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Homeward (Chapter 6 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***¹

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6: Homeward

Since September 1995, I've been taking field notes, conducting interviews, and writing class and conference papers on the Cove men. It's now December 1996, time to start pulling everything together for my dissertation. I recognize that my position in this community as a straight, married, female researcher is both unique and potentially problematic. I'm still struggling to find a voice that speaks not just *about* these men but *with* and *for* them as well.² At an advising meeting, I learn that I'm not the only one feeling conflicted about my project.

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² See Fine (1994).

Project-ing

Art leans forward in his chair and says, “I’ve heard from several readers of *Composing Ethnography*. Many of them singled out your piece on bulimia,³ calling it ‘sensual’ and ‘poetic.’ Do you think you can be as present in your writings about this gay culture?”

“I’m striving for that,” I tell him. “I think it would be dishonest to write from a traditional ‘objective’ stance. I’m studying these men closely by *getting close*. I’m not emotionally or politically neutral; I’m their *friend*, their advocate.”

“Still, aren’t there limits to your access?”

Remembering my recent experiences at The Vice and Stud,⁴ I say, “I can’t imagine a straight woman could have more access than I.”

“That’s exactly my point,” he presses. “Maybe there’s only so much a gay man *can* share with a straight woman. What about the spaces you *can’t* enter, the experiences you *can’t* share, the conversations to which you’re *not* privy?”

“Are you suggesting that we only study and write about groups to which we belong?”

“No.” In a gentle tone, Art says, “You’ve been in the field over a year. It’s time to take heed of where you are in this community and to determine what others—gay and straight—can learn from you. Give it some thought.”

I spend the next few days considering Art’s advice. That weekend, a conversation with Rob deepens my understanding of who I am to my research community, who they are to me, and how our friendships might offer me a position from which to speak.

³ See Tillmann-Healy (1996).

⁴ See Chapter 5.

In Both Worlds

After brunch, nine softball guys and a fieldworker leave the restaurant and decide to meet at Gordon's apartment. I catch a ride with Rob, who doesn't know the way. Directing him south, I ask how he's spending the holidays. He smiles. "I'm meeting Tim's parents."

"Marvelous! How are you feeling about that?"

"Nervous," Rob admits.

"How accepting is Tim's family?"

"Well, their first impulse was to 'fix' him. As devout Mormons, they feared for his salvation. Not wanting to be separated from him in the afterlife, they tried to help him 'find his way back to God.' Since then, I think they've realized that he's unlikely to 'convert' to heterosexuality. Overall, they're supportive of Tim, though I wouldn't say they're supportive of this 'lifestyle.'"

"What about your folks?" I probe.

"They know nothing." I nod but don't push.

"Tell me," Rob then requests, "how did *you* get here?"

I smile and ask playfully, "Here in your truck?"

"*Here*," he responds, "among us."

When I tell him of "coming out" with David, Rob says, "I don't know if anyone's ever said this to you, but Tim and I have talked about how comforting it is to be around you and Doug. We all were raised to be straight; for part of our lives, many of us thought we *were* straight. Sometimes being gay means giving up that familiar life. You and Doug give us a chance to live in both worlds."

The profundity jolts me. Smiling, I say, "You give *us* that chance too."

The Dynamic Duo

I point out Gordon's place, and we pull over. Inside, Rob plops between Tim and Pat on the couch. I nestle into the recliner as our host flips to the Cowboys game. When someone raps on the door, I rise to answer it. "Hey Steve," I say to Gordon's old roommate, a handsome Atlantan of 39 with salt-and-pepper hair, long-lashed, steel blue eyes, and wonderfully deep dimples.

"Heeey!" he responds. "I read that paper you wrote about Gordon."

A wave of anxiety ripples through me as I recall the references to Steve's old boyfriend being HIV positive. "Were you ... surprised by some of the things Gordon told me?" I ask. When he pauses, my fingernails dig into my palms.

"Well!" Steve exclaims. "I can't believe he said I took him to that gay beach!"

"C'mon Steve," Gordon interjects, "I edited a *lot* where you're concerned."

"She can interview me next," Steve suggests. "I'm sure you left out a few choice details about yourself."

"May I see the paper?" Rob asks.

"Yeah," Gordon says, "I'll get it." When he heads for the bedroom, I take in a soothing breath. A few moments later, Gordon returns. "Here you go," he tells Rob, handing over the document. "And I brought the first paper Lisa wrote about us."

"I'd like to read that again," Tim says. Pat looks on as he flips through "Tales from the (Softball) Field" and Rob starts examining the pages of Gordon's life history. I nervously twirl my hair, waiting for them to comment on the writing, the issues raised, or

the personal disclosures, including my bulimia, which I briefly discuss in the paper on Gordon.

“I didn’t know you had a gay relative,” Rob says, reacting to Gordon’s discussion of Great Uncle Maurice. “My sister’s a lesbian.”

“When I read that paper,” Steve shares, “I related to lots of things—like the gay newspaper. Gordon said he couldn’t bring himself to pick it up; he thought everybody was watching. Before I came out, I was just as desperate for information—and just as terrified.”

Having my work passed around so casually feels odd. But it’s nice to see it sparking connections and discussion. Watching them read, I marvel at how easily my fieldwork and my friendships with them intertwine, each seeming to extend and deepen the other.

In many ways, friendship has become my methodology. I study these men with the same practices I use to build and sustain relationships with them: conversation, empathy, support, and shared activities.

The writing adds another layer. On paper, I show my understanding and compassion in scenes and dialogue they can enter. In response, these men tell additional stories, to each other and to me. The cycle continues: we talk, I write, we talk.

For them, my researcher role seems to move from periphery to center and back again. Much of the time, our interactions feel like ordinary friendship encounters. They might even “forget” sometimes that I go home and write field notes. But my ethnographer self never fades completely into the background. After a telling disclosure, someone may ask, “Did you get that?” or, “Are you writing this down?” and once in a while, someone says, “Please don’t put that in your paper”—a request I always honor.

Overall, my scholarly interest in the group seems to open more conversations than it closes. Since my investments in their lives are both personal and academic, they can assume that I want to see, hear, and *feel* this community from the inside. I've never even *thought*, "I didn't need to know that," and I suspect they sense this about me. David once told me that he'd never seen a straight person work so hard to understand gay men's experiences, feelings, and concerns. Perhaps my dual role invites them to be more candid than they might be with someone either "just a friend" or "just a researcher."

When they reveal something private, I often wonder if they're telling Lisa-the-friend, Lisa-the-researcher, or Lisa-the-dynamic-duo. At least once a day, Lisa-the-researcher wallows in ethnographic guilt for turning these men into objects of study. If they reach out to Lisa-the-friend, I ask myself, does "the other Lisa" have a place in the encounter? I struggle, therefore, not only with writing "right" but also with writing "rightfully."

Just One Example

The night air lacks a Midwest winter's bite, but those gathered at Impulse for the league's holiday party appreciate its teasing nibble. Bar and patio sport faux greenery, white lights, and bowls of anise and peppermint candy. Over the sound system blare spoofs of Christmas tunes, lending new meaning to seasonal phrases like "don we now our gay apparel."

From a bench, Rob and I watch Tim greet someone neither of us recognizes. The two embrace, then laugh at a whispered inside joke. Tugging at the collar of his polo, Rob shakes his head. At this, I take the candy cane from my mouth and ask, "How are things?"

“There’s been some tension,” he admits, eyes still fixed on his partner. “He’s quite the party boy. You should see him at work.”

“He *is* a bartender,” I say. “Kind of goes with the job.”

Rob looks at me, his blue eyes large and intense. “Does *kissing* go with the job?”

Oh Tim. “I don’t know. What sort of kissing?”

“I’ll give you just one example,” he says. “Last week, Tim’s working at the club. I go down there and hang around his bar a while. This guy comes up, orders a drink, and in exchange for his tip, Tim kisses him—on the mouth, with tongue!” Rob exhales, then lowers his voice, “I’m sorry, but I’m standing *right there*. Everyone’s asking me, ‘What’s up with you guys? Why’s Tim acting like this?’ That doesn’t reflect well on me, you know? And then I wonder what he does when I’m *not* around.”

“Did you talk with him about it?”

“Matter of fact, I used you and Doug as an example. Tim and I had gone around and around, but he just wasn’t getting it. So finally I said, ‘Tim, how would Doug feel if Lisa went around kissing other guys? Think he’d tolerate that?’ A light went on. He could imagine how Doug might react. I then said, ‘Guess what? That’s exactly how I feel.’”

Why use *us* as an example? I wonder. Even in a conversation between same-sex lovers, does a reference to a gay couple not carry the symbolic weight of a straight, married one? Or might Rob’s choice have been less general and more particular? Perhaps he perceives, as I do, that our primary relationships have some parallels.

“It’s interesting that you cast Doug and me in the roles you did,” I tell him, “because ever since you began dating Tim, I’ve seen connections between our connections. I may be projecting my own issues, but it seems to me that Tim has been caught in emotional and

relational storms for some time—with coming out, with Jack, with Brandon, with the HIV scare. Your goodness and stability give him shelter, but they also frighten him because he somehow feels unworthy. So, perhaps unwittingly, he engages in sabotaging behaviors. They're his defense against vulnerability." Looking a bit stunned, Rob nods. "You're the brightest sun I've seen shine on Tim since I've known him. But when you don't feel deserving, facing the light of happiness requires courage. I hope Tim finds that."

Kissing my cheek, Rob says, "Me too."

So I wonder: should Lisa-the-friend have kept this episode out of her field notes? Do you really need to know about Rob and Tim's latest fight? Am I exploiting Rob's pain because it shows an "interesting" connection between our relationships? Should I delete this section?

In the coming days, I continue debating the ethics of my dual role. Meanwhile, a Cove player suffers a penetrating loss. The news comes just after Christmas.

Speaking of Loss

"Hello?" I call into the cordless phone.

"Hey darlin'," answers a quiet voice.

"Al!" I respond, gripping the sofa cushion. At dinner the other night, David told us that Al's father is "covered in cancer" and that he will live only about six weeks.

"Just callin' to wish you happy holidays." His drawl is low and scratchy but cheerful.

“Happy holidays to you too,” I say, thinking maybe the prognosis has improved.

“How’s your dad feeling?”

His silence foreshadows his words. “He died Christmas Eve.”

“Oh, Al!” I gasp.

“Yah,” he sighs, “his doctors led us to expect more time.”

Biting the inside of my mouth, I ask, “Were you with him?”

“We all were, Mom holding his feet, me holding one hand, my brother holding the other.”

“Did he go peacefully?”

“They had him pumped full of morphine.” Then, with an exhausted half chuckle, he adds, “Funny thing. At one point, my brother whispered, ‘This might be a good time to tell Dad you’re gay.’”

We share a little laugh before I note, “I thought your brother didn’t know.”

“Well *I’ve* never said anything.”

“So, um, did you tell him?”

“My dad? No, no.”

We sit through several moments of silence. At last, he says, “Anyway, expect me at your New Year’s party.”

“I’ll see you then. Take care, Al. You’ll be in my prayers.”

Closing my eyes, I shake my head, hurting for a son grieving a father. Who was he, I wonder, this man whose disdain or rejection Al must have feared? Did he know his boy had loved and been loved? Did he want to know? How does Al feel, now that he never can share that part of himself with his father?

Comp-lications

I spend the next month in comprehensive exam exile. Each of my committee members—Eric Eisenberg, Marsha Vanderford, Carolyn Ellis, and Art Bochner⁵—asks me to reflect on one area of study in my academic program and to explore that area’s applicability to my dissertation. Writing my responses, I realize that I’m still trying to find an ethnographic voice that is both eloquent and ethical.

At my oral examination, my committee is supportive but cautionary. “Given that you are not male and not homosexual,” says Carolyn, “how can you understand and write about this subculture from the inside?”

“All research involves communicating across experiential, relational, and cultural similarities and differences,” I reply. “Myerhoff (1978), for example, in *Number Our Days* is a Jewish woman studying a Jewish culture, but her respondents are considerably older than she. In her study, Austin (1996) interviews Annie, a woman both like (Black and educated) and unlike herself (Austin is from the rural South; Annie grew up in Africa). Cherry (1996), a straight and healthy researcher, becomes immersed in the lives of a predominately gay community of people with AIDS. These ethnographers understood and wrote from the inside by observing members of their research communities closely, by listening empathically to their stories, by participating in their lived experiences, and by committing themselves to their welfare.”

⁵Barney Downs, an associate professor of Communication, joined my committee shortly after this meeting.

“Have you thought about who this study is *for*?” asks Art. “If you’re writing for straight readers, how will you find a tone that’s not preachy or self-congratulatory? If it’s for gay readers, won’t some ask, ‘What can a straight woman teach *us* about being gay?’”

“As I move from writing field notes to writing the text, those issues will be in the forefront of my mind. I hope that my work will find a home in university classrooms, perhaps as a supplementary text in a course on friendship, sexuality, and/or fieldwork. In addition, my participants, other gay men and lesbians, and their straight associates are an important audience. I’d like my work to be as evocative and useful *to them* as to my academic colleagues.”

“That’s a tall order,” Art observes, “and a delicate balance.”

Marsha speaks next. “My exam question asked you to reflect on rhetorical approaches to studying communication. Much of your answer focused on narrative inquiry. What role has—and will—narrative play in your project?”

“Narrative is the core of fieldwork,” I say. “Researchers listen to, record, transcribe, and tell stories. My field notes, essentially, are recountings of and reflections on stories shared by and with participants: coming out stories, family stories, relationship stories, stories of hardship and crisis. Writing ethnography, moreover, involves composing narratives that make sense of fieldwork experience. What my narratives will look or feel like, I don’t yet know.”

“Marsha’s question speaks to the ‘how’ of your study,” Eric observes. “I’d like to hone in on the ‘what.’ In your response to my exam question, you began to explore the place of identity in your study. Can you say more about that?”

“For two years, I’ve attended how these men construct themselves and are constructed by others; how they communicatively perform and conceal their gay identities in both public and private spaces; and how gay identities move through the multiple, shifting contexts of their lives. In the process, I’ve been moved as never before to reflect on the construction, maintenance, and transformation of my *own* sexual orientation and identity.”

“Does that make you an observer of gay men’s identity negotiation?” queries Eric. “A participant in that process? A participant observer of your own identity in this gay culture? I don’t yet have a clear sense of your position.”

“Frankly,” I tell him, “neither do I. The more I observe them, listen to them, share my life with them, read about gay identity and cultures, and write field notes, the more invested I become in my research community. Can I speak most persuasively and rightfully as observer? Participant? Friend? Advocate? Some combination? I’m not sure. I know that I have to find my place. It will be difficult to move forward until I do.” They all nod.

Shortly after my comps defense, the Cove team resumes practice for a tournament that opens each spring season. Meanwhile, I’m taking a seminar in ethnography, my program’s last course. Students are assigned to go into the field and write about “the spirit of a place.” Based on my observations the first day of the tournament, I write the following short story.

Men Kissing

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 movie. 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.

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 foil-wrapped 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 tongue. Loading down the foam cup with Dixie sugar and Sam's Club faux creamer, I spot Tim and Rob in line for the men's room. Lip-locked, they gently cradle each other's heads.

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

"State Fair," Doug reminds. 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. What an image—our leftfielder peddling hair pieces 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 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 receives 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-posessed jewels.”

Other surprises await. I find a voucher for one free well drink at Rascals; a packet of Banana Boat Baby Sunblock 29; two LifeStyles lubricated condoms, red; an ad for The Cove’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.

People begin filing past, so our group 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, Doug unevenly warbles, “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.

Later that week, I present "Men Kissing" to my Ethnography class. A male cohort takes issue with the opening line ("Men kissing—it strikes me as wonderfully subversive."). "I assume you've never employed the term 'subversive' before," he tells me, "because your usage strikes me as naïve. What exactly does men kissing subvert?"

My cheeks burning, I reply, "Only all of orthodox masculinity."

The interaction between Doug and Terry is only the first of many significant encounters at the tournament. Later that day, I have this one with Joe.

Swingers

"Let's swing," suggests my congenial companion, pointing toward the playground. "I'd like to talk with you about something."

As Joe and I make our way over, we cross paths with one of the 20 or so women here for the tournament. I look up and into the brown eyes of a gold-jerseyed player with long, shiny curls pulled through the back of her navy cap. "Hi," she greets in a sultry alto voice. Her mouth opens a bit as she tosses a warm half-smile.

“Hiii,” Joe and I chorus. But her lingering eyes are not on him. Her head rotates over her right shoulder as she passes by. She and I exchange a penetrating glance, making the hairs on my neck stand on end. She gives a tiny nod before turning away.

“Hello!” Joe says, feigning insult. “I’m here too!” I just smile and watch her stride to the dugout, her hips swaying breezily.

Having reached the swing set, each of us takes a blue rubber seat, grips the chains tightly, and pushes off from the sand below. Our laughter blends with creaking metal as he secures his khaki FSU cap and sighs, “I met a woman.”

His statement seems fitting in light of the previous encounter and in the frame of rolling scenery, where a teal and gold parrot perched above the park’s lavatories continually approaches and recedes, enlarges and shrinks, while its owner tries to coax the defiant bird down.

“She works at my office,” Joe explains, his mocha eyes gazing into the distance. “I find her very attractive, to the point where my heart pitter-patters when she enters the room.”

I straighten my body and lay back my head. From this view, I pass over tiny dunes of sand, then a patch of rye grass, grass then sand, sand then grass. “Have you told her how you feel?”

“No, but I asked a colleague about her. I guess she’s involved with someone, but they’re having problems. Turns out, she asked about me too.”

Returning to an upright position, I comment, “That’s a good sign.”

"I'm not so sure," Joe replies, digging his feet into the dirt. "My last relationship with a woman ended after I told her I was gay."

With a tennis-shoe brake, I ask, "You said you were 'gay' or 'bisexual'?"

"Gay."

Confused, I say, "But you were drawn to her, and now you're drawn to this woman."

"Yes," he responds matter-of-factly. "I still fall for women, but my primary attraction is to men. My old girlfriend thought she could handle it."

"She couldn't?"

"Could *you*?" he queries, back-stepping again, then springing off. Going forward, Joe arches his back, pulls the chains toward his body, and extends both legs high into the air. Coming back, he kicks his feet far behind, almost to his spine.

"I don't know," I say, taking flight again. "If I felt secure in our relationship, I might be able to. But I also might worry that you'd be unfulfilled, especially if you said you were 'gay' as opposed to 'bisexual' or 'curious.' I would wonder if you'd rather be with a man."

Reaching maximum altitude, Joe lets out a howl. "So," he then poses, "should I ask her out?"

I pump higher and higher. "If you're that interested, sure." My stomach drops, and I close my eyes to ward off the dizziness. "Wow!" I exclaim, dragging my feet again.

On his next peak, Joe leaps from the swing. Landing safely on the ground, he turns to me. Giddily, he asks, "When should I tell her I'm gay?"

"Not sure I'd do it on the first date. Things might not work out anyway."

"And if things *do* work out?"

"Then you'll tell her."

Approaching his swing, he probes, “Would you want to know?”

“That a potential lover considered himself gay? Yes.”

“Another flight?” Joe suggests, giving my swing a push.

“Aaaah,” I hedge, still a bit nauseous. “Oh, why not?”

This episode moves me to think about the fluidity of sexual orientation and identity. Given Joe’s repeated physical attractions to women, what does it mean to say that he’s gay? Why doesn’t he claim to be bisexual? Because both straight and gay people police the borders so strictly? Because, for him, being gay is less a claim to a *sexual* identity than to a political or community one? Undoubtedly, Joe opens himself to more validation and affiliation by claiming to be gay than he would by claiming to be bisexual, but what does he close off? In theory, his gay identity all but precludes cross-sex romance, but what about in practice?

And what about *my* encounter with the gold-jerseyed woman? My heterosexual identity calls me to deny or explain away the powerful attraction I felt for her in that moment. Pushing at the boundaries feels exciting but also risky. However limiting, our categories bring order to the chaos of human experience and desire. That order undoubtedly is an illusion—but one I’m not yet sure I’m prepared to give up.

“Is He ... Flaming?”

In its next game, The Cove gets trounced, as it does most of the weekend. This time, an error-ridden defense and a pop-fly offense culminate in a mercy rule. “One, two, three,” our players count down before giving their post-game cheer: “way to lubricate us, Trojans!”

“Very catchy,” I praise. “Way to maintain that sense of humor!”

“It’s the only thing we *haven’t* lost this weekend,” Tim observes.

“Two to 18,” Pat growls, shaking his head. “What a tournament!”

“Forget about it,” I encourage, “let’s have lunch.” When Al suggests Friday’s, everyone nods. We collect our gear and head for the parking lot.

Popping the trunk, Doug asks, “Have I told you about Xavier?”

“Whom?”

“There’s this guy who comes into Walgreens almost every day now. Xavier never has a prescription for me to fill. He comes ‘just to talk.’ I’m not sure, but I think he *likes* me. He keeps asking me to have a beer with him.”

Uncertain why this is the first I’ve heard of Xavier, and why now, I query, “Does his crush bother you?”

“I’m not sure it’s a crush,” Doug says. “I’m not even sure that Xavier’s gay.”

“Does he know that you’re married?”

“Oh yeah, I’ve mentioned you several times, but he’s never tried to coordinate a meeting with both of us, *if you know what I mean.*”

Do I know what you mean? “Well, maybe *you* should coordinate the meeting,” I suggest. “I’d be happy to check out the competition.”

Opening my door, Doug loudly insists, “He’s *not* the competition.”

Hmm. Dost the pharmacist protest too much?

At the restaurant, they set a table for 11. Just when it's ready, some of our Atlanta opponents walk through the wooden double doors. "Heeeey Tampa," greets a lanky African-American. Counting their turquoise and white jerseys, I ask the waitress to expand our party to 18. After several table reconfigurations, we at last take our seats. "Introductions!" announces the same man. "I'm William, and to my right is Kurt." He continues listing their names, but I lose track.

We then go around our group. "Hey, I'm Rob."

"Hi Raaaahb," William fawns. "Please tell me that you're single."

"Actually," Rob says, "I'm with Tim over there."

"I'm Anna," says the former teammate who's joined The Cove for the tournament.

"And I'm not with anyone, in case you're interested." William smiles.

"Pat. Ditto what she said."

"And Tiiiiim," William says before he can.

Going around our part of the table, Tim says, "Doug, Lisa, Joe, Al, Jeff—"

"Ooooh, Jeff," William flirts, "a sexy Mexican or somethin'."

"Italian," Jeff corrects. "And next to me is Hank. We couldn't talk 'im into another season, but he's helping us out for the tournament." A bit embarrassed, Hank waves.

"So many beee-yootiful men," William swoons, tugging at his closely-cut beard.

"Ooh, and ladies. Y'all play softball too?"

"Anna does," Tim explains, "and Lisa's writing her dissertation about the team."

William turns to me, adjusts his round glasses, and purses his lips. "And whuuut, Miss Lisa, is so captivating about this team?"

“Their experiences, their feelings, their stories. I’m hoping that my project will foster understanding and community between gay and straight people.”

“*Straight people?*” William repeats.

“Well,” I point out, “in our group we have Anna, myself, my husband Doug—”

“Doug!” William exclaims, looking over at him. “I never suspected.”

“Thank you very much,” Doug says with a grin. Ever so slightly, I shift in my seat.

“It *is* a compliment,” William insists.

“I know,” Doug responds.

“He knows,” Rob assures.

“And Hank,” I say, completing the list.

“They’ve been trying to convert me,” claims Hank.

Adds Doug in his best James Earl Jones, “To another side of the force.”

“The *dark* side!” Hank says.

“This ain’ no dark side,” Jeff counters. “It’s *aaawl* sunshine.”

Hank begins to protest, but William interrupts with, “That’s just two tears in a bucket, so mother fuck it!” No one knows exactly what he means, but we crack up nonetheless.

Their spokesman keeps us in stitches throughout a lunch of slow service and lukewarm food. As we take our last bites, he compliments, “Y’all have a great sense of humor.”

“We laugh at everything you say,” Rob observes.

“See what I mean?” William asks, getting up from the table. “Scuse me a minute. I need to use the little girls’ room.”

When he leaves, our pig-tailed waitress returns. As she distributes checks, clears dishes, and wipes spills, we admire her black, high-cut vinyl shorts. Instead of responding, she says, "That guy who was just here, is he ... *flaming?*" Her palm goes limp, and she sways it like a pendulum. The table falls silent.

At last, Rob responds, "Yeah, we *all* are."

Her mouth drops open, and she looks away. "R-really? I'd never guess *you* were gay."

"Thanks," Rob bites. He clenches his teeth, and I wait for him to say something more. He doesn't. No one does.

Before making a quick exit, she weakly tosses out, "Seems like every good looking guy is gay."

By the time William returns, we're all standing behind our chairs. "Whuut?" he asks. "No one's havin' another cocktail?"

"Nah," Rob answers. "Let's get back to the tournament."

The group talks little on the way to our cars, and Doug and I drive most of the return trip in silence. Only when the ballpark comes into view does our energy pick up.

Rob and Tim arrive at the same time, and the four of us begin raking our server. "I'd never guess *you* were gay," Rob mocks. "Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"She was clueless!" says Tim. "Had no idea she was being insulting."

"And stupid," Doug adds.

Rob exhales, then, "Forget it. Please, let's just forget it." With that, he strides toward the field.

Watching him, I wonder about his response to our waitress. Was it enough? She was caught in her heterosexist web, and Rob replied sarcastically to her back-peddling remark, but was this “teachable moment” effective? Did she rethink her assumptions? Should we have been more direct, more expressive of our anger—to her, perhaps even to her manager? Why did so many of my gay companions not respond to her? I could see frustration in their narrowed gazes and tightened foreheads. Are they afraid that if they turn the valve, they’ll explode? Is this experience so ubiquitous that they’re numb? Why didn’t *I* respond? Was I giving the floor to Rob because it seemed more rightfully his? Was I surprised into silence? Am *I* numb?

Then I wonder about William. What’s it like to be so conspicuously gay? What does he face that men who can pass (like the Cove men) don’t? At the same time, how much of this repugnant “third-party” discourse does he *not* have to hear because few would presume him heterosexual? To pass or not to pass, each seems an equally complex path.

Second Shot

At field four, I secure the lens onto my new camera and position myself behind home plate. Looking into the viewfinder, I see only black. Confused, I adjust the settings, check the battery, and examine the flash. Still, every time I peer through, I get the same onyx landscape. “Take off the lens cap,” suggests a man behind me. I smile, knowing both the voice and the correctness of his diagnosis. How cliché of me, I think, and how dumb!

“Thanks, Colin,” I say, turning to greet the former Suncoast player. “How are you?” His appearance speaks for itself: full face, shiny hair, and smooth, rosy complexion. My

mind flashes to a different time—just one year ago—and a different Colin, dangerously gaunt with pale, jaundiced skin.

Colin shows me his camera and explains the features on mine, taking me through aperture and depth of field. Much of it goes over my head, but I play along, happy to see some fire back in his crystal blue eyes. “By the way,” he says, “did you get a team picture from when Michael was alive?”

Studying his newly robust chest and arms, I tell him, “No, do you have any left?”

“I’ll send you one,” Colin offers. Then, with a quizzical look, he asks, “What?”

“I’m sorry to be staring, Colin, but I can’t get over it. You look so ...”

“Healthy?” he finishes. When I nod, his face flushes a bit.

I watch him return his lenses to their case, and one thought occupies my mind: thank god for Protease inhibitors.

Intersubjectivity

Nine AM brings a disappointing 12-run shutout, ending the tournament for The Cove. As we clear the dugout, I remind the grumbling group, “It’s supposed to be fun.” Grimaces all around. “Besides,” I try again, “you lost so early in the day that we can get breakfast!”

Our attentive waitress brings two fresh pots of coffee as 10 of us enjoy dishes remarkably unique for a strip mall café. Dill omelets, banana and granola pancakes, and Spanish frittatas circle the table as we rehash the games. Changing the subject, I ask across the table, “Your mother still in town?” When Al nods, I say, “Maybe your mom and Gordon’s mom should get together. Marilyn will be here another week.”

“They’d have a lot to talk about,” he agrees.

“Gordon said he might disclose to her first,” I toss out. “Is it easier to tell moms?”

“DON’T ASK ME,” say Al, Rob, and Stewart.

“I wanted that over in one shot,” Pat tells us.

“How did it go?” I ask.

Pat sets down his fork and takes a sip of cream-and-sugared coffee. “I was home for Easter. I knew I had to do it, but I was really nervous. I remember going into the bathroom and having to take some deep breaths. When I opened the door, my mom asked if anything was wrong. I directed her into the living room, where my father was sitting.” He pauses to adjust his oval glasses. “I just said it: ‘I’m gay.’”

“My mom said, ‘We still love you.’ But my dad,” Pat recalls, mimicking his father’s nonverbals, “he dropped his chin, his mouth fell open, and he said, ‘Jeezus ChrrRIST!’” Pat laughs at the memory but winces a bit before saying, “I’ll never forget that.

“Then he told me three things. ‘One, the average life span of a gay man is 39 years.’ I said, ‘Well, I’m almost there already.’ I was 35 at the time. ‘Two, there’s a place in Arizona with an 80 percent success rate.’ You know, *conversion*. I said, ‘Dad, if conversion were possible, believe me, I would’ve done it by now.’ ‘Three, if you’re in the closet, you’d better stay there. This will destroy your business.’ I thought, ‘If anything, coming out would *help* my business.’ A lot of gay people prefer to keep their money within the community.

“The whole time my dad was talking, he wouldn’t look at me. He stared at the floor, the chair, anything to avoid eye contact. I had to get out of there. My mom said goodbye, but he said nothing. *He wouldn’t even look at me.*”

As I edit this section, a familiar ball settles into my throat, and tears well in my eyes. I feel like I'm right there—in Pat's living room, in his body, in his heart. Each time I read these pages, I hope for a different response from his father. I want him to *look at Pat* and say, "I love you, son. I'm sorry you've been alone with this for so long." I want him to reach over and hold Pat while he cries (as I'm crying now), releasing years of loneliness and struggle. But some things you just can't revise.

Months after this breakfast, I ask Pat, "In a perfect world, how would your father have responded?"

Looking away, he replies, "My dad would've said, 'I love you no less for it.' That's all I ever wanted from him."

While the server clears his plate, Pat exhales. "From my parents' house, I drove to my brother's place. He was leaving as I was walking up. I said, 'I dropped a bomb on Mom and Dad. I told them I'm gay.' My brother put his arm around me and said it didn't matter. 'However,' he said, 'that does explain why they just called and told me to get over there right away.' We both laughed. So my brother was really cool about it."

This supportive encounter concludes the story of Pat coming out to his family. I finish my meal wondering about the emotions lingering beneath its "happy ending."

When Pat spoke his father's words, his voice was strained; when recalling the averted gaze, rivers of tension cut his brow. I heard equal stress in Rob's voice when he told our is-he-flaming waitress, "We *all* are." I saw the same lines on Tim's forehead when

that drunk barked, “Your quarterback is a faggot!”⁶ But time after time, our group seems to suppress anger, pain, and fear by ignoring a situation, by laughing at it, or by addressing it on the surface and quickly moving on. What are the consequences of these defenses—for emotional health, for relationships, for social change? Don’t they keep us estranged from one another?

Since the disclosure in 1995, Pat and his father, now battling cancer, have not spoken about his sexual identity. Why? For Pat, was coming out so painful that he’s not prepared to risk any more? For his father, is having a gay son so disconcerting that he erects verbal and nonverbal barriers to knowing more? For them, what else might open, and what might close, by broaching this topic again? Who, if anyone, should take the initiative, and when? For them, as for Al and his father, someday it will be too late.

Practice as Usual

It’s been raining much of this Saturday morning, rendering the field a maze of standing water and mud. That may explain why the practice’s only attendees are Pat, Stewart, and Scot (an aspiring actor of 20 and The Cove’s latest addition).

Squatting behind the home plate fence, I steady my Canon Rebel, zooming in on Pat. He smirks before sending Stewart a grounder. I push the button halfway to focus, and just as I’m about to take the shot, I hear it. “*Fucking faggots!*”

Startled, my right hand releases the camera, but I catch it by the lens with my left. I look toward the cross-town, which runs just behind the Hyde Park field. A beat-up, olive

⁶ See Chapter 3.

Chevy whizzes down the curve, its male passenger leaning out the window and calling, “*Fucking loooooosers!*” Wicked howls of laughter follow.

When the car passes, I peer into the viewfinder at Pat, then Stewart, then Scot. I study each closely, searching for any sign of hurt, embarrassment, or anger. No eyes glare, no brows furl, no jaws clench. Their warm-up continues as usual. Maybe they were distracted, I tell myself, maybe they couldn’t hear from the outfield. Maybe.

In the next meeting of my Ethnography seminar, I tell the class about this incident. “It’s difficult enough for these men to—”

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” interrupts a male colleague, “but being called a ‘faggot’ is no big deal. It happened to me just the other day.”

“But the term doesn’t assault you in the same way it would if you were gay.”

“You’re making too much of it,” he says, “and if you don’t mind, I’d prefer to discuss the readings for tonight.”

“Making too much of it.” The phrase sticks in my mind. Better than being dismissive!

As I impatiently await the end of class, I think about how estranged I feel from the department. Most weeks, I spend just three hours here. In my first year, it was between 20 and 30. Each previous semester, I took three courses; now, I have only one. Thanks to a university fellowship, I’m not teaching either, whereas I used to be assigned two classes each term. But my absence isn’t merely physical. I’m emotionally estranged as well. I don’t feel nearly as connected to my cohorts or as invested in the departmental community as I

once did. What has been lost, and what would it take to regain—from my colleagues and from me?

Bagels with Satan

After practice, we decide to meet at The Village Inn, where a matronly server brings us skillet breakfasts and pancakes. As we sip coffee, I wonder if anyone will mention the “fucking faggots” incident at the field. No one does. Instead, we get into a discussion about Stewart’s family.

“Your folks know you’re gay?” I ask.

“Oh no!” Stewart exclaims. “They’re not ready for that one.”

“How do you know?” I probe.

“Well,” he says, stabbing a home-fried potato, “my parents aren’t the most tolerant people, my father especially—a real racist. When I was 18, I asked this guy over to our house. We were having a party. After while, one of the guests said to my dad, ‘There’s some *Black* kid here.’ My father came up to me and ordered, ‘*Never* invite him again!’ My eyes really opened that day. I saw my father in a whole new light.

“My dad,” Stewart continues, then breaks into laughter. “My dad won’t eat ...” he barely can get the words out, “he won’t eat bagels!”

“Bagels?” Pat queries. “Why not?”

Hushing his voice, Stewart mocks, “*Jewish thing.*” We giggle ourselves silly.

“And my mother, whoa!” he says, throwing his hands in the air. “She told me that Satan ... *Satan* has been planting evil seeds in her head.” Stewart loses it again. “He’s

making her think I'm," he looks to his right, then his left, then leans in, as if guarding a secret, "a homosexual!

"But the best part," he tells us, " is that she had a conversation about me—with God!"

I play along. "What did God say?"

"He covered for me," Stewart reports. "So, I've got a dad who won't even eat a bagel and a mom haunted by Satan. Think they're ready to hear their son is gay?"

"Maybe not," I reply, "but at least God's on your side."

Tacit Agreements

When we arrive for Thursday night practice, little leaguers have the field. Doug and I cheer as a series of fielding errors and some aggressive running turn a single into four bases. In the half-full bleachers, the young boy's proud parents stand and high-five each other. Stretching out by the fence, Gordon encourages, "That 'a way, kid!"

"Hey," I call as we approach, "how was the State Fair?"

"Uh!" he exclaims. "Should 'a been selling *teeth* instead 'a hair!"

I swat his arm and ask, "Your parents still here?"

"Their 21st day," Gordon replies, scratching his goatee-in-progress. "But they're drivin' back to Philly tomorrow."

"Did you tell them?" I pry.

"Nah," he responds. "They don't wanna know."

"How can you be sure?"

“In three weeks, the closest either of them came to opening the door was when my mom looked at that picture of us from Lauderdale, the one of you and about 20 guys. She said, ‘My, you have a lot of male friends.’”

“To which you said ... ”

“Nothing! Look, I’ll tell them when they’re ready.”

As Gordon picks up his glove, I wonder about his assessment. I think his parents *are* ready. When I met Tex and Marilyn, I sensed that they want to know their son. I saw it in their concerned faces; I heard it in their earnest questioning. So what’s Gordon waiting for? The “right” time? From my experience with disclosing bulimia, that time never comes. What does come is a nerve-racking, composure-lacking, hands-shaking, lump-in-your-throat-making experience. It sucks, yes, but what a relief when it’s over!

Still, I’ve no right to judge. I’ve kept a part of myself hidden for 10 years. No one’s invented more excuses not to tell than I. Maybe that’s why I can’t seem to confront my friend more directly.

While Gordon warms up with Doug, I find Al below an old oak, where a slow shower of acorns rains upon the hard ground. He lies down, using his glove as a pillow. “What’s up?” I ask, hoping to learn more about Neil, his new lover.

“Been movin’ the boy into his house,” Al replies. “Neil’s brother and friend will be stayin’ with him. Neither of them knows.” Al raises his eyebrows and shoots me a look that suggests trouble. “I also met The Parents. They were eyein’ meeee! I was thinkin’ to myself, ‘Oh, jus’ figure it out!’”

I sense something underneath his light tone. “Is it difficult, Al, keeping this secret?”

“Sometimes,” he admits. “I won’ lie about it like I used to. These days, my mother and I seem to have an agreement: don’ ask, don’ tell.”

“So what do you do when something important happens in your personal life, like you meet someone, or a relationship falls apart?”

“Who!” Al exclaims. “A few years ago, I called home after a break-up. I was *devastated*, cryin’ on the phone to my mother. I told her what’d happened, but in my story, I changed the sex of the person I was datin’. I was such a mess that Mom flew me home.”

Hesitantly I ask, “Are you, um, are you sad you never told your father?”

“Well,” he sighs, “my dad knows now, and there’s nothin’ he can do about it. I don’ think my father could’ve handled it. My family’s pretty fundamentalist. Even dancin’ is out. Just imagine how a gay son would go over!”

“I can’t.”

“Neither can I.”

As Al closes his eyes, I ponder “don’t ask/don’t tell” agreements. How are they formed? When Al and Gordon began coming to terms with their sexual orientation, did they consciously or unconsciously decide to stop sharing their romantic lives with their families? When they reached a certain age and no women were coming home or being mentioned, were family members scared into silence? When did these communicative behaviors become rules? How much do their families know? How much do they *want* to know? Do their families speculate about Gordon and Al’s sexual orientation among themselves, or do they “dare not speak its name”—ever? What do such tacit agreements permit? What do they prohibit?

"I Don't Need Change"

Scattered Sunday clouds offer inadequate shelter from a sun that seems 10 feet overhead. I feel my lips cracking and my hair fading to brass. "Beverage?" Rob offers.

"I'll go with you. Then you can tell me how things are between you and Tim."

"Hectic," he admits. "I've been traveling a lot for work, and Tim's busy with his last semester of classes. But we're talking about living together in June." I smile.

We approach a large cooler between the home and visitors' stands. Next to the blue chest, this year's league commissioner sits in a folding lawn chair. "Hey there," Rob greets. "One bottled water and a Gatorade, please." The commissioner starts bending down to unhook the metal latch but stops abruptly. Grabbing his lower back, he flinches. Through his T-shirt, the outline of his body becomes visible. He can't weigh 140 pounds. Every rib and vertebrae is visible, and yellowish, pallid skin hangs loosely from his triceps and knees.

"I got it," Rob says. "I got it." He reaches into the ice and water to find our drinks, then hands over three dollars.

"Change ..." the commissioner wheezes, "you've got change coming." Mucus rattles in his throat as he speaks himself out of breath. "The box on the ground ... can you hand it to me?"

"Don't worry about it," Rob says, touching his shoulder. "I don't need change."

As we return to the bench, neither of us voices what we both suspect: AIDS will claim this life before the spring season ends.

A Whole Other Dissertation

Later that afternoon, Pat and I make our way through the trendy shops, cafés, and galleries of Hyde Park Village. As we round the corner toward Joffrey's Coffee Shop, I ask, "What did you think the first time you met Doug?"

Pat smiles, blushing a little. "When I joined the team, I thought everybody was gay. And I was kind of, ah, interested in Doug. 'Cause he's my type, you know, tall, lanky."

"So you thought he looked gay?"

The question seems to surprise him. "Um, I don't know," Pat says reluctantly. "It just never occurred to me that straight people would play on a gay team."

We find Tim and Rob waiting at an outdoor table. When Pat and I take our seats, I decide to pursue this line with them as well. "Guys, do you think Doug could pass as gay?"

Rob cocks his head and studies me a bit while Tim crinkles his brow. After thinking about it a second, Rob says, "Doug is handsome, clean-cut, and well-dressed enough, but if I saw him walking down the street, he's not someone I necessarily would peg as gay."

Still eyeing me suspiciously, Tim inquires, "Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering," I reply. "It's not a problem."

"Oh good," he says. "I thought maybe you were worried about something."

I smile and tell him "no," but I'm not sure he believes me. I mean, I'm just curious about how these men see Doug. Really! Do I seem concerned? I shrug it off ... for now.

When *Dateline* breaks for its final set of commercials, I check the time on the VCR—10:46 PM. Where is Doug? He was off work at 10. Hung up at the pharmacy? He would've phoned by now. Traffic maybe. But at quarter to 11? Car trouble then. I'm sure he

would've called. I try not to worry, but at 11:00, I dial his work number. "Walgreens pharmacy," answers a female voice.

"Hello. Is Doug Healy still there?"

"Oh no," she replies. "He left at 10:15."

Perplexed, I hang up. Did he tell me about an errand; was he meeting Pat or Gordon?

Eleven-fifteen comes, 11:30, midnight. At 12:30, I swear, I'm getting in my car.

It's now 12:15, and my hand trembles slightly as I put my contacts back in. Moving quickly, I peel off my pajamas and head for the closet, where I throw on a long-sleeved T. As I'm stepping into stretch pants, I hear a bolt click. I stride toward the living room.

"Hi honey," Doug says. His sweet smile fades when he sees the all-business expression on my face.

"Where the hell have you been?" I demand.

Doug takes a step back and gives me a puzzled look. "I went for a beer," he answers.

"Where, Orlando?"

"Xavier's house," Doug tells me.

I pause, dumbfounded. "*Xavier?*"

"You know, the guy who keeps stopping by 'just to talk.'"

"I know," I snap. "So you went to his *house?*"

"What's the problem?"

"The problem? I can't believe you! Didn't you say that Xavier is interested in you?"

"I don't know that for sure; I don't even know if he's gay."

"But he comes to see you at the pharmacy *every single day.*"

“Just about.”

“Uh!” I exclaim, exasperated. “I can’t believe you didn’t call to let me know. It’s quarter after 12! What if he’d tried to attack you? What if he’d slipped Rophynol in your beer?”

“Listen to yourself,” Doug says. “If Xavier’s gay, then he’s likely to victimize straight guys? Aren’t you beyond that kind of thinking?”

“Him being gay makes him neither more *nor less* likely to hurt someone.”

Walking away, Doug lets out a prolonged sigh. “You’re overreacting.”

I follow him into the bedroom. “Here’s a scenario for you. For a month, a student of mine has been hanging around after class, making up any excuse to talk with me. I can tell he’s interested in more than my theories of communication. One night, I accept his invitation to go back to his place for a beer. I don’t call you. You don’t know his last name, so you have no way to find me. Would all that be cool with you?”

Doug turns to face me. “No,” he says sheepishly, “it wouldn’t.”

“What you did was not smart! You don’t know this man! Weren’t you thinking at all about your personal safety?”

“I guess not,” Doug admits.

“Besides, what kind of message do you think it sends when you agree to have a beer at the home of someone who’s got a crush on you?”

A long pause follows. “Lisa, do you think I’m gay and I’m having an affair?”

Boom.

His question hangs there a moment. I exhale slowly and say, “Douglas, I trust you. But crazy things go through your head when your partner is missing for two hours.”

“So the thought occurred to you?”

“Yes,” I admit. “It did.”

“I love you,” he tells me.

“You scared me.”

“I’m sorry,” Doug says. “I’m really sorry.”

Over the next several days, Xavier continues to frequent Doug’s store, each time asking, “When can we have another beer?” With every visit, it becomes increasingly evident that he’s looking for more than a drinking buddy. As much as I hate to admit it, whenever Xavier’s name arises in conversation, an unsettling question turns over in my mind: *what does Doug really want?*

A week later, I attend the master’s thesis defense of my friend Leigh. Afterward, she thanks me for coming and says, “I can’t wait for *your* defense.”

Overhearing, her boss and mentor Harriet approaches. “Leigh tells me you’ve been studying gay men. How did you become involved with that?”

“My husband plays for a gay softball team.”

“Oh right,” Harriet remembers. “Leigh mentioned that.” She looks away, seeming to process something. “But, um, your husband, he’s not gay, right?”

Her question stirs up emotions from the other night. “Not to my knowledge,” I say, trying to feel as light as my words. “That would be a whole other dissertation.”

That's It

Al passes me a bite of sausage while I wait for a salmon dijon to replace the overcooked one I sent back. "Here," he says, "the *real thang*, not the vegetarian stuff you're always eatin'." When I wave in refusal, Al encourages, "Ah c'mon, live a little!" So I do. He catches my slight smile in response to the spicy, greasy meat. "See!"

When I hand over his fork, Al shares, "Talked to my mom the other day. You won't believe this. She said, 'Al, I've been talkin' with your brother, and he and I agreed that we don't need any secrets in this family. We're past that now.'"

"Wow!" I exclaim. "That really opened the door." Al nods but says nothing. "So," I probe, "how did you respond?"

He digs through his mound of pasta and peppers a bit before answering, "I said, 'You're right Mom.'"

I smile, wondering what Al's not telling me. "And ... what else did you say?"

"That's it," he insists.

"That's *it*?"

"That's it," Al repeats, stabbing another slice of pork. "More sausage?"

"No," I say, looking at him quizzically, "that's it."

In this moment, I want to reach across the table and shake him. I'd like to shout, "*Tell them!* Confirm what they already know so you all can move on!"

But I don't. I guess Al and I have a tacit agreement of our own.

Men in Pumps

It's Easter Sunday, and I'm about to tackle the reading for Ethnography when the phone rings. "Hey baby," says Doug. "I'm at the house of Rob's friend, Jon. You should come—people to meet, things to see."

"In other words, a fieldwork opportunity?"

"Better bring your camera," he advises.

When I ring the bell, I hear snickering and shuffling inside. Rob appears, about five inches taller than usual. I look down to find black platform sandals on his feet. "I'm the asshole," he explains, referring to a card game where your hand determines your position in a hierarchy that ranges from president to asshole. Any superior can tell you to do anything.

Tim comes over. "Hey! I've been wanting you to meet Kerby," he says, leading me to the table. Wearing a Wonder Woman T, a 20-ish man with ultra-blond spikes and ear and tongue piercings extends his hand.

The men continue their game. As president, Pat orders everyone into the shoes. He's about to let my husband off the hook when Doug slides his pant legs past his knees and says, "Hand 'em over." He groans while squashing size 10½ men's feet into size nine ladies' pumps. Bunched up and buckled in, Doug climbs upon the piano bench.

"Strike a pose!" Tim instructs.

He turns his back, sticks out his rear end, looks over his shoulder, and tosses a come-hither glance. Letting out a girlish sigh, he says, "They really accCCENTuate my calves, don' cha think?"

“Unbelievable,” I remark as the men whistle, applaud, and cheer.

Doug’s other gender-bending experience is no less eventful. While practicing a Madonna routine with Jeff and Pat for the 1997 Miss Suncoast Softball pageant, he tries to outdo his co-stars by finishing with the splits. Doug pulls a hamstring and has to sit the bench for a month.

Ironically, Doug’s willingness to perform as one of the “girls” seems to solidify his position as one of the boys. Often, like at this Easter party, he chooses their comfort over his own, pushing his boundaries in order to prove himself worthy of insider status.

More and more, I feel like an insider as well. My social life revolves around Thursday practices and post-practice gatherings, Sunday games and brunches, plus phone calls, movies, and meals throughout the week. My academic life, moreover, involves taking notes on the group, recording our interactions, and conducting and transcribing interview sessions. In spite of my efforts, I find that there are limits to the intersubjectivity I can share with these men.

The Lone Ethnographer

Cream candles set in iron chandeliers as big as satellite dishes illuminate the main floor of Odyssey in Orlando. Flashes of red, green, and yellow emanate from dozens of spot and strobe lights while Tori Amos’ “Professional Widow” pumps from refrigerator-size speakers. Recognizing its tune, many standing near the bar down their drinks and pack the already-full dance floor.

Our Tampa group has splintered. I spot Al upstairs chatting with a tall guy I don't recognize. Near the stage, Pat—shades on, shirt off—grooves with a young raver. Gordon must be outside or in line for the bathroom, and I haven't seen Rob and Tim since we got here two hours ago. That leaves me dancing with Gregg, a charming new acquaintance who has his eye on a boyish platinum blond. "Where's your husband?" Gregg shouts over the music.

"What?" I ask, placing my hand behind my ear.

"DOUG ... WHERE IS HE?"

With a shrug, I mouth back, "No idea."

He takes a step toward me and says in my ear, "You're amazing."

"No," I tell him, pointing at his slinky silver shirt, "that *outfit* is amazing."

"I mean it. Your husband's wandering a gay club, and you don't seem worried." Is that a bit of foreboding I hear? Before I can ask, he's again making eyes elsewhere.

For a while, I don't mind Gregg's diverted attention; it gives me the freedom to turn inward and enjoy the rhythm. But after several minutes of him looking over my shoulder, I give him a shove toward the male Marilyn and say, "Go!"

I wander through the crowd, looking for Tampa people. Pat comes into view, but when I see him take the Blow Pop from his mouth and place it between the raver's lips, I shy away. I locate Tim and Rob, but they're attached like double-sided tape. Glancing upward, I no longer see Al.

As I step off the dance floor, I feel something I haven't felt in months—*left out*. Where do I fit, I wonder, when everyone's either paired off or trying to pair off? Perhaps

nowhere. Maybe this is how gay men feel in straight clubs. But they could pass as insiders there, an option I don't have here, and besides, we never go to straight clubs.

How dependent I've become on them for a sense of inclusion, and how it stings to be pushed back to the periphery! In this moment, I grasp the limits of my role as participant in this community. A bit melancholy, the "lone ethnographer" ascends the stairs, walks over to the railing, gazes down over the sea of men, and observes.

Standing there, I consider that for some time, I've been thinking of Doug and me as "model heterosexuals." But now I wonder how many could follow our lead. How many straight men could get used to being presumed gay? How many straight women could adjust to the sometimes-disconcerting mix of conspicuousness and invisibility? How many straight couples would all but leave behind their old worlds; and how many of those wouldn't fit into this one because they don't enjoy the club scene, because they lack disposable income, or because they have family commitments? What *are* the possibilities for border crossing? And what are the consequences?

Not a Massage Parlor

A moment later, Doug startles me from behind. "Been looking all over Odyssey for you. What are you doing?"

"Watching," I tell him.

When he asks, "Want to get some air instead?" I nod.

Taking my hand, he leads me to the 'L'-shaped patio, where we find Gregg. The guys wait under a large potted tree while I purchase two bottled waters from a man working the hot dog cart. Walking back, I pass a raver sitting astride her companion, her legs wrapped

tightly around his back. His tongue dueling hers, he grips blond ringlets with one hand as the other ventures up her micro Lycra skirt.

Through the amazingly dense 4:00 AM crowd, I make my way toward my husband and acquaintance. From a few feet away, I hear Gregg imploring, “Dougie, stretch me. You’re the only one tall enough.” Obliging, Doug moves behind Gregg, who sways to the music thundering from inside. Arms high overhead, Gregg puts his palms together; Doug then places his hands around Gregg’s. Both go on their tiptoes, elongating their groove-weary backs.

“Excuse me!” a male’s stern voice shouts. We turn to find a navy-jacketed security guard. “This is *not* a massage parlor. If you guys need to do that, take it someplace else!”

“*This,*” Gregg retorts, “is a gay club, *sir.*” The guard stares at Gregg and Doug a few moments before continuing along his patio beat.

Peering over silver-rimmed sunglasses, Gregg marvels, “Of all people, he picks on Doug!” The three of us laugh. “Did he really say, ‘This is *not* a massage parlor?’”

Later, the story of this encounter will be repeated so often that the security guard’s comment becomes incorporated into our group’s vernacular, so whenever people get “a little too close,” someone will say, “Excuse me, this is *not* a massage parlor!”

“Enough about him,” Doug says disgustedly. “Let’s go dance.”

As we reenter the club, I watch Officer Anti-Massage pass by the raver couple, still crawling all over each other. He glances at them briefly but says nothing.

“Ya Keep Tryin”

Knee in the practice field dirt, I focus for a shot of Pat on the mound. He brings his right arm back and through in a fluid motion that sends the ball in a lazy arc. Click!

“Scuse me,” calls an unfamiliar voice from beside the dugout. “You with this team?”

“I am,” I respond, turning around. From his too-long feathered hair and beer gut, I assume he’s not gay.

“D’ you know if they’re lookin’ fer guys?” he asks.

I cough through a giggle. “Oh, they’re always looking for guys.”

“I been wan’n’ tah be picked up,” says the man.

For real? Smiling, I reply, “Then you came to the right place.” I pause, unsure how to handle this. Jeff looks over from first base and grins. “They’re almost done with the season,” I say.

“I’d shore like tah play,” he persists.

“Okay, here’s the deal. Are you familiar with Suncoast Softball?”

“No, ma’am.”

“It’s a gay league,” I say, watching his eyes for reaction. Nothing. “Are you gay?”

“No, ma’am.”

“There are straight people who play; that’s my husband in right center. But you have to be cool with gay people, understand?”

“I jus’ wanna play.”

“Hold on then,” I instruct, cupping my hands around my mouth. “Mr. Manager, could you come here please?” As Jeff strides toward the dugout, I ask the man, “What’s your name?”

"E.J.," he replies.

"Jeff, this is E.J. He's interested in signing on."

"Nice to meet ya," Jeff greets, holding out his hand. He turns to me, "Did ya explain the situation?" I nod. "Ya have gay family or somethin'?" Jeff asks him.

"No sir, I jus' wanna play ball." E.J. runs his hands down his Wranglers.

"All right," Jeff says, "as long as ya accept that the league is centered around our lifestyle. If ya can handle that, great. If ya can't, don't bother."

"I understand," E.J. affirms, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"There is a team with only eight players," Jeff tells him. "Ya could start Sunday."

"That'd be fine, sir, jus' fine."

"Write down your number; I'll get in touch with their coach and have 'im call ya."

"I do appreciate it." I tear a sheet of paper from my notepad and hand it to E.J. along with my pen. He scribbles the information and shakes our hands before returning to his pickup. Jeff and I watch as E.J. pulls away from the field.

"Think he'll show?" I ask.

"I think he will."

On Sunday, Jeff warms up with David while I get settled in the dugout. "Hey Li," Jeff calls between throws. "You know that guy? The one from last practice."

"E.J.?"

"Rudy called 'im three times."

"And he never called back," I anticipate. When Jeff nods, I say, "I knew it!"

"I didn't," my friend tells me. "I believed 'im when he said he wanted to play."

“What do you do?” I muse.

“Ya keep tryin’,” Jeff replies.

I go home thinking about Jeff’s last statement. It moves me to consider my feelings of isolation from straight associates. How has my absence impacted me? What have I gained and lost? What message has my absence sent my old worlds? That straight and gay lives shall remain separate? No, that *can’t* be the moral of my journey. If Jeff and other gay men can “keep tryin’,” then surely I can too.

No Polish

The first Sunday in May, I sit on the bench next to Kerby. He doesn’t seem to mind my incessant questions regarding the chemical conversion of his once-dark locks into flaxen spikes; the violet, green, and lavender tattoo winding around his upper arm; and the silver stud through his tongue. “Did it hurt?” I ask of the piercing.

“Not as much as the Prince Albert,” he says.

The closet doors blew open for Kerby ages ago, and he hasn’t looked back since—remarkable for a 22 year old raised Mormon in Salt Lake City. A sharp storyteller who can recall of a long-past event not only who did and said what but also how they were sitting and what they were wearing (accessories included), Kerby keeps me entertained while The Cove struggles to end this inning.

The guttural roar of an old engine intrudes upon our conversation, but we try to ignore it. Then we hear something unmistakable. “*Faaaggoooots!*”

“Not again,” I moan, as umpires, players, and spectators turn toward the parking lot.

A grey sedan creeps down the street, along the left field line. Then the carload of males turns the corner onto Swann Avenue, which runs behind the outfield. "*Suck me, faggots!*" If my stare had the force of Carrie's in the Stephen King novel, their ride would end in a spectacular fireball. Hysterical guffaws fade slowly as the four-door motors away.

I steal a glance at Kerby, whose back has straightened. Looking into his green eyes, I remark with mock surprise, "Wait a minute, there are *faggots* here?"

In a child-like falsetto, Kerby responds, "And me without my good nail polish!" We exchange smiles, but they fade simultaneously. I lay my head on his shoulder, and he pulls me close, stroking my hair.

When I go home to write about this episode, it occurs to me that keeping it locked away in my field notes accomplishes nothing. It doesn't communicate to my gay associates how deeply angry and hurt I was, and it doesn't challenge the structure of homophobia that renders such incidents so commonplace. My gut tells me that I have been a mere witness long enough. Soon it will be time to *bear witness*.

Other Women

After yet another loss, Pat reminds his frustrated team that we're hosting a fundraiser at Impulse. We agree to meet there at 4:00.

Doug and I move quickly to the patio, where several Cove players busily set up. Al loads a tray with a can of Redi-Whip and plastic shot glasses of cubed Jell-O in lemon, apricot, and black cherry. Meanwhile, Tim and Rob put out plates, buns, and chips for the

barbecue. Gordon stands behind a small bar that David and Pat lean on as they strategize about the sale of raffle tickets. The duo agrees on one dollar each or five dollars for a ream extending “from dick to the floor.” I don’t ask what the “bargain” entails for women.

I feel a tug at my sleeve. “Lisa,” says Tim, “there’s someone I’d like you to meet.” He walks me across the patio and stops by the buffet table. A striking woman I recognize offers a manicured hand when Tim tells me, “This is Mia.”

“We met once before,” I remind. “You were wearing this fabulous leather ensemble.” She looks equally stunning now: short, sleeveless dress in a summery yellow floral; deep burgundy locks, perfectly bobbed; flawless make-up. I glance down at my team jersey, denim shorts, and dirty Nikes, then reach back to feel my unwashed, pony-tailed hair.

“Anyway ...” Mia says, turning toward Rob. As they continue whatever conversation we interrupted, I smile at Tim and walk back to the bar.

A few minutes later, Tim comes over again. “Rob and I sensed bad vibes between you and Mia,” he says. “What were you thinking when I introduced you?”

Surprised by his analysis, I consider it a moment, then tell him, “The only thing I can remember thinking is that she had a nice, firm handshake. Why?”

“We thought maybe ...” Tim hesitates a bit. “Maybe you’ve gotten used to being the only girl—” Shooting me an oops! glance, he stops to correct himself. “Sorry, the only *woman* around. Maybe you don’t like women anymore!”

My mouth falls open. “Is that a joke?”

“Is it?” he shoots back.

My first impulse is to tell Tim he's crazy, but then I begin asking myself some tough questions. How long *has* it been since I wrote Kara—a year? When *was* the last time I had lunch with Alexandra, Christine, Jennifer, or Leigh, and why don't I ever invite them along when I do things with the softball guys? Am I protective of my position as the only woman in the group? If I am (and women similarly located are), how encouraging can that be for other women wanting to cultivate friendships with gay men?

Suddenly, Tim busts out laughing. "I'm kidding!" he assures. Only a little relieved, I break into a half-hearted chuckle.

Pink Triangles and Personnel Folders

After the barbecue, our group heads inside. Doug makes a run to the bar and returns with Rob, who appears distressed. I walk over and ask, "You okay?"

"Nervous," Rob admits, shifting his weight. "I just ran into a co-worker."

It takes me a second to grasp his meaning. "Who doesn't know," I add.

"Right. None of them does."

"Could you come out at work?" queries Jon. "This might be an opportunity."

Wringing his hands, Rob says, "I don't think so. The environment is pretty conservative. I like my job; I earn a good living; and I hope to move up in the next year. If they find out, they can refuse to promote me; hell, they can *fire* me. It's too risky right now."

"I'll go outside with you," I offer, trying to comfort him but feeling ambivalent about engaging in a "passing" conspiracy. "We could hold hands or something."

“Thanks, but my colleagues already think that I’m seeing Tim’s friend Linda. Now I’ve been spotted in a gay bar. Going out there with you might confuse the situation even further.”

“Is he your superior?” Jon asks.

“My subordinate, but a trouble maker—not someone I want to have any dirt on me.”

“IT’S NOT DIRT!” Jon and I insist.

“I know,” he responds. “I know it’s not.” Rob smiles but remains distracted.

The word “dirt” sticks in my consciousness. What a horrible situation! Rob works 12- and 15-hour days, sometimes traveling all week for his company, yet his career seems so precarious that he conceals both his gay identity and his most significant relationship by constructing this lie about Linda. Then tonight, while having a good time with his partner and friends, he runs into somebody from his other world. Instead of the two bonding over the mutual discovery, Rob ends up even more anxious. But the most wrenching part is that he throws the “dirt” not onto an unjust cultural system but onto himself.

A little later, Doug and I stand on the patio catching up with David. He gives us the latest scoop on his peak-and-valley relationship with Chris. Right now, they’re in a pack-your-bags crater. When David begs us to change the subject, Doug obliges, “Not to talk shop, but did you hear they may be splitting our district?”

“I did hear that,” answers our friend.

“It means a district supervisor position will open,” Doug tells me. Then, turning to David, he says, “You should be ready. What have you got, 10 years with Walgreens?”

“Just about,” David replies.

“Would you take the job?” I ask him.

“Giirl, I would take it in a heartbeat, in a *heartbeat*. But chore huzzband will be promoted loong before I.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Buhcause Doug has you! There’s a big ol’ pink triangle on my personnel folder.”

“You don’t think you’ll *ever* be promoted?” I inquire.

“No way, no waaay! I have hit the gay ceilin’!” When I shake my head, David says, “Welcome, girl. Welcome to the real world.”

Graduations

When I reach the apartment Tim and Rob just began renting, much of Tim’s family is already there. I recognize his mother and brother Joseph from Doug’s birthday lunch yesterday, but we really didn’t have a chance to talk.

Rob presents me to the group. “Everybody, this is Lisa. Her husband, Doug, who’s working today, plays softball with Tim and me. They’re close friends of ours.”

“Nice to meet you,” says a smartly dressed older woman. “I’m Mimi, Tim’s grandmother.” She smiles sweetly, clasping my right hand with both of hers.

A younger, longer-haired version of Tim approaches. Rob informs, “This is Tim’s brother, Matt.” He takes my hand a bit reluctantly, his quizzical look suggesting he doesn’t know quite what to make of me.

“Your husband plays on their team?” he asks. I nod. “I thought everybody was ...”

“Gay?” I fill in.

“Most everybody is,” Rob explains. “But occasionally, a straight person comes along who doesn’t mind hanging with a bunch of gay guys.” He winks at me.

“Is Doug, ah, *comfortable* out there?” asks Joseph with a slightly suspicious scowl.

“He is,” I answer. “Like Doug, these guys are educated, professional, athletic. Frankly, they’re much more similar to him than different.”

Obviously mulling it over, the brothers mutter, “Hmm.”

“Lis, would you give me a hand in the kitchen?” Rob asks.

When we’re alone, I ask, “How’s the visit going?”

“Well, I think. They’re very nice, caring people. I was a little worried about Matt; he’s the sibling who seemed to have the most difficulty when Tim came out. Ever since he was a little kid, he always admired Tim, wanting to look just like him, be just like him. When Matt found out Tim was gay, his world caved in. Suddenly, he didn’t want anything to do with Tim, and he *hated* it when anyone compared him to his brother. He changed his hairstyle and took up different activities—anything to be unlike Tim. I can tell that Matt loves his brother, and he’s trying to be tolerant, but it’s good for him to meet straight people who are at ease with us. Maybe it’ll help him move beyond tolerance.”

I smile. “And how are the rest of them handling everything?”

“Okay,” he says. “They seem a bit taken aback by us living together. They’ve never had to deal with Tim being gay on *his* turf before. You remember that we went to his mom’s for Christmas, but he was sick and in bed the whole time, so they really didn’t see us together. This weekend, Tim’s been trying to normalize our relationship for them. He kissed me goodbye before leaving for the University of Tampa just now. They were all staring, but nobody said anything.”

Glancing at the kitchen clock, I gasp, “Ooh! We’d better get going.”

Hundreds crowd the campus. Every chair is taken, so Grandma Mimi and I stake out a tree about halfway to the podium while the others try for a closer spot. Cameras ready, we sit through speech after speech, name after name, until finally, we hear it: “Tim Mahn. Accounting. Magna cum Laude.” Mimi and I let out a collective “Whooo!”

Suddenly, she reaches over to hug me, saying, “I’m glad you’re in Tim’s life.”

Glowing, I reply, “That makes two of us.”

New Traditions

The Cove spends Memorial weekend at a tournament in Atlanta. Headed to our first dinner out, four of us pile into a rented Bonneville. At a stoplight, I ask Tim and Rob, “What’s happening with that same-sex marriage case in Hawaii?”

* * *

In 1990, three same-sex couples applied for and were denied marriage licenses from the Hawaii State Department of Health. Attorney Dan Foley filed suit on the couples’ behalf. At the trial of *Baehr v. Lewin*, Foley argued that same-sex couples are entitled to equal protection under the law. The case was dismissed. On appeal in May 1993, Hawaii’s Supreme Court ruled that the Department of Health’s actions had been discriminatory, and that unless the state could prove a “compelling interest” in withholding legal status from same-sex unions, it could not do so.

In September 1996, President Clinton signed the federal Defense of Marriage Act. The following May, Hawaii’s legislators passed a bill putting a constitutional amendment to

the voters: “Shall the legislature have the power to reserve marriage to opposite-sex couples?”⁷

* * *

Tim responds, “Believe it or not, the issue is still unresolved. It’s been like seven years since those couples first applied for marriage licenses.”

Shaking my head, I observe, “Our culture has tended to stereotype same-sex relationships as less meaningful and committed than heterosexual ones, yet we close off the very avenues that lend support to such bonds.”

“To tell you the truth,” Tim says, “I’m not sure that most gay people care that much about marriage. It’s an institution rooted in a life we left behind.”

* * *

Along these lines, Michael Warner (1999) suggests that marriage works by legitimating some forms of relationships and delegitimizing others. This “program of privilege” (p. 117), he argues, is no answer to sexual or gay liberation.

* * *

Looking at his partner, Rob replies, “That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have the *option*; we may want that someday.”

A picture comes into my mind. “I can see it now: tropical flowers, tiki torches and moonlight, Birkenstocks instead of wing tips, Don Ho strumming Handel’s ‘Hallelujah’ on the ukulele, and a suckling pig luau reception!”

Tim laughs. “Still want to be a ... what did you call it?”

“A *groomsmaid*. Absolutely!”

⁷ See “Marriage Project – Hawaii” (2000).

“We’ll need help changing the man/woman parts of the ceremony,” adds Rob.

“No problem! I’m an expert at wedding revisionism.”

“That’s the truth,” Doug agrees. “Will you get wedding bands?”

“Maybe Claddagh rings,” Rob says, “the ones with the hands, heart, and crown.”

“For friendship, love, and loyalty,” I recall. “Very Irish, Rob Ryan. What about your names? Will you keep your own? Hyphenate? Ryan-Mahn or Mahn-Ryan? You could combine them. Let’s see, Ryahn works, or Mayan.”

“I’m not sure,” Rob says. “I’d have to think a *long time* before changing my name.”

“Tell me about it,” I concur.

“Black tie affair?” Doug suggests.

“YES!” they respond together.

“And the women?” I inquire. “Will we wear gowns, cocktail dresses, grass skirts?”

“Cocktail dresses,” Tim replies, “definitely.”

“I don’t know,” Rob says, “I’d like our wedding to be traditional.”

“A traditional gay wedding,” I ponder. “I like the sound of that.”

On November 3, 1998 Hawaiian voters approved a measure giving their legislature the power to reserve marriage to opposite-sex couples. In December 1999, Hawaii’s Supreme Court dismissed the *Baehr* case, saying that the constitutional amendment rendered it moot.⁸

⁸ See “Marriage Project – Hawaii” (2000).

Many eyes have since turned to Vermont. In 2000, the state Supreme Court ruled in *Baker v. Vermont* that the state has an obligation to extend the same legal rights and economic benefits to same-sex couples as to married couples.

Blasphemy

After dinner, we find our way to a bar called Blasphemy, “a must see” according to Pat. There, a rotund female officer checks our IDs and ushers us inside. The line to pay the cover moves quickly, but when the giant, scraggly-haired bouncer spots me, he holds out his hand and shouts, “Whoa! No women! No women before 2:00!”

Tim steps in front of me. “We called ahead and told the guy we were bringing her. He said it wasn’t a problem.”

“She’s our softball sponsor,” Rob fibs. “We’re in town for the Armory Classic.”

“Well ... all right,” he concedes. “But our policy is no shirts on the dance floor.”

“I’m brave,” I tell Tim and Rob, “but not that brave.”

“*That’s* why we called ahead,” Tim says, getting impatient. “We asked if she had to take off her shirt, and the guy we spoke to said she didn’t.”

The bouncer handling the other line comes over. “What’s the problem?”

“This lady doesn’t want to remove her shirt,” the first tells him.

“She *can’t!*” the second insists. “Don’t you remember that time? All those lesbians! They started baring their chests; the whole place was in an uproar! No way, honey. Your shirt stays *on!*”

Shrugging his shoulders, the first says, “You heard ’im.”

I smile. “If it makes you more comfortable, gentlemen, I’ll keep it on.”

We move inside the bar, which is illuminated by only black lights. All the shirtless men blend into the darkness, but my white tank top acts like a giant reflector panel. It must be visible from a hundred yards. My breasts never so conspicuous, I cross my arms protectively in front of my chest. Meanwhile, Doug peels off his shirt; less than enthusiastically, Rob and Tim follow suit.

“I have to pee,” I tell the guys, so Rob and Tim wind us through the thick forest of men toward the bathroom. When we reach it, Tim bypasses the 20-man line to check out the facilities.

He returns with a crinkled nose. “You definitely don’t want to go in there.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“Trust me,” he says.

When Rob queries, “Can you hold it?” I give a nod.

We then try finding space on the dance floor, but it’s wall-to-wall sweaty chests and backs. When Pat sees us, he waves us over. “Have you visited that room?” he asks me, pointing to the abyss in the back.

“No,” I respond.

“You don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

“Trust me,” he says.

So many places not to go, so much not to see. I turn to Rob and Tim. “Listen, I don’t mean to wimp out. I know what you went through to get me in here, and I appreciate the fact that you thought enough of me and of our relationship to show me this place rather than assuming that I couldn’t handle it or wouldn’t want to go. I make no judgments about

this bar, about the men here, or about whatever's happening in all the areas I'm supposed to avoid. But as a woman—as the *only* woman at Blasphemy—I don't sense that I have a place here. I think I'd like to leave.”

“I'm glad you said something,” Rob tells me, slipping his shirt back on. “To tell you the truth, Blasphemy isn't my first choice either. This meat market might be fun if I were single—”

“But there isn't much appeal if you're in a monogamous relationship,” adds Tim.

I turn to Pat. “You said Blasphemy was a ‘must see.’ I hope I've seen enough of it to earn my gay card.”

Pat laughs. “You earned your card a long time ago,” he assures, kissing me goodbye. With that, we blaze a trail out of Blasphemy.

Crossing the Line

The weekend after our return from Atlanta is Gay Disney, a gathering each June that brings to Orlando 100,000 gay men and lesbians and a few hundred Southern Baptists. Doug has to work, but with the guys' encouragement, I decide to attend the festivities anyway. Pat and I drive to O-town together, meeting Tim, Rob, and Kerby at their hotel. We pass the afternoon sunbathing and club wear shopping. Around 9:00 PM, the group begins to shower and dress for the night.

At Odyssey, we head straight for the dance floor. The music progresses from “gay anthems” (dance mixes of popular songs) to house (techno) music to a more industrial hard house. Hours pass without notice.

From across our circle, Rob smiles at me. When I smile back, he grooves my way. The music kicks in, and Rob takes my hand, pulling me close. About the same height, our bodies fit well together.

He tucks his head between my neck and shoulder, blowing lightly onto my back. In my ear, he says, "There's no substitute for a woman's body." My heart begins to pound. Rob pulls back, staring intently into my eyes. He eases closer, until our noses almost touch. When his lips part, I tell myself, "You'd better decide now where you want this to go." I peck the side of his mouth, as if to say, "I like being with you; perhaps I'm even attracted to you, but we're approaching dangerous territory."

Suddenly, Rob spins me around, then reaches behind my back, unhooks my strapless bra, and pulls it out the side of my dress. My jaw drops, and I recall a line I just read in Rauch and Fessler's (1995) *Why Gay Guys Are a Girl's Best Friend*: "A gay guy hugs you to show he cares. A straight guy hugs you to determine if your bra is front- or back-opening." Perhaps I should lend my copy to Rob. With a devilish eyebrow flash, he leans in and says, "I was a straight man for a long time." Hand on my thigh, Rob tugs at my stockings and informs, "These are coming off next."

Okay, I think, as exciting as this "research" experience is, we have to stop now. "My friend, I assure you that those are staying *on*." Perhaps feeling he took one liberty too many, Rob sheepishly hands over the white satin.

"What can I do with that now?" I ask with a smile. "It doesn't go on the same way you took it off." A bit guiltily, Rob folds one cup atop the other and stuffs my brassiere into the back pocket of his jeans, where it remains until morning.

When I get home at 9:30 AM, Doug's already up and out running. I head for the bathroom to wash up and brush my teeth.

Doug passes by just as I'm peeling off my contacts. "Have fun?" he asks, kissing my cheek.

"Yeah," I tell him. "You really should have been there." I kick my shoes away, remove my stockings, and pull my dress over my head. It's then I realize I'm still braless. "Honey," I say, "Rob, um, well, he has my bra."

"*Rob has your bra?*" he repeats.

"It was amazing," I report with all the nonchalance I can muster. "He undid it with one hand, and before I knew it, he'd yanked it out of my dress." Doug laughs. Looking up at him, I inquire, "Are you mad?"

"I'm not mad," he says.

"Not at all?"

"I guess not."

"Is that because Rob's gay?"

Doug thinks about this a moment. "Yeah, that's at least part of it. Also Rob's my friend; I trust him. And I trust you."

Kissing him tenderly, I silently query: *But do I trust myself?*

* * *

In the literature on friendship between gay men and straight women,⁹ there are two competing narratives about sexuality. One holds that friendships between gay men and straight women are relatively free of the sexual tensions that complicate many interactions

⁹ See Nahas and Turley (1979), Malone (1980), and Hopcke and Rafaty (1999).

between heterosexual men and women. Women in particular, so the story goes, “appreciate the companionship of men who are not attracted to them for sexual reasons.”¹⁰

The other narrative, however, recognizes that even these friendships can be erotic. It suggests that women often develop powerful physical attractions to gay men and that gay men and women do have sexual relationships.¹¹ In his survey of 161 gay men, Nardi (1999) indicates that about 20% of his respondents had had sex with a straight woman who was a best, close, or casual friend.

* * *

As I reflect on my encounter with Rob, my inner voice tells me that we crossed the (albeit blurry) line between friendship and a more explicitly sexual relationship. It’s something I’ve never said of my interactions with these men. At first, my dance with Rob felt much like the dance with Tim two years ago—playful and flirtatious but still within the realm of friendship. But as we stood there, poised to kiss, I realized that even with a gay man, I can’t ignore boundaries. Perhaps I felt free to explore such attractions because I assumed that they couldn’t be reciprocated. Now I recognize the possibility of mutuality (and the risks, especially for two people already involved in monogamous relationships).

Then again, isn’t the line between friendship and sex, at least to some extent, arbitrary and fictional? What purposes—and whose interests—does monogamy serve?¹² Is this arrangement negotiable, for Rob and Tim, for Doug and me? To what possible consequences? Could either couple agree on the terms? And, perhaps most difficult to

¹⁰ See Nahas and Turley (1979, p. 123).

¹¹ See Malone (1980).

¹² In his book *On Flirtation*, Adam Phillips (1994) suggests that in order to commit to a relationship, we must first commit “to commitment itself.” While not seeking to dispense with our capacity for commitment, he asks us to embrace life’s contingency and uncertainty and to imagine the many lives within each of us “competing to be lived.”

answer is this: am I so willing to explore these thoughts because, at least for now, it is I—and not my husband—who has an attraction to another?

Two weeks later, boundaries again are tested. This time, however, the desires in question are Doug's.

Gay Tendencies

I take a stool at the breakfast bar. Across from me, Kerby leans on the counter, anxiously tugging at his bib overalls. His gaze narrows when he says, "I need to tell you something."

"Uh oh."

Kerby places his fingers on my left hand, caressing and squeezing lightly. The gesture feels like one of sympathy, and I cock my head. He straightens my wedding band, then looks into my eyes, saying, "I think you deserve to know that there's been some discussion in the group about Doug's ..." My mouth opens slightly as I await the last word. Lowering his voice, Kerby adds, "*sexuality.*"

Eyes widening, I ask, "What do you mean?"

He smiles nervously and clears his throat. "Some people are worried about him going to Odyssey." Confusion crinkles my brow. Seeing I'm not getting it, Kerby explains, "They think if Doug has gay tendencies, they might come out while he's partying."

My pulse picks up. "What do *you* think?"

"I told them, 'You're fucking crazy! Don't you think if Doug were gay he would've revealed this by now?' I said it was their own wishful thinking."

"*Whose* wishful thinking?"

“Now I’m *really* in deep,” Kerby says with a sigh. “Gregg’s made comments on more than one occasion, but Gregg thinks every man is gay. Jon also has his concerns. And Pat--”

“Pat?” I respond. “He’s known us well over a year!”

Just then, a friend of Kerby’s approaches from the patio. I recognize Gary from the clubs; his dark skin, black hair, and muscular build always have reminded me of ice skater Rudy Galindo. “I said something once,” he confesses. “The last time we were at Odyssey, Doug came up and told me I was *beautiful*. I was so shocked hearing that from a straight man, I didn’t know what to think.”

“Please!” Kerby exclaims. “Doug once told me that if he were gay, I’d be his boyfriend. I said, ‘Thanks, but that really doesn’t help me out!’” Then Kerby turns to me and says, “If I thought for a minute that Doug were gay, sister, you’d have been off the nearest cliff!”

“Gee thanks, Kerby,” I respond.

“You know I’m kidding,” he says, planting a kiss on my cheek. “God, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No,” I reply, “I think this is important. Maybe for some people in the group it’s easier to believe that Doug’s in the closet than it is to believe that he’s straight yet comfortable in a gay community. Maybe they’re even *afraid* that he’s primarily attracted to men, because that would throw out our evidence that a straight man can be truly close to gay men.”

“In my experience,” Kerby says, “that *is* rare.”

“*Very* rare!” affirms Gary.

* * *

In Dwight Fee's (1996) study of friendship between gay and straight men, gay male respondents reported feeling highly aware of how threatening many straight men find their homosexuality. "Every once in a while an exceptional straight man would come along," writes Fee (1996, p. 198), "But this is exactly what he was—an exception." He continues, "[G]ay men saw definite contrasts in gay and straight friends, and obviously did not seek out straight men. They only had rare instances where they felt they could meaningfully connect with straight men, finding little appeal in their usual instrumental approach to friendship, if they even got that far" (p. 199). Later, Fee reports, "Sometimes they even wondered why the straights were open to them, questioning their sincerity as well as, occasionally, their sexual preference" (p. 221).

Price (1999) interviewed 25 pairs of gay and straight male friends. Only nine of the 25 straight men reported that they socialized with their gay friend's gay associates. Of these, six indicated that the gay man's friends and acquaintances had expressed doubts about the straight friend's heterosexuality.

* * *

"You mind if I talk with Doug about this?" I ask.

"Ooh boy," Kerby hedges. "I guess it wouldn't be fair to tell you and then expect you not to inform your husband."

"I'm glad you told me," I say.

"I probably *won't* be glad tomorrow," he predicts.

I arrive home past 3:00 AM. Having to work at eight, Doug's been asleep for hours. When I crawl in bed, he turns from his left side onto his back and asks if I had a nice time.

“It was fine,” I report, wondering if I should leave it at that. But of course I don’t.

“Want to hear something interesting, or should I tell you in the morning?”

“Tell me now.”

The room is completely black; my eyes haven’t yet adjusted, so I can’t see him at all. Facing him, I lie on my left side and put my right hand on his chest. Into the darkness, I say, “The group has been discussing your, ah, sexuality.”

Abruptly, he rolls onto his right side, leaving my hand to rest on his pillow. “My *what?*”

Swallow, breathe. “Well, some are worried that if you have ... gay tendencies, they might come out while you’re partying at Odyssey.”

Silence. At last, he queries, “They think I’m in the closet?” We both snicker, a little nervously perhaps. “Who are we talking about here?”

“Gary admitted saying something after you told him he was beautiful.”

“I said that? I don’t remember, though maybe I did.”

“And Jon, and Gregg, and uh, Pat—”

“*Pat?*” he responds, taken aback. “What about Kerby?”

“Kerby told them they were ‘fucking crazy.’”

Doug laughs. “Good for him.”

A question forms in my head, one I’ve never asked him directly. I pause, not sure I want to go there. At last, I just spit it out: “*Are you curious?*”

“Sure.”

Surprised by the immediacy of his answer, I inquire, “H-how so?”

"I've wondered what it's like to be with a man. I mean, what do they do to each other? How does it feel?" When I say nothing, Doug adds, "I'm sure you've thought about being with a woman."

"Yes," I reply, "but it's mostly conceptual for me."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when I watch a film with two women making love, for example, or I imagine myself being intimate with a woman, I find it more intellectually interesting than physically exciting. Is that ... is that how it is for you?"

"No," he answers, almost apologetically. "I think for me it's a little more physical."

I pause again, then decide to push on. "Do you feel you need to ... *act* on any of your curiosities?" I try to swallow my brewing anxiety.

"No," Doug says emphatically.

"Have you ever, um, experimented sexually with another male?"

"Never."

Deep breath, then, "*Would* you experiment if you weren't in a relationship with me?"

"I ... I seriously doubt it," Doug responds. "Besides, I *am* in a relationship with you. I'm fully committed to that. If I weren't ... hmm. Can you imagine? The guys *really* would think I was in the closet. Still, I'm certain that, if we weren't together, I'd be dating women or in another relationship with a woman."

"How do you feel about what they said?"

With a note of sadness, he tells me, "I don't know how to take it. Does it mean they think little of me?"

"Thinking you might be attracted to men is thinking 'little' of you?"

“That’s not at all what I meant. Do they think I’m not genuine, that I’m using their friendships only as a means to ‘test the waters’ or to fantasize about desires I’m too ashamed to bring to the surface?”

“I suspect that they don’t know what to do with you. The level of your ease is so singular that the only way they can make sense of it is to think that you might be suppressing your sexuality. Maybe they’re afraid of the consequences of that—for you, for me, for our marriage, and for our relationships with them.”

“So what should I do?” he asks. “Should I not compliment them? Not hug them?”

“Don’t second guess yourself. You’ve been open and kind and affectionate. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“If that’s true, then how could they think I’ve been in the closet all this time?”

“Cut them some slack. They endure so much, especially from straight men.”

Closing his eyes, he says, “They need exposure I guess.”

As we settle in for sleep, I tell him, “To men like you? Definitely.”

For some time, I watch Doug approach our friends with more reserve than I’ve seen in years. He greets less openly and embraces less tightly (if at all). When I point out my observations, Doug admits intending the distance. Several of our friends notice the change and seem equally uncertain about how to interact with him. The scenario reminds me of Dwight Fee’s (1996, p. 229) study. He indicates that, in these kinds of situations, both the straight and the gay male friends are asking themselves, “How do I communicate affection without threatening him?”

Perhaps their physical restraint isn't something to be concerned about. All relationships involve both reaching out and pulling back. Still, I worry that they'll start pulling back emotionally as well. What then?

Slowly, Doug and our friends work their way back. Over the next few weeks, their interactions become less and less hesitant. As a group, we emerge from the experience a bit rattled at first, but stronger.

A Call From Home

My mother calls from Minnesota. Though she catches me in the middle of constructing a paragraph, her tales of painting the shed, weeding the flowerbeds, and getting the dog shaved for summer offer a welcome break from the buzz and glow of my computer. As usual, we eventually get around to dishing about the relatives—how some have changed, how some should change, and how some will never change. “Your father said something interesting to me the other night,” Mom recalls. “He said, ‘If one of our sons came home and told me that he was gay, I’d be okay with it.’”

With a good dose of disbelief, I respond, “*Dad* said that?”

“Surprised me too,” she says. “I don’t think he would’ve said that two years ago.”

I process a moment, then ask, “Mom, do you think that has anything to do with me?”

My mother laughs. “Lisa,” she answers, “I think it has *everything* to do with you.”

When I hang up, I reflect on my old and new worlds. I’ve known for some time that the Cove men have changed me, rendering me more open to new ideas and less tolerant of old prejudices. My marriage also has evolved, becoming one of the most daringly honest

unions I've ever encountered. Now I see that my old worlds have been changing too, altering their assumptions to accommodate mine. Maybe I *can* go home again.

In 1999, my parents (without prompting from me) began attending seminars on the Christian Church's evolving perspectives on homosexuality. My mother, a school nurse, is currently trying to persuade her principal to invite representatives from Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) to the next community health fair.

While I continue to receive such reinforcement for my *life* project, my academic project has yet to be written. One morning in May 1997, I meet my advisor for breakfast.

Finding My Place

Rolling the ball of butter off my apple/oatmeal pancake, I say, "I have so many feelings about the project and so many materials to go through, I don't know where to begin."

"Just talk for a while," Art suggests. "Share what your fieldwork has meant to you."

"These men have become my best friends, my family; they've expanded and deepened my relationship with Doug. They've moved me to examine our cultural constructions of sexual orientation and identity; they've deepened my political commitments to people who are marginalized; and they've changed who I am as a scholar and teacher."

"Are you writing about all that?" he asks.

A question leaves my lips: "*Should I be?*"

Art sets down his coffee cup. "I don't understand. Why would you ask that?"

“If I take a traditional ethnographic stance, I’m supposed to be objective and distanced. But I’m emotionally attached to these men and politically invested in their welfare. If I take an autoethnographic stance, I can recognize and write from my interests and sympathies, but I’ll be focusing on my own experience. I value and want to feature *their* experience as well.”

“But you’re making a false distinction,” he says. “Even the most traditional ethnography is, in some ways, autoethnography. The culture an ethnographer studies, the sites she visits, the issues she investigates, the methods she employs, the perceptions she has, the lessons she gleans, and the way she writes all relate to her personal and emotional biography. At the same time, all good autoethnography draws from and teaches about cultural life.

“Besides,” Art continues, “what you always have seemed most passionate about is what happens *between* you and them. Perhaps you can approach your project as what Tedlock (1991) calls ‘narrative ethnography,’ where the ethnographic *dialogue* becomes the focus of investigation and you represent fieldwork experience and relationships in the form of stories.”

I exhale. “I’ve been searching for my place—as a person and as a researcher—in this community, and you’re right. What I really have to offer others is an account of what’s happened between us.”

“So go back to your field notes and write.” And that’s exactly what I do.

A Journey into Narrative Ethnography

Art gives me Tedlock's monograph. Reading it, I learn that narrative ethnography combines the researcher's lived experience in the field with ethnographic data, reflections on fieldwork, and cultural analysis. For the first time, I can envision how to write thoughtfully, passionately, and ethically about my fieldwork.

To review my research experience, I first print out a copy of my field notes. For several days, I pore over these, reexamining my descriptions of, and my emotional and analytic responses to, social actors, scenes, and conversations. I highlight all turning point experiences, from asking Tim for permission to study the team to my discussion with Doug about "gay tendencies." On a sheet of paper, I begin listing key episodes.

While inspecting my notes, I realize that many significant moments had occurred when I wasn't studying this community in an academic sense. Looking over my experiences in the field triggers thoughts of my childhood, my secondary, undergraduate, and early graduate educations, meeting David, and the first encounters Doug and I had with David's community. Who we were *before* stumbling onto this path thus becomes an important part of the story.

In order to tell that part, I spend hours in quiet contemplation and in conversations with Doug and David. Using systematic introspection,¹³ I try to recall every instance I thought, heard, or talked about homosexuality prior to September 1995 (when I began taking field notes). Certain experiences, like going to Tracks, return in vivid flashes; others creep back slowly, enveloped by fog.

¹³ See Ellis (1991b).

My list of key episodes with me at all times, I make additions while I read, eat, and drive. I keep a notepad next to my bed to record ideas that surface as I drift off to sleep. After a week of intense introspection, my inventory of encounters spans several pages. It's now time to write.

The First Draft

I begin crafting ethnographic short stories.¹⁴ In these, I attempt to show my encounters with my research community through dramatic emplotment and tension, strong characterization, (re)constructed dialogue, thick description, and a discernable moral or message.

For episodes not covered in my field notes, I rely on what Stanislavski terms “emotional recall,”¹⁵ a process similar to Lee Strasberg’s method acting. According to Bruner (1986), this works by reliving the past and recalling an experience in all its sensual and affective detail. For actor and author alike, emotional recall evokes a response in oneself in order to create a powerful and convincing scene for others to engage.

To create “Lesbian Thanksgiving,”¹⁶ for example, I close my eyes and experientially return to my childhood home. I ask myself, “What can be seen, heard, and sensed here? Who’s present, and what are they doing and saying?” Eyes still closed, I begin typing. I list the foods and how they taste, the rooms and how they appear, the people and how they move and talk. A half hour later, I’ve exhausted my memory. I open my eyes and begin examining the two pages I’ve entered. These become my field notes for that event.

¹⁴ See Ellis (1995).

¹⁵ Also see Ellis (1991a).

¹⁶ See Chapter 1.

For episodes that occurred between September 1995 and May 1997, I rely heavily on field notes written from tapes and jottings. Before composing an ethnographic short story from field notes, I read over the relevant passages several times, highlighting sections and making notes in the margins. I then engage in emotional recall to see if further detail or reflection can be gleaned. Only after I feel sufficiently “inside” an episode do I begin to set the scene.

I also listen closely to the hours of interactions and reflections I recorded. Hearing my participants’ voices helps me return to the past, to sense and feel previous experiences. The tapes prove invaluable in writing dialects as well. Throughout the episodes, I try to mimic David’s combination of camp and Kentucky drawl and the hints of a Staten Island Italian upbringing still evident in Jeff Grasso’s speech.

In certain cases, interview tapes and transcripts are crucial resources. Preparing to write about my first life history session with Gordon, for example, I listen to the tape and read the transcripts several times. Our words and voices take me back to that night, enveloping me in the issues and emotions. When I begin reconstructing our dialogue, I strive for readability, cutting conversational threads that seem extraneous and weaving together related threads. Nonetheless, the tapes and transcripts allow me to stay close to the actual words spoken.

The tape from a session with Pat Martinez also provides materials for a short story. When preparing to write what I later title “Intersubjectivity” (where he offers his coming out narrative to a group of us gathered for breakfast), I remember that Pat shared further details during a focused interview. For this episode, therefore, I study my field notes from the restaurant and the related section in both the interview tape and transcript. As a result,

“Intersubjectivity” contains some of the most detailed storytelling by one of my participants.

The first draft takes more than two months to complete. Each day, as I scan the list of turning points, an entry strikes me, and I immerse myself in that experience, using all the available materials.

As I work, I make constant “member-checking” phone calls, where I question my participants about events, take down their responses, and incorporate their recollections into the text. While out with these men, moreover, I open many discussions with, “Today I wrote about...” or, “Remember the time...” Again I note their reactions, and when I return home, I make additions and corrections to the manuscript. Both strategies bring a co-constructedness to the project.

By July 1997, I have 196 typed pages of individual scenes—dated, organized chronologically, and separated by asterisks. As I print out a copy for Art, a smile of accomplishment crosses my lips for the first time.

But it quickly fades. I realize, as never before, that moving toward the end of this project probably means *moving*, away from a community that has become mine. With more than a little ambivalence, I meet Art for breakfast and turn over the manuscript.

“For having completed so much,” he observes, “you seem pretty down.”

“I am down,” I admit. “It’s ironic. At long last, I feel like this project is happening. I should be ecstatic.”

“But?”

“But the sooner I finish, the sooner I leave the field.”

Art reassures, “Many graduate students become attached to where they attend school.”

“It’s more than that. I’ve always liked USF and living in Florida. But until recently, being here felt transitory. Tampa was just a stop on the way to somewhere else.”

“And now?”

“Now it’s my *home*.” I reluctantly add, “And I’m not sure I can leave.”

Art strokes his beard a bit, asking, “What are you saying?”

I swallow my rising emotion. “I’m saying I’ve begun to question what kind of life I want and who I need in it. Do I hope to be an academic? Yes. Do I think I can be that here? I don’t know. My options certainly are limited. But every time I think about leaving—not leaving USF, not leaving Tampa, but leaving *them*—I get a sick feeling in my stomach.”

Art sits back and sighs.

“I want to finish my Ph.D.,” I tell him. “I’m committed to that. I suspect you don’t like what I’m saying. You have high hopes for me—a great job at a fine university. I want that too. But I also want a *life*, and I have that here.”

Our session ends with a promise not to close off my options. Art takes my manuscript home, and I spend the next month trying to imagine how he’ll respond. Will my narratives intrigue him, shock him, disappoint him?

One afternoon, Art asks that we meet in the conference room at school—the moment of truth.

He leans forward in his chair. “I had no idea you were so ... *immersed* in this culture.”

I take a deep breath. For weeks, I’ve been squirming. I’ve written from the center of my personal and academic selves, offering my whole being to this project, but what if it wasn’t enough? What if my encounters with my research community are only interesting and important to me?

“We should discuss form,” he says. “Journal entries are okay, but the storytelling lacks variety.”

“*Form*,” I repeat. “Is that your major concern?”

“At this time, yes. Later, you’ll also need to work through the theoretical issues at stake.”

A few moments pass before the significance sinks in. “But this is it; *this is the project?*”

“It’s the beginning,” Art tells me. “I’d say 80 percent of what’s here will end up in the final version. But there’s a lot of work left. What I’d like you to do now is make the text read more like an ethnographic novel than a series of episodes. Continue developing the plot and subplots, and increase the dramatic tension.”

As soon as I arrive home, I rush to my computer and begin the second draft.

The Second Draft

Making the text more novelistic requires another round of performing emotional recall, studying field notes and transcripts, listening to tapes, and holding conversations with

participants. The sequence remains chronological as I “fill in” what happened between the episodes and work toward more literary transitions.

In addition, I dispense with the dated entry format and begin thinking about significant blocs of time (which later become chapters), such as the period before Doug and I met David, our early explorations of this community, and my initial fieldwork semester. Since the first section covers 23 years (in which I had few significant encounters with same-sex orientation), I decide to intersperse the present-tense episodes with past-tense commentary. To give the remaining text a sense of continual unfolding, however, I maintain present tense in the chapters that follow.

The Third Draft

After receiving Art’s comments on the second draft, the following weeks require fewer returns to my original fieldwork materials and more attention to modes of storytelling. Art reports difficulty keeping track of the characters (over 120 in the second draft). Upon his urging, I begin deciding who would receive greater, and who lesser, attention. After much reflection, I determine that my main characters are Lisa, Doug, David, Tim, and Gordon; and that my supporting characters (those at the center of three or more scenes) are Brandon, Rob, Al, Pat, and Art. I also keep several minor characters (those central to one or two scenes), including Bob, Kerby, and the other members of my doctoral committee. Painfully, I eliminate about 40 “extras” (those with no or virtually no lines); the ones remaining are those that help develop other characters more thoroughly.

By this time, the central questions of my project seem to be: what does gay-straight friendship require, mean, and do; and how can friendship be a method of inquiry? To

ensure that all episodes speak to one or both questions, I study the manuscript from beginning to end, making notes about each story's function.

When finished, I make another pass, this one to eliminate text that either doesn't fit or that addresses an issue portrayed elsewhere similarly and/or more evocatively. To help flesh out the issues, moreover, I add layers of emotional and intellectual reflections within and following several episodes.

For a more readable and engaging text, I also bring together scenes separated in time through the use of flashbacks, flashforwards, and thematic groupings. Finally, I add titles to many of the episodes to offer a sense of things to come.

Toward an Analysis

It's 1:00 AM and I've just finished yet another pass at this narrative ethnography. I've studied every episode, dissected every line, and quibbled over every adjective. I feel an unparalleled sense of accomplishment as I save the file.

But, as I turn off my computer, I'm left with the question, "What does it all mean?" What do my travels suggest about gay communities, straight communities, the people who inhabit them, and their/our relationships? I decide to sleep on it and begin again tomorrow.

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