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Deadline: Ethics and the Ethnographic Divorce¹

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Stretching back in my home office chair, I access the college voicemail. The system lets me know, “You have one new message.”

A friendly but unfamiliar male voice: “Hi, Dr. Tillmann. I’m writing a story about gay-straight friendships.”

This triggers my PTPD (Post-Traumatic *Presidency* Disorder). Eight years of beating back threats to civil rights. Under Gore or Kerry, would friendship across sexual orientation—the topic of my dissertation and first book—have passed from social justice crusade to “so 20th century”?

Other feelings flood my body: hope for the change Obama promised; pride that a reporter views my work as potentially useful; and fear. Raw fear.

“I found your book, *Between Gay and Straight*, on Amazon,” says the voice.

Shit. Can I talk about that in light of—

“My piece is for the Sunday Style section...”

I cringe at the cliché. Fifteen years of friendship, teaching, research, and activism relegated to the Style section. *Queer Eye* and the great sigh.

“...of the *New York Times*.”

¹ The most updated version of this piece appears in the book *In Solidarity: Friendship, Family, and Activism Beyond Gay and Straight* (Routledge 2015). Earlier versions of “Deadline” were presented at the 2009 National Communication Association meetings and published in *Qualitative Inquiry* (Tillmann 2010; used with permission, Sage Publications: <http://qix.sagepub.com/content/16/7/596.abstract>).

The *Times*? Eight years too late, this call. In 2001, publicity for my newly-released book had accelerated: features in the *Milwaukee Journal* and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, a one-hour discussion on Minnesota Public Radio, then ... 9/11. With the Cheney cabal hawking WMD mythology, who had space for a heartfelt, uplifting story of my husband's and my integration into a network of gay male friends? Who cared that a heterosexual South Dakota farm boy grew up to play right centerfield for a predominantly gay male team in a queer softball league? We were at war, goddamn it!

The voice again: "I'd like to ask you a couple of questions."

Tension grips my neck. I have *responses*, I think, but few answers. You may not like the answers I do have. *I* don't like them. They are not *good* answers to questions flowing naturally from what had been a good story. The Afterword is a fucking downer.

I imagine our interview opening with, "So, Lisa, do you and your husband still keep in contact with members of the Cove team?"

"Yes," I would tell you honestly, "I still count these men among my closest friends."

An astute Sunday Style reporter would note: "You said 'I' and 'my.' What about your husband?"

Struggling to swallow, I suppose I would have to let you know, "He and I divorced in 2006."

"Your-husband-came-out-as-gay," you might blurt out, as many did, the inflection on "gay" straddling question and declaration.

To be fair, I did live, write, and publish a border-crossing ethnography. In it, I discussed ongoing speculation about my husband's sexual orientation. But I would answer, "No. The project, our friends, had nothing to do with the divorce."

Your humanity might prevent you from probing, “What then? In the book, you two seemed so perf—”

“Call it a period piece” would be my wry reply.

Even if asked, I would not tell a reporter about the grueling Tuesdays. Session after session, he and I claw through the muck of our pasts. I frantically dig for the buried trunk of his unhappiness.

I surely would not speak of that April Tuesday. Seemingly, we had gained ground. London in March. Vegas the previous Thursday to Sunday. We arrive for the week’s session. He uses the restroom while I chat up our counselor about slots, Cirque du Soleil, and Pai Gow poker. He returns with a near-empty bottle of water, sits down, and announces, “I had an affair.”

I would not disclose how many people have stopped me at this point to interject: “With a man?”

Therefore, I would not have to repeat my standby reply: “If my husband had come out as gay, that may have been infinitely *easier*—unless that too had involved infidelity, then I suspect it would have felt exactly the same: *personal*.” I refuse to debate origins of sexual orientation. With sexual indiscretion, there is no debate. Irrefutably, it’s a choice. In his case, two and a half *years* of choices.

I would leave out his leaving that Tuesday night, his secession from the “daringly honest union” I wrote about in *Between Gay and Straight*.

To my disclosure of divorce, you might offer, “I’m sorry. I had noticed you dropped the hyphenated name.”

I’m not sure “dropped” captures it, I would think but not say. Cast? No ... severed.

Gingerly you might ask: “Does your husband—” You would catch yourself. “Your *ex-*

husband ... does he still play in a gay league?"

"No," I would reply. "He has ... uh ... other commitments."

I would not tell you that my ex-husband abandoned his mistress and called next to the stand a Jehovah Witness. He converted so they could marry in 2008. He indeed "came out"—not of the closet but into the Watchtower.

Yeah, I realize those are not mutually exclusive spaces.

See, if I did tell you of his conversion, you likely would say incredulously, "According to Watchtower dogma, homosexuality is an abomination and may be caused by demon possession!"

To this, I would have to admit, "I did read that."

"B-but," you might sputter, "does your ex, the protagonist from *Between Gay and Straight* ... does he believe that?"

"I don't know," I would have to answer. Maybe I never knew.

If I told you all this, you would be within your rights to say, "This story sucks!"

Which is exactly why I hesitate to report to reporters on this subject. Exactly why "Deadline" was the *pre*-narrative spelunking in my belly for more than three years, unable to stand and walk to the page.

Perhaps, Mr. Sunday Style Reporter, these are *not* the questions you wanted to ask. Perhaps you wanted academic reflections on media portrayals or on intersections between the political climate and interpersonal relationships. "Your" questions are really my projections—*my* questions.

A few more: was *Between Gay and Straight* only a story, only *my* story? Was this character—this relationship—that I constructed merely a *construct*? What happens when the characters we create stop saying their lines, when the people on whom we base these characters

cut us from their scripts?

Into my voicemail, you say, “I’m on a really tight deadline.”

Dead, I think. Exhausted. Extinguished. Barren. Buried.

Line. Line of dialogue. Line of text. Research line. *Lifeline*.

Dead Line.

“I would need to speak to you in the next hour. If you do get this, the name is Doug.”

Of course it is. That’s the name of his character too.

Characters need no ethical protections, but what of the *humans* whose love, ambivalence, and/or cruelty inspire our renderings? As a researcher—as a professor who *teaches* research ethics—I am obligated to ensure accuracy, to uphold confidentiality, to secure informed consent, to use deception only as a last resort, and to promote beneficence.

In terms of accuracy, I could stand behind public record. My ex-husband confessed to the affair in open court, and both the county and the church sanctioned his remarriage. Public record provides legal cover, but what of my “relational ethics”?²

Confidentiality would be impossible to offer. This account only makes sense in connection to my book, which I published under my real name and in which I used his real name. Even if I wrote under a pseudonym and altered every identity marker, his character remains identifiable—to himself, to his second wife, to the children he now helps raise.

To perform and/or publish this piece, am I obligated to inform *all* of them? To secure their permission?

Would proceeding without informed consent constitute a form of deception? What of *his* deception? Am I obligated to hold myself to a higher ethical standard as a researcher than he

² According to Carolyn Ellis (2007, 3), “Relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and take responsibility for actions and their consequences.”

embodied as my husband? Part of me wants to say, “If he didn’t want to be typecast as a cad, he shouldn’t have played the part so convincingly!” But “cad” oversimplifies and flattens.³ He deceived me about the affair but acted honorably in many other ways throughout our 13 years together. I did not have an affair but surely inflicted harm with my words, my actions, my inactions.

In *Between Gay and Straight*, I advocated “friendship as method,” researching with the practices, at the pace, in the natural contexts, and with an ethic of friendship—a stance of caring, hope, and love.⁴ To promote understanding and combat injustice, I suggested using this approach to research perpetrators of hate crimes, such as the men who assassinated Matthew Shepard. Surely my ex-husband deserves at least the ethical consideration I thought appropriate for *murderers*.

Finally, beneficence calls me to minimize the risks and maximize the benefits of research. He has moved on to another family, another life. How might revisiting our dissolution and understanding more about its impact on me and on my work facilitate his learning and growth? Is it arrogant and self-serving to think that such revisiting would provoke anything beyond shame and pain?

What of my ex-husband’s journey? How does *he* frame our life together and our unraveling? What does my character in his story think, feel, and do?

Every human, including him, has to live with uncertainty, vulnerability, and injustice. As Art Bochner reminds, there often is “no getting to the bottom, no transcendental point of view, no final truth to be rendered.”⁵ We move forward with pieces missing. We do not get *over*, which implies resolution, but get *on*—alone and in solidarity.

³ See Kiesinger (2002).

⁴ See the Appendix and Tillmann-Healy (1998, 2001, 2003).

⁵ See Bochner (1997, 429).

Of seven friends associated with my work, one survived an alcoholic family system. Two lived through divorces of their parents, both of them while children; at age 40, one bore witness to his mother's second divorce, this one from the only man he ever called "Dad." Five have buried one or both parents. One mom and one dad suffered cardiac arrest and flashed quickly from this life; slowly and cruelly, cancer, ALS, and Alzheimer's took the others. All seven have endured the wrenching end of a partnership. I cannot reveal how many are HIV positive. With the hopeful exception of HIV, these losses will not be overcome; they will be integrated, as those men and I remain integrated in friendship.

I decide that I can do this. I can tell ... Doug about the subversive and liberatory potential of friendship across difference, offer something helpful to inspire members of dominant groups to become better allies to those marginalized by sexual orientation and/or other social locations. My core feels solid, resolute ... but my hand shakes when dialing Doug's number.

One ring.

My chest caves.

Two.

Given my own swirling uncertainties, will I be able to frame this in a useful way?

Three rings. Click.

"This is Doug..."

"D-doug?"

"...please leave a message."

I pull my iPhone away from my ear. The "End Call" button beckons. My left index finger swoops.

No. I clear my throat. "Doug, this is Lisa returning your call. I don't know if your story is

complete, but I can speak with you. You have my number.”

Doug never calls back.⁶

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⁶ I gave my ex-husband the opportunity to review and respond to this piece. He declined.