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Lisa M. Tillmann Ph.D.
Rollins College, ltillmann@rollins.edu

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Men Kissing¹

Lisa M. Tillmann
 Rollins College Box 2723
 Winter Park, FL 32789
Ltillmann@rollins.edu
 407-646-1586

Men kissing—it strikes me as wonderfully subversive. In the U.S., we tolerate little boys who sloppily smooch their fathers and brothers, but when our little men reach a certain age, such displays induce a cultural squeamishness. Verbally and nonverbally, subtly and not so subtly, we send the message: “You shouldn’t do that anymore—especially in public.” Our little boys become adolescents whose physical contact we conspire to confine to fields, courts, and rinks. Many grow into men who keep other men at arm’s length, communicating to the next generation of little boys, “Kissing me(n) is not appropriate; it’s not masculine; it’s not *right*.”

Three years ago, I’d never seen men kissing—not even in a film. This weekend, I’m surrounded by male lips pecking, smacking, and lingering on Mayor Dick Greco (Ball Fields, that is, near the University of South Florida in Tampa).

Along with a smattering of women, more than 300 men come from places as distant as Toronto for the third Gasparilla Softball Classic. The atmosphere is much like a class reunion, only the males don’t greet with stiff, distant handshakes. I watch as an Atlanta Heretic puckers for a Virginia Outlaw, and a Birmingham Cub plants one on a Ft. Lauderdale Hot Spot.

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Four softball fields occupy most of the terrain. Between them sits a sand-cushioned playground with a swing set and jungle gym. Atop the twist slide, the tongues of two Atlanta Trojans are engaged in an enthusiastic tango.

Players inhabit the eight concrete-block and metal-fencing dugouts as the stands fill with spectators, duffle bags, and jugs of Gatorade. Square and triangular banners in a variety of plaids and polka dots line the bleachers. Underneath, an Atlanta Thunder cups the unshaven face of a Cincinnati Comet, laying a smooch dead-on.

The Florida sun tries to warm this early February morning while a cool breeze teases the back of my neck, whipping and turning my pony-tailed hair. As I move toward the concession stand, little packs of silver-foiled Hershey's Kisses entice me, but I settle for a cup of coffee instead. Initially smitten by the robust, roasted scent, my nose crinkles when the bitterness of day-old espresso meets my mouth. Loading down the foam cup with Dixie sugar and Sam's Club faux creamer, I spot partners and Cove teammates Tim and Rob in line for the men's room. Lip-locked, they gently cradle each other's heads.

Nearby, the rest of our team stretch out. Scanning the group, I ask, "Where's Gordon?"

"State Fair," reminds my husband Doug. I'd forgotten that Gordon's stuck all weekend at a promotion booth. His business partner thought they could scope out clients there; his teammates, however, find that notion ridiculous. Gordon, you see, sells hairpieces. What an image: our leftfielder peddling rugs amid the Zipper and Scrambler, livestock pageants, and fruit judging.

“Peanuts, popcorn, get your hair here!” quips Al, turning to steal a public kiss from the cheek of his lover, new both to him and to this gay community. Neil’s cheek blushes when Al’s lips take their leave.

Laughter, layers of it, can be heard all around, hooting, howling, snickering, snorting, giggling, and guffawing. Spontaneous laughter responds to a struggling player’s surprisingly powerful line drive. Solicited laughter follows cheers of “2-4-6-8, do it like you masturbate. Whack it! Whack it! Whack it!” Despite the analogy’s androcentrism, I smile, wondering how women can play softball “like we masturbate.”

In addition to the sometimes-campy performances, other markers of gay culture appear. Someone hangs a large rainbow flag on the fence behind center field, and several vehicles parked in the lot display pink triangle decals and stickers. Community-identifying buttons, jewelry, and T-shirts also help transform this city park into a gay space, where men and women can be collectively “out.”

When I approach, Jeff and beaux unvelcro their mouths and wave me over. I sit next to them on the hard, patchy ground of clover and browning grass. Prickly burrs await anyone not careful about where she places her butt. I discover this immediately.

Thorns removed, I begin examining the contents of a plastic bag received upon registration. The first item provided is a tournament schedule. On the second page, the legend of pirate José Gaspar gets a bit of much-deserved revisionism. “Surreptitiously,” it reads, “Gaspar would sail into town. ‘ARRRR!’ he would growl, while looting the guava trees. Erect went his member as his eyes fixed on the soon to be possessed jewels.”

There are other surprises inside: a voucher for one free well drink at Rascals; some Banana Boat Baby Sunblock 29; two LifeStyles lubricated condoms, red; an ad for Solar's Pirate Fest claiming, "A Pirate's Treasure is his First Mate's Body"; from Barnett Bank a "Mightygrip," useful for safely unscrewing light bulbs and mayonnaise jars; a string of reflective Mardi Gras beads; and a Tootsie Roll Pop, chocolate—my favorite. The mix is eclectic and colorful, much like those gathered here.

When people begin filing past, our Cove team heads to field one for opening ceremonies. The Tampa Gay Men's Chorus has been invited to sing the Canadian and U.S. national anthems. Before they begin, my husband warbles unevenly, "Ooooh, Canadaaaaa!"

"I know that off-key voice," calls someone from behind. We turn to find Terry, a former teammate who moved to Georgia last year. I watch Doug and Terry embrace. They don't retain rigid, military postures or slap each other nervously on the back. Jaw-to-jaw, they share a moment of reunion before Terry puckers and plants.

"Jealous?" he teases, peering over my husband's shoulder.

"Grateful," I respond. How beautiful these sights of unashamed men kissing.

Epilogue

"Men Kissing" is based on events that occurred during one day of fieldwork for my Ph.D. dissertation, a narrative ethnography of a community of gay men in Tampa and of the friendships that have been cultivated between those men, my husband Doug Healy, and me.

When Doug moved to Tampa in 1994, his trainer at work was David Holland, a man who would alter the course of our lives. Doug and David became friends almost instantly. For a

couple weeks, Doug and I had a recurring conversation about whether David might be gay, a question David all but answered by inviting us to meet him at Tracks, a gay nightclub in nearby Ybor City.

Neither Doug nor I (both 23 at the time) had ever had an openly gay friend before. In fact, both of us had grown up in the rural Midwest with rather conventional ideas about sexual orientation and identity. “Alternative” sexualities had been almost invisible to us, and the pictures that were presented tended to be cropped and blurred, linking non-heterosexual desires and behaviors with deviance, threat, and sin.

Despite our limited exposure to gay people and cultures, we agreed to meet David at Tracks. As it turned out, this was only the beginning.

In November 1994, David mentioned to Doug that he played softball. When Doug asked if his team needed players, David told him that the team (sponsored by a bar called The Cove), and indeed, the whole Suncoast Softball league, were gay-identified. If that didn’t bother him, David said, Doug could join under a league provision that allowed each team to field two straight players.² At the start of the next softball season, Doug became The Cove’s right centerfielder.

For the next year, ours was an innocently personal journey—a straight couple venturing outside the boundaries of their small-town socializations. But in the fall of 1995, the journey took an unexpected turn.

I was enrolled in a graduate course on qualitative methods at the University of South Florida. When my intended study fell through, the softball field emerged as an alternative

² In 1999, this rule was relaxed. There no longer is an official limit on the number of heterosexual players a team can have on its roster or can field at one time.

fieldwork site. What started as a class project on gay male friendship blossomed into a dissertation on the (inter)personal and social implications of friendship across sexual orientation (see Tillmann-Healy, 2001).

The events described in “Men Kissing” took place in February 1997, about a year and a half into my fieldwork. In a seminar on ethnography, I was assigned to go into the field and write about “the spirit of a place.” For me, the theme of men kissing captured that spirit.

My project fits within narrative ethnography (see Tedlock, 1991), both a way of practicing fieldwork and of writing about fieldwork experience and relationships. As a method, narrative ethnography explores the character and process of the ethnographic dialogue between researcher and participants—a move from studying “them” to studying *us*. As a mode of representation, narrative ethnography employs techniques more often associated with fiction and new journalism than with social science, such as thick scenic description, reconstructed dialogue, dramatic tension, and temporal shifts (see Denzin, 1997).

Because narrative ethnography centers on the mutual and reciprocal relationship between researcher and participants, a high degree of reflexivity is required. Narrative ethnographers must recognize both self and others as historically positioned and locally situated (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) in cultural categories such as gender, race, and sexual identity. Fieldwork, in turn, involves communicating about, through, and across these categories.

Although my position in “Men Kissing” is more as observer than participant, I do not claim (and make no attempt) to be dispassionate or apolitical. For narrative ethnographers, objectivity and neutrality are synonyms for estrangement that are both unachievable and

undesirable (Jackson, 1989). We take instead a *purposefully ethical stance* toward fieldwork and participants (Punch, 1994), conducting our projects *with* and *for* our research communities, not merely *in* and *about* them (Fine, 1994). Ideally, suggests Denzin (1997, 2000), such work sparks conversation and action directed toward greater social accord and justice.

The criteria by which we judge narrative ethnographies are different from those used to evaluate traditional social science. Moving from factual truth to narrative truth (Bochner, 1994; Spence, 1982), projects can be assessed by their personal, relational, and cultural *consequences* (Jackson, 1989). Says Robert Coles (1989, p. 47), “there are many interpretations to a good story, and it isn’t a question of which one is right or wrong but of what you do with what you’ve read.” The best stories, according to Bochner (1994), enlarge our capacity to cope with life’s struggles, deepen our ability to empathize, and expand our sense of community.

Readers of these works are positioned differently than in traditional research. Narrative ethnographers write for those who wish to be engaged on multiple levels: intellectually, emotionally, ethically, and aesthetically; to confront texts from their own experience; and to participate as co-producers of meaning. Narrative ethnographies embrace, in Denzin’s (1997, p. 247) terms, a “dialogical ethics of reading.”

Because narrative ethnographies remain open-ended, encouraging multiple interpretations, readers are invited to offer personal, analytic, and critical responses. Texts thus become sites of political empowerment and resistance (Bochner, 2000). Ideally, by interacting with the work, readers find something to take in and use, both for themselves (Coles, 1989) and for social change (Denzin, 1997).

What you take away from this story largely will depend on what you bring to it. Practitioners of qualitative research might be moved to reflect on methodological questions raised by “Men Kissing.” For example, what are the opportunities and challenges associated with my position as a young, white, female, married, middle-class, educated, heterosexual researcher who studies a collective of gay people, most of whom are white, middle-class men under 40? How might my status as a (young) woman mediate and/or exacerbate potential problems associated with studying a (marginalized) group to which I don’t belong? Am I reflexive and dialogic enough? In the context I describe, how ethical is my ethnographic gaze? Do I sufficiently go *beyond* voyeuristic gazing to practice what we might call ethical *engagement*?

“Men Kissing” also can be examined as a literary text. Readers of ethnography are encouraged to assess the effectiveness of this ethnographic short story *as* a short story. What are the strengths and limitations of presenting these events in this way? How might the text have looked and felt differently had another form been used, such as ethnographic poetry (see e.g., Austin, 1996), a layered account (see e.g., Ronai, 1995), ethnographic fiction (see Angrosino, 1998), or ethnographic drama (see e.g., Ellis & Bochner, 1992)? Is reading this a “sensual” experience; does it offer “a taste of ethnographic things” (Stoller, 1989)? Does the plot have enough action and suspense? How well does “men kissing” work as a unifying theme? What other themes are possible? To what possible effects? What responses do the characters evoke, including my character? What can “Men Kissing” move us to think, feel, and do?

Readers who identify with feminism and/or queer theory should interrogate the work's ethics, politics, and implications. Feminist respondents might question whether the scene described adequately challenges orthodox masculinity. Further, what is the place of *women's* experience in "Men Kissing"? What roles are possible for women in general and for lesbians in particular in this gay (male) space (as described by a heterosexual woman)? Is this story sufficiently "queer"; does it contest heteronormativity and heterosexism and undermine the binary construction of hetero- and homosexuality (see Stein, 1999)?

Both feminists and queer theorists could ask: in what way(s) and what context(s) is men kissing (as an act and a story) subversive? Are there ways in which this (as an act and a story) could reinforce rather than disrupt and transform the gender (and sexual) order? Are there ways in which men kissing (as an act and a story) could feed rather than counter the backlash against gay visibility? Does this text "normalize" male intimacy, affection, and sexuality (and is the move from margin to center desirable?), or merely put it on display? How might we use this text to usurp the power of sexual shame (see Warner, 1999)?

Whatever your interpretations, it is my hope that this text helps us envision—even if only for a moment—a place beyond the closets of heterosexism and homophobia and a day when such stories no longer will need to be written, when there will be nothing left for men kissing to subvert.

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