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## Tales from the (Softball) Field (Chapter 3 of the book *Between Gay and Straight: Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation*)

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***Between Gay and Straight:  
Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation***<sup>1</sup>

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3: Tales from the (Softball) Field<sup>2</sup>

From Life to Project (and Back Again)

A few weeks after Tim's party, the fall semester begins. Since January, I've been writing about connections between body image, eating, and identity. During the first month of Qualitative Methods, I investigate how these relationships are performed in public life. Observing how people interact with each other and with food, I take field notes at a grocery store and some restaurants, but nothing suits my ethnographic tastes. Frustrated, I call Carolyn Ellis, the course professor and a member of my doctoral committee.

“Are you sure you want to write another paper about eating?” she asks.

Gripping the phone tightly, I admit, “No.”

“What else could you study?”

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<sup>2</sup> I borrow this title from the paper I wrote about my first semester of fieldwork. Some episodes recounted here were adapted from that piece; others were written later, from field notes.

"I'm not sure," I reply, "that's the problem."

"Can you give me a general goal?"

"I'd like to study communication and relationships ethnographically."

"That sounds good," Carolyn affirms. "What settings come to mind?"

"A family dinner table?" I offer hesitantly.

"Hmm," she responds. "What about something totally unrelated to food? Where do you go after class or on the weekends?"

After several minutes of suggesting and rejecting site after site, group after group, Carolyn asks, "Can you think of *anything* else?"

I say nothing; she says nothing.

Suddenly, a light goes on. "Doug plays on a gay softball team."

A slight pause, then, "He what?"

"He's the only straight guy on his team; in fact, the whole league is for gay men and lesbians."

"That's, um, rather unique," Carolyn says. "Is there a project in it?"

"Maybe I could learn more about ... hidden identity. No, how about gay men's friendships?"

"Could be intriguing. Are they playing together this fall?"

"I think they're starting Sunday."

"Before then," Carolyn instructs, "think about some specific issues you'd like to investigate, how, and for what reasons. Some people will question your position in a community of gay men and ask what a straight woman can bring to the study of gay male friendship. Keep your options open, and most of all, *trust your instincts.*"

As I hang up the phone, I feel both relieved and apprehensive, relieved that I may have escaped class project limbo, apprehensive about the concerns Carolyn raised. She's right, I think, I can't just show up and start taking notes.

I begin contemplating how to secure the team's permission to conduct a participant observation. Should I talk to David? I know him the best. Or Tim? He is the coach. I wonder who's more likely to be receptive. What will either think of a straight woman wanting to study gay softball players? It does sound a little strange. How will I frame my interest in the group? Saying, "The food thing didn't pan out" isn't much of a pitch. What *is* my interest? Am I only seeking the completion of a project? What's in it *for them*? Could my study harm our relationships?

But just when fear and concern threaten to overwhelm me, something indefinably exciting begins to stir.

The phone rings, Doug calling from work to say that Brandon and Tim have invited us to a benefit concert tomorrow. I hardly can believe my luck—a face-to-face meeting I didn't have to contrive. My choice is made; I'll approach Tim.

As soon as I hear Doug's car, I rush out to greet him. But the numb expression on his face tells me his news is more pressing than mine. "You remember Michael?" he asks.

"Your teammate?"

He nods. "David called me just before I left Walgreens." With quiet tenderness, Doug says, "Michael passed away." I gasp.

Not sure how to mourn him, we embrace. He and Doug played only one season together—Michael's sickest season. I'd met him a couple times. He was sweet, always a

gentleman, but I can't say I really knew him. Doug fills me in with the few details he has: Michael's family was with him, and he seemed at peace, but he was just 29.

"I didn't know he was that ill," I remark.

Sighing, Doug changes the subject, "So what's your news?"

"Given the circumstances, it seems inappropriate—"

"Why, is it good news? I could use some."

I muster a little excitement and tell him about the study. He kisses my cheek and says, "I'm happy you've settled on a project. It should be really interesting."

Much later, however, Doug admits having some initial worry that I would "take over" this area of his life and that my study could negatively impact my, his, and our relationships with his teammates, especially if they didn't like what I wrote.

Thinking Doug's firmly in my corner, I begin preparing for tomorrow. How should I raise the issue with Tim? I mentally rehearse both a detailed explanation that anticipates his questions about what I'm seeking and a brief one that solicits his responses. After much consideration, I decide to wait for an opening. Then, as casually as possible, I'll say, "Tim, I'm interested in learning about gay men's friendships, and I'd like to study the team." I practice this line over and over, stressing different words each time.

That night, I dream it's Michael who presents me to the team. "She needs you," he tells the Cove men, "and while you don't know it yet, you need her too." With that, Michael dons his cap over a full head of hair. He then strides into the outfield and disappears.

I awaken long before the alarm goes off. Unable to focus on schoolwork, I spend the day scouring the kitchen and tile floors. At last, 7:00 p.m. comes.

### Getting In

Doug takes the driver's seat of my Nissan 240. The occasional grind of his awkward shifting makes me uneasy, but his boyish grin keeps me from criticizing. We follow Brandon's pickup across the Gandy Bridge, down to Madeira Beach, and into a parking lot.

"Love the sun dress!" Tim praises as I walk around the car. He then whispers playfully, "Are you wearing a bra?"

"Do I need one?" I ask, half returning his flirtation, half expressing self-consciousness.

"Do you *have* one?" Tim asks.

"In the back seat," I admit, and we both laugh.

The damp air sits heavy and still as I inhale scents of salt water and smoked oysters. We move swiftly toward the waterfront pub. Its purposefully weathered exterior wood, entrance path covered with sand, and mariner décor are so very Florida.

Doug walks with Brandon, whose closely cropped hair draws attention to large, long-lashed eyes, proud cheek- and jawbones, and the perfect teeth of an orthodontist's poster child.

A couple paces behind, Tim and I stroll in silence as I work up my courage. He doesn't know me that well, I remind myself, and some of the players don't know me at all.

Is this asking too much? Will Tim question why a straight woman wants to study a gay softball team? Do I have a reasonable answer?

When we reach the line, Doug turns around and queries, "Did you ask him yet?"

With a narrowed gaze, I tell him, "Not yet." So much for a graceful approach.

"Ask me what?" Tim probes.

"You're coaching again this season, right?"

"You want to play?"

"No ... but I'd like to write about the team." Tim's haunting, mossy green eyes widen. "In my Communication program, the area I'm focusing on is personal relationships. I want to learn more about gay male friendship, and I'm hoping you'll help convince the team to let me conduct a study."

Did that sound convincing? Stupid? Will he agree? If he says "no," both of us will be uncomfortable, and I'll need to come up with yet another project. My heart pounds.

"You'd just hang out at the games?" he asks.

"Pretty much; pose some questions, take some notes."

"Fine with me. I'll ask the rest of the guys tomorrow. You coming?"

"Count on it," I say, not quite believing how easily he consented. Tim takes my hand. As we sway to the thumping music coming from the bar, I anticipate an enjoyable evening, which it turns out to be, except for a single—but unforgettable—moment.

We make our way inside, ascend the stairs to the deck, and assume a table overlooking the bay. A waitress in short cut-off jeans brings us drinks, fried gator tail, and jalapeño poppers.

Nearby, throngs of UF and FSU fans stake their claims to Florida's football throne. While I sip my cheap tequila margarita, their drunken banter escalates. Suddenly, something slices through the commotion.

"*Faggot!*" a man shouts before barking out several guffaws. "Your quarterback is a *faggot!*"

I lick the salt from my lips and swallow hard. The hairs on my neck stand on end as I dig my fingernails into my palms. Do I say something to the besotted oaf? Given the context—the bar setting, the crowd of inebriated strangers—what would I say? And our companions, what do *they* want? I feel like, I don't know, apologizing. I glance across the table. That slight smile on Brandon's face seems to cloak something. But what? Anger? Pain? Fear? He says nothing. I study Tim carefully as he rolls his eyes. What do we do, Tim? Confront him? Discuss it privately? Let it go? I'm taking my cues from you. A moment later, Tim resumes talking about his accounting program.

I try to move on but can't. "*Faggot,*" "*faggot,*" "*faggot*"—it won't stop echoing in my head. Slowly, I take in the word, chew on it, swallow it, and feel it move downward. For many years, I've consumed that term at the tables of insult and "humor." How many times did I absorb it without notice? How many times did I not hear it, not *feel* it, because it didn't hurt me or anyone I knew (or *knew* I knew)? Still, I met David over a year ago; since then, surely I've heard such disparaging words on many occasions. Why the outrage now? Perhaps I needed to hear it in the presence of gay men. Tim and Brandon—how their faces, their voices, redefined my experience of this term! For my whole life, "faggot" has gone down like water. Never again. From this night, it will digest like a piece of glass.



In spite of my feelings, I allow the incident to pass without comment. Why? I tell myself I'm just following my companions' leads, but what would they say about it anyway? Wasn't it my place to note, "What a jerk," or to ask, "How does that feel?" How else can I know? How will anything change if everyone sits, as I just have, in complicit silence?

I'm exhausted when we get home, but I head immediately for the computer to write my first field notes. After describing the setting and my research proposal, I spend a long time recounting the incident on the deck. I'm not sure it's relevant to the topic of gay male friendship, but the words come quickly, furiously.

Given tonight's impact on me, I crawl into bed wondering how prepared I am to undertake this project. What's around the next corner? More ignorance, more pain? Do I have the capacity to understand and respond to what I see, hear, and feel? How will I change—emotionally, politically, ethically? To gain the knowledge I need to do this project well, what comforts, what privileges, must I concede? The last time I look at the clock, it's 4:13 a.m. I'll be at the field in just a few hours, I drift off thinking, just a few hours.

### Opening Day

I park my car in the street between the Kash N' Karry grocery and the field. Gathering my pen, notepad, and tape recorder, I sense a slight queasiness in my stomach. Doug works every other weekend, and this Sunday, I'm here alone for the first time. Get a grip, I tell myself. If I'm going to understand these men's experiences and feelings, I need to establish and deepen relationships with them on my own. But how?

My role could be pragmatic, I guess, keeping stats or something. It also could be more personal. I don't see many women around; perhaps some of these men would like more female companionship (perhaps not!). Until I know what they need, I'll just remain open and listen well. Plunge in, Lisa, for today begins a new season.

The Cove assembles at the parking lot's edge. Most of the old players I recognize. I know David and Tim, of course, and the mid-30s burly guy with lots of chest hair is Al. Now who has the round glasses and receding hairline? Gordon, that's right. Tim's old boyfriend Jack should be here too, but I don't see him. "Hey coach," I call, "where's J—"

Anticipating my question, he says, "Wouldn't play with me after The Break-Up."

Note to self: romance and softball—a volatile mix.

This place, however, seems anything but volatile. A large rainbow flag flaps against the tall fence behind home plate. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet balloons held captive by metallic ribbons float gently above the stands, and streams of crepe paper flowers line the bleachers, where a sax, flute, and trumpet begin to play. I can't recall the title of their tune, but I think it's from *Cabaret*.

As I take in the surroundings, Tim calls the team together. "Ready?" he whispers.

Focusing on the familiar faces, I say, "Yes."

"Guys," Tim begins, "most of you know Lisa."

"Hiiii, Lisa!" several of them say.

Tim gets right to it. "She wants to study the team."

Ooh boy, I think, here we go.

"*Study us?*" Gordon repeats. "For what, a class?" When I nod, he asks, "So ... what do you wanna know?" The Big Question.

“Well, um, okay.” I clear my throat. “I’m a PhD student in the Communication Department at USF. The team interests me from a relationship perspective.” As soon as that leaves my lips, I wish I’d said something less pretentious than “relationship perspective.”

“Because we’re gay?” queries Gordon, cocking his head.

“Partially. I’d like to learn more about how you build friendships and what role the Suncoast league plays in that process.” Silence. “Any other questions?” No one speaks. “Objections?” They shrug and smile. “Uh, thanks! I—”

“Coaches,” a league officer calls into a microphone, “gather up your teams!”

David grabs my arm and insists that I stand with the players during opening ceremonies. “C’mon, girl,” he drawls, “you can be our mascot.”

Eight teams assemble on the infield as the officer again commands attention. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he says, his voice garbled by the crackle of static, “welcome to another season of Suncoast Softball!” This is met with loud clapping and cheering.

When the crowd quiets, the man continues in a subdued tone. “Today, we are without a friend.” The officer pauses, and several men and women remove their caps. “As many of you know, Michael died last week, and while we are deeply saddened by his passing, we are honored to have his mother, sister, baby niece, and brother in attendance today.” Applause breaks out. “In our first game, Jake will play in his brother’s honor. The red jersey he wears belonged to Michael.” More applause.

“We got Wendy playin’ too!” David shouts. “Fresh out of the delivery room!”

The announcer smiles. “Michael’s sister Wendy, I’m told, will be joining The Cove as well.” The crowd hoots and claps. “And now,” he booms, “it is my pleasure to introduce The

Rainbow Players. They'll open with 'I Am What I Am,' one of Michael's favorites."

Throughout the minor key rendition, heads bow, tears flow, and mourners embrace.

Standing here, I feel shamefully voyeuristic and terribly out of place. Their loss, their grief, is not mine. Part of me wants to grasp their sorrow, to make it my own. How else can I understand and write about their lives? But part of me wants to run from their sorrow, to maintain an "objective" distance. How else can I protect myself from this pain?

As the band finishes, David grasps Jake's shoulders, saying, "I'm so sorry," while Tim hugs Wendy. Al, meanwhile, pats the siblings' backs, saying something in Wendy's ear. When Gordon walks up, he shakes the sister's hand, then the brother's, with both of his.

Moments later, The Rainbow Players begin the national anthem. A few softly sing; the rest of us stand silent. The crowd roars during "the home of the brave," and Jake takes the mound for the first pitch. When the ball pops into the catcher's mitt, the crowd roars again.

The Cove hauls its equipment into the visitors' dugout. While Tim sets down the bats, Brandon playfully gropes his behind. Meanwhile, the band breaks into a spirited two-part "Macho Man."

"Batter up!" yells the plate umpire.

The opposing players, sponsored by a bar called Rascals, assume their positions while Al takes a few practice swings. Before stepping up, our lead batter runs his hand over the thick, coarse hair that would be curly if longer. Sitting next to me, David whistles at Al, who then shakes his butt. At this, David yells, "Bull whip!" I laugh with him, though I have no idea what his phrase signifies. I figure it's from a secret gay code I will learn to crack.

Their pitcher stares at the plate, then arcs one high and outside. Al's sapphire eyes narrow, estimating the pitch's worth; he wisely lets it go. Arm and back muscles tensing, Al grounds the second toss. The shortstop shuffles over and scoops it up. This will be close. "Dig, dig, dig!" David yells as Al pumps toward first. The ball nearing the baseman's glove, Al dives over the bag amid a cloud of dirt. He gags and spits.

"Safe!" we yell from our bench.

"Out!" they yell from Rascals'.

"Safe!" decides Blue, and we applaud his Cove-favorable call.

"That ump is *cute!*" I say to David, enjoying how we can compare notes on men.

"Isn' he?" David agrees. "He started callin' games for us 'bout three years ago. All our umps are straight, but at th' time, this one didn' know our league was gay."

"How long before he figured it out?"

"*Too long.* You've seen how nellie some of us are."

"Was he cool about it?"

"Nooo!" David exclaims. "In fact, he walked right off th' field."

"Hmm. But he came back."

"I guess he figured out that this is the nicest, thee *liveliest*, and the ab-so-lute funniest group of jocks and not-so-jocks ever to set foot on a softball field. So he stayed on, and since then, we've had no more umpire problems."

When Jake steps into the batter's box, fans of both teams applaud. He adjusts his lid, tucking in auburn bangs, then strokes the milky skin at the base of his neck; it's already turning a vibrant pink. The pitcher releases, and Jake shifts his weight onto his right leg.

Swinging through, he launches the ball—up, up, up—and over the high fence in right field for a double. That was for you, Michael.

Tight, grey cotton shorts accent Tim's muscular legs and trim waist as he strides to the plate. After passing on two bad pitches, he cranks one over the shortstop's head. Tim reaches second with ease, batting in both Al and Jake.

As the next batter steps up, our bench chants, "GorDON, GorDON, GorDON!" In response, he peers over the sunglasses shielding his baby blue eyes and shakes his head. The Cove player readies himself. He looks at a pitch.

"Steerike!" calls the ump.

Second chance. Gordon's ready. He swings—plink! "Foul!"

Gordon adjusts. Here comes the third toss; it's over the plate. Another swing, and yes—contact! "Damn!" Gordon curses as the ball again drops outside the left field line.

"Straighten it out," I encourage. But then Gordon jogs toward the bench. "What's he doing?" I ask David.

"In this league, sugar, a foul ball's your third strike."

"Harsh," I remark.

Wendy grabs her bat, and the crowd enlivens. She curtsies and pulls off her cap, releasing wild, flaming-red tresses. Wendy steps up, swings, and misses—BIG—then pauses a moment to laugh at herself. "C'mon, darlin'," Al calls, "after givin' birth, softball's a walk in the park."

"You aren't kidding," she responds, changing her stance. On the following pitch, Wendy slugs a perfect single up the middle, sending Tim home. The rally ends when the next two batters make outs, but The Cove takes the field up 3-0.

As our players gather their gloves, a weathered, silver-haired man approaches. “Hi, huuuoney,” he says, pushing large square glasses up the bridge of his nose. “I’m Larry, bar manager of The Cove.”

“I’m Lisa,” I tell him. “My fiancé plays for your team.”

“Your fian—oh, the straight boy! He’s haaandsome.” Larry then gives a scratchy, four-pack-a-day yell, “Three uuuuup!”

Teammates respond together, “Three down!”

Unsatisfied, Larry screeches, “Three uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuup!”

The players bust out laughing, each calling, “Three down!” at a different time.

“Paaathetic!” scolds Larry. He offers me a giant Tums bottle filled with a slightly pink liquid.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Mostly vodka, with a splash of Gatorade for the athletic supporter.”

“Why a Tums jar?”

“Cause the Blue Nazis told me I couldn’t bring liquor containers to the field.

Besides, I figure its previous contents might coat my stomach a bit.”

“I’ll pass for now.”

At the top of the last inning, it’s 15 all with Al leading off. When David again calls, “Bull whip!” the batter cracks a smile.

“What does that mean?” I venture.

“I dunno,” David answers, innocently batting his eyes. “I just like to see him giggle.”

Hmm, is “bull whip” not part of “the code,” or is my gay mentor not telling me something?

With his trademark wood-chopping swing, Al sends one over the second baseman's head for a double. Then, after waiting for his pitch, Jake powers one deep into left center. The Cove dugout rises as the ball rolls into the fence. Despite his less-than-lightening speed, Al should make it home, but will Jake? Yes! Five batters later, we're up 21-15 with a half inning to go.

Top of their order steps up. Tim's first pitch falls a foot behind the plate; Blue calls it deep. Strain evident on his forehead, our coach drops the next two short. With a 3-0 count, the batter judiciously holds back. The fourth pitch is right on—strike one. Tim then offers a perfect arc. Strike tw—no, it catches the corner of the plate. Ball four.

The second batter moves inside the box. Liking the first toss, he fires a shot up the middle. On impulse, Tim raises his left arm in time, and the ball rips into his glove. He shakes out the sting and says, "One out."

Batter three tries to work Tim for another walk, but the Cove pitcher answers with two textbook tosses. At this count, both know the batter must swing. Strategically, Tim pitches him outside. Our opponent reaches and pops up to short. Two down.

But here comes their Big Gun, just who Rascals needs to start a two-out rally. Offering no "meat," Tim sends one high, ball one. The next pitch has little arc—exactly what a power hitter wants. Swinging through, he whacks it up the left field line. Gordon takes off but won't get there in time. The ball drops. "Foul!" calls the ump. Whew, strike one.

Thinking it outside, the batter looks at the next one. "Steeerike!" rules Blue. Yes! Two on him.



Tim again pitches him high, but the batter takes it anyway. He knocks it deep into left, sending Gordon back, back. Larry and I gasp. Striding all the way, our fielder turns to gauge it. His arm at full extension, Gordon reaches out, then collides with the fence. "Holy Mary!" exclaims Larry. "Is he all right?" Gordon turns, pulling the ball from his glove.

"Game!" shouts the plate ump as we stand to cheer.

After shaking hands with Rascals, The Cove clears the dugout for the next team. Unsure what to do, I'm relieved when David suggests lunch.

We buy pasta salad and bagels at Kash N' Karry, then return to the field and climb onto the back of a shaded pickup. Before long, Tim and Gordon join our picnic. Immediately, Gordon asks, "So Lisa, why are you so interested in gay men?" I can't tell if his tone is one of curiosity or skepticism.

"I'm interested in all kinds of *relationships*," I tell him. "But I must admit, I do find myself drawn to gay men." Why is that? I wonder.

"I'm drawn to women," Tim shares.

"As in *attracted* to women?" I ask.

He smiles. "I'm attracted to some women. In fact, I was engaged a couple years ago. Of course, I eventually told her I was gay. She wanted to stay together, to try and make it work, but I knew it wouldn't."

"I've never been engaged," Gordon offers, "but I've dated women, even since moving here from Philadelphia to *escape* the straight life. Romantically, women were easier for me to approach and relate to than were men. But after a while, I thought, 'This is ridiculous; this is *not* why you came to Tampa.' So I really tried to put a stop to that."

“Many believe that humans are naturally bisexual,” I toss out. “Do any of you agree?”

“Not me, sugar,” insists David. “I have tried—yes, it was *years ago*—but I have *tried* havin’ sex with women. The day I gave up all that was the happiest day of my life, so please don’t take it personally when I say that *I am not one bit bisexual.*”

“Not even toward *me*?” I tease.

“Oh giiirl, you are as cute as cute can be—for a *fish.*”

\* \* \*

This is a term that I first (and only have) heard used by gay men. Women (especially straight women) in gay male circles also are called “fag hags,” “fruit flies,” and “faggotinas.” Of these, “fag hag” is the most popular. According to the stereotypes Rodi (1992, p. 201) articulates in his novel *Fag Hag*, straight women who befriend gay men “aren’t, or don’t consider themselves attractive to heterosexual men, so they cultivate friendships with gay men, because gay men aren’t threatening to them. If there’s no possibility of romance, there’s no possibility of rejection, either.” As a woman who “mothers” gay men by exchanging emotional support for the male affirmation she so craves,<sup>3</sup> the “fag hag” lives a sad existence. Describing such a woman, Rodi (1992) offers:

She pressed herself, all hundred and seventy-odd pounds, through crowds of taut, muscular young men and, through sheer flamboyance, attracted the attention of a few of them. And as she talked to them, using every ounce of feminine wile and wit at her disposal, they laughed in delight and flattered her and sometimes even kissed her, but never, never once, not even for a

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<sup>3</sup> See Warren (1976).

moment, did they stop looking over her shoulder for something better.

All told, the “fag hag” is little more than “an amusing diversion,” a “pathetic” “figure of fun,” a “silly indulgence, of no importance—not beneath notice, but not much above it, either.”<sup>4</sup> Curiously, as Nardi (1999, p. 118) indicates, “no equivalent phrase exists for friendship between straight men and lesbians, straight men and gay men, or lesbians and straight men.”

Some women wear (and some gay men bestow) the label “fag hag” as an ironic badge of honor. The term “fish,” however, is not one I’ve heard reclaimed in this way. In his short story “One of Us,” William J. Mann (1995, p. 171) offers this story and interpretation:

“*Fish*,’ one friend in D.C. had said, scrunching up his face. What he was doing, really, was affirming that he could finally, after many years of secrecy, proclaim his sexual attraction to other men in public...[T]he real objects of his scorn were the straight men who’d oppressed him into toeing the line. But instead of bashing the straight boys, many gay men fall into the age-old sexist trap of using women as a means for men’s ends.”

\* \* \*

“*Fish*?” I say to David, giving him a swat. “Don’t comment on where you don’t go.”

“I’m just fuckin’ with ya.”

“You are *not*, and that’s why you should withhold judgment.”

“Agreed,” he says. “But, Lisa, not all gay people are comfortable with the idea of bisexuality. Lot of folks use it as a steppin’ stone.”

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<sup>4</sup> See Rodi (1992, p. 96).

“How so?”

“Sayin’ they’re bisexual lets ‘em act homosexual without havin’ to stand with—and up for—our community.”

\* \* \*

Along these lines, Chris Shyer writes in *Not Like Other Boys*, “Bisexuality we took as a joke. Many homosexuals dip their toes into the murky waters of public opinion by claiming to be bi. It sounds less unacceptable...not as final.”<sup>5</sup>

While David and Chris Shyer’s opinions may stem from experience (i.e., they know people—or *are* people—who began their coming out by calling themselves bi instead of gay), their comments reflect a binary construction of homo- and heterosexuality. Later, I will problematize the move to shore up—rather than deconstruct—these categories.

\* \* \*

“But what is sexuality anyway?” I query.

Is it a set of genetically programmed impulses and/or environmental influences? A collection of fantasies, sensations, pleasures, and/or behaviors? A lifestyle? An “orientation”? A “preference”? A cultural affiliation? A political one? Is it an identity? Conferred by others? Adopted by oneself? Is it, as Foucault (1990) suggests, culturally and historically specific discourses that serve the interests of those in power? A “continuum” of desires ranging from exclusively same sex to exclusively different sex?<sup>6</sup> A *two*-dimensional index that treats one’s level of attraction to men separately from one’s level of attraction to women?<sup>7</sup> Is there some truth in each of these?

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<sup>5</sup> See Shyer and Shyer (1996, p. 176).

<sup>6</sup> See Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948).

<sup>7</sup> See Stein (1999) and Storms (1980).

The range of possibilities elucidates the difficulty in communicating about—and across—sexual orientation and identity. So how would a scientific determinist trying to map “straight” and “gay” genetic codes talk to a radical social constructivist critiquing “compulsory heterosexuality”?<sup>8</sup> Perhaps one way would be to sit them down, over bagels and pasta salad, and invite them to share stories.

“*What is sexuality?*” David repeats. “Better let me think on that one.”

After lunch, we stroll over to the chain-link fence. Hanging from it is a framed picture of Michael. His smiling face, free of AIDS’ ravages, must have been photographed some months ago. Next to this, petals of white memorial flowers waft gently in the breeze. I inhale deeply, savoring the carnation perfume, and wondering how my life will change during this fall season, a season born of loss but filled with the promise of eight glorious Florida Sundays.

I bid the team goodbye and return to my car. The 30-minute drive passes quickly as I speak everything I can remember into my micro-cassette recorder. At home, I use this tape and jottings taken during the game to compose field notes.

Writing through my impressions of the sexuality conversation with David, Tim, and Gordon, I note how each had dated and had sexual experiences with women, with responses ranging from discontent (David) to a level of comfort not yet found with men (Gordon). My own theory of sexuality, moreover, takes on a “both, and” quality. It occurs to me *both* that, from an early age, I have desired males in a more sexualized way than I

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<sup>8</sup> See Rich (1993).

have desired females, *and* that these differential desires have been shaped and constrained by a heterosexist culture.

Then I write of Michael. The photograph of him won't leave my mind. Whose face will be the next to occupy that frame? Will it be one of the men I sat with today, sharing a lunch of bagels and pasta salad? "I'm afraid of AIDS," I type into my field notes, "afraid of others' suffering, afraid of being left behind."

In spite of this fear, I feel driven to know these men, to understand not only their friendships but also the larger context of their lives and struggles. I turn off my computer, wondering what more I will learn from them and who I will become.

### Spinning Straw Into Gold

The following Saturday, Tim and Brandon come to our place for a barbecue. Doug and Tim head outside to fire up the grill, leaving Brandon and me to oversee the kitchen. Adding carrots to the steamer, I request, "Tell me how you met Tim."

Brandon smiles. "Last year, I went to a club with my old lover. He stayed by the dance floor while I went for beers." Blushing a little, Brandon says, "I noticed Tim right away: nice features, really attractive—even for a bartender." His voice intensifies. "When I tried to pay, Tim waved his hand, refusing to take my money. We exchanged glances, and I returned to my boyfriend. Later, I made sure I went for the second round as well. Of course, I ordered from Tim. And again, he waved his hand, not letting me pay."

The themes in Brandon's story are remarkably ordinary: an existing partnership, an intriguing stranger, a coy flirtation. I can imagine any of my girlfriends telling a similar tale.

But there's nothing ordinary about the sparkle in his eyes; you'd think Brandon were pitching a Hollywood screenplay.

"Several weeks ago," he continues, "I went to a different club. And there again was Tim, handsome as ever, behind the bar. I approached. This time, I ordered one beer and handed him 10 dollars. When Tim came over with change, I waved my hand, just as he had. Suddenly, Tim recognized me. After all those months! 'Just *one* beer?' he asked, wanting to know if I was alone. 'Just one,' I told him. 'For now.'"

"You're happy with him," I observe.

"Never been happier," says Brandon. "And what about you? How did Doug come into your life?"

With that, I take my turn spinning straw into gold.

We could become close, I think, as Brandon and I stand here sharing, giggling, and tending the vegetables, *really close*.

### Managing Identities

Tuesday brings softball practice. As Doug drives us to the field, humming along with the radio, I test my tape recorder, double-check the batteries in my camera, and make sure I have three working pens. Eyeing me, Doug asks, "You nervous or something?"

"Excited," I reply as Tim's Jeep and Al's car come into view.

"Twenty minutes early," Doug remarks. "Just for you, dear."

Smiling, I settle into the dugout while Al, Tim, and Doug begin warming up. I inhale, ready to take in new knowledge. But something soon spoils the practice parade.

Plop, plop, plop, the droplets burst against the wooden roof. It escalates into drizzle, then a low-pressure shower. Within minutes, it's coming down in sheets. The guys sprint for cover.

We huddle in the cement block and fencing shelter. They shake water from their hair and wipe muddy feet on the still-hard ground next to the bench. When the pitcher's mound becomes an island, Tim says, "I think the others will assume it's a rain-out."

"Anyone for a drink?" I ask, trying to salvage this fieldwork opportunity.

"Hops is right down the street," Al suggests.

We count to three and make a collective puddle-leaping car dash.

The host shows us to a booth against the back wall. As we pat our faces with napkins, the waitress brings samples of their micro-brewed beer. Setting a golden pilsner in front of Al, she asks, "What can I get you to eat?"

"Nothing," he tells her. "I have dinner plans."

"A date?" she nosily queries.

"Somethin' like that."

"She's a lucky girl!" gushes the waitress.

"*Isn't she?*" he wryly replies.

When she leaves, I say, "I suppose you always have to monitor how much to tell."

"Been doin' that about 10 years now," Al reports. "Most times, I figure it's not worth gettin' into. It's almost funny, the dumb things people say when they don' know who they're talkin' to. One time, Gordon and I were at a bar in Orlando where we met this straight couple. We were havin' a real nice conversation, when all 'a the sudden, the guy



spouted off, 'You're not gonna believe what I saw today—two faggots holdin' hands!' He didn' have a *clue* that Gordon and I could 'a been those two guys."

I shake my head in empathic displeasure. "How do these issues play out at work?"

"I'm a general manager for a manufacturing company. Been there over a decade. I'm not about to put my career on the line, so I don' talk about my personal life. My co-workers can draw their own conclusions."

"What about your family?" I probe.

Al falls silent a moment. "My parents, my brother," he says, "they have no idea."

"How do you—"

Checking his watch, he says, "Listen, I'm already late. I'll tell ya more some other time."

When he disappears from view, I sip my beer, pondering what a momentous project it must be for Al to manage his gay identity. The everyday irritations. Is it worth confronting this presumptuous waitress? The financial costs. Given the lack of federal, state, and local civil rights protections, can Al afford to jeopardize the career in which he's invested so much time and energy? The emotional weight. How would his straight friends react; would his family reject him; should he just keep this to himself for *another 10 years*?

In some ways, it reminds me of my experience as a woman who's struggled with bulimia. Diminishing remarks, isolating secrecy, fear of others' responses—this is everyday life for anyone who conceals a stigmatized identity. Perhaps one day I'll risk sharing my own secrets with these men.

After a second beer, Tim and I wait by the crowded, noisy entrance while Doug signs the credit card slip. "I'm in trouble," Tim predicts. "Someone won't like that I went out for drinks without checking in."

"Here," I say, handing over a stick of gum. "Your man will never know."

Tim's eyes grow large; I'm confused until he mouths part of what I just said: "Your man."

Was that a mistake? I wonder, as the once talkative couple next to us quiets and an elderly woman turns around. Did they overhear? Are they staring? Does it matter?

"Your man," I hear myself say. Should I have made no public reference to Brandon? Should I have lowered my voice? I don't want Tim to feel exposed, but I also don't want to suggest that his relationship is something to hide. Damn, I don't know the rules! *Are there rules?*

My pulse picks up as Tim motions for us to leave. We exit the restaurant quickly, and when the door closes behind us, my "I'm sorry," overlaps his "That's okay."

Touching his shoulder, I say, "I didn't mean to out you in front of all those strangers."

"Don't worry about it. I was just giving you a hard time."

"It's not my place to decide how open you'll be."

Tim stops walking. "But you know why it came out like that? Because you didn't have to think about it. You said 'your man' the same way you'd say 'your girlfriend' if I were straight. It's a good sign."

"You think?"

"Well, are you as comfortable as you seem?"

For a moment, I gaze into the clearing sky. "I think I am," I say.

*But am I?*

“Then how about coming to the Pride Film Festival with Brandon and me tonight?”

I turn to Doug, who just caught up with us. “Why not?” he replies.

### Images and Imaginings

After picking up Brandon, we head to the Tampa Theater, a historic cinema palace complete with balcony, vermilion carpet, and pipe organ. Finding David in the lobby, the five of us move into the next room.

The scent of coconut popping oil fills the air as we admire the far-above ceiling, which sparkles with stars. The sparse audience consists of men in both couples and small groups and a few pairs of women. Scanning the program, Tim reports, “Looks like three short films tonight.” The lights dim.

Stark black and white images flash: two smiling men holding each other, then only one with eyes glassy and forlorn, then the profile of a church. Bells ring. The unseen narrator speaks with a quiet Irish intensity. When his partner died, he tells us, the family—who didn’t visit, assist, or nurse—swoop in to claim the body, whisking it away for a “proper” Catholic funeral. There, his partner, lover, and caregiver must sit in the back with distant relatives and acquaintances.

House lights flick on, and the audience begins to murmur. Tim looks over as if asking for response. Still trying to absorb the haunting representations, I only can say, “Powerful,” before darkness falls again.

The second piece opens with scenes of water: a claw-foot tub with a handsome pair of bathers, a solitary swimmer descending to a pool’s cement bottom, an ominous,

swallowing sea. As in the first film, two have become one, bound forever by rituals of love and AIDS. The hallowed survivor stumbles into solace at an unlikely place. Wandering the zoo, he finds an exotic reptile, and in its eyes, the man sees himself—caged but still living.

The theater illuminates. “Not sure I understand the whole man/lizard connection,” David quips. Lowering lights quiet our cathartic laughter.

The subject of the third film speaks directly to the camera. “This is a picture about coming out as a gay man,” he says, “and about living with AIDS.” We accompany him on a painful journey to the grave of his dad. The tombstone reads, “Beloved son, brother, and husband.” The man not much a father in life, we see, is not a father at all in death.

We later find ourselves in the kitchen of the mother who cried when her son told her he was gay and the stepfather who reassured, “At least he didn’t kill someone.” Can our young narrator go home again? Are these the people who will comfort him as he dies? We are left to wonder.

When the theater brightens, the crowd stands and begins filing out. Making our way through the lobby, we hear a weak, throaty voice, “David?” Our companion turns to embrace a sallow man whose black suit would fit someone 20 pounds heavier.

Opening his stance, David reminds Doug and me, “Y’all met after we saw Chris in *Jeffrey*, which Nathan here directed at The Loft Theater.”

“Oh sure,” I recall. “Such an enjoyable production.” Immediately, I wonder if “enjoyable” is an appropriate description of a play about AIDS. I wish I’d said “heartwarming” or “thought-provoking.”

Nathan smiles and bids us goodbye. Once his friend is out of earshot, David comments, “He looks better.”

We step onto the sidewalk, and without looking at David, I ask, “How many guys on the softball team would you say are HIV positive?”

With no pause, he answers, “A third, possibly half.”

“God,” I gasp, “I had no idea.”

“Stick around, sugar,” he says, “and you’ll get more than an idea.”

I take a deep breath, trying to face AIDS, the abstraction, so that one day I might be strong enough to face its reality. What will happen to the Cove men? Will they become the shadows and ghosts I saw in those films? Who will *I* become? Someone who runs off to compose a paper when fieldwork gets too painful? Someone too busy tending deathbeds to write?

“Need a drink, girl?” David asks, as if reading my mind.

Laying my head on his shoulder, I reply, “Straight up.”

In the months that follow, David continues to serve as a powerful presence and educator. He becomes so central to both our lives that Doug asks him to be a groomsman in our wedding, set for New Year’s Eve. From the moment he accepts, David helps us create an occasion that reflects our evolving values.

### Gay Etiquette

“On’y a hun’red lef’,” garbles Doug as his well-worn tongue runs across yet another line of glue.

The dining room table lies somewhere beneath black markers, red felt-tip pens, and piles of wedding invitations, RSVP and thank-you cards, response envelopes, gratitude

envelopes, inner envelopes, and outer envelopes. “Who invented the multi-envelope invitation?” I ask, suckling my third paper cut.

“Somebody who owned a paper mill,” answers David.

“You are a saint for helping with this,” I tell him.

Smiling, David says, “It’s a privilege.”

“Fifty invitations from now,” Doug responds, “you might change your mind.”

When finished writing out my cousin’s address, I check the next name on my list.

“Ah, David Holland. Will that be David Holland and—”

“And *guest*,” interrupts David.

“Things still rocky with Chris?” Doug queries.

“As crack cocaine.” Moving us along, David says, “Who’s up?”

“Tim Mahn,” I report. “What should we do for Tim and Brandon? One invitation with both names? They do live together. Two, each with ‘and guest’? That’s so formal. Or two, each with the addressee’s name only. Mm, that doesn’t acknowledge them as partners.”

“What does Miss Manners say?” asks Doug.

“Well, ‘proper’ etiquette requires a separate invitation for each unmarried person,” I say. “But what about gay etiquette? I don’t think Miss Manners has a chapter on that.”

“Our etiquette would have you treat them as a couple,” David suggests.

“So one invitation,” I say.

“Right.”

“Now ... Tim before Brandon because his last name is first alphabetically or Brandon before Tim because he’s older?”

David laughs. “*That* I don’t think matters.”

After David goes home, I sit at the computer, reflecting on my evolving relationships with the Cove men. I write about David’s validation of Tim and Brandon as a couple and how he used the wedding invitation as a “teachable moment” for Doug and me.

I note that he called it a “privilege” to help plan our wedding, but the privilege we didn’t talk through was that of marriage itself—a privilege to which David may never have access. He and Chris are reminded of this in virtually every context of their lives. They cannot legally have sex (Florida still has laws against sodomy); they have no community property rights; neither can receive health or life insurance through the other’s employment. As I ponder these things, images come to mind, fragments falling down the page, like poetry.

### Keys

As a little girl,  
I wouldn’t have seen you, believing you didn’t exist.  
You were an innuendo, a caricature.  
a punch line, a hairdresser’s flaccid  
wrist.

While an adolescent,  
I would have tolerated you, believing you didn’t choose.  
You were an accident, a sickness,  
a pity, an affliction for shrinks  
to muse.

In college,  
I would have accepted you, believing you were oppressed.  
You were a movement, a platform,  
a cause, another liberal  
quest.

Today,  
 I watch myself      watching you,  
 and wonder what      lies in store.  
 You are my      informants, my teachers,  
 my friends,      the keys  
 unlocking      my doors.

Tomorrow,  
 I must turn outward again,  
 and look beyond myself.  
 With our experiences, our stories, our friendships,  
 I'll be the keys for someone else.

Throughout October, I spend as much time as possible with the Cove team. I continue observing games and practices, and Tim shows me how to keep the scorebook, giving me an “official” reason to sit in the dugout.

There I develop further my dual role of friend/researcher. Much of the time, players treat me as “just a friend.” They ask about my life as much as I ask about theirs; they tease me; and they solicit my participation in cheers and practical jokes. Once in a while, though, the team “remembers” my other purpose. On many such occasions, my researcher role provides a source of humor. With an eye toward my tape recorder, David will jostle his old friend (and The Cove’s first baseman) Jeff Grasso. Sometimes Tim will speak surreptitiously into the recorder. Later, when I listen to the tape, I discover his humorous message or sexual innuendo. In the playful relationships we’re building, the Cove men seem to accept (and even *enjoy*) my dual role.

One Sunday, I arrive as usual. Unpacking my camera, notepad, and tape recorder, I don’t suspect that today, the people I need to conduct my research will need me as well.



### Liabilities

As a stiff gust whips long bangs across my face, I take a seat on the bench. Behind me, I hear Tim shouting, "Where the hell is everyone? If we can't cover the positions, we have to forfeit!"

Entering the dugout, Jeff asks, "How many short?"

"*One*," Tim answers.

The wise-cracking 35 year old lights his usual Sunday morning cigarette and says, "I guess Li will hafta play." Jeff always calls me "Li," and I like how it rolls off his Staten Island-Italian tongue.

"Wait a second," I defer. But the idea catches on. Jeff tosses me a glove, and I try it out as Tim adds me to the batting order. "It's really not my sport," I explain.

"Listen, Missy," Tim says, "you'll be taking notes in right field today."

I want to protest, but ethnographers Clifford Geertz and Dwight Conquergood sit in my imaginary stands. Both demand my bodily participation in this participant observation, so I jog to catch up with Brandon, who's playing center field. He waves and smiles.

As Tim warms up at the mound, I vacillate. Even though I haven't played softball since a family picnic five years ago (and I played *really badly* then), part of me *wants* the ball to come my way. That's the kind of athlete I am; bring it on! But most of me hopes the scent of my fear doesn't reach the visitors' bench.

During the first inning, a batter sends a pop fly to shallow right field. A "real player" would get there, but I misjudge it by several feet. Mine is not the only error, however. A few plays later, one goes high and foul beside the third base line. Ron calls it but loses the

ball in the sun; it bounces off his glove and onto the dirt. An inning later, Brandon drops one as well. "Lisa," he says, "you fit in perfectly."

My last shot at softball glory is a popper that flies between Brandon and me. I race toward it, then wimp out. "Brandon?" I plead, passing the buck.

"It's all yours, honey," he calls. Thunk! Not mine.

At bat, I cause two outs, but I do hit the ball twice. On my initial attempt, I take the first pitch and send it up the right field line. The first baseman scoops up the ball and walks over to step on the bag. "Way to hit opposite field!" Tim encourages.

Batting the second time, I follow Coach's advice to "look at one." When the ump generously calls a ball, the crowd praises, "Good eye, good eye!" At the next toss, I swing, causing a pop fly that never leaves the infield. The woman playing second makes the easy catch. When I apologize, my "teammates" respond with, "Nice cut!" and, "Great contact!"

Everyone seems in good spirits, even though we're getting massacred. After our next at-bat, the mercy rule is invoked.

"Hey," Jeff says as we come off the field, "you should play."

"Oh thanks," I tell him, "but I'd be a liability."

"We're *aaaw* liabilities, Li," he replies, and we jog to the dugout laughing.

As I gather my things, a young woman approaches. "Hello," she greets, tucking brown hair behind her ears.

"Hi," I say, wondering who she is.

"You play for The Cove?"

"Not usually, but my fiancé does."

Tilting her head and letting out a skeptical giggle, she asks, “Your *what?*”

“Fiancé,” I repeat, then realize she needs more context. “We’re friends with David, Brandon, and Tim.”

The woman nods. “Oh, I see.” She purses her rosy lips and adds, “Tim and Brandon are two of my best gay friends, too.”

Best *gay* friends? I reflect. I wonder what she meant by *that*.

“So why can’t your fiancé play for a straight team?” she queries with a note ringing somewhere between suspicion and condescension.

“He *can*,” I tell her, “but his *friends* play for this team.” I throw my bag over my shoulder and walk away.

What nerve, I think, hands clenched. Irritation rises within me, but just as it’s about to bubble into anger, I stop myself. Why this reaction? She called Tim and Brandon “gay friends.” So what? They *are* gay; I probably wouldn’t know them if they weren’t. And big deal, she questioned a straight man’s presence here. Who wouldn’t? Most Suncoast teams have no straight players. Maybe she was sizing me up, finding out who I am and what my motives are. Maybe she’s a straight woman looking to connect with other straight women who connect with gay men. Here was an opportunity to know someone associated with this community—maybe even someone like *me*—and I walked away. Why? Did it give me pleasure to one-up her as a “sensitive straight”? That seems counterproductive. I should have been more patient, more open.

Suddenly, I stop walking. I still can be. I’ll go back over, introduce myself, and try getting to know her. After all, if Tim and Brandon like this woman, there’s a good chance I will too. Turning around, I scan the crowd, searching for her brown hair. I move closer to

where we stood, then closer yet. But with each step, it becomes more and more evident that she's already gone. I leave the field feeling like a jerk.

That night, Doug and I drive to The Cove Lounge, site of the 1995 Miss Suncoast Softball Pageant. Ballplayers in drag, we're told, compete for the crown.

### What a Drag

When I pull open the door, several patrons seated in swiveling, high-back bar stools turn to check out the latest arrivals. I wonder what they think of the tall blond who holds the hand of a woman. With the billowing smoke and dim recess lighting, I can't make out their faces.

"Hey!" someone calls from over by the jukebox. Jeff appears, looking enchanting with his ebony hair shiny and slick, mustache impeccably groomed, and curly-lashed eyes smiling from the almost empty rocks glass of Grand Marnier in his hand. When he asks, "Wanna see a party?" Doug and I follow him to the poolroom.

Rounding the corner, we come upon a statuesque figure with her back turned. She looks glamorous in a sleek, ankle-length gown, black with a sheer white sash across one shoulder. From her ears dangle long silver earrings with three stars, each stacked atop the other. Velvet and rhinestone pumps adorn her feet. "Look who came!" Jeff announces, and the figure pivots around. Beneath the ringlets and rouge is outfielder Terry.

"Oh my god," I gasp. "You're hot!"

"Don't sound so surprised, daaahhhling," Terry says in his best breathy voice.

I take a closer look. An upswept wig conceals his James Dean sideburns. Bronze foundation, fuchsia lipstick, coal black eye liner, and false lashes complete the illusion. “Did you shave your chest?” I ask him.

“Only as far down as I had to.” Terry pulls out the front of his dress to show me the line.

We return to the main bar, and I spot Cove teammate Bob at a table close to the stage. I haven’t had much opportunity to get acquainted with him, but I know Bob is 34, a New Jersey transplant, and a right fielder somewhat new to the game. Seeing me, Bob flashes his eyebrows and waves me over. “Sorry I missed your softball debut,” he says when I reach him. “Thanks for covering my position.”

With a good-humored grin, I reply, “I’ll thank *you* not to make me cover it again.”

Just then, the announcer calls into the mike, “Are you ready for this year’s Miss Suncoast Softball Pageant?” The crowd claps and whistles. “Our first performer represents Rascals. Here’s Anita Dick!”

Blue and red stage lights flick on, and a large “woman” appears wearing a full-length, hoop-skirted dress in cotton candy pink. Puffy short sleeves accent her lineman shoulders, and ringlets cascade down her back. With metallic belt and wand, (s)he looks like The Good Witch on a very bad day. “Somewhere over the rainbow,” (s)he mouths to a jazzy Judy Garland recording. Her teammates howl, and a line forms to offer her tips.

“Let’s hear it for Anitaaaah!” the announcer inspirits when Ms. Dick moves into the finale. “Next up, I give you Mary Contrary!”

From the speakers booms Alanis Morissette’s “You Oughta Know,” an anthem for the (wo)man scorned. A man clad in bad-boy boots and hat comes into view followed by his

sequin-gowned partner. The cowboy sits in a chair looking cold and aloof as the man in drag mouths the words: “I’m here to remind you of the mess you left when you went away. It’s not fair to deny me the cross I bear that you gave to me...You oughta know.”

After the crowd applauds Mary’s intense presentation, the smoke of dry ice begins blowing over the front of the stage. When Terry appears amid the fog and music by The Pretenders, the Cove men jump up with bills in hand. Some turn their cheeks for a lipstick kiss; a few slip dollars into Terry’s strapless bra. Not to be outdone, Doug lies on the floor and crawls beneath his teammate’s dress, making him the first to discover that Terry performs au natural. Leave it to the straight guy. Reeling from my third vodka tonic, I snap an off-center shot of Terry finishing with a parade wave—elbow, elbow, wrist, wrist, wrist.

A cheerleader troupe represents Angels. Five guys wear yarn pompons on their white Keds, periwinkle T-shirts with their team logo in pink tucked into raspberry pleated miniskirts, and wigs styled with little girl bows and ribbons. Throughout “Leader of the Pack,” they roll their fists, as if revving a cycle, to the “vroom” sound that follows the title line.

When the MC switches tapes, The Eurhythmics meet my ears. Roars of pleasure permeate the room as another contestant takes the stage. Sporting a body-hugging sleeveless dress in violet with gold trim, white athletic socks pulled over calves, and chunky shoes, (s)he grooves to the spooky, pulsing melody. During the refrain, (s)he tugs on the ends of a frizzy flaxen wig, head tilted and eyes opened as wide as possible, revealing long, brassy lashes. The performer’s twilight-zone stare and unshaved mustache keep everyone in stitches.

A trio of Miss Americas takes their places. The middle one looks stunning in her honey-colored wig and model-perfect make-up. While the others cover the “oohs,” she mouths, “Set me free why don’t you babe...’cause you don’t really love me. You just keep me hangin’ on.”

The next performer is Ima Guy, whose tight, ruby tank of sequins is stretched to the limit by giant breasts shaped like construction cones. Gyrating about, Ms. Guy continually hikes these from waist to chest.

At this, I sit back, feeling conflicted. Part of me finds this pageant deliciously provocative and irreverent. I’ve laughed as hard as anyone tonight. On a deeper level, I sense a strange kinship with the male performers. Certainly they “oughta know,” as well as I, how wrenching it feels to be kept “hangin’ on” when nothing’s left.

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Rob, a respondent in Hopcke and Rafaty’s (1999, p. 66) *A Couple of Friends: The Remarkable Friendship Between Straight Women and Gay Men*, says this about gay men’s identification with women: “When we gay men hear sappy love songs on the radio, it is the female part we sing along to, because it is women who express our own feelings about loving, losing and desiring men.”

\* \* \*

But another part of me grapples with the fact that the characters being embodied here are not gay men; they are women—grotesque versions of female torch singers, cheerleaders, and beauty contestants. The men’s slathered-on make-up, ridiculously high hair, oversized breasts, and fuck-me ensembles glorify—worship even—the most oppressive aspects of feminine “beauty” (no wonder I’ve seen only two other women here

tonight). Perhaps they also scorn and critique those aspects, but do they scorn and critique women (i.e., *me*) as well? I wonder how entertaining these men would find a parade of women competing for a Swishy Sissy title.

\* \* \*

Writes lesbian author Merrill Mushroom (1995, pp. 69-70), "I resented [gay men's] caricaturing of women. I resented their flaunting of their privilege...Don't they realize they are demonstrating the same loathing toward women that straight men exhibit, the same loathing that straight people in general show toward queers?"

\* \* \*

In contrast, drag can be read as an ironic and critical response to misogyny. By undermining the system of gender identification, drag reveals that gender and sexuality are not stable *things* we have but repeated yet revisable *performances* we enact.<sup>9</sup>

The announcer introduces the final act, a plump fellow in a straight black dress and full, Cher-style wig. (S)he performs the evening's most danceable tune, "We Are Family." As Jeff and David start singing along, "I got all my sistas with me," I decide to give my critical consciousness a rest.

When the song ends, I escape to the ladies room. There I find several contestants competing for space in front of the mirror. While Anita Dick holds my stall door shut, I realize that I'm the only "lady" sitting down to pee.

I find Doug outside, and we take our seats for the moment of truth. "Before we begin," says the announcer, "we want to recognize the most photogenic performer: Terry

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<sup>9</sup> See Butler (1999).



from The Cove!” Having just kicked back shots of José Cuervo, our outfielder wobbles up the steps for his award.

“And now,” the MC continues, “the 1995 Miss Suncoast Softball title goes to ... Ima Guy!” The breast man. Ima sashays to the stage, offering some blown kisses and mock tears as (s)he is crowned and offered a dozen red roses. At this, patrons begin draining the evening’s final drink.

Doug and I bid our goodbyes and move toward the exit. On our way out, we bump into Ron, whose ribbed T-shirt hugs the cut upper body that defies his 40 years. “Feeling okay?” he asks me.

“A little tipsy perhaps,” I confess.

“Careful driving home,” he cautions.

When we get in the car, Doug turns to me and says, “If I were going to date someone on the team, I think I’d choose Ron.” A bit taken aback, I laugh, wondering how many heterosexual men would make such an admission. “Have you ever been attracted to a woman?” Doug then asks.

“Hmm,” I utter while reclining my seat. “I’ve always been drawn to my friend Kara. I’m not sure I’d label my feelings sexual, but there’s definitely an intensity between us. Have you ever felt that way about a man?”

“Once,” Doug admits, “but I bet he’d find that perverse.”

At the last word, I know exactly who he’s talking about—a nice, though rather traditional and reserved, friend from home. We pull out of The Cove parking lot, and I sleepily reply, “Life-affirming energy perverse, huh? What a drag.”

Next year, at the 1996 Miss Suncoast Softball Pageant, it becomes even clearer to me how the performance of drag can move us to think—and feel—outside of our cultural boxes.

### Border Crossing

Bob, Al, and I cluster together in front of the stage. The next contender is Andy, the catcher for a team called The Wet Spot (sponsored by a bar with the same name). The long blond mane is his own; the rest, glitz and glamour: charcoal-lined, cerulean-shadowed eyes, rosy cheeks and glossy red lips, scarlet press-on nails, and low-cut blue taffeta dress.

Bob leans in to say, “Now *that* should’ve been a girl.”

“Woman,” I correct.

While a hip-hop tune begins thumping, (s)he struts about, lip synching the in-your-face lyrics that instruct the listener to observe a “body beautiful.” With every step and groove, Andy radiates confidence.

From center stage, (s)he makes eye contact with me, pivots, and approaches. My heart beats faster. Our gazes lock as we synchronize our motions. I adopt the performer’s hip swaying; (s)he mimics my shoulder rolling. “Body beautiful,” we mouth together, nodding and smiling each other on.

Why does (s)he focus on me? I wonder, this beautiful man. Or woman. Or man-as-woman. In this moment, to which am I drawn? Does it matter?

For much of the song, we peer intently into each other’s eyes. The rhythm picks up, and we match each other move for move. At the song’s finale, Andy bows in my direction, as if sharing credit for the performance.

On my left, Al bumps me. “What was *that* all about?” he asks, his mouth slightly agape.  
“Border crossing,” I say.

The Friday after our first Miss Suncoast Softball Pageant, Doug and I again make our way to The Cove, this time to help the team raise money.

### Jell-O Fellowship

At 15, I peddled fundraiser candy bars for choir. Teenagers, chocolate—it wasn’t a hard sell. Ten years later, I prepare myself to hock squares of colored gelatin made with vodka instead of water. I wonder how friendly this crowd will be.

Inside the bar, Doug and I find Gordon, already vending strawberry-banana and orange-mango shooters. “C’mon,” he calls over the happy hour buzz, “let’s get you started.”

We find six large trays of translucent cubes in the cooler. “Can you handle a full one?” Gordon asks.

“Please,” I tell him, “these hands spent five summers serving cocktails.”

“Haven’t been in the back yet,” Gordon reports. Say no more.

On our way to the poolroom, we pass a Rastafarian with scraggly braids and round John Lennon sunglasses. “Gelatin?” I offer. With a too-cool glance, he waves “no.”

We then approach a pair of grunge guys standing with their backs against the wall. One has streaked hair bleached platinum and a ring in his nostril; the other a shaved head and baggy thrift store jeans. “Cove softball shooter?” I propose, waving the tray to jiggle the Jell-O.

“Later,” says the shorn.

I start to feel discouraged, but then some PR comes over the PA. “Suncoast Softball shooters,” says the announcer, “as fruity as you are!”

Looking a bit juiced himself, Terry approaches. I hold the tray up to his nose and ask, “Orange-mango or strawberry-banana?”

“I juss bought ssix from Gor’on,” he slurs.

“C’mere huuuney,” someone calls from across the room.

“I think he means you,” I tell Doug as we make our way over. Suddenly, a man in a white dress shirt and linen pants turns around. The perfectly poofed sandy hair and wide beryl eyes belong to Dennis, our wedding coordinator.

“Oh my,” he says.

“D-dennis,” I stammer. Of course, I’m not nearly as surprised to see him here as he is to see us.

“Never expected to find *you* at The Cove,” Dennis remarks.

“Doug plays for their softball team,” I say, feeling the need to justify our presence.

“We’re, um, raising funds,” adds Doug.

“No kidding?”

In one sense, I feel a new connection to Dennis. Even though wedding coordination is a rather “gay” profession, I suspect he still feels guarded at the conservative social club that employs him. Perhaps Dennis now will see us as allies, and he’ll feel more at ease than he did when we were “regular” clients. In another sense, though, I feel like Doug and I walked into his private party. Surely Dennis came to The Cove to escape, to be himself, to feel safe. I worry that we violated his sense of security.

I can't do anything else, so I smile at Dennis. A moment later, he smiles back and says, "Give me a shooter for everybody at the table."

"Wow!" I exclaim, handing over eight Dixie cups. "Thanks!"

He slips me a ten. "Take one for yourself," Dennis tells me, "and one for Doug."

In the next month, Doug and I have a few business meetings with Dennis. Though he never mentions the above encounter, I notice that he smiles more, and there's a deeper warmth in his tone. It may be just my imagination, but I like to think that "our moment" at The Cove had something to do with it.

Out of shooters, Doug returns to the cooler while I check out the main bar. There I find a crowd of men moaning, shrieking, and laughing. At first, I can't see the target of their vigor. Moving closer, though, I behold the man at work.

### Men at Work

He fills the small black stage, his white T-shirt and cut-off overalls hugging rippling abs, pecs, bis, and tris. Atop his head sits a hard hat, slightly askew. The music, teasingly slow, sets the pace for his swaying, shaking, and strutting. The hat goes first; he flings it, Frisbee-style, into the corner. Howls of approval follow as he unhooks one strap, then the other. Tongue circling his lips, he wiggles the denim over his abdomen, down his hips, then his knees. With a brown Caterpillar boot, he kicks the overalls into the crowd.

A man with feathered auburn hair and long mustache approaches, 10-dollar bill between his index and middle fingers. Spectator whispers into performer's ear. With a nod

from the stripper, the tipper pulls the T over Construction Boy's head. Down to clinging Calvin's, he bows and exits stage left.

Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA" begins blaring from the sound system. The second act flexes and poses his too-tanned, too-tattooed body. Save the stars and stripes boxers, his routine bears no relation to The Boss' post-Vietnam, working man anthem. At the refrain, the brown-haired beauty brushes back the long, wispy bangs of his bowl cut. In a snap, the boxers fly off, revealing a silver sequined G-string. At this, a man twice his age steps before him, trying to keep pace with his gyrations. Admirer tucks a five into the desired pouch. The dancer smiles a teeth-only smile, thanking the man but sending a "don't-linger-too-long" gaze.

Behind me, someone asks, "Still with us?"

I spin around and find Doug, Gordon, and Terry. "Gosh, I've never seen so many—" "Steroid users?" Doug questions.

Gordon and Terry laugh. "You've been going to the wrong bars," Terry says to me.

"Apparently," I respond. Looking over at my partner, I'm unable to decipher the expression on his face.

Most times, Doug is good humored about my new opportunities to watch men. Two months from now, we'll have the following encounter at Impulse, a club where Brandon tends bar. We go there with Alexandra and Christopher, a straight couple that mixes well with our gay associates.

A Gay Gaze

As we approach the door, Christopher asks, "Will I know anyone?"

"Brandon should be working," Doug tells him.

"Aah," Alexandra sighs, "Braaandon." Her husband turns to fan her.

The bulky bouncer wears a thick silver-link chain, a size-too-small T-shirt with rolled sleeves, and baggy black jeans. While checking our IDs, he gives each of us a twice-over. "Are we that obvious?" Doug whispers.

Looking at his plaid polo and golf shorts, I reply, "We are."

Inside, I survey the room. Behind a small bar between the pool table and stage, Brandon busily mixes and uncaps. Before turning toward the cooler, he makes eye contact and tips back his head, indicating that we should come his way.

When we reach him, I say, "You remember Alexandra and Christopher."

"Great to see you," he tells us, flashing a smile. "What can I get you?" We order beers and step off to the side, making room for several new patrons.

"He may be the best looking man in Tampa," Alexandra says in my ear. She may be right, I think, as we watch Brandon work the crowd. Alexandra notes his chiseled features; I comment on his sculpted body. We both approve of the Gasparilla Fest pirate attire: red bandanna, gold hoop earrings, and eye patch.

Our husbands watch us watch him, shaking their heads at the intensity of our stares. "I know what your name will be tonight," Doug tells Christopher, loud enough for us to hear.

Laughing, Alexandra responds, "Straight men look at women all the time."

"No one's criticizing," Christopher replies.

“I never used to look at men like this,” I say.

“Like how?” Doug asks.

I mull it over, then respond, “In this prolonged, objectifying gaze.”

“But gay men look at each other like that,” Alexandra remarks.

“That they do,” I concur. “So maybe I’m learning a gay gaze.”<sup>10</sup>

“Me too,” she says, glancing over at the pirate pouring Perrier. “He is beautiful.”

“Mmm hmm,” I agree.

On the way home from selling shooters at The Cove, I ask Doug how he feels about watching (and watching me watch) strippers and other attractive men. “A little weird,” Doug admits. “Straight men aren’t exactly encouraged to check out male bodies. I’m also envious. I’ve always wanted larger arms, a bigger chest, more definition, and when I see you admiring them, I assume that you wish I had that kind of physique.”

“That’s interesting,” I tell him, “because when I look at them, I’m not comparing the perfection of their bodies to your body, but to *mine*. Seeing them, *I* feel soft and unfit.”

“Me too!”

“It’s funny, when we first associated with gay men, I thought I’d feel more at ease about my appearance. I assumed they wouldn’t be looking at me, so I wouldn’t be worrying about myself.”

“But many of the gay men we know are obsessed with age, hair, skin, body.”

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<sup>10</sup> Pearlberg and Wilder (1995, p. 327) assert that from gay men, women can learn “a whole new—and very enjoyable—way of gazing” that offers them a means to express themselves as sexual persons “without apologizing for or rationalizing it.”



“And it makes me even *more* self-conscious than I was before! Really, they’re worse than most women.”

“Most *straight* women,” Doug says. “Lesbians seem to be less superficial.”

“Touché. We haven’t really interacted with the lesbians who play Suncoast Softball, but they do seem to create their own kind of beauty, one that, in many ways, contests our culture’s oppressive standards.”

“You should get to know Anna,” he suggests. A few weeks ago, Tim introduced us to The Cove’s only female recruit. Doug and I also met her “friend” that day.

“I really should,” I decide.

Two days later, I get my chance. While The Cove concentrates on defeating Angels, I concentrate on Anna.

### Watching Assumptions

Just to her left of third, she snags a solid shot that could have cost two bags, easily. The base coach drops to his knees and bows before her, chanting, “Not worthy!” She laughs.

When Anna returns to the dugout, I wave her and Al into a pose. He holds one hand in front of her, as if about to grope her breast; both offer open-mouthed smiles. Click! I put down the camera and watch her a moment. She has the build of a softball player, I note, athletic, a little stocky perhaps. Her no-fuss sienna mane is held back by a simple rubber band. No make-up, no nail polish. I wonder if she thinks I’m too much of a “girly girl,” a (not always complimentary) reference to the femme role.

As I scan the stands for her companion, Tim teases, “Are you staring at Anna?”

“Maybe,” I confess.

“She wouldn’t be interested in you anyway,” he says.

“And why not?” I ask, a bit defensively. Doesn’t she like girly girls?

“She’s *straight*,” Tim says, offering a wry grin.

“Huh?”

He rephrases, articulating each syllable. “An-na is *not* a les-bi-an.”

“Oops,” I utter, to myself as much as to him. “Watch those assumptions.”

Doug, meanwhile, spends the day struggling at the plate. Hitting one for four, he descends into a slump that rolls into December. Two Sundays from now, his on-field demeanor becomes an issue. While every Cove player experiences bouts of poor hitting, no one seems to respond quite the way he does.

### Watching Them, Watching Us

We sit under a tarp, shivering through the final inning and clapping as much for the heat it generates as for team spirit. Down by three with two outs, Doug steps up. Squinting, he gives the ball a look. Our batter thinks it junk and steps back. “Steerike!” yells the lanky, mustached ump.

The pitcher fires again. Doug waits ... waits ... swing! His cut, slicing nothing but air, brings shouts of “Whoa!” and “Whoo!” from the crowd. He rolls his eyes, embarrassed.

Last chance. Eyes following the high arc, Doug pivots through, scooping the ball from underneath. The instant it leaves his bat, he knows the path—right to the fielder in left center. His opponent won’t even have to move.

Doug hurls the aluminum culprit into the dirt; it bounces with the sound of a distant gong. Grinding his teeth, he curses, “DAMmit!!”

His teammates emerge from the dugout, patting him on the back and shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Doug,” they say. “Nice swing, buddy.”

He shrugs them off. “DAMmit!”

Watching Doug kick the fence, David shakes his head, saying, “Such a het’ro.”

For a moment, his comment surprises me. I’ve seen many aggressive, competitive gay players. Tim, for example, attacks the ball, both defensively and offensively, and Gordon chases down and dives after even the most remote pop fly.

Still, I’ve never seen either throw a bat or kick the fence. By his account, Doug only reacts negatively to his own performance, but do his teammates know that? Some participants here, like David, came of age never playing sports; some grew up rejected by those who did; many others competed but silently struggled with a sexuality still marginalized by sports.<sup>11</sup> Will Doug’s behavior remind them of the homophobic jock culture Suncoast Softball tries to counter? In this moment, I’m reminded of our outsider status.

“When you’re on their turf,” I tell him as we clear the dugout, “remember that they watch you.” As I say this, I reflect not only on Doug’s tantrum but also on the following interaction, which took place just before today’s game.

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<sup>11</sup> In professional sports, it has been over 20 years since former running back Dave Kopay publicly acknowledged his homosexuality. Few have followed suit. Notable exceptions include retired major leaguer Glenn Burke, Olympic champion diver Greg Louganis, retired tennis superstar Martina Navratilova, former New York Giants tackle Roy Simmons, and U.S. National champion ice skater Rudy Galindo. Of these, only Navratilova and Galindo came out while at the top of their sports. Not surprising, suggests Bull (1995, March 21, p. 29), given the “stranglehold homophobia retains” on athletics and their sponsors.

“Hey Lisa!” Brandon shouts. “Come see.”

I make my way down the bleachers and meet him by the scoring table. He points to a corkboard where tacks hold rows of pictures in place. “What’s up?” I ask, slipping my arm through his. Taking a closer look, I realize why Brandon called me over. In the right corner hangs a photograph of me. As I enjoy my image’s slight, close-mouthed smile, I remember the camera’s click when I walked by a spectator last week.

“What a star!” Brandon says. “Shades on, hair blowing, you could be Demi Moore.”

“Ha!” I say, giving him a mock punch. I lean toward the board for further scrutiny.

“What’s the matter?” he asks. “Don’t you like the shot?”

“It’s not that,” I tell him. “I guess I’ve been observing all of you so carefully that I haven’t thought much about *being observed*.” As I say this, other teammates begin congregating around us, watching me watch myself being watched.

That Sunday brings the fall season to a close. With all practices and games behind me, it’s now time to write.

### Writing “Tales”

When I return home, I print out a copy of my field notes and read through it several times. I then begin writing comments in the margins and highlighting themes in different colored markers. I also listen to my field tapes and study the dozens of photographs I’ve taken since September.

Though I try to be thorough and methodical, the more I pore over these sources, the more difficult and uncomfortable it becomes to draw definitive conclusions about “them.” I scour my materials for insights into gay male friendship, but I find that my deepest and most passionate insights are not into “their” relationships but into *our* relationships.

Because of this, I decide to use my field materials to compose ethnographic short stories about my evolving relationships with the Cove team. For the next month, I write about how these men have changed the ways I think and feel about sexuality, coming out, heterosexism, and AIDS. Throughout the episodes, I layer in reflections from some of the literatures I’ve been reading on identity, friendship, gay cultures, and representing one’s fieldwork community. I work hard to move seamlessly between scenic description and more analytic reflection.

The project consumes me. On several occasions, I awaken in the middle of the night to scribble notes or return to my computer.

When I read over the final draft, I feel an intoxicating rush. My Qualitative Methods class meets for the last time this week. It will be my first opportunity to share this journey with colleagues.

### Presenting Self, Presenting Fieldwork

My spirits are high when my turn comes. I’ve decided to perform a couple of the narratives, hoping my voice can convey the significance of what I encountered and the emotionality of the bonds I formed and solidified.

As I speak of the Cove players, I realize that I’ve probably “fallen in love” with my informants a little too deeply; surely someone will question my lack of critical distance. At

the same time, I expect a generally positive reception to my ethnographic project and writing.

When I finish, the first hand in the air belongs to a graduate student in sociology. I wait excitedly for her question or comment. After a bit of reflection, she asks, “Do you ever wonder why?”

Confused, I query, “Why *what?*”

“Why they’re, you know, *gay?*”

I pause, feeling my body tighten a bit. “I don’t,” I tell my classmate.

“Do you think it’s a biological aberration?” the woman then asks.

“*Aberration?*”

“Abnormality then,” she says.

“I wouldn’t use that word either,” I tell her.

“From the available evidence and from your experience with gay men, do you think it’s biological, psychological, or environmental?” she asks.

\* \* \*

Importantly, as Stein (1999, p. 329) indicates, “almost every investigation into the causes of homosexuality has aimed at its elimination.” Historically, the consequences for gay men and lesbians have ranged from psychoanalysis and electroshock treatment to genital mutilation and brain surgery.

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“I don’t think bodies, minds, and contexts are separable,” I reply. “I’ve met gay men who say they knew their sexual orientation early in childhood; others believed they were straight until their teens or twenties. Some say that they choose to be with men; others say

the ‘choice’ was made for them. It seems highly unlikely that a single factor or path leads one to a particular set of fantasies, desires, and behaviors. Besides, my own interests lie more in what it *means* to be gay—emotionally, relationally, and politically—than in *why* someone’s gay.”

“You never wonder about it?” presses a male student.

I let out a sigh, then retort, “Not any more than I wonder why I’m straight. We always seem to assume that *heterosexuality* needs no explaining.”

Cupping his chin, he says, “Your project does lack a theory of sexual orientation.”

I stare at him a moment, disbelieving where the conversation’s going. “I don’t claim to advance a theory of sexual orientation. I claim to show narratively the possibilities for and consequences of studying and befriending members of a gay male community.” My voice rises in pitch. “Frankly, I’m surprised and disappointed by this exchange. After all the characters and situations I offered, *this* is how you want to spend the discussion period, focusing on why my participants are gay?”

\* \* \*

Many people—gay, bisexual, and straight—share an interest in the origin(s) of sexual orientation. It is widely believed that discovering biological bases for homosexuality will improve the cultural climate for non-heterosexuals (because such bases would suggest that one does not *choose* homosexuality, just as one does not choose the color of her or his skin—a frequently invoked analogy). On one hand, people who believe in biological bases for sexual orientation tend to be more supportive of gay and lesbian rights than people who

do not hold this belief; on the other, we might question how solid a foundation for gay and lesbian rights can be provided by *lack of choice or agency*.<sup>12</sup>

\* \* \*

“I wish we had more time,” Carolyn says apologetically. “I know others had comments and questions. But we have many more presentations scheduled for tonight.”

I stand there a moment, immobile, and study the faces of my classmates. Do I know you people? Reluctantly, I gather my notes and relinquish the floor.

My mind races throughout the last hours of class. What about my performance moved them to focus on causes of homosexuality? Did the narratives not evoke the power of my journey? Was it somehow safer to intellectualize about sexual orientation than to examine my fieldwork experiences and relationships? *Would* a theory of sexual orientation have helped me frame those?

Regardless, their remarks struck not only as professional inquiry but also as personal attack. Given my growing identification with the Cove men, perhaps that’s to be expected. But a reactionary stance will do little to promote dialogue. I need to prepare myself for these kinds of responses. When taken by surprise, I move too quickly to defensiveness. It’s possible that I heard homophobia when it didn’t speak, and even if it did, wasn’t it my call to answer?

Nine o’clock comes, and I leave the room feeling disappointed about the presentation. The class is finished, but as I will discover, the project is just beginning.

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<sup>12</sup> See Stein (1999).



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