that this typology will move us away from the gatekeeping mindset of activism only being valid if it is seen by others and move towards a model that celebrates or appreciates contributions made behind the scenes of a movement that make long-term institutional change. Whether someone falls inside the spectrum or outside of it, it is critically important that we recognize the way we influence a movement and where we feel comfortable when supporting a movement.

Personal Narrative and Commentary

Aiden throughout Time: My Positioning on the Social Movement Personal Identification Scale

The typology presented within this thesis comes from the multiple experiences I had during my undergraduate career. As someone that is passionate about social justice, human rights, and inclusive practices, I have found myself taking on the values and ethics of various social movements. While I am a queer person and identify as a queer advocate, I cannot always confidently place my identity in other movements such as racial justice, reproductive justice, or climate justice. I struggle to find my identity within these movements because my main advocacy focus has been queer right. I have gained a more intersectional view of my community, which led me to support and empower the voices
of activists and advocates from other communities. In order to further explore the typology provided, I have included single instances in my social change experience that exemplify my view of each identity category. It is important to recognize that while I have experienced these identities within my lifetime, identity development is a fluctuating process and therefore may have changed overtime as I experienced new leadership roles, education, or mentors.

*Activist: Light the Way, Spring 2018.*

During my freshman year of college, I was a candidate member for the honor fraternity offered on my campus. I personally did not like fraternity culture because of the gender exclusive aspects of it; however, this fraternity labeled itself as gender inclusive. Part of my candidacy required me to work with my fellow candidate members to put on a service project of our choice on behalf of the chapter. When we initially planned the project, my group members encouraged me to chair the project and be the president for our initiate class. These members felt that I had the organization, creativity, and community connections to help guide them towards a successful project planning process and I was more than enthusiastic to rise to the occasion. During this period of my life, I was not only a new college student, but I was processing my childhood experiences with sexual assault and trauma. I was meeting with a therapist weekly to address situations that I had suppressed and normalized for years. These meetings allowed me to be vulnerable and honest with myself for the first time, while also learning more about consent. Before college, I had very limited education on sexual assault and harassment, but the work I did in therapy allowed me to further understand sexual violence. It was
through this that I came to understand the importance of raising public awareness for the importance of consent and healthy sexual relationships. As I came to this understanding, I researched local organizations in the Bangor area that supported victims of rape and sexual assault, in hopes of creating a service project for the organization I found. The organization I ended up selecting was Rape Response Services and when I reached out to their office, they said the organization was in need of money to purchase supplies for victims placed in safe housing. With this in mind, I worked with my peers to create a luminary bag fundraiser called “Light the Way”. This fundraiser involved tabling in our university’s student union to sell brown paper bags for a dollar and those who donated were able to decorate their bag with a message of support for victims of sexual violence. Figure 5.2 is an example of the bags that community members made for our bag lighting ceremony, along with the flyer I made for the event. After tabling for a couple days, we
raised over $200 for Rape Response Services and had an overwhelming amount of positive message bags at the lighting ceremony.

Figure 5.2 Light the Way Flyer and Bag Design

Looking back on this experience, I have come to realize that this project was a way for me to reclaim my trauma while also giving back to those in my community. When we hosted to luminary bag lighting ceremony, I was given the opportunity to give a speech on behalf of our organization, but it was also the first time I publicly recognized myself as a survivor of sexual violence. This event required me to put myself in a vulnerable position as I went in front of my community to raise awareness for an issue that directly impacted me. Along with the fundraising, tabling, and public speaking, I was given the opportunity to go on a local news channel to talk about the event and encourage
people to get involved with our service project. This was one of my first activist projects in college as I was pushed into the public eye to spread the message and resources of community organizations. This event required me to relive the trauma I ignored for so long, while composing myself in a professional way, in order to support my community.

*Advocate: Black Hair Care Fair & Student Government, Spring 2018.*

As mentioned previously, I was heavily involved within the RHA at UMaine during my first year. My commitment to the organization and our community was noticed by the executive board members of our chapter and our members to the point where I was offered a proxy position at Student Government meetings. While RHA and Student Government both serve the needs of our campus students, there has been a long history of our organizations not being able to see eye to eye or fully collaborate. The proxy position was created so that one member of RHA would attend student senate meetings to provide updates and upcoming events within the organization. By developing this type of position, both executive boards hoped to create a stronger partnership and find better ways to fund campus activities. When I was selected for the role, I was prepared to represent RHA positively and create an alliance with Student Government that empowered students of marginalized identities to seek leadership roles or funding within our organizations. These goals were critical to my leadership goals because I wanted to make all students feel empowered, supported, and heard by the people representing them. While this goal was something I held for myself and the organization I represented, I felt let down by the environment that Student Government provided.
Student senate was held every Tuesday at 6pm. The meetings often ran for over two hours and consisted of a restricting agenda that pushed us through positional updates, legislation, funding request presentations, and community-based conversations. The senate meetings were held in the “Bangor Room”, a large room within our student union and all the student elected senators would sit at a u-shaped table while guests and presenters sat in a group behind them. When I walked into my first senate meeting, the first thing I noticed was the lack of representation amongst the senators. Almost every senator was a white passing cisgender male or a white women. The only people that held marginalized identities within that space came from representative boards, holding similar positions as I did. It is worth noting that in senate meetings, representative board members can discuss business, but we were not given voting rights. For weeks I attended these meetings, sitting through excruciatingly long meetings with very little break. I remember looking at several agendas and not seeing a place for me to provide updates, nor did the executive officers bother to learn my name. It was clear that this organization was not willing to put in the effort to make me feel welcomed or keep up their end of our partnership.

During one of the senate meetings, the Black Student Union came in to present their funding request for the Black Hair Care Fair they were hoping to host towards the end of the year. The goal of their program was to provide free hair braiding and other services to students of color in time for graduation. During their presentation, they mentioned that there were no stylists near the campus community that offered Black hair services. This lack of services caused many students to feel underserved and insecure about their hair, which resulted in several students shaving their heads. Along with their
speech, the group provided over twenty written testimonies from students that could not make it to the meeting and had several students give live testimonies about how this type of event would positively impact them and their community. It was clear that this event was needed for students of color in our community. However, during the presentation several senators either did not listen, did not give the speakers the same respect as previous ones, and some just left the room before the presentation started. It was disheartening seeing these activists come forward with messages of communal support for an event that would be resourceful to many students, just to have the students who represent them completely ignore their voices. During the discussion period, several white senators stated that this was an unnecessary program because it only benefits a small portion of our campus and it is unfair that white students did not receive similar treatment. Another member of the executive board talked about how his hair texture was also different since he is Vietnamese, but he did not require special services; therefore, it was absurd to ask for money for such a niche event. At one point in the conversation, I got so fed up with the ignorant and blatantly racist comments that I threw my hand in the air to make a point. This was the first time I ever spoke outside of attendance and the senators all collectively turned in shock. During my point, I discussed how appalling it was to see a representative board turn their back on a community of students that are in need of resources and quite frankly fund their organization. I mentioned that the program itself only require $1,500 serving upwards to 200 students and at the time would only require about two percent of their remaining $60,000 budget. I could tell that the senators and executive board members were getting tense as I threw out statistics and reasoning as to why they needed to fund this event. At one point, I directly stated that if RHA had the
funds left they would fund this program on the spot, since we are more committed to supporting our students than making a profit off their activity fees. Once I stepped away from the podium, the Black Student Union members stood up and clapped behind me while the senators all stared at me with anger in their eyes. I was met with anger and several of the executive members responded saying they needed to save that money for office renovations, which never actually happened. While I am not a person of color, during that discussion I felt that with the power I possessed in my position and race I needed to advocate for the voices of the students sitting behind me. It was clear that many of the senators did not care or want to hear what the students had to say, so I felt it was my duty to advocate for them since they already did everything they could.

This stands out to me as one of my first experiences advocating within my campus community because I used my power within a system to elevate the voices of those being ignored. I was not allowing the dominating white narrative rationalize not supporting the resources that students of color needed. It did not matter to me that I would not benefit from this program, rather I was more concerned about marginalized communities not being supported by the people who claim to represent them. Following the senate meeting, I stood in the hallway with all the Black Student Union members as we mourned the lack of support our Student Government had for students of color. I made a promise to them that I would not stop pushing for this event and seeking funds until it was happening. I worked with other department leaders to gain Student Life’s attention and worked with RHA to scrape together the small amount we had left. Within a week, we raised more than double the amount needed to host the event without Student Government’s help.
On September 20th, 2019 I attended a public gathering in Bangor, ME to promote the need for more sustainable practices and ideologies in Maine. The goal of the gathering was to gain public awareness of our need to counteract the rapid rate of climate change. I decided to attend this gathering after seeing that one of my close friends had reposted the event invite on their Facebook page and planned on attending. During this time, climate justice was heavily flooding social media as people were calling attention to the Amazon Rainforest fires that were occurring at alarming rates. It was the first time that I saw younger activists like Greta Thunberg calling on government officials to develop policies that would direct funding to stop the fires, limit the use of fossil fuels, and protect the rainforest from further destruction. Climate change was being talked about by almost everyone on social media, the news, and even in households. It was as if people were starting to recognize the problem and finding ways to prevent the problem from getting worse. Before this gathering, I had very limited interest or knowledge of the climate justice movement. My knowledge of climate change and the importance of living sustainably developed from the few biology classes I took my freshman year, along with the resources I saw my peers posting on social media. At this point in my life, I tried to eat a more plant-based diet to reduce my carbon emissions, recycled as much as possible, used reusable water bottles and straws, and tried to purchase various products from local stores, rather than overseas. I valued living green and sustainably, but I would not consider myself an advocate or activist for the climate justice movement because I was not attending every lecture, protest, or event that was offered around climate justice. In comparison to my other examples above, I did not have any leadership responsibilities
within the movement, and I was not actively seeking ways to get involved with organizations or people that promoted environmental justice. While this was not a movement that I claimed a role in, I actively tried to find ways to inform myself about climate justice and the ways that I could individually improve the climate. Climate change is definitely a topic I value and support, but I have put more of my advocacy efforts into advocating social justice issues. Along with this, I am always looking for ways to promote the messages of this movement within my daily interactions while attending a protest every once in a while, but it is not something I actively claim an advocate or leadership role. As seen in Figure 5.3, I was just another body within the movement looking to educate themselves and contribute in any way possible without taking on the full responsibility of the movement. Being a participant is just as important as being an advocate or activist because without communal support people cannot seek change nor is the need for change seen by society. While I continue to support the movement and actively try to live sustainably, I have to admit that I slip up on being environmentally conscious and these ideas are not always at the forefront of my thoughts. I am more than willing to repost things or show up to a protest every once in a while, but I have yet to find my place within the movement long-term.
During my sophomore year, I had the opportunity of being an intern at a local reproductive healthcare clinic, the Mabel Wadsworth Center. This was my first internship, and I was originally interested in it because I thought it would expand my knowledge of social justice movements beyond racial justice and LGBTQIA+ rights. While I was an intern, I created bulletin boards, blog post on various reproductive health topics, tabled at local schools, provided emergency contraceptive to people in need, and attended various conference focused on reproductive health. One conference that I attended was the Civil Liberties and Public Policy conference where I met hundreds of reproductive justice activists and advocates. During this conference, I attended various panels about issues within reproductive health, learned about issues impacting women
and the transgender community across the globe, and ways to fight against legislation that restricts reproductive healthcare practitioners. Through learning about this type of legislation, I was able to gain my first in-depth education on the Pro-Life movement. This was not the first time that I heard about the movement, since I saw social media posts about the groups beliefs and the ways religion influenced some of their values. I never really researched the movement on my own because I was not interested in reproductive health or the issues that the community of reproductive justice activists and advocates faced. I was simply uninformed and living outside of both movements.

While sitting in the panel about legislation I learned the ways that Pro-Life views limit a person’s choice to have an abortion and coerce people into keeping a pregnancy through fear tactics such as morality and social rejection. All of these beliefs are enforced while there is little consideration of how carrying a pregnancy full term would impact the mother. As I learned about the movement’s values and harmful actions against people seeking abortion, I found myself disagreeing with the ideas they were preaching. At this time, I was by no means an activist or advocate for reproductive justice as I was in the development stages of understanding the issues that the movement tackled. This is an example of how I acted a bystander within the Pro-Life movement because once I learned that their views and tactics did not align with mine, I knew I would not push forward their agendas or support the movement. I further educated myself and those around me out of retaliation, so that we would not associate with the Pro-Life movement. I disassociated myself from the movement to the point where I was cutting off connection with friends and colleagues that supported Pro-life ideas because I could not understand their perspective. Having just learned about both movements, I was limited in my ability to
have a conversation about reproductive rights or try to change the perspectives of those in opposition of abortion. While I tried to inform myself and those around me, I would not consider myself an advocate because I was not deeply involved in the movement and it was my first real stride towards understanding both movements. Additionally, before I held this internship position and attended the conference, I would have still considered myself a bystander because while I might have acknowledged both movements at some point, I did not push myself to learn more or associate with either movement.

The examples above serve to demonstrate the ways people can find their roles within movements throughout time. While I was developing my role as a queer advocate, I found myself in various roles in other movements. Similar to a personal identity, it is important to recognize the ways that someone’s identity can fluctuate overtime or even intersect with other identities. It is possible that people take on a collective identity within their movement when first joining. However, I believe that people join the collective identity only to find their individual role or identity within the movement. Without these identities, people might not stay in a movement long-term, or they may value one of their movements over another. By allowing this individual adaptation, people can claim various roles at a time and find their place in a movement without social institutions defining their roles for them. In general, the goal with this model is to allow people to find their individual role and value in a movement in hopes of sustaining long-term personal investment.
While identifying one’s place within a social movement is incredibly important to predict their future involvement, it is equally important to recognize the impact that being an advocate or activist has on a person and how it could lead to their departure from a movement. For example, the global threat of COVID-19 has shifted the ways that individuals conduct activism or advocacy and the requirements for public attention and resource management have shifted from in-person experiences to primarily social media or other online forums. While this change may seem positive for some, there has been an overwhelming sense of burnout as individuals attempt to keep up with non-stop resource and event coverage. In the article How Do We Keep Going? Activist Burnout and Personal Sustainability in Social Movements, Laurence Cox identifies that social justice activists are more likely to face the feeling of burnout because they live within a culture of overworking for little repayment or they are expected to provide support pro-bono, encounter the actions or views of their opponents, they witness various forms of social injustices occurring within communities, and they may never see physical outcomes that result from their movement involvement (Cox 1970). While individuals willingly join social movements and place themselves on the identification spectrum, it is important to recognize that the work done for a social movement takes a toll on an individual’s life and well-being. This connects back to Bobel’s point about activism involving a “significant cost” for the individual because here Cox is arguing that social justice takes a
toll on someone since more often than not they are taking on work with no repayment. Bobel extends this idea by saying that the burnout is rooted in the extensive physical labor that one has to put into a movement before they can even be considered an activist. It is also worth noting that Cox’s arguments were developed before the COVID-19 pandemic, however the overworking environments and culture of little payment have only drastically increased. People are finding that they can no longer separate work from home because of stay-at-home restrictions and the changes occurring within workplace requirements. As work exists at home, people find little to no separation from their work and are having to produce more material in order to make up for the lack of in-person communication. All of this contributes to the symptoms of burnout which include feeling a sense of hopelessness, being physically ill, finding a loss of pleasure in everyday activities, deleting all forms of social media, removing oneself from their movement, or thinking negatively about their work. It is important that individuals and organizations involved with social justice acknowledge the toll that this work takes on the individual because if burnout continues to plague our activists and advocates, then we could see a decline in the willingness for people to participate in social change.

In order to sustain long term involvement, we must first educate individuals on how to care for themselves while still contributing to the movement; until individuals are informed on burnout they will not know how to prevent it or seek out help for the feelings they are experiencing. Along with promoting education around burnout, individuals must take steps to recognize what their limits are and what ways they can implement self-care into their daily routine, so they are not constantly overworking themselves. While I provide these more individual level ways of supporting people
through burnout, it would be dismissive of me to not address the larger issue that many activists and advocates face which is a lack of recognition for their work. For example, there are many lawyers who take on social justice-based cases or advocate for certain policies as pro-bono work, meaning they voluntarily take on this work and do not receive payment. While the individual may find their work fulfilling, one must recognize that our current society functions under capitalism, which means that the people who work pro-bono are risking their monetary safety in order to create change. Self-fulfillment is a positive experience for many, but at the end of the day these individuals need to decide whether taking on work with no repayment is worth risking their access to basic necessities such as shelter or food and water.

This idea has especially become pertinent for educators during the COVID-19 pandemic as they are expected to create course lesson plans and spend more time than ever supporting their students virtually, while receiving the same form of payments pre-COVID. While the positive words from administrators could make someone feel appreciated in their role, it gets to a certain point where words no longer compensate the work. People need payment and other physical forms of support in order to continue their work. This development in burnout and repayment is something that I personally worry about because following my graduation from the University of Maine, I plan on pursuing a master’s degree from Syracuse University in Higher Education. With this degree, I hope to work at higher education institutions to support students through their college experience and make higher education more accessible and inclusive to all student demographics. I recognize that the work I hope to do will be influenced by COVID-19 because the higher education experience has drastically affected students and
faculty as social distancing, mask mandates, and other policies limit in-person meetings and events. While I know that this career path will cause some degrees of burnout even with the compensation that is offered, I hope that I can create a climate of recognition and support that actually benefits the people I work with and that I can support students through any changes that occur. Having experienced the pandemic as an undergraduate student, I have a deeper understanding of the struggles that students face with all these changes, but I have also heard perspectives of faculty that inform my decision to go into higher education and make me want to bring on changes to improve everyone’s experience. I have hope that these feelings of burnout and lack of repayment will start to be addressed as the pandemic slowly dwindles, but I also recognize that I may initially face burnout in the same way as when I was doing activism work.

In addition to repayment, within social justice communities there needs to be a culture change from overworking yourself with little repayment to setting boundaries and putting out your best effort with higher payment. Along with this cultural change, activists and advocates need to acknowledge the work of people who are not prominent in the movement but continue to push forward the resources and agenda of a movement. What I mean by this is that activists need to stop gatekeeping who is able to call themselves an advocate or activist and recognize all the contributions people make to our movements even if it’s small. If someone is willing to be an ally and provide the movement’s resources or messages to those who might not have any other experience with the movement, then recognize them as a change maker. While actors within a movement might devalue the smaller contributions an individual makes for a movement, it is important to recognize that being a spectator means someone does not get a full
picture of an individual’s struggle. From a spectator’s point of view, these small contributions may seem easily achievable, however they are ignoring the risk that someone might be taking for even attempting small changes. When devaluing someone’s action based off of an outside perspective, there is no deeper understanding of how these small contributions might be all that someone can offer. Simply put, someone assuming that other’s actions are not as valuable because they do not appear as exhausting does not mean that an individual is not benefitting the movement or furthering the progress of a movement.

We cannot create social change without having a strong community of people fighting for a common cause. Community is built when we recognize the individual power that each of us has in a movement. Whether someone is on the front lines as an activist, behind the scenes sustaining the community as an advocate, or trying to find their role in a movement as a participant, everyone has value and allows a movement to progress towards its goals. While bystanders might not directly benefit a movement, they help the people within it create goals that involve reaching out and creating understanding with those who might not support or understand a movement. For decades, queer activists have been taking to the streets to demand the rights and acceptance they deserve. Queer advocates worked in the background to sustain our culture and further define the identities or experiences of our community members. Allies have worked as participants to find ways to elevate the voices of queer activists and create a culture that accepts queer people rather than tolerates. While there are still people who remain bystanders, it is because of the roles that each queer person occupies, whether out or not, that our community has been able to work towards outcomes such as marriage equality,
creating a societal conversation around transgender experiences, and finding value in queer scholarship. To conclude, if social movements want to engage more people and develop a sustainable form of involvement for these individuals, they must allow them to identify their place in the movement and ensure that their efforts do not go unpaid or unrecognized. We all play a role in ensuring that the people who fight and advocate for our communities are valued no matter the size of their contributions.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Aiden Ciaffaglione (they, them, their pronouns) was born in Columbus, Ohio and raised in Southington, Connecticut. Aiden graduated from Southington High School in 2017 and chose the University of Maine to reconnect with the feeling of home that they experienced in Maine when they visited during their childhood summers.

During their time at the University of Maine, Aiden double majored in Sociology and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. They also pursued two minors in Psychology and Political Science. Aiden was heavily involved with the Residence Hall Association (RHA) during their undergraduate career, serving as a hall representative their first year, the National Communications Coordinator (NCC) their second year, the North East Affiliate of College and University Residence Halls (NEACURH) Spring Leadership Conference 2020 Conference Chair their third year, and the NEACURH Coordinating Officer for Recognition and Service their fourth year. Aiden was recently honored for their work with a national board level nomination into the NACURH Advancement Society.

Within their academic interests, Aiden joined Project Q, a research and curriculum focused development committee to provide more queer inclusive experiences for honors students. They presented their experiences as a queer student within honors at a National College Honors Council Conference and was recently honored with the Steven F. Cohn Thesis Fellowship. More recently, Aiden became a member of the national honor society Phi Beta Kappa. After graduation, Aiden plans on continuing their education by pursuing a master’s degree in Higher Education at Syracuse University.