“Speak Your Mind and Speak It Clearly”
Discourse and the Importance of Voices in *Boy Erased*,
Garrard Conley.

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Abstract:

The voices of the autodiegetic narrator and its character counterpart in \textit{Boy Erased: A Memoir} by Garrard Conley enter the debate around the ontology of voice in literary texts. Using this debate, I will provide an analysis of the voices in this memoir in order to prove the importance of assuming a voice for the narrator, to compensate for speech silenced through discourses and social contexts. The social contexts and discourses that surround the main character silence his speech, to the point that it can be actively used to control even the private self, as gay conversion therapy tries to do. This dangerous silence leads to a need to finally be heard, which is provided through the ontologically silent voice of the narrator. This evolvement of the character to the narrator is the reason why voice and the way it allows for heard speech is essential.
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Introduction

Described as “gut-punching” and “powerful”, *Boy Erased: A Memoir* by Garrard Conley, published in 2016, tells the story of the son of a Baptist pastor in Arkansas who is outed as gay and presented with an ultimatum: lose everything or attend a gay conversion therapy named Love in Action or LIA. Supposed to emerge heterosexual, he breaks through expectations and goes on a journey to figure himself out. With such a strong subject, the coming-of-age arc of the character and narrator illustrates important progress and evolvement through their voices.

As a memoir, the book observes the model of what Genette calls an autodiegetic narrator, or an overt narrator who is the main character, on whom the emphasis is put (763). When it comes to an autodiegetic narrator, it can be hard to differentiate between the character’s voice and the narrator’s voice, as the ‘I’ of the narrator is the same as the character’s. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan defines the degree of perceptibility of the narrator with several markers: “description of settings” (*Narrative Fiction* 98), “identification” and “definition” of character (98-99), as well as “commentary” and “reports” of information unknown to the character (99). We can take for example in *Boy Erased* the several times the narrator intervenes to add information he learned after the events of the book, like LIA director’s past mistakes. As for the character’s voice, it can be divided through several “types of speech representation” (111), and I will focus on “direct discourse”, or dialogues, “indirect discourse” and “free indirect discourse” most present in the memoir. This formula and multiplicity of the voices allow for an analysis of the role of voice in memoirs.

The ongoing discussion about the ontology of voice in narratology offers an ideal context for an analysis of those voices. With a push for a more reader-oriented interpretation of voice, the theories debate the fixed points in older models, while trying to understand where the voice itself comes from, if it exists or can be heard and whether it should still be discussed. The voices in *Boy Erased* provide a perspective on those issues.
How do the voices appear in *Boy Erased* and which roles do they play? The book sets up a distinction between discourses and voices. How much do those discourses influence and produce voices in the text? *Boy Erased* demonstrates the influence of discourses on the possibilities of expression and explain the dangers of silence and by extension, the necessity of a voice. Using an analysis of the different voices in the book, I will use them to determine their role and what they indicate about the idea of silence and voice.

Firstly, I will start by analysing the voices of the character, their relation to his subjectivity, both influenced by a vast set of discourses, and by asking how well this speech allows him to express himself. Secondly, I will take a closer look at how gay conversion therapy use discourses and authority to modify both voice and subjectivity, leading to a silenced voice. Thirdly, a study of the voice of the overt narrator itself offers insight in its limitations and in the rules it follows, while simultaneously adopting other conventions to the benefit of his voice and message. Finally, the evolvement of the voices of the character to the voice of the narrator illustrates the importance of having a voice and its ties to the reader.

**Part I: Does Writing Produce Voice?**

Genette’s theory is one of the better-known and most famous models in the field, and it often appears as a reference and the obvious choice when it comes to the analysis of narrative fiction. By defining the notion of “autodiegetic narrator”, he provides a solid ground for the narrator of a memoir. Since the narrator is the character in the time of the *récit*, meaning the time of the *telling* instead of *histoire*, the time of the story, his existence is acknowledged, where a more covert narrator could lead to a debate of his existence at all.

As a kind of homodiegetic narrative, the autodiegetic narrator falls under the umbrella of what Monika Fludernik calls “natural narrative” (“New Wine” 624). She describes it as a narrative with real-life parameters that fits into a communication model with a sender, a
message and a receiver: “The first-person narrator is, therefore, a teller who frequently addresses narratee, his life experience and avowedly try to get the “point” of the narrative across, the meaning of his life” (Fludernik, “New Wine” 624). The natural narrative needs a first-person narrator because it follows the parameters of conversational storytelling, of a communicative framework. This claim comes from the idea that the medium of the novel rests on the use of language, which “serves interactional purposes” (Fludernik, “Narrative Voices” 708). Since this narrative appears to need a sender, does it mean it produces voice?

As an autodiegetic narrator, there are two instances of possible “voices”: on the ontological level of the story and the level of the text, also the level of the reader. “In Gérard Genette’s work […], while the manifestation of voice can be classified, voice itself simply exists as an essence. […] There is apparently no disputing that audibility of mediation as a guarantee of full presences” (Gibson 642). Voice, in Genette’s work, is one of the categories he uses to analyse the relationship between narrative discourse and the narrated story with *mode* and *temps*, which is also explained by Fludernik (“New Wine” 619). The presence of voice is never in question for Genette, which is why Andrew Gibson criticises the “fixed point” (641) that exists within narratology: the equation of voice and speaker figure. According to him, no matter which medium the narrator is using, he does not “speak”, he does not have a voice properly speaking: “They are in fact no narrative voices and no voices literary narrative, whether the voices of authors, narrators, or personae” (640). Although he agrees that the narrator can be present, he argues for the absence of voice. There is nothing to “hear” from a text, even if there is a narrator, who is a set of rules in the same way Rimmon-Kenan describes the implied author (644). The voice of the narrator is a concept that is used without question in order to give the text characteristics of real-life for analysis and, therefore, is not based on anything concrete. This conclusion seems to go against the generally accepted “voice” of the narrator but also the experience of reading. When explaining why the lack of voice in the text appears like such a
strange idea to the average reader, Fludernik tends to think that it is because of the reader’s need to “hear” the text. It is why her theory includes the idea that the reader imposes the real-life parameters of storytelling, namely conversations, to literary texts, even those with covert narrators: “The presence of a speaker constitutes an interpretative move, in which the reader concludes from the presence of a narrative discourse that somebody must be narrating the story” (“New Wine” 622). Therefore, she argues that this supposed voice is an effect of reading, and not actually present.

If the author is often put aside as an unattainable interpretation, the reader, on the other hand, appears to be an important part in most literary theories due to contexts, life experiences and other factors that influence the analysis itself. When it comes to the presence of voice in the text, as I mentioned, Fludernik theorizes that it is the only reason a narrator is given one. The reader is the sole producer of voice when the text is actually silent. When commenting on this, Jahn explains that if the narrator always has a presence, and especially in the case of a homodiegetic narrator, he does not need to “speak” to be a narrator, as stage directions, for example, are not voiced on stage. But it does not mean he has to be or is silent: “At one or more stages of the processing of the text, words when being read are sounded in internal speech” (Jahn, “Cognitive Status” 695). Even if the voice is not audible, it exists in the internal monologue created by the reader as they read. The internal speech of the reader is what produces the voices in the text. This could be extended to the characters, who even in dialogues, do not have speech on the level of the text, but have voices in our internal speech. Richard Aczel expresses a similar idea about the importance of reading itself in his essays: “There are, to be sure, no voices in written texts; there are only ways [...] of metaphorically conceiving text as voice in the act or play of reading” (Aczel, “Throwing Voice” 704). This means that if the voice is not present in itself in the text, what Gibson sees as silence, Aczel and Jahn elucidate that voices can be created, “heard”, through reading, through the internal speech of the reader,
or through metaphors and the linguistics markers that indicate voice. The readers become the pivotal point of the analysis of voice in written text, to the extent that they determine the presence of voice. I agree, but I would add that the problem with sticking to a reader-only vision of voice is that it is impossible to actually analyse, as each reader will give the narrator, and by extension the characters, different voices, and even different voices at each reading. Thus, the question has to go beyond that: are there voices in the text or is the text, and the narrator and characters, silent on the level of the text?

The consensus appears to be that there are no voices, or no actual speech, in a narrative text. The arguments to dismiss the voice of the narrator have been discussed, but what about the characters? The issue with the voice of the narrator is that it occurs on an ontological level that is different from our reality since it comes from a book, but it is not on the ontological level of the story within the book. To question the existence of its voice is, therefore, a fair point. However, when it comes to the characters, their voices are less commonly questioned. When Rimmon-Kenan refers to the “types of speech representation” from McHale’s theory (110), “direct discourse” is defined as “a ‘quotation’ of a monologue or a dialogue” (111) and “free indirect discourse”, the narrator’s report of the thoughts or speech of the character (115). In other words, she demonstrates that characters appear to have a voice within the narrated story. I would say that this is mostly an assumed point, as we tend to consider characters as full-blown beings in their stories, but we seldom consider their “voices” on the level of the text or the reader. Indeed, if the narrator lacks a voice because of the medium he finds himself in, why would it be different for the characters, especially when compared to a homodiegetic or autodiegetic narrator?

Although the issue is not exactly part of the debate on narrative voice, Gibson states that “there is finally no such thing as either a narrative or cinematic voice, if with voice we associate a vital, spontaneous, unpredictable, and properly human event” (655). In making this
comment, Gibson does talk about the narrative voice, but if voice is defined as he does, then characters also cannot have a voice. They are as silent as the narrator is. In conclusion, then they have speech on the level of the story, but not on the level of the récit. This leads to the question of why both characters and narrators are considered as silent. Is it really that they simply cannot have speech and, by extension, a voice as Gibson defines it or is it that a “spontaneous, unpredictable, and properly human event” of voice is prevented in the medium of narrative discourse?

Though I can agree to some extent that the absence of speech leads to the absence of voice, I believe it is important to consider how that silence comes into consideration in the literary field. In his article “Voice and Narration in Postmodern Drama”, Richardson, using the play *Hot ’n’ Throbbing* by Paula Vogel, demonstrates how discourses, whether actual voices and other conventions, impact voice. In his example, Richardson presents the two main characters of the play before introducing the “Voices”, embodied influencing discourses on stage. He then explains the violent end of the story in a scene of domestic abuse where the dialogue between the main characters is dictated by the Voices, one female and the other male, respectively, seemingly following expectations of that kind of scene in fiction or even reality: “The drama is as much about the struggle between two competing discourses as it is about the individuals who happen to speak them” (Richardson, “Voice and Narration” 690). Those two Voices or discourses appear on their own, outside the characters but influence greatly their voices. By analysing a play, Richardson tries to point out that the discussion ignores the audible voices, but what he also highlights in this discussion and in his implications part is that the embodied Voices themselves, or more precisely the discourses they represent, can create and control the voices of the characters, but also the narrator. My point is that, according to this, when following certain discourses and expectations, the characters and narrators lose the spontaneity, the unpredictability and the “properly human” characteristic of their voices,
which, according to Gibson, would make them silent. Richardson’s theory sheds light on the massive influence that discourses, rules and conventions have on the production of voices, whether it is on the level on the story like it happens in *Hot ‘n’ Throbbing* or on the level of the text. In fact, Richardson underlines in his conclusion that

they foreground the extent and importance (as well as the instabilities) of the performance of narration in everyday existence, how we continually construct and reconstruct our public selves and our ideal audiences through the act of narration, and how arduously we work to elude the social texts that threaten to overwhelm the voices that we call our own. (693)

This means that the voices in the text, whether overt or covert, homodiegetic or heterodiegetic and even our own, real voices are constructed through representations and discourses that are themselves based on conventions. But this also means that there is no real way to escape them. They control the narrative, every narrative. It leads to Jahn’s idea of the maximally covert narrator (Jahn, “Narrative Voice” 670): this narrator, covert to the point of almost non-existence, is still a narrative because there needs to be some kind of organisation within the story. This is when Richardson’s Voices in narration comes into play. Discourses are necessary for the production of voice, whether narrator or character, but they can end up silencing those voices too. However, if every voice is under the control of discourses and conventions, it makes the possibility of the narrator’s reader-created voice relatively void as even that kind of voice would be influenced by those same discourses.

As an illustration, Aczel’s theory of “over-hearing”, which is part of the play of reading, demonstrates this idea that the reader is exposed to different types of influences in the act of reading:

An understanding of reading as over-hearing of voices [...] it is at once complex over
of overdetermination; the temporal, historical over of something repeated, done over
again; the incomplete, falling short over of overlooking; and the combination of fortuitousness and intention that informs the over of more usual sense of over-hearing.

(Aczel, “Understanding” 597)

Those four points define how voices are created and heard by the reader, according to him, and explain why voices in text and interpretations in general, linked to the differences in their hearing, can be so vastly different. He also mentions how this “over-hearing of voices in literary texts will be understood as something overdetermined, unfinal, in process, and historically situated” (597). This points to the constant evolution of the voice created by the reader through the historical context, which is itself created by discourses, conventions, and rules that evolve with time. Therefore, even if the voice is created by the reader, it would still be silent.

One of the evolutions that Gibson refers to in his essay that particularly concerns the notion of voice in literary texts is the idea of literature separating itself as “parole muette from functional language, la parole efficace.” (645). The functional language is, therefore, everything that is not literary texts. This includes our own, actual voices, our own speech, but also, by extension, the speech of the characters within the story, as they are considered beings. As a result, literary texts become mute and lose their voices when they are considered on the level of the text. Despite the negative connotation of muette, Gibson emphasizes that the silence in the text is not a bad thing. In point of fact, he argues that literature is also a form of “bavardage”, of chatter, which is itself, in a way, a form of voice. Yet, it is not the kind of voice that one can hear, it is still mute. It is, according to him, a voice that is “available to all” (645), due to the absence of authority, identity and other social implications of voices. “In narrative, writing finds a voice, but a voice that is ceaselessly traversed by writing and remains a parole muette” (647). Basically, if literary texts are silent because they do not follow the rules of and lack speech, they still have their own kind of voice, a voice that is free from at least some of the discourses, rules and conventions that la parole efficace, or actual speech, is
submitted to. Richardson fairly agrees by stating that “literary characters function both as a real people might and as purely verbal constructs do; surely it is time to grant the same dual status to narration: it might be constructed as if uttered or written by an individual human, or it might be a tissue of divergent discourses spliced together for particular literary fact, and utterly irreducible as a single realistic subject” (Richardson, “Inhuman Voices” 700). Thus, it is not wrong to consider the voices of the characters both on the level of the story, as parole efficace, and on the level of the text, as parole muette, since they exist on both levels and accomplish different roles on those two levels.

Ultimately, what is at stake here is the possibility to have a “voice”, whether it is through speech or through narrative discourse. Expressing oneself through a narrative, through literature, when speech is either not available, restricted or even dangerous, gives the opportunity to have a voice. Gibson also underlines how the “politics of writing” (645) are important in this situation, and how especially the difference between speech and literary voice matters. “Voice” in narration, albeit it is silent, carries the possibility for everyone to finally be able to have a voice, which Boy Erased brilliantly show as a necessity.

Part II: The Voices in Boy Erased: A Memoir, Garrard Conley.

‘Relaxed into the role’: Silenced Voice.

The book uses a range of ways to represent and report thoughts, from the voice of the main character through “direct discourse”, or quoted dialogues, (Rimmon-Kenan 111) to “indirect discourse” to “free indirect discourse”, which allows the narrator to report the character’s speech and thoughts in his idiolect (115). Both parts of the character’s voice are part of the characterization which shapes the identity of the character. Hume defines identity as a “bundle or collection of different perceptions” (252). Garrard’s character is constructed with a similar idea in mind. The free indirect discourse, “Ma’am, you look lost” (Conley 67) or “Wine from
the jars of Cana: what was empty suddenly restored, the wedding feast continuing, the disciples believing in miracles.” (38) and indirect discourse, “I thought that by sticking to the script I might avoid scrutiny” (48), are only available to the reader through the narrator, while his dialogue, which often portrays a different image of him, is the only thing that the other characters see of him and that dialogue adapts itself to its surroundings. One of the clearest examples is when Brother Nielson, a deacon, asks his opinion about the war in the Middle East, and while he only answers by analysing the story of Job in the Bible, he expresses his fear of giving his opinion: “to be counted a sissy was one thing; to be counted a sissy and an Arab sympathizer was another” (Conley 47). Those opinions are quickly labelled as liberal opinions, hence why, in the conservative, religious environment he lives in, those opinions are classified as the “other”, their opposite. But Garrard’s performance at the eyes of the other characters, especially the men of the Church, appears as different from his thoughts reported by the narrator. However, since those two voices, either the “speaking” voice as a character or the “silent” voice through the narration, are the main form of characterisation in the book, they are the gateway to the character’s subjectivity. Both express different facets of himself, one private and the other public and show how both are influenced by the discourses and social expectations that surround him.

If the notion of subjectivity can be up for debate, the discussion about how discourses and the influence of those discourses and the voices that portray them influence the character is present in the book: “If, as Bakhtin suggests, every utterance is permeated with heteroglossia—the tongues of others with which every utterance is “over-populated” — every act of speech is an act of ventriloquism” (Aczel, “Understanding” 599). If we consider the character’s voice in that way, then each instance of speech, whether speaking on the level of the story, or the mimetic report of his thoughts in the narration, there is space to analyse the different discourses. In the case of Boy Erased, two main discourses are presented in the book: the religious
discourse of the Missionary Baptist Church he is part of on one side, which is represented mainly by Garrard’s father and the deacon Brother Nielson. It is expressed mostly through references to his upbringing and traditions, which consists on repetitions, actions “Bible study every workday morning” (37), or speech “my father liked to say” (36), followed by examples from the Bible. They are reflected by the use of learned habits through Bible verses, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Conley 37, his italics), or repeated prayers “the words automatic” (94). This use of Bible verses and stories, which include the references to the story of Job (48), shows a habit of repetition, first by his immediate surroundings, then by Garrard, which shows their impact on him. His life in college on the other side is partly the symbol for those liberal thoughts he tried rejecting: “Smiling at the memory of so many mandatory church services receding behind the carpe diem mentality of certain Humanities courses” (100). He clearly seems to favour this “carpe diem” and more secular way of thinking and behaving, which is shown through his references to books, articles “so casually anti-Creationist” (108), or discussions with a “heavy dose of fundamentalist bashing” (164). However, it is also clear that his religious roots are neither completely gone, and neither to be dismissed. Those two discourses, which manifestly cannot align with each other, are competing to be the main discourse in his speech, while simultaneously creating Garrard as a subject.

The idea that the way we express ourselves, behave and think is influenced by external factors that are mostly outside of our control is central to the notion of subjectivity. “[The voices in Hot ‘n’ Throbbing] also display a distinctively postmodern take on the intersubjectivity and even intertextuality of the self— the way individuals are constructed by the discourses that surround them, perhaps even more [...] how we continually construct and reconstruct our public selves” (Richardson, “Voice and Narration” 693). The book gives access to two kinds of the character’s public selves: the one he shows through the narrator’s report of
his thoughts, which is more private, and the one he shows to the other characters, through dialogues and behaviours. While the mentality of college appears as a rather passive discourse, which he explains by stating that the discourses used in discussion are just “ideas” that can be taken and discarded without being scared of their implications (Conley 172), and therefore, freer in the choice process, although maybe more grabbing in its logic, the mentality of his religious community is portrayed as overpowering: “His son. His wife. For a while, it seemed my mother and I had lost ourselves in the abundance of all that my father had come to represent for the people around us” (221). Although he recalls being encouraged to be his own person, he recognises that what his father’s beliefs are what is supposed to define him and what he is supposed to align himself with, according to the Bible (221). Thus, his different “public selves” are influenced heavily by those two discourses, revolving around his struggle with his identity.

If at the beginning of the book he is able to be so split between the influences, to hang onto both sides, he knows this situation cannot continue: “I decided that this was what it was like to be truly insane, that only insane people clung to both sides so doggedly, refused to let him part ways, let them battle inside the mind” (174). In other words, he cannot find a way to reconcile those two discourses as they appear totally opposite for him. This reminds of Richardson’s analysis of the scene of domestic abuse in Hot ‘n’ Throbbing: “The drama is as much about the struggle between two competing discourses as it is about the individuals who happen to speak them” (Richardson, “Voice and Narration” 690). In this scene, the main characters, in a moment of distress or anger, snap into their respective discourses represented on stage, even though they appeared able to distinguish themselves from them before. A similar turn of events makes the choice for Garrard after his rape. Afterwards, even though he does not actively mention a change of mind, the free indirect discourse rests on one metaphor after the other. He stops following the previous patterns of learned habits, such as Bible verses, religious reflections or references to video games or college discussions and starts using metaphors
where he always ends up on the unfortunate side. Firstly, he compares his rape with the one suffered by the daughters of Lot in Sodom (Conley 116), then he is Narcissus (161) before being trapped in the Minotaur’s Labyrinth (163). Afterwards, he compares being at university to being Ulysses with unplugged ears, asking to be untied from the mast (166) then he uses a hunting metaphor where he misses the target, or the truth (171). Then, perhaps one of the most interesting one for a conversation about voice, he compares himself to Link, Zelda’s silent protagonist (183). A whole chapter, “Diagnosis”, is dedicated to the movie *The Passion of Christ*, which is the only comparison where he is not in the worst position as he compares his pain to Jesus’ pain. The evolution of those comparisons shows first the destabilisation of his religious thinking, then his progression back to greater stability, to the realisation that he could change himself to fit the “chosen discourse”.

However, what this indicates as well is the lack of actual choice within the individual about the discourses he is influenced by. Most of his comparisons refer to secular books or references, yet the final one, the one that “wins” is the religious one. What this shows is the how powerful the religious voices in his life were above the secular, liberal influence of his college education, to the point he decides to focus on it and he accepts to “change” his sexuality to fit the expectations of those voices:

To grow up in a family where the word homosexual was whispered, to play in the playground and hear the words faggot and queer, to go to church and hear of sin, and then to college and hear of illness and finally the counselling center that promises to cure is hardly to create an environment of freedom and voluntary choice. (*UnErased*, Episode 3)

Charlie Silverstein, a gay activist at a conference in 1973, said this about the influence of voices on the “voluntary” choice of going through gay conversion therapy, indicating the true lack of choice when the pressure of one’s surroundings are taken into account: “I didn't yet recognize
it, but the logic of ex-gay therapy, the idea but my sinful urges were somehow equal to David's, began to invade my thoughts. Of course I was sitting on the same bed as a pedophile; according to scripture, I was no better than a pedophile, or an idol worshipper, or a murderer” (Conley 133). The character is shown here to be clearly under the influence of a discourse that forces his thoughts to think of himself differently, and that is just one example. So, even if we can say that the character has a voice, or at the very least, access to speech, it is trickier to say that this voice is free as it is shaped by the discourses, which themselves operate on different levels of power. So, I want to ask how much can discourses control the different speech and aspects of the subjectivity and what it means for the voice.

‘Not Your Own’: Erasing Voice.

In *Boy Erased*, as I illustrated, the different discourses and how they shape simultaneously subjectivity and voices appear as an important part of the book and the point it is trying to make. However, until now, my analysis focused mostly on rather passive cultural influences. His ability to have more “liberal” thoughts and consider a life outside of his community show certain freedom from his overpowering conservative religious environment, even if, as underlined by Charlie Silverstein, his choices are not as voluntary as they appear due to this social pressure to change. Gay conversion therapy, one of the main subjects of the memoir, is one of those active influence, acting under the umbrella of the religious discourse. Love In Action, or LIA, is the organisation hosting the “ex-gay” programme attended by Garrard Conley and is the conversion therapy referred in the book. With the information in the memoir, LIA meets almost all the criteria to be considered a cult, following Steven Hassan’s BITE model. It refers to Behaviour, Information, Thought and Emotional control. Through this
model, I want to show how LIA first controls the external expressions of its attendees in order to get to their subjectivity.

In order to control the possibility of expression, they first start to limit the access to contradictory discourses, from critics to secular sources of information, and promote obedience: “reading secular literature was discouraged at LIA—patients could “only read materials approved by staff” (82) “I had been told to cast aside everything but my Bible and my handbook” (8) the content of their wallet and phones are inspected (15-17) and they are even encouraged to drop out of college to avoid “unhealthy influences” (22). But beyond that, they also control where and with whom they live during the programme, as Garrard explains that he has to live in an “approved” hotel and leave only to come to LIA (11), but also their leisure time and activities, as their free time is for homework, food and rest only (11). This control of information clearly limits the presence of discourses to ensure that the subjectivity and their voice of the attendees are shaped through “approved” criteria. Then, when it comes to controlling the external aspects of expression, one of Hassan’s point includes the control or restriction of sexuality, which for a gay conversion therapy appear as an obvious one, but this also lead to the point of controlling clothing and hairstyle to mould them to LIA’s vision of the heterosexual person: “FI [False Images, or signs of ‘deviance’] behavior may include hyper-masculinity, seductive clothing, mannish/boyish attire (on women), excessive jewelry (on men), and “campy” or gay/lesbian behavior and talk” (15). This follows the idea that gender norm is a binary with fixed rules, but those rules also influence sexuality. This is in itself a form of discourse that controls the external expressions of the attendees to get to change their internal self. This control goes through changing their names, which are replaced by interchangeable letters (24), which diminishes their identity, at least to the others.

Furthermore, the BITE model deals with points that focus on changing their thinking process. On one hand, they teach them to be positive about the change, that they can and should
pull through because there is no way to happiness outside of the group. This links to one
Hassan’s main point, modifying behaviour with rewards and punishments. Garrard explains
through the narrator’s reports and through dialogues with the staff of LIA that they are mostly
encouraging and positive (5, 18) but that the “us vs. them” mentality is present, “we were told
that [...] [Satan] has free dominion over everything not directly issued from the church or the
Bible” (92), which leads to a clear notion that change is necessary to survive, a technique that
rests on cautionary tales about AIDS and homelessness (21).

On the other hand, they use a heavy jargon that the residents are forced to use, which
change their mindset: “The LIA lingo had already taken up permanent residence in my
thoughts” (83), “MIs [Moral Inventory] helped us recognize our FIs, the development of which
we could now trace clearly in the As [Alcoholism] and Pos [Pornography] and Ss [Gambling]
and Ms [Mental Illness] of [...] our family’s sinful histories” (84). Through this lingo, which
Garrard uses a lot, they promote a feeling of shame and guilt, which the attendees come to
associate with their sexuality. In their MIs exercises, they are expected to write about one time
when the “sinned” sexually, in thought or physically, in order to repent: “The whole purpose
of the exercise was to realise how shameful these memories were and refashion them to fit
God’s purpose” (84). If Hassan does not explain the effects in his model, bell hooks in an
interview states that “shame produces trauma and trauma often produces paralysis” (“Melissa
Harris-Perry and bell hooks Discuss ”). The promoted shame in LIA has this specific purpose.
Indeed, it is underlined several times in the book, either through the speech of the director, John
Smid, or through Garrard’s thoughts, that what LIA expect from their attendees it to “become
an easily moldable shell, a vessel for God” (Conley 85), that “we had to be willing to give up
any ideas about who we were” (92), through prayers and deep analysis of their “sins” without
distraction. LIA does not intend to change them to be simply a straight version of themselves,
but to conform totally to their expectation of a Christian, to reject critical thinking and doubt
and accept the answers they are given. Therefore, the BITE model illustrates the purpose of LIA and the methods applied which lead to the character’s speech and eventually thoughts being changed and controlled by the religious and cult-like discourses of gay conversion therapy, as well as the voices that portray them.

Those voices, presented in *Boy Erased* mainly as John Smid’s and David Cosby’s, are the representatives of those oppressive discourses used in LIA and my use of the BITE model could lead to thinking that they are aware of the methods. Their speech and discussion with Garrard being the only way to get a glimpse of their subjectivity, it is impossible to tell if they are, however, they seem to believe in the doctrine they provide. Cosby is described as a stereotypical straight male and a recovering addict, who believes strongly in the discourses of LIA as he perpetuates Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s idea of homosocial desire: “[Homosocial] is applied to such activities as “male bonding,” which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality” (1). Indeed, he explains that the reason for their homosexuality is the fact that they didn't play enough sports and started idolizing other men's body (Conley 144). As for Smid, he is an “ex-gay”, meaning that he went through conversion therapy “successfully”, but he is also the main voice for LIA as director. His repetition of LIA’s doctrine, “sinful flesh, and manipulative attacks of Satan” (87) and Bible verses 1 Cor. 6:19 (92) for example, follows the same pattern as Garrard’s use of the LIA lingo and show his relation to the discourse: “it was easier to lie when you believed the lie” (277). He represents a successful case for the implementation of discourses. Therefore, both of them are influenced by those same controlling discourses, but the way Garrard hears them is as part of those discourses. In the podcast *UnErased*, Jad Abumrad notes that “The idea that [Smid] was selling at Love In Action, or perhaps that he bought into, ultimately goes way beyond him. The sources of that shame are as much the families of those kids, the peer groups, the school where they went to, and certainly the churches, the society at large that creates the
condition for Love In Action to exists” (Episode 4). Smid was also pushed by the cult-like methods of LIA to make a change in his life and identity, and he explains in the podcast that he felt the need to help other homosexuals to find the right path. Therefore, whether it be for Garrard or for the voices that influence his own, their voices, produced through discourses, are forced to follow a specific one by necessity. This replica of learned and repeated discourse prevents this unpredictable, human event that Gibson held as a definition of voice.

The book makes the clear point that the opinions Garrard expresses through his dialogue with other characters and through the narrator’s reports of his thoughts are vastly different, even though he has access to only one discourse this time. His external expressions through speech are forced to fit the discourses that surround him at the time, meaning that through conversion therapy, his dialogue is controlled, he uses the LIA lingo. His thoughts accessible through indirect and free indirect speech to the reader reveal his thought process when he thinks outside of the imposed rules, but, as Gibson puts it: “As to who speaks in the text, the answer, it would seem is no one, ever” (640). This means that on the level of the story, he has a voice that is limited to the rules, but that the voice he uses outside of those rules in the book is silent. Yet, the memoir raises the problem with silence.

Indeed, pretending to fit in the programme, Garrard explains that through LIA, “my guilt and fear had all but disappeared in only a matter of days, replaced by what I could only describe as Nothing” (Conley 137). If this Nothing could appear to mean that the therapy is working, the fact that he prays to Nothing instead of God show that silence does not only mean his own, but also the lack of God’s voice that will follow him into adulthood, and this absence of voice was seen as the affirmation that God has abandoned him because of his sexuality. “The silence worries me” (260), as he states when his mother stays silent on the phone, follows the same idea that silence is an affirmation or rather a lack of disagreement. The idea is perpetuated when it comes to his own silence towards others. During his therapy sessions before LIA, the
therapist interprets his silence and repetitions as repentance and humbleness (235) and at LIA, even after he realises that he will not be able to change his sexuality and that he does not want to, his silence is the acceptation of the doctrine: “I pretended that I didn't trust myself, all the while thinking *Fuck God*” (276).

It should be pointed out that the results of silent are not always bad, like when his parents accepted his rejection of conversion therapy even though they do not talk about it (327), or when his mother came picking him up when he called her to leave LIA, “She took this is a yes, the only evidence she needed to convince herself to end my therapy sessions with love in action.” (327). However, while we clearly see him oppose LIA’s doctrine and even his religion in his thoughts, his behaviour differs, in fear of repercussions. Voice cannot exist without discourse, but the available discourse is not always fitting, and other discourses not always allowed. The main issue is not just the silence then, but the impression of being silenced, of not being able to speak without consequences because of the implications of voice.

Gibson writes that “it is the violence of the voices what is partly what is consigned in the crypt” (639) on why one would prefer silence. He explains how silence can be a “contradistinction to the voices” (639), a way to avoid actively responding to ideologies, a sort of middle ground. bell hooks expresses a similar idea, as she was “taught to speak and yet aware of the betrayal of too much heard speech” (*Talking back* 7, my italics). It is not the voice itself that carries violence, but the social context that imposes silence in which the voice is produced. And the “violence” of a voice is acknowledged in *Boy Erased*. After his rape, he tries to report David for his abuse on someone else, but he is asked to “stay quiet” by the pastor (Conley 133), yet when David outs him, silence appears as his only choice, as nothing would change his parents’ minds (161), so others’ voices have more power than his own on his life. Silence becomes critical during his time at LIA, where his voice could be his demise since he is aware that if he says he will not change, they would make him stay there for years (275). “It
was telling people the truth that got you into trouble” (216). With this, it becomes clear that the context in which the voice is produced is also the cause of its silence, its impossibility to be heard. As Garrard puts it, “in taking on the power of invisibility, I had also given up my voice” (181). Therefore, if neither voice nor silence are solutions on the level of the story, it is time to wonder about the role of the narrator.

On the subject of getting a voice through writing, bell hooks acknowledges the struggle of the writer to get out of this enforced silence, as “inner struggles, efforts made to gain the necessary confidence to write” (8) are other ways silence is imposed. And she explains how a narrator, or a writer, that is herself, yet different can help overcome the silence, how she “construct a writer-identity that challenge and subdue all impulses leading me away from speech into silence” (8). Garrard, creative writing student at the time of LIA, does mention a Moleskine journal where he writes his short stories (17), his “secret world of stories that belonged only to [him]” (216). Already, he had a writer-identity available only to him. This was his way to start fighting the silence until he finds the courage and confidence to be the narrator of his own life.

‘I wanted stories that sprawled, took on lives of their own’: Unerasing Voice.

Earlier, I came to the conclusion that it appeared the narrator does not have speech on the level of the text, except for a reader-produced one, nor does he have one on the level of the story. Gibson, indeed, underlined that the silence of the narrator was part of the parole muette (645) that is characteristic of literature, as opposed to the characters’ parole efficace. So, what appears to be the role of the parole muette, the silent voice of the narrator in Boy Erased? With an autodiegetic narrator, he used to be the character who had such trouble between silence and
speech and now finds himself a different position. About the narration of Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, John Green explains how the narrator, Holden Caulfield, uses this position to finally tell a story that was traumatic for him, that defined his identity, to give his side of the story. The narrator in *Boy Erased* follows the same idea: now older, he is able to write about these events. Being a memoir makes it even more interesting because the medium was carefully chosen. Conley decided to write a book, and not just give interviews, which seem to indicate an agreement with Gibson, that the voices in a book fill a different purpose than speech. Conley writes: “I won't know who I am until I finish [the book]” (338) in the last few pages of the book. They are dedicated to relating how the book came to be, and the character and soon-to-be narrator equates writing this book, writing this part of his life down, with finding himself.

He explains how he felt sometimes crazy, wondering if all of this happened, “a year of my life is missing, undocumented” (311), and he even refused to remember some parts until the writing of the memoir, as it is quite obvious from the description of the rape (116). The narration is, therefore, a way to characterise not only the character but also the narrator, while allowing the former to voice those events outside of the heavy social context and implications of speech.

This idea that narration can be a way to voice things that are usually not talked about joins Susan Lanser’s vision of narratives: “it is rather ‘a trope of identity and power’ for ‘the collectively and personally silenced’” (Gibson 640). In other words, this makes narration a way to free oneself from the authority, race, gender or other criteria that influence how heard a voice can be. The narrator uses **parole muette**, or writing, acting almost like a megaphone, to remove the voice of the character from its social context that creates this “human event” that is speech to allow a voice to be given back to silenced minorities. In the last pages of his book, Conley explains how he sees on different “ex-ex-gay” Facebook groups, usually hidden, the testimony of different survivors who are still very much struggling with scars from conversion therapies, “the chorus of voices will grow each year, revealing decades of pain, decades lost, families torn
apart, relationships ruined because people outside the ex-gay world can never understand what we patients went through” (Conley 335). The path leading to the writing of a memoir did not include only a need to voice his own pain and understand his own, but also the need to carry the other survivors’ voices, to let them “speak” through him. Those silenced voices also include his own mother: “I would force myself to hear her side of the story, listen to her voice amid the buzzing of harmful memories” (206). In order for her voice to be “heard”, one of the chapters is even focalized through her with the voice of the narrator.

In finding his voice and the courage to express it, the narrator wants to counterbalance the over-represented “redemption arc” of the ex-gay leaders and finally give an account of a life heavily impacted by gay conversion therapy. This strips away the reader from its simple voyeuristic-like position and puts in a position of receiver in Fludernik communicational model, which means that the narration falls into her “natural narrative” (624). Indeed, one of the reasons he states starting to think about writing a book about his experience is the light tone used in a liberal podcast to talk about conversion therapy. Due to the lack of survivors’ voices, people tend not to take it seriously, which adds another layer on the need to write: “It is precisely [...] in its unassimilable relation to the future, its pure refusal to be reduced to the term of the present, that the political force, the political determination of writing is most powerfully at stake” (Gibson 646). Gibson’s point is that writing has a different power from speech in that, unlike the latter, writing does not only exist in the moment, or even cannot exist in the moment as it is read necessarily after its production. In other words, a memoir appears as the best way to communicate a message, especially since it rests on life experience. Conley agrees when he writes, “what I have experienced may have been unique, but in no way was it disconnected from history. Minorities continue to be abused and manipulated by both nefarious and well-intentioned groups of people, and harmful ideas continue to develop new political strains all over the world” (Conley 328). The need for a message to instigate change, if only in
the minds of the reader, is clear in this passage, and this start of a dialogue with the reader in a way brings a voice to the narrator, even a silent one.

Although I grant that this written voice is freer from social contexts than actual speech, it does not mean that this voice comes without its own limitation. Firstly, the discourses that influenced the voice of the character may have changed, but they are still present and to be communicated in the message. Richardson furthers this point by saying “the play also document the circulation of public discourse has about gender and sexuality, as speeches and ideas overheard or adapted by the woman are incorporated into her text, and will presumably go on to animate other individuals who will view her film once it is finished” (“Voice and Narration” 690). A similar way is taken by the narrator of Boy Erased who communicates the way discourses influenced and controlled him before through the lens of those new discourses. Explained through different details of his life, reading a master’s degree in creative writing (Conley 331), listening to a liberal podcast, openly gay (332), not a believer anymore (337), but also the main message about the dangers and consequences of gay conversion therapy, the discourses have changed from the one in the voice of the character, but this time, the discourses are not only influencing the narrator, they also seek to “go animate” the reader, to make them think. However, there is also another kind of “discourse” that is proper to literature that shapes the voice of the narrator: the rules and conventions of creative writing.

The narrator has to abide by those rules, but he also uses them to the benefit of his message. Janet Burroway writes that “if literature as any social justification or use, it is that readers can identify the common humanity in, and can, therefore, identify with, characters vastly different from themselves” (127). Thus, not only is the character’s characterisation important for the memoir itself and the narrator, but also for his message. With this, the characterisation of the other characters become also important, and the reminder that those are based on real people appear as important: “The names and certain identifying characteristics
of some key figures in my life [...] have been changed” (Conley, Author’s Note). The Author’s Note relates the research he made before the writing and admitting the possible inaccuracies due to a lack of documentation, but also mentions how conventions influence the narrative: “the chronology is accurate, altered only in places where the narrative requires it. I have excluded details that seemed irrelevant to the nature of the story.” This kind of information, in the end, would not have changed the reading experience of the memoir, but it reminds the reader about the “reality” that is behind the writing of a memoir.

Therefore, the character and narrator can find a voice through narration, but it stills has to be written within the pages of a book to an audience, which comes with its own rules and limitations. They themselves act as a kind of discourse influencing the voices present in the memoir, and with the discourses in the voice of the narrator are part of the necessary production and evolvement of a narrative voice.

‘From the body of one avatar to the next’: becoming voiced.

When it comes to a discussion about the importance of voice, an autodiegetic narrator offers a perfect example as it displays the evolvement of the voice, starting with the character and eventually getting to the narrator. This evolvement of the voice begins with the evolvement of the subjectivity of the characters, showcased through the discourse. Rimmon-Kenan, in her discussion about characters, shows how they are constructed: “The ‘I’, according to [Hélène Cioux] is ‘always more than one, diverse, capable of being all of those it will at one time be, a group acting together” (30). A fragmented ‘I’ corroborates the idea that a subject, and therefore, a character can be made out of different kinds of “voices” influenced by different discourses as present in Boy Erased: “I had leaped from the body of one avatar to the next” (115). Indeed,
each different voice that constitutes his subject is associated with a hobby. Video games are
the symbol for his religious life: he equates the doings of his in-game avatar with his own
struggles (62) as the Zelda metaphor showed a silent protagonist expected to save a kingdom
(182), and following LIA’s “forget yourself” doctrine to becoming a “stock player in a harp-
and-halo bit” (294), while literature and books represent his homosexuality and eventually his
college self (82), to which he tries to hang on after being outed. His LIA self was associated
with Nothingness, due to both books and video games being forbidden. And finally, his
“present” self has taken on the avatar of the narrator. Although they are vastly different from
one another, those avatars appear as different voices through the way different discourses
influence or control them, which make up his character and subjectivity.

The evolvement of those voices that are separated yet still come from the same character
comes back to Gibson’s separation of literature between *parole muette* and *parole efficace*
(645). In the end, they both come from language, to which they entertain a different
relationship. I demonstrated that young Garrard could only express himself through “parole
efficace”, and proved inefficient for the character, while the narrator Conley was “parole
muette”, which is freer from social contexts but works through other kinds of discourses. The
constant change of the discourses forces the character to be in constant evolvement until he
eventually becomes the narrator. “Do you want to change?” (Conley 270) means he cannot
both keep his old life and live his sexuality openly, so he has to make a choice. The evolvement
appears as inevitable for the character himself, but then, this need to write to know himself, “I
won’t know who I am until I finish it” (338) also show how necessary this evolvement was.
Staying silent through *parole efficace* just was not an option anymore, at the risk of losing
himself, and the transfer to *parole muette* was the only solution. However, from now on, the
evolvement of the voices has just started.
One of the purposes of the voice of the narrator is to send a message and on the receiving end is the reader. As I explained, the idea that the reader is the producer of the voice in the text is mostly agreed on, which gives them the prime role in the fight against silence. Indeed, whether it is Jahn’s “internal speech” (“Cognitive Status” 695), Gibson’s haunting of the voice, Aczel’s “hearing is not simply a physical activity of the ear, but an orientation, and mode of understanding “something-as-something” (“Understanding” 603), or Fludernik application of real-life parameters, the narrator appears to get a voice that is not totally silent, even if it is just an “illusion”. If this voice is not deemed fit for interpretation due to the fact that each reader produces a different voice depending on their own social context, I would argue that it is no less important for the goal of the voice to be heard. In Boy Erased, the evolvement of the voice goes towards this goal, but as Gibson admits, the text itself is silent (640). Therefore, the reader is necessary for pursuing the evolvement towards a heard voice, even if it is imagined. “The listeners also readers who recreate and in doing so renew the text—participate equally in the creation of the world who presented in the text” (Aczel, “Understanding” 605). The reader reinvents the text and gives it their meaning and eventually voice. If the reader of Boy Erased does not assume a voice for the narrator, he stays as silent as his character counterpart and I believe it is not an option.

Furthermore, not only are the characters and narrator given a voice in the case of writing, but also the author, especially in the case of a memoir. In Talking Back, bell hooks points out how “the right to voice, to authorship” (6) is a privilege, which is not always accessible as speech, and writing is presented as a way to access it. “It is that act of speech, of “talking back”, that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject— the liberated voice” (9). Writing is a way for a silenced voice, an erased voice, to be heard and for the writer to become subject. The assumption of voice goes beyond the character and narrator, and even beyond the book. In the present case, this book has
given the author, Garrard Conley, a voice to express himself, and, to be a “mouthpiece for other people” (“20 Queer”). Consequently, this newfound voice and all the elements that came later (a podcast “UnErased”, a movie “Boy Erased”, interviews, conferences, etc.) influence in return the voice of the narrator. “Writing can be considered on its own terms and then it can also be looked at in relation to a writer’s background and personal history” (bell hooks, Writing 21). Being aware of the author and his activities influence the reading and eventually the “over-hearing” (Aczel, “Understanding” 597) or understanding of the text, and this is without accounting for the essay “Boy Erased” by Conley or the other documents available about LIA. It is a continuous circle that ensures the perpetual evolvement of the voice and makes sure that it is heard.

**Conclusion**

On the whole, parole muette or voice is an important component of literature, as it allows silenced voices to be heard. *Boy Erased* is a great example of the workings of the politics of writing brought up by Gibson. Admittedly, the newness of this book means that the analyses concerning him are far from extensive and I hope to see more written about it, both in the discussions about voices and about all the other subjects I could not possibly have the time or space to bring up in this essay. Moreover, given how the discussions about voice go in narratology in recent years and as my point concerns the need for an assumption to be made, the assumption of voice, it is evident that a different analysis and a different argument could be made. However, I believe finding a voice and letting it be heard through writing is important in the scope of narratology and English studies, but it also goes beyond that. The impact of voice in writing shouldn’t be left out of the theory, as it exists within social contexts where
voices need to be heard but where speech is not always accessible. *Boy Erased: A Memoir* is a prime illustration of the relevance of such concerns.
Works cited:


