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TOWARD AN APPLIED COMMUNICATION RELATIONAL INQUEST: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, CO-CONSTRUCTED NARRATIVE, AND RELATIONAL FUTURES

by

DEREK M. BOLEN

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2012

MAJOR: COMMUNICATION

Approved by:

_______________________________________
Advisor

_______________________________________
Date

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_______________________________________
DEDICATION

To my Mom and Dad
   for very much
   making all things
   possible

And to my Aunt Kelly
   an incomparable theorist
   in my personal field of
   relationship study
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people who have made this dissertation project, my education, and the life they’re in possible. I am not sure where to start, and I am certain I’ll forget someone, so I apologize in advance to anyone that I have forgotten.

I want to first thank my advisor, Sandy Pensoneau-Conway. She did all the usual things that good advisors do for their advisees. She met with me when I wanted (and sometimes when I didn’t want), she bought me coffees (and sometimes drinks), she talked about my work (and my life), she was genuinely interested in my future (and my past and present), and she told me when I did both bad and good. But she also surpassed the minimum requirements of a good advisor. I knew that when Sandy read my writing, listened to me talk, and responded that she did so from her heart. Because when Sandy teaches, mentors, advises, and relates she does so with nothing less than every ounce of her being—she draws from her heart and gives everything that she can plus a little bit more. Her feedback on my work and presence in my life has inspired (and at times challenged) me to grow as a writer, teacher, researcher, and social justice seeking being.

It dawned on me just how great of an advisor I had at the start of the 2011 school year when all of my classmates were doing introductions, naming their advisors, and saying, “the best advisor.” I smiled because it was then that I knew that I very likely had the best advisor in the University and likely the whole of the field of communication (most certainly the best advisor for me). As a result, I really can’t fathom a way to even begin thanking Sandy for being my advisor, mentor, pedagogical role model, and friend. Instead I can offer some song lyrics from Glee that come to heart when I think of your role in my life and success, “If you wanted the moon, I would try to make a start, but I would rather give you my heart, to sir Sandy with love.”
I am also indebted to the rest of my dissertation committee. First, I am so thrilled (read: giddy) that Tony Adams agreed to be the fifth member of my committee as my outer outside committee member, my autoethnographer extraordinaire, my scholarly role model, and my great friend. I love reading everything that you write. I feel honored that you took time from your own life and work to read what I wrote in this dissertation. It’s a real Wayne’s World “I am not worthy” moment for me. I still feel like a pesky little brother. I hope that before long I’ll be able to shed that skin and do some good, meaningful work with you.

I’ve seen so many classmates struggle to choose their non-communication committee member. I had no such problem. From the first time that I met Heather Dillaway I knew that sociology would be my cognate and that I just had to have her on my committee. From letting me hone my autoethnographic voice in her social inequality class to facilitating a directed study on masculinities, she always challenged me to challenge myself and in the process selflessly dedicated her time to my education and me. I consider myself fortunate to have crossed paths with Heather. Hopefully, one day I will be able to pay back the time that Heather always made for me. Because I know that she would never accept it from me, I will continue to pay it forward (just like she did) to my own students.

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know how your fit on my dissertation committee, but you didn’t let that deter you. As a result, I feel so much better prepared to move forward with my work because of what you brought to this project. You’re such a brilliant and prolific scholar. Of all the “in development” works out there, I most look forward to reading your book with your late mother. For you to move from conventional social scientific work to helping realize your late mother’s dream work, I am inspired.

Beyond my advisor and committee, my family and friends have been so supportive and loving throughout not only this process, but also the whole of my life. I could have never made it if my Mom and Dad hadn’t refused to give up on me. And God knows I gave them plenty of opportunities. Sometimes I think about how very lucky I am to have been raised (and continue to be raised) by my Mom and Dad. Most times I fear that I take it for granted. But not a day goes by that I don’t dedicate myself to striving to be just like them. Because I know that if I am ever able to make it even halfway to achieving that goal, I will have still managed to be nothing short of great.

I am so very fortunate to have a brother and sister who also happen to be two of my best friends. Zack and Erin, it remains an absolute thrill to be your big brother, even if sometimes I feel like I am learning from you. I look forward to the time that we spend together traveling, writing, chatting, and just hanging out. Of all the good things that have happened since I first moved away from home, becoming so close to the two of you is my favorite. I hope that I have been involved with and been able to support you both in your life endeavors as much you’ve been involved with and supported mine.

My Aunt Kelly has been one of the most important people of my life. Along with so much other life wisdom, Kelly imparted upon me some of the most important critical/cultural
theoretical perspectives of/on relationships in the most formative years of my personal/intimate relationship life—college. Long before I knew the words to understand what I do in this dissertation, Kelly taught me to critically think about relationships, society, and life in ways that have enabled me to find happiness. On top of all of this, there’s her unwavering support of my education.

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Greg Cook, my love, you have been so patient and supportive through my ups and downs as I completed this dissertation. When I first started graduate school I was warned that many a relationship have become fatality to the endeavor that is graduate education. You’ve seen me through mood swings of impending end-of-the-world proportions. You’ve made sure that I eat, drink, and sleep. You told me when I was wasting time (even when I didn’t want to hear it). You understood my erratic work methods. And even though you utterly hated the television I watched (e.g., Jersey Shore) to wind down, you graciously left me to do what I needed. All of this while you probably didn’t know that it was your stability, your balance, your work ethic, your kindness, your respect, and your love that inspired me to keep working. There is nothing in life
that I look forward to more than writing our relational future together. I am so excited to be starting the next chapter of our life, to co-construct the story of us.

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No one has clocked more time at my desk with me than my dog, Raider. Everyone warned me that Jack Russell Terriers aren’t good companion dogs. They couldn’t have been more wrong. From the desk to the kitchen to the desk to the bathroom to the desk to the bed and back to the desk, you were right there for every single keystroke (and backspace) of the way. And Bob the cat, although you’re often off and doing your own thing, I always knew you were around. We’ve made it through college and three graduate degrees together. Both of you are important and beloved people in my life.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

After fiddling with his phone for a while, he tells me that he wants to show me something. I know. I am not in control of my body when I reach over and take the phone from his hand. I mean, I am, but it’s mindless. Maybe it’s trust. He wants to show me something, so I look. Like how he’s wanted to tell me things, so I listened. But I guess that’s still because I wanted to. I position the phone so that I can see it. I look at the small screen of the phone. I have never seen this particular image before, but I have seen many like it. Well, not just like it because I (think I) know the person in this low megapixel picture. The other guys were (no)bodies. I am sure my face does something reactionary—and it’s not affirmative. I look for a moment. In the moment(s) between my eyes meeting his naked body to when I looked away, my mind floods with questions. What just happened? Why would he do that? What have I done to make him think that this is okay? Why is it my burden as the gay one to not let this happen? What do I do now? What does this mean for... everything? I respond with judgment. I will regret this. “You shouldn’t have done that,” I say. That it was insulting. Other stuff. I feel that I have made what happened into a situation that needed attending to. He apologizes. The difficult-to-make-eye-contact-because-of-positioning becomes ideal. He casts his eyes toward the ground, but looks like he is trying to find a focal point below the floor. He starts apologizing. His words slow. I have never heard him talk like this before. He says lots of things. I wish he would stop because now I am starting to feel bad. And I shouldn’t, should I? Did I just scorn him? Are my negative feelings the result of my masculinity?

I want to be more supportive. I want to convey to him that I will help him, but I am still plagued by the script that tells me to not let the straight guy think that I am trying to get in his
pants. *Because I am not. I never have tried. I am not attracted to him like that. I respect him. I remember that I respect him. Wait, what?* Not attracted to him like that? *So... I am attracted to him—*somehow. He tells me that he has never been attracted to anyone the way that he is attracted to me. *I don’t think about this too much. I will think about it much more, but later.* I decide to stop this. That I don’t want him to feel like this. I reach over and put my hand on his leg for just a moment and tell him that it’s okay. I tell him that I am attracted to him, too. *I thought about this action before doing it, I envisioned me leaving my hand on his leg for sometime. But I can’t. Heteronormativity is inescapable for me. Instead, I pat his leg. Like a dog. And I am sure the words came out horridly—partly because they represented something that was an undeveloped feeling and partly because I am actually terrible at being affectionate on any level.* I tell him that he needs to explore this... with someone that isn’t me. I tell him that I’ll help him how I can. I ask him if he has any questions. *Because even though I know that I am not allowed to speak to this matter as only one person, I will disregard that and throw myself in front of the heterosexism bus if I can give him something that can convey my empathy help him feel better.*

He tells me that he thinks he will always be attracted to women. Then he tells me that he doesn’t think that he could bottom. *This boggles me because I had previously told him that I don’t like bottoming. Was he screwing with me? Was he trying to show our incompatibility? I should have told him that there are lots—lots—of ways to have sex. I am sure he already knows that. So what was that all about?* I am so tired. I don’t want this to end. There’s so much more to talk about, but I have to sleep. I want him to come back to my hotel room with me because I am worried about him. He says he needs to spend time alone to think about things. This is a bad idea to me. *I am very uncomfortable. He is vulnerable. I want to protect him. I never want to protect*
anyone. Well, almost no one. We exchange goodbyes. They are awkward. They don’t feel like goodbyes. I see his face and it looks like he is going to cry. We go back into the casino for a bit. I am trying to do what I can to be certain he’ll be okay. Selfish?

We’re back outside saying goodbye again. As I am turning to walk away, he asks if he can have a hug. He can. We hug. It’s a hug unlike any other hug that I have ever participated in. I couldn’t understand the motivations, implications, or the emotions tangled into it. *I also didn’t understand why, for a fraction of a moment, I thought it would be a good idea to kiss him as the hug ended. I attribute this to the complexity of the hug, my inability to reason what has occurred, and maybe more. But I don’t kiss him. I never do. I don’t make the first move.*

I walk away—sun slowly rising. It’s a long walk back to my hotel. I think about him. I begin the process of reframing the weekend, reframing him, based on everything (whatever that means) that has occurred. I don’t know anything—except that I will miss him. I am sad, but I realize I am smiling. I don’t know how long it will take for me to make sense of this. I might never be able to, but I get a text message. I know it’s him. I know there’s possibility.

* 

Struggling to drag the space heater to the alcove of the room that serves as my office, I burn my hand on the coil. “So it is on,” I flippantly mutter. The wheels on the bottom of the heater are no help as I pull it across the Berber carpet. Like magnets, the dog and cat (Raider and Bob, respectively) follow the heater’s bumpy, clumsy trek across the room. They settle in around the heater, Bob cuddles into the nook that Raider creates after he lies down on his side along the heater. In the process of moving the heater, the next line the paper I am working on comes to me, “And I am not sure how much time I have to make this sense.”
As I frantically write the first paper about what I will come to see as a field of relational inqueery, I struggle to come to terms with the way that my field has failed me (and likely, vice versa). Beyond me, I struggle to come to terms with the way that my field has failed countless (and maybe read: un/countered) others. But on this cold winter night, I am writing to save a relationship. To make sense of something that no matter how hard I try, I cannot. A relationship where nothing can be gleaned from the relational narratives of television, movies, or music. A relationship that escapes the advice of friends and family. This relationship, this queer relating, is slipping through my fingers. I know that. I also know that I have a society to blame, but I have no idea how to stop it… how to even slow it (on neither macro nor micro levels). So I write. * * *

This is a story about stories. Most of the stories are about relationships of which I am a part. Sometimes I am the narrator, like now. Sometimes I am a character. Other times the stories are told by my self and someone else—at times about me, at times not about a relationship, at other times about the stories themselves. My personal experiences with relationships, particularly as my relational experiences fail to fit within (to the point of seeming unwelcomed) the field to which I am preparing to make my academic home (relational communication studies), motivate this dissertation. It makes sense, especially in light of Richardson and St. Pierre’s (2005) argument that “the ethnographic life is not separable from the Self” (p. 965), that I undertake the current dissertation project as my formal entry to my academic field.

The narratives in this project trace my experiences in the academy, life, and the blurry space between. More specifically, the stories run the gamut through my experience engaging in autoethnography about my relationships, writing autoethnography and sharing it with relational
others, writing autoethnography with relational others following a turning-point, and finally working to a sort of co-constructing autoethnography as relationship.

As a reflexive endeavor, it appears that I have been mucking around (cf. Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1998), both consciously and unconsciously, in the arena of relational communication, autoethnography, and queer theory. As such, this is a queer constructionist autoethnographic project about relating and relationships. I have three goals: creating a space and terrain for queer relationships in the study of personal relationships and relational communication, founding and beginning to further a field of relational inqueery, and offering an applied communication approach within queer relational studies that stands to benefit both the field and the queer on social and personal fronts.

Plan of the Dissertation

Chapter Two, “The Study of Personal Relationships,” reviews the current state of the study of personal relationships, an area of inquiry that is almost wholly controlled by the dominant paradigm of social scientific inspired post positivist essentializing and reductionary research. The study of personal relationships has a long history making its way into many disciplines, under many names, with the fruits of its labor published in many journals. The current dissertation project is concerned with the study of personal relationships and the field of communication’s contribution to it. Within the field of communication, relationship research shows up under several names or subfields (for instance, interpersonal communication and relational communication). Arguments can be made that relational communication is a subfield of interpersonal communication and everything can be neat and tidy in its designated place, but they’re unnecessary at this venture.
Communication research relies on categories and labels to make the sort of meaning that allows for predicting and controlling (Henderson, 2003). The study of relationships is no exception. Handbooks on personal relationships generally begin with a chapter on the various types or typologies of relationships. These types, or labels, of relationships are the categories in which relationships can be made sense of within (or as outside of). VanLear, Koerner, and Allen (2006) identified seven typologies for relational study: family, marital, divorce, parent-child, sibling, romantic and premarital, and friendship. Conceptually, all relationships fit into at least one of these categories (sometimes more than one). However, category-driven research has a normalizing and essesentializing way about it. As a result, the relationships that fit into such categorical constructs are “normal” and are studied with varying degrees of ease, but what of the relationships that do not fit neatly within the constructs?

Most relational communication scholars are aware of the existence of “under-studied” relationships. There’s even a history of some researchers trying to “shed light” or “draw attention” to these “under-studied” relationships (e.g., Wood & Duck, 1995). In their edited volume (Under-studied relationships: Off the beaten track), Wood and Duck (1995) included relationships between cultural minorities (Gaines, 1995), relationships between lesbians and relationships between of gay men (Huston & Schwartz, 1995), work relationships between bosses and workers (Zorn, 1995), and even online relationships (Lea & Spears, 1995). All of the types of relationships included in Wood and Duck’s (1995) volume were, indeed, under-studied at the time (and probably still are, for the most part), but something was still missing. The problem was that they were all normative relationships. Meaning, all of the relationships identified either mimicked or mirrored the dominant idea of all the other relationships that were already being studied—they merely just introduced new populations with some “unique”
variables. This normativity is underscored by the editors’ inclusion of “long-lasting” marriages between one man and one woman (Dickson, 1995) as an under-studied relationship. So in this volume, an important volume for personal relationship studies in communication, marriage—the most normative and norming of all relationships—still made its way in and as the lead chapter no less.

For an idea of what relationship research is like in the field of communication, an analysis of interpersonal communication research from 1990 to 2005 in 19 journals most likely to publish interpersonal research, Braithwaite and Baxter (2008) found that 83.2% of interpersonal communication research was faithful to post positivist traditions, 13.9% utilized an interpretive approach, and 2.9% was from a critical perspective. While the analysis was specific to interpersonal communication, it’s clear that the dominant mode of discourse is that of a post positivist tradition. Of this, Braithwaite and Baxter (2008) concluded:

Interpersonal communication research is not as diverse as it could, and we believe, should be. We have also observed too little diversity within the ranks of interpersonal scholars and, we would argue, not enough diversity in the contexts, populations, and topics studied. (p. 15)

So the paradigmatic (or meta-theoretical) approaches to studying interpersonal communication are not diverse, and neither are the contexts, populations, and topics being studied.

The current field of relational communication research is controlled by the dominant paradigm of social scientific research. As a result, the study of people and their relationships takes place through conceptually-fixed categories of fixed relational possibility and is accomplished using a limited amount of methodological approaches. The purpose of Chapter Two is to create a springboard for introducing queer theory into the study of personal
relationships in order to queer the field of relational inquiry. In doing so, this chapter brings to light the ongoing oppression caused by a sanctioned gap in the extant literature brought to life by the lack of variety in accepted methods of relational research endeavors.

Chapter Three, “Queer Theory and the Study of Personal Relationships,” works to re-view and re-imagine the impact and limitations of the dominant paradigm in relational understandings and inquiry by applying a queer treatment to the existing relational inquiry constructs. As a verb, queer acts to destabilize that to which it is applied (Talburt, 2000). For instance, whereas the study of relational communication revolves around fixity of relational categories, queering the study of personal relationships and relational communication would work to destabilize the categories that have been fixed. Elia (2003) argued for a paradigmatic shift in how relationships are studied (and taught). Some nine years later and his arguments have yet to be realized. While many criticize queer theory as unusable and academic high theory, it is my position that in learning and growing from key propositions and assumptions of queer theory it is possible to re-imagine a form of relational inqueery that has further reaching capabilities as applied communication.

Departing from extant research on relationships and gender (by which researchers generally mean/t sex), this section considers the interplay between gender (as construct and performance), sexuality (beyond mere orientation), and erotics (in considering an unexplored desire [Nardi, 2007] in most research). In terms of queer as a modifier for a type of relationship, a queer relationship calls into question

a certain type of heterosexual relationship style [that] is often promoted as the best, most respectable, and cherished sexual lifestyle that provides social currency and status…This notion continues to be promoted and reproduced despite the fact that many people—both
heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals—actually do not fit into such neatly categorized and narrowly defined sexual relationships. (Elia, 2003, pp. 62-63)

In other words, a queer relationship is a non-normative relationship that acknowledges the tenets of queer similar to how Warner (1993) explained each individual’s coming to a queer identification:

Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about bearing the body. (p. xiii)

Queer relationships in the vein of queer theory “emphasize sexual practice as an area where social and cultural meanings are contested and negotiated” (Piontek, 2006, p. 81). This differs from the fixity that accompanies the heteronormative constructs of relationships with this, similar to individual identities, queer relational identities “become unsettled, destabilized, and open to flux and change” (Plummer, 2005, p. 191). Relating is less about following the established dominant how-to-heteronormative script and more about becoming (and even remaining) open to new possibilities of relating. Relating is not just doing, relating is becoming. Doing relating in relationships is tangled with normative expectations of relating, but relating as becoming envisions new possibilities that may be outside of existing categories or typologies.

Conceptually, queer relationship coverage in the current literature is scant. In some instances, such as Warner (1999), queer relationships emerge through implication as a result of the criticism of heteronormative relationships on the sexual level and the level of marriage. In
these cases, relationships that vary or subvert the heteronormative construct could be potential queer relationships, though are not named such. However, Elia (2003) explicitly called for a new paradigm of queer relationships in the discipline of communication studies. While both allude to the hierarchical achievement of heterosexual marriage as dominant to other forms of sexual or intimate relationships, neither approaches the implications of this hierarchy on relationships that might otherwise be labeled friendships. The little research that does name a queer relationship is founded in heteronormativity. Generally, queer relationship is used as an alternative label for gay (and/or lesbian) relationships (e.g., Elia, 2003; Lannutti, 2005; Monsour, 2006; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). In that way, queer (relationship) is misused to define a gay coupling’s embrace and performance in accordance heteronormative modes of relating in what Duggan (2003) called homonormative. This use is an affront to queer. Identifying as gay does not mean that one also identities as queer (Halberstam, 2005); vis-à-vis, not everyone who identifies as queer is gay (Thomas, 1999).

In terms of relational inquiry, queer theory expands the possibilities of exploring relationships in what I call relational inqueery. Experience has brought me to a place where I theorize on queer relationships. To illustrate the potential of queer theory in relational inquiry or relational inqueery, I engage in queer autoethnographic endeavors in line with queer methods that Plummer (2011) indentified such as scavenger methodologies (e.g., Halberstam 1998), which are assemblages of a variety of methods like ethnography, archival research, and textual criticism. Relational inqueery is envisioned as a queer scavenger method of narratives. As Plummer (2011) noted, most queer methods include a reading of the self (e.g., Miller, 1998) or autobiographical element.
Chapter Four, “Doing Autoethnographic Inquiry,” introduces a methodology of doing autoethnographic inquiry. Methodologically, autoethnography is a postmodern ethnographic approach (Richardson, 2000) based on lived experience and characterized by narrative, reflexivity, aesthetic style, and writer-reader-text relationships. Autoethnography blurs the line between researcher and subject by combining the two. Narrative accounts of lived experience show the taken for granted and mundane of life in terms of culture, relationships, society, and self. Through a reflexive process, an ongoing positioning and repositioning of the self among where it has been, where it is, and where it is headed, narratives put past experience into play with the present in both the personal and academic. Marked by accessibility, autoethnography blurs the boundary between the academy and the real world with texts that can be read and engaged by audiences in and outside of the academy. Autoethnographers engage in creative approaches of text construction driven by experience and aesthetic style of both self and autoethnography. The writer-reader-text relationship separates autoethnography from conventional social science approaches through inviting readers to interpret and engage with text and writer in personal and political ways. In this way autoethnography works to move private to public in socially just political ways. Autoethnography wants more than just a passive read (Holman Jones, 2005).

Four approaches to autoethnographic inquiry are explained: (a) meta-autoethnography, (b) personal narrative, (c) co-constructed narrative, and (d) writing-stories. Meta-autoethnography (Ellis, 2009) is, simply put, autoethnographic inquiry of autoethnography. It allows autoethnographers to (re)examine, (re)vision, and (re)engage with old texts in new ways by (re)writing or adding new narratives. In this way, this dissertation is a meta-autoethnographic project. Personal narratives (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) show the self making sense, doing, and
becoming within (and without) culture, relationship, and society. Co-constructed narrative (Bochner & Ellis, 1995) is a move from personal narrative (solo-authored) to narrative constructed by two relational members. The result is one dialogic narrative account of individual narratives. In this way, co-constructed narratives show people relating and are texts of relationships becoming. There are two co-constructed narratives in Chapter Five and one in Chapter Six. Finally, writing-stories (Richardson, 1997) are a form of meta-autoethnographic narrative that highlight the process and context of writing. Writers construct reflexive accounts of contexts, pretexts, and processes of old pieces. Writing-stories add new layers of inquiry by way of writing new pieces on established pieces. Writing-stories are the texts that interweave the narratives of Chapters Five and Six together.

Chapter Five, “Bad Romances and/or Rad Bromances: An Autoethnographic Inquiry of Co-Constructed Narratives,” uses a meta-autoethnographic approach to revisit and reflex upon two co-constructed narratives that are the result of one relationship (whereas Chapter Six focuses on another relationship). Together, these pieces (re)construct the beginning, middle, and end (of sorts) of a relationship.

Two co-constructed narratives undergird this chapter. The first piece, “Finding (Our) Autoethnography...”, was co-constructed at the beginning of the relationship. It accounts a becoming of a relationship that defies definition as we work together to produce an autoethnographic piece about doing autoethnography. The second co-constructed narrative, “Co-Constructing a Queer Relationship: Vulnerably Writing Masculinities,” was written by both of us after a sizeable relationship turning point. It exhibits our joint efforts in using writing to negotiate the fluidity, openness, and instability of our queer relationship.
These two co-constructed narratives are situated among ten other narratives. Four of these narratives are personal narratives in varying styles. The longest is “A Bad Romance, In Medias Res.” I wrote this piece after a near relationship ending conflict. It is an account of my feelings and sense making at the time along with a contextualization of the current relationship in the terrain of other queer relationships that I had been in. It’s also an example of my use of autoethnography within a relationship as a relational sense-making and attempted maintenance device. Finally, there are six writing-stories that work to bind (and unbind) the other narratives together (and apart).

The chapter is meta-autoethnographic, first, through the inclusion of new personal narratives that fit between the co-constructed pieces and, second, because of the addition of narratives about writing the stories, or writing-stories. In this way, this chapter is an autoethnography about autoethnographies, providing an account of the situating of the performance of doing autoethnography as relational inqueery.

Chapter Six, “Writing for the Future: Co-Constructing Relational (Im)Possibilities,” is comprised of a co-constructed narrative that writes toward a relational future through working within the social constraints of the current location in the present. This co-constructed narrative is a departure from traditional co-constructed narratives in that it can be thought of more as writing toward an epiphany or turning point instead of writing in reaction to it. In doing so, the current relational context and constraints are negotiated, which creates possibilities for the mitigation of relational social pressures. Writing-stories precede and follow the co-constructed narrative to situate the piece and reflex on its writing.

Using writing-stories, this chapter presents previously written and ongoing co-constructed narratives of my relational partner and I. We took an offensive narrative position.
Instead of writing about an epiphany or turning point, we wrote anticipating them. I saw writing as a way of overcoming hurdles that are socially placed. This remains an ongoing relational practice. Then, a writing-story accounts the practice of co-constructing the narrative. A performance autoethnography designed to be proactive instead of reactive—writing toward instead of away from an epiphany or a narrative form of applied communication research.

Chapter Seven, “Revisiting Relational Inqueery: Outstaying My/Your/Our Welcome and/or Breaking and Entering,” functions as a critical autoethnographic discussion and conclusion section for the journey of the dissertation in terms of the current field of relational communication; coming to the point of forging new queer spaces; the (im)possibilities of relational inqueery with a focus on the autoethnographic narratives, co-constructed narratives, meta-autoethnography, and writing-stories featured in the dissertation; and the future of further elaborating relational inqueery. The chapter ends with final reflexions on the project.
CHAPTER 2

THE STUDY OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

People study personal relationships for many reasons. I am with Gergen and Walter (1998), “For many of us, the professional interest in processes of relationships has grown from the soil of personal experience” (p. 110). People study people relating because their own experience inspires them to do so. Beyond that, people study people relating because of the ubiquitous notion that relationships are what make our lives meaningful (Perlman & Vangelisti, 2006). The study of personal relationships takes place across a myriad of fields ranging from social psychology to communication and within specific fields like interpersonal and relational communication. As a result, what follows is an interdisciplinary review of the study of personal relationships. I say this to make the distinction that I do, indeed, recognize a difference between social psychology, communication, sociology, interpersonal, and relational communication and to highlight the necessity of blurring the boundaries.

This chapter serves as a point of origin or, perhaps more aptly, departure for the current study. In order to advance a change in the study of personal relationships, it is necessary to establish such a position. Because the personal relational experiences that inspire this project are between myself (a man) and other men, where detailed examination takes place, this chapter will include relevant research to relationships between men. This chapter will (a) define personal relationships, (b) explore metatheoretical approaches to studying personal relationships, (c) examine the organization of personal relationships in research, and (d) end with a summary.

What is a Personal Relationship?

If the study of personal relationships is at the center of the present study, then it is important to spend time exploring how personal relationship is understood in the body of
research that largely defines it. In order to explore what a personal relationship is, both relationship and personal relationship will be examined.

**Relationship.** It is generally accepted that we form relationships because we have a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), but as Rogers and Escudero (2004) noted, it is rare that relationship is defined in contemporary studies. What precisely constitutes a relationship has always been debated, though with much less fervor as of late. Definitions vary in levels of specificity from more the specific, “Two people are in a relationship with one another if they impact on each other, if they are interdependent in the sense that a change in one person causes a change in the other and vice versa” (Berscheid & Peplau, 1983, p. 12) to more abstract, you are in a relationship when you have a “sense of being in a relationship” (Duck, 1988, p. 2).

In seeking to delineate what operationally constitutes a relationship, variables have been explored such as relational continuity (Sigman, 1991), series of interactions, interdependency (Kelley et al., 1983), and frequency and duration. A relational communication perspective departs from these more rigid notions of relationship in favor of describing relationships as “moving, ‘living art’ forms, creatively shaped by the interactive behaviors of the participants” (Rogers, 1998, p. 70). This fits better with Shotter’s (1993) social constructionism, founded on the notion of conversational realities. Shotter posited, “To talk in new ways, is to ‘construct’ new forms of social relation, and, to construct new forms of social relation … is to construct new ways of being” (p. 9). Our relationships are created in our conversations. As such, what constitutes our relationships is our communication.

**Personal relationship.** A personal relationship is a specific type of relationship. Hinde (1979) made the distinction of a personal relationship relying on knowledge of the other as compared to role or formal relationships, which are determined by positions in society. For
Hinde, personal relationships meant that there was a knowing of the other that went beyond the knowing of what the other does or where the person is positioned socially and how it relates to the self. According to Perlman and Vangelisti (2006), personal relationships are “more than isolated interactive moments” and “include a range of relationships, including but not exclusive to our most intimate relationships” (p. 3). Perlman and Vangelisti speak to an ongoing nature of personal relationships, which can manifest in a range of relationship types including romantic.

In addition to personal relationships, research also characterizes close and intimate relationships. Perlman and Vangelisti (2006) use the terms close relationships and personal relationships interchangeably while specifying intimate relationships as a type of personal relationship. “Personal relationships include a range of relationships, including, but not exclusive to our most intimate relationships” (Perlman & Vangelisti, 2006, p. 3). However, in determining the closeness of a relationship, intimacy is often a variable (Laurenceau & Kleinman, 2006).

**Metatheoretical Approaches to Studying Personal Relationships**

I agree with Perlman and Duck (2006), who maintained, “It is crucial for us personally and as a species that we understand and foster our relationships” (p. 27). But how we do that is not nearly as simple as stating the position. The field of personal relationship research has been characterized as multiparadigmatic (VanLear, Koerner, & Allen, 2006). This stands to reason considering that the field is interdisciplinary with researchers working in such diverse fields as sociology, psychology, and communication. Each field approaches the study of personal relationships with its own set of assumptions that drive the research that is done. Echoing Deetz (2001), “Trying to produce any organizing scheme of these discourses accounting for different theoretical conceptions, methodological preferences, and value commitments is filled with difficulties” (p. 7). For the purpose of this project, I will provide a brief overview of
metatheoretical approaches to studying personal relationships to lay a foundation for understanding a bit about where we have come from and where we are.

In the field of communication, Braithwaite and Baxter (2008) identified three metatheoretical approaches from which interpersonal communication research was accomplished between 1990 and 2005 by analyzing published research: post positivist, interpretive, and critical. Moreover, they found that the vast majority of interpersonal communication research was conducted from a post positivist approach, 83.2%. While research from interpretive approaches accounted for 13.9%, critical approaches to interpersonal communication accounted for a scant 2.9%.

**Post positivist.** Post positivism is the dominant research discourse in the study of personal relationships (Charania & Ickes, 2006) and interpersonal communication (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2008). The majority of the accepted research within these two fields is accomplished from a post positivist approach. Researchers who work within this approach will all value similar things and hold similar beliefs about research. A post positivist approach could be considered the science of studying personal relationships. Berger and Chaffee (1987) explained that “communication science seeks to understand the production, processing, and effects of symbol and signal systems by developing testable theories, containing lawful generalizations, that explain phenomena associated with production, processing, and effects” (p. 17). The goal of such research is understanding and improving behavior through systematic study. Duck, West, and Acitelli (1997) elaborated, “Historically, relationship research sought to focus on deterministic predictability, explanation, and control—and this is presented as a primary purpose of much research even today” (p. 2). Little has changed since 1997.
A post positivist approach is characterized as: an a priori process that assumes the existence of an objective reality to be discovered with the aim to predict and control (Chaffee & Berger, 1987). The researcher is positioned as objective and producing value-neutral theory, so the research results are supposedly objective and generalizable (Charania & Ickes, 2006). “For communication scientists, the problem to be solved is one of identifying and then explaining regularities by constructing and testing theories” (Berger, Roloff, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2010, p. 7). Theory building is central to a post positivist approach.

Emerging from sociology, social psychology, and political science, many theories used in early interpersonal communication research came from these fields (Berger, Roloff, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2010). Theory is critical for communication science. Chaffee and Berger (1987) offered, “theories are useful to the extent that they can be tested to assess their validity” (p. 102). They continued by providing the criteria for good theory: explanatory power, predictive power, parsimony, falsifiability, internal consistency, heuristic provocativeness, and organizing power. These criteria continue to be used today for evaluating research and in teaching future generations of communication researchers (cf. Griffin, 2012).

Research conducted from a post positivist approach is generally done so using quantitative methods (i.e., methods that work with numbers). As the dominant research discourse, post positivism sets the standard for researching (Duck, West, & Acitelli, 1997). Vangelisti and Perlman’s (2006) edited volume, The Cambridge Handbook of Personal Relationships, favored social scientific methods over interpretive methods, directing readers interested in qualitative research to another source. In doing so, the volume demonstrated the status of post positivist research and conventions of the field.
Ickes (1994) identified several methods of studying close relationships from a social scientific standpoint: self-report (most used, one or more person providing data through questionnaire, interview, diary account, etc.), peer report (rarely used, a relational informant provides data through questionnaire, interview, etc.), observational (trained raters observe relationships), life-event archival (analyzing archived information), experimental (exploring relationships between changes of independent and dependant variables), physiological (measuring biological function), and eclectic (combining more than one of the previously mentioned approaches). Data collected from any of these research methods is analyzed, often statistically, with the goal of creating new knowledge and approximating reality (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Research methods and results are evaluated based on reliability, validity (external and internal), and generalization (Berger, Roloff, & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2010). The research should do what it is that it claims it does, the measurement tool should be sound internally and in practice, and the results of the findings should be as broadly representative of as large a group of people as possible. Research findings are then presented in prose that is scientific/technical (Deetz, 2001) and in the voice of “disinterested scientist” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 112) to demonstrate the removed and objective position of the researcher.

The vast majority of extant research on personal relationships has been accomplished from the post positivist approach. Communication has been studied within personal relationships in terms of interaction (e.g., self disclosure) and processes. Some of the processes that have been studied include coming together (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and falling apart (Miller & Parks, 1982). Interpersonal communication research in personal relationships has always been directed toward applied communication (Cappella, 1987). An example of applied communication research is the move from understanding to prediction and
control in terms of competency in communication and interaction skills (cf., Green & Burleson, 2003). Ultimately, the contribution of the post positivist approach to the study personal relationships is also a defining characteristic of it, which can be understood in no other way than formidable.

**Interpretive.** Interpretivism is marked by the centrality of language in its endeavors. An interpretive approach understands reality to be socially constructed. “Realities exist in the form of multiple mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific, dependent for their form and content on the persons who hold them” (Guba, 1990, p. 27). Interpretive approaches are often understood in opposition to post positivist approaches. An interpretive approach is characterized by: a rejection of the objective view of reality in favor of multiple realities that are constructed intersubjectively, embracing and engaging subjectivity, seeking to create understanding, valuing the view of the individual, recognizing research as context or situation specific, uncovering local meanings, focusing on meaning and meaning-making, researching that works as sensitizing devices, and producing theory as heuristic device (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011).

Research conducted from an interpretivist perspective is concerned more with “the invention of meaning than the discovery of truth” (Farrell, 1987, p. 137). Instead of revealing a concealed truth about reality, interpretive work seeks “to understand and interpret the meaning of phenomena” (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 106). Understanding the meaning of phenomena presents a unique opportunity for the betterment of society when something that had previously gone misunderstood or ignored is revealed. In personal relationship research that often means working to understand how people make meaning and understand relating and the phenomena that occur in the doing of relationships. Duck, West, and Acitelli (1997) emphasized
the importance of engaging interpretive approaches in order to represent “the fluid and uncertain quality of relationships [that] is absent from much theory” caused by “the (real or imagined) theoretical certainties and continuities that have been the bedrock of scholarly thinking about relationships” (p. 3). Interpretive approaches to studying personal relationships reveal something that is concealed from post positivist approaches: “moral, ideological, and narrative knowledge” (Bochner & Ellis, 1995, p. 201).

For interpretivists, theory resists creating “propositions purporting to describe an objective reality” (Pearce, 1995, p. 101). The result is a range from research that seems to lack theory in the conventional sense to theory that is practical (Barge, 2009) or inductively grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory is the inductive process of theorizing about phenomena throughout the process of data collection through the write up of the research manuscript using a constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2000). The research is directed by the data being collected and analyzed through collection. Grounded theory is the result of building theory quite literally from the ground up.

As previously mentioned, interpretive approaches assume an inductive approach, which means that interpretive researchers begin their study in the field. Interpretivist approaches vary widely and run the gamut of qualitative research methods from long interviews to ethnographic participant observation. Leeds-Hurwitz (1995) offered social approaches (interpretive approaches) to studying communication, which

- “describe events occurring between people in the process of interacting rather than reporting how events are perceived through a single person’s understanding” (p. 6);
- “assume a focus on process as well as final product” (p. 7);
- accept that reality is socially constructed (p. 7);
• are concerned with “how social meanings are created—how social actors construct meaning from incomplete bits and pieces of behavior” (p. 7);
• “emphasize the study of identity” (p. 8);
• “make good use of the concept of culture” (p. 8), understanding that because “no interaction takes place outside a particular cultural context … direct observation of actual behavior” is necessary (p. 9);
• accept “the need for reflexivity” (p. 10); and
• are “frequently holistic” (p. 10).

Because individual identities and relationships are social constructions situated in culture and context, identities, culture, and context are all considered integral to interpretivist approaches to the study of personal relationships.

Some researchers advocate focus on the culture and context within which relationships exist (Morrill & Snow, 2005). Culture and the social context for interaction within personal relationships have been studied through ethnography (Fitch, 1998; Fitch 2010). Bochner (2002) advocated the narrative turn in interpersonal communication research, focusing on the stories of relational life. Stories of relating can be considered theories of relating. Bochner and Ellis (1995) encouraged the use “personal narratives that display how people participate in the process of making sense of their local circumstances” (p. 201). Personal relationships can be studied through the relational members’ crafting of narrative texts that make visible the invisible in relational experiences, like a couple’s decision to have an abortion (Ellis & Bochner, 1992).

Because interpretivists are interested in local knowledge and un/under-represented people, interpretive methods emphasize the voice of the other (Hertz, 1997). Findings are often considered co-created (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) because of the closeness between the researcher
and researched. The research that is done in interpretive approaches is presented in manuscripts using a romantic and embracing language (Deetz, 2001) and incorporating the voice of participants.

It is worth noting that not all qualitative research is interpretivist. Some qualitative research is post positivist. For example, research done working with relational communication theory is qualitative in that it requires observation and interpretation, but the results of observation and interpretation are quite quantifiable. Researchers use a sophisticated key to code interactions, rendering them relational and analyzed relationally in terms of values assigned to individual interactions (cf. Rogers & Escudero, 2004).

Critical. Critical approaches are predicated on the belief that “human nature operates in a world that is based on a struggle for power,” which “leads to interactions of privilege and oppression that can be based on race or ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, mental or physical abilities, or [sexuality]” (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 102). Where there is power, there is struggle. Everyone is not positioned equally in their ability to struggle for power. As a result, some people are oppressed. The undergirding goal of critical work is identifying structures of oppression (Deetz, 2001) and empowering the oppressed (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Systems of oppression are reified through the participation of those oppressed. “In reification, a social formation is abstracted from the ongoing conflictual site of its origin and treated as concrete, relatively fixed entity” (Deetz, 2001, p. 27). Critical research works to make the site of oppression known and offer the oppressed the tools for emancipation, while in the process, encouraging inclusiveness and inciting change (Wood, 1993).

Critical approaches pay attention to “social structures, freedom and oppression, and power and control” (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 103) and “moral and ethical issues”
Critical research often has an open political agenda (e.g., women, gays, etc.). There are a multitude of well-founded critical approaches including feminist, queer, and postcolonial. Each critical approach brings specific areas of concerns and arenas for critique. Critical work in personal relationship studies is nominal. One example is a feminist critique of communication studies (Bowen & Wyatt, 1993b) with a specific feminist critique of interpersonal communication (Wood, 1993).

In *Transforming visions: Feminist critiques in communication studies*, Bowen and Wyatt (1993a) described a feminist critique as providing “a different vocabulary and a fresh way of looking at the phenomena that we deal with, both as scholars and as ordinary people, every day of our lives” (p. 1). Wood (1993) further elaborated that a feminist critique “is especially interested in exploring the nature and extent to which women and women’s ways of knowing, acting, and experiencing are included and represented in research on interpersonal communication” (p. 20). Wood’s (1993) feminist approach to interpersonal communication focused on the structures of the academy and practices of interpersonal communication researchers that continue to privilege men and men’s ways of knowing.

Critical research takes the form of cultural criticism and ideological critique (Deetz, 2001). Wood (1993) specifically critiques the way that communication researchers have reified sexism. The reification of sexism against women occurs as a result of “taken-for-granted assumptions that have long been entrenched in academic research” (Wood, 1993, p. 20). Wood argued “methodological convention and convenience have resulted in a corpus of research that focuses on the normative behavior of people who represent a privileged, nonmajority segment of the population—white, middle class, educated people” (Wood, 1993, p. 28). Further, Wood (1993) elaborated that when researchers continue to conduct studies within long-established
constructs, “we contribute to a false perception of these as normative and correct” (p. 29). Wood concluded that studies are needed to examine classes, races, ages, and ethnicities.

Organizing Personal Relationships in Research: A Case of Friendship, Gender, and Sexuality

From a post positivist, social science inspired tradition, communication research relies on categories and labels (Henderson, 2003). Hinde (1996) imparted the importance of classifying relationships in a science-inspired approach to the study of relationships. In order to organize the knowledge that we accumulate, categorical structures become imperative. VanLear, Koerner, and Allen (2006) organized personal relationship types into seven typologies: family, marital, divorce, parent-child, sibling, romantic and premarital, and friendship. Each of these typologies is distinguished from each other by marked differences. For instance, friendships are generally understood to be intimate, but are distinguished from romantic relationships. Using these typologies, researchers can conduct research positioning a typology as independent, dependent, intervening, moderating, or contingency variables (VanLear, Koerner, & Allen, 2006). Relational members in studied relationships are further organized and analyzed according to sex, gender, and to a lesser extent, sexuality (Monsour, 2006).

Sex, gender, and sexuality in relationships. Gender and sexuality are means of stratification (Weber, 2010). Researchers use these labels (gender and sexuality) to attempt generalization for groups. To explore the use of gender and sexuality in personal relationship research, consider that of adult friendships. Monsour (2006) described the literature on adult friendship as “theoretically impoverished” (p. 61). While researchers have done research on friendship, no theories were developed resulting from that research. This could be the result of a lack of definition. Of utmost importance, intimacy in friendship remains undefined. In addition, current friendship research is heteronormative, which means that it best describes a heterosexual
Heterosexual friendships. Heterosexual same-sex friendships involve two males or two females. Research on heterosexual same-sex friendship found that men related through “closeness in the doing” (Swain, 1989) and “side-by-side” activity (Wright, 1982) while women were “talking companions” (Gouldner & Strong, 1987) and related “face-to-face” (Wright, 1982). Wood (2000) summarized, “Typically, women friends share many aspects of their experiences, thoughts, and feelings” and even though “men might care deeply about their male friends, they are less likely than women to express those feelings explicitly” (p. 307). This is a reason why men engage in cross-sex friendships, so they can freely express their emotions. Men are likely able to experience a closeness in cross-sex friendship that they are unable to with other men.

In heterosexual cross-sex friendships, which involve one male and one female, the importance of intimacy is apparent. Wood (2000) stated, “One persistent issue that surfaces in research on cross-sex friendships between heterosexuals is the difficulty of closeness that does not have sexual undertones” (p. 307). Cross-sex friendships have to deal with a level of potential intimacy that same-sex heterosexual friendships do not.

When Nardi (2007) asked straight men if they were attracted to their closest male friends, they avoided the question and answered by saying they “admire[d], like[d], or s[aw] them as
attractive” (p. 55), but they would never say that they were “attracted to” their closest male friends. “The role of sexuality in straight men’s friendships remains mysterious, not like the highly discussed concerns about the role of sexuality in cross-sex friendships” (p. 55). Similar to heterosexual cross-sex friendships, friendships between gay and straight men raise questions of “intimacy, sexuality, and masculinity” (p. 55).

**Gay/straight friendships.** Our society is heteronormative, which means people assume that everyone is straight unless given good reason to think otherwise (Warner, 1991). Gay men are “obligated to live in straight worlds” (Fee, 2000, p. 45). As a result of living in straight worlds, “Gay men are sufficiently adaptable to enact heterosexual roles and know how to fit themselves into heterosexual ‘scripts,’ and they are frequently called on to do it whether they want to or not” (p. 47). Although gay men might not want to enact heterosexual roles, because they inhabit straight worlds, their performances can be important in self-understanding and in finding ways to fit and be. Aside from needing to participate in straight social worlds, Fee (2000) argues that sometimes gay men might want to participate in straight social worlds.

Fee (2000) found that gay men would seek straight friendship when they were trying to avoid an intimate connection with someone and were looking for a friendship that was strictly “instrumental.” This meant that the relationship was not deep, did not require strong emotional input, and was generally described as “hanging out.” Somewhat inversely, straight men would seek the friendship of gay men for more of the intimate reasons. Straight men characterized their friendships with gay men as closer and more open than their friendships with other straight men, which were generally more rigid and based on instrumentality.

Additionally, Fee (2000) described the friendship between gay and straight men as a “discourse of instrumentality and intimacy” (p. 59). While no research has been done to examine
the potential same-sex attraction among straight men in friendships with gay men, some of the gay men admitted to entering friendship because of physical attraction. Nardi (2007) added, “Some gay men have to work around the sexual in order for the friendship to continue” (p. 56). But according to Fee (2000), “Some of the straight men are ‘clueless’ in this respect” (p. 53). That is not to say that all of the straight men were unaware of the possibility of sexual attraction. Muraco (2005) found that straight men would outline appropriateness of certain activities with their gay friends, such as making certain that the friendship was understood as platonic before a sleepover.

**So what?** Gender and sexuality are inextricable (Rubin, 1975; Sedgwick, 2008) in “that each can only be expressed in the terms of the other” (Sedgwick, p. 30). Sexuality is considered in cross-sex friendships, but not so much same-sex friendships beyond the labeling of sexual orientation. Where it is mentioned, it is not explored. Sexuality in terms of attraction and desire is seldom explored between men (Nardi, 2007).

The majority of the research on gender and friendships, though theoretically lacking, has focused on heterosexual friendships that are same-sex or cross-sex (Gouldner & Strong, 1987; Swain, 1989; Wright, 1982). Some research has been done on gay/straight friendships (Fee, 2000; Muraco, 2005; Nardi, 2007), but none of the research approached the friendship as a non-normative relationship. If it did, where would it go? How might it be organized?

The erased, understudied, inappropriate, dark side, and beyond. When individuals’ identities and/or relational configurations do not fit, they risk going unstudied (symbolic annihilation), being under-studied (Wood & Duck, 1995), being termed inappropriate (Goodwin & Cramer, 2002) or being located on the dark side (Cupac & Spitzberg, 2011). However they are
termed, they are not normative or normal relationships. As a result, they become positioned as inferior to the relationships that do fit and are normativized and normalized.

As researchers, what we research and how we organize and name people and their relationships is significant. What we do has the potential to reify social orders and reinforce cultural practices. To counter this, Lannamann (1991) called for a critical perspective in interpersonal communication research. Supported by queer theory, Elia (2003) proposed a queering of relationships.

**Summary**

Personal relationships are studied for a variety of reasons in a variety of ways. However, the study of personal relationships is dominated by a post positivist approach. Post positivist approaches work to create new knowledge through uncovering truths about reality. Other approaches of conducting relational research (i.e., interpretive and critical) are disadvantaged by the dominant paradigm of personal relationship research. In the pursuit of generalizable theory and results, one mode of understanding and learning about relationships is reified as superior. While both interpretive and critical approaches to studying relationships have the potential to uncover, give voice to, and free un/under represented people, research continues to mainly focus on the established ways of knowing through using knowledge structures and categories like gender, sex, sexuality, and rigid relationship categories like friendship. In the process, the dominant paradigm of personal relationship research not only disadvantages other research approaches, it disadvantages some individuals and relationships that do not fit the established structure and categories for studying relationships.
CHAPTER 3

QUEER THEORY AND THE STUDY OF PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

To this point I have offered that my own experience in personal relationships is what has brought me to such study, which is true. However, the impetus for this project is my personal/political/professional relationship with queer theory. In queer theory I have been able to envision a different way of looking at, thinking about, and understanding personal relationships for my self and others (including those studying personal relationships). Chapter Two set up the current state of the study of personal relationships in terms of the dominant paradigm of approaching research and the fruit of such labor. In this chapter, I aim to share my vision of queer theory by offering a queer critique of the study of personal relationships and imagining the possibilities of queering personal relationships and their study. To do this, I will explore: (a) queer theory, (b) queer critiques, (c) queering relationships and their study, and (d) making the move from queer critiques to queer methods. The chapter will end with a summary.

Queer Theory

Queer is a term that has a variety of meanings—from an umbrella term for all non-heterosexual people (which Sedgwick [1990] said was a mistake), to a derogatory term for such people, to “weird” or “strange” (the way my grandma still uses it). For Warner (1993), queer “represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (p. xxvi). Rather than an objective passive criticism of society, queer tends toward highly persistent political pursuit of critically questioning normalcy and normalization to ends of social justice. Queer is not a noun; queer is an adjective or verb
Nouns are stable and/or stabilize. Adjectives and verbs modify and depict action—queering. *I am queer. Not: I am a queer.*

Those who engage in queer-theory-based-studies can be considered queer theorists. Queer theorists are “oriented towards separating the individual from the social, promoting an ideal that we are all unique, special, unfettered by structural forces outside of our control” (Kirsch, 2000, p. 3) through disputing “seemingly indisputable concepts” (Turner, 2000, p. 3). Like social constructionists, queer theorists vary in the degree to which they hold tight to such ideas. For instance, I do believe that there are biological forces at work that dynamically interact and change with our social constructions of life and living of life.

Queer theory was explicated and explored in the field of communication studies in a special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* (“Queer Theory and Communication,” Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003). Gearhart (2003) offered, “Queer theory explores the interface of gender and sexuality … [and] contends that our culture imposes upon us multiple ‘essentialist’ identities that fragment us” (p. xxix). Such exploration and positioning is with serious implication for the study of communication and personal relationships. Gearhart continued, “In contrast to traditional cultural assumptions, queer theory suggests that every part of our identity is both fluid and mixed, and is thus capable of transformation” (p. xxix). Transcending Cartesian thought of the self as situated within the mind, queer theory sees self and identity as both personal and social engagements ripe for disconnection and deconstruction. As such, “social identity is by no means a stable, enduring index of categorization; it is, rather, always being contested from within. … Identity is better understood as a *process* of human development than a “task” to be “achieved”” (Hammack & Cohler, 2009, p. 4). This problematizes the individual as a subject of study.
Queer theory does well to defy definition. However, there are a few clear assumptions innately inherent to every queer theoretical endeavor. First, the world is a heteronormative place that prefers a certain type of relational configuration premised on the naturalness of (hetero)sex and (hetero)sexuality. Second, gender and sexuality are constructions that exist socially—meanings and values are constituted by people and not necessarily related to biology.¹ Gender has been described in innumerable ways, ranging from a “science fiction” (Plummer, 1995, p. 157) to a dance (Lorber, 2008). Gender and sexuality are better understood as performative phenomena—existing through reiterative and reifying performances by and for people as dictated by heteronormative culture. Because they are performative phenomena, queer theory recognizes the categories gender and sexuality as fluid (instead of fixed) and encourages the active protest and critical interrogation of normative practices. As a result, the entirety of the heteronormative ideological construct is premised on something that is not objectively real and therefore fundamentally problematic.

**Queer Critiques**

Work accomplished in the vein of queer theory generally takes the form of queer critiques, which are “reading[s] against the grain of a wide variety of cultural texts in order to expose the normative logic, ideology and injunctions at work underneath” (Ramlow, 2009, p. 132). Queer critiques generally take aim at political, cultural, institutional and/or ideological constructs as they pertain to gender and sexuality (similar to the feminist critiques offered in Chapter Two). Thus far, queer critiques have been the expanse of queer theory work in personal relationship research. For example, Foster (2008) criticized the use/operationalization of commitment in interpersonal research as being heterocentric and an example of the

¹ Some constructionists maintain the importance of recognizing links between sex and gender. Although constructed, gender can and does have very real implications. *(cf, Hacking, 1999).*
heteronormative ideological base for researching relationships. As a result, the research that interpersonal researchers accomplish with such an operationalization of commitment negates the possibility of importance for relational types that are not fixed on such a definition of commitment. This, in turn, creates a sub-class of relationships. Foster concluded by inviting researchers to be more reflexive in the ways they operationalize commitment.

Another common queer critique of relationships is that of the ideology that supports the importance, prominence, and privilege of heteronormative means of relating. For example, Warner (1999) argued that gays and lesbians should not seek marriage because it reifies the production of heteronormative relational importance. It is in this type of critique that marriage is revealed as the most revered relationship type (Elia, 2003, Warner, 1999). Because relationships are categorized and organized, as discussed in Chapter Two, it follows that those relationships are then asking for the assignment of social import. From the position of marriage as most revered socially, all other relationship types are subordinated to varying degrees.

To extend Elia (2003) and Warner’s (1999) critique, I draw inspiration from Connell’s (1995) social organization of masculinities (based on Gramsci’s [1971] notion of hegemony) and offer a construction of the social organization of relationships (Figure 1). As the hegemonic mode of relating, as mandated by heteronormativity, marriage is atop all other forms of relating in terms of cultural privilege and resources. No other relationship, save possibly mother/father-child, comes close to imbuing one with the sort of social rights, resources, and privileges as marriage. However, relationships that embody the possibility or inevitability of marriage (dating, courting, or an engagement) are complicit to hegemonic marriage because of the rights, resources, and privileges that they grant to the not-yet-married and the efforts they represent in seeking to attain that relational status. Finally, friendships and relationships designated below (on
the figure) are subordinated. These relationships do not enjoy the privileges of marriage, nor do they receive the rewards of working toward becoming married. In our discourse the social organization and hegemony of marriage can be recognized in the responses to an inquiry about a personal relationship: “Do you like him? Are you two dating?” “No, we’re just friends.” The two questions, and others like them, implicate potentiality and possibility for sublimating the relationship. The “just” of friendship illustrates the subjugation of such a relationship. To sentiments such as this, Elia (2003) explicitly called for a paradigmatic shift of queering relationships in the discipline of communication studies to offer new ways of researching and teaching about relationships.

**Figure 1. Social order of relationships.**

Queering Relationships and their Study

The potential for research to reify cultural social orders that cause oppression calls for an examination of the dominant paradigm of research on personal relationships (Lannamann, 1991).
The research that we do reifies the importance of certain relationships and creates subclasses for other relationships to exist in. Elia (2003) called for a paradigmatic shift in personal relationship research and pedagogy. Little has changed in nine years. In short, a Kuhnian paradigm shift would involve a revolution by means of an anomaly in the conduct of normal science (Kuhn, 1962). An anomaly is something that draws question to the practices of normal science. The dominant paradigm then responds to the anomaly through reconstructing its understandings, commitments, and modes, or a shift occurs. A paradigm shifting work this project is not. Its potential comes in the form of an anomaly that beckons a reconstruction of the understandings.

Queer is also a verb, which acts to destabilize that to which it is applied (Talburt, 2000). For instance, the dominant mode of personal relationship research necessitates fixity of relationship categories (Henderson, 2003). To queer personal relationship research aggressively destabilizes the fixed categories. This is fundamentally problematic for the dominant paradigm of personal relationship research—post positivism.

Whereas post positivism is predicated on the notion of an objective reality that can be known, queer theory focuses on “words and the power of language” (Giffney, 2009, p. 7) because of its presumption of reality as sorts of discursive formations (cf, Foucault, 1972). A post positivist’s dedication to the existence of a real world that can be known becomes particularly problematic from a queer perspective through the researcher and subject relationship. First, the researcher assumes an objective position, which is impossible from a perspective that holds subjectivity in high regard. A researcher’s presence in research processes colors the research with the discourses that constitute (and are constituting) the researchers’ self, which flow through researchers and everything that they do. For this reason, objectivity in the research process is an impossibility from a queer perspective.
Second, social researchers aim to study a particular subject. Through collecting data from human subjects, researchers organize and analyze data to theorize life and accumulate knowledge about the world that builds on what is already known. This is often done with the express purpose of prediction and control. Browne and Nash (2010) argued, “The nature of the ‘subject’ of research, previously envisioned as a unified, coherent and self-knowledgable individual, is redrawn as contingent, multiple and unstable; constituted within historically, geographically, and socially specific social locations” (p. 4). From the post positivist perspective, the collection of data from human subjects presumes a fixity in subject identity and being, but a queer perspective holds identities and being as unfixed, open, and ongoing constitutions. Essentializing data on subjects is problematic if the “subjects” are not fixed. A lack of a fixed subject makes the creation of knowledge of the real world impossible because the data on which it is based are faulty and flawed. At best, data collected from subjects can be viewed as fragmented, contestable moments of subjects situated in specific social and cultural contexts. One of those contexts is that of the research study itself. At worst, the productions of knowledge from a post positivist perspective can be viewed as reproductions of itself. For example, much research done from the dominant perspective is quantitative self-report in the form of questionnaires or structured interviews. These practices are pervaded by the ideologies of the dominant paradigm that are designed to reify its existence and value (Lannamann, 1991). In the process, the research produced reproduces social and cultural constructions embedded within the ideologies of the researchers imbued by the dominant paradigm.

The ontological and epistemological constructs of these perspectives (post positivist and queer) are another work in its own right. In the present project, labels and categories concerning how subjects are organized in terms of gender, sex, and sexuality and their relationship with
labels and categories of personal relationships (e.g., friends, friends with benefits, etc.) are of principal interest. Gender and sexuality and their implicated labels and categories are integral in social organization in terms of cultural institutions and relations of power and personal relationships with each other (Sedgwick, 1990). As such, relationship types are often researched as generally fixed phenomena experienced with variance based on a finite amount of identifiable normative variables. Different behaviors and characteristics between people indicate different types of relationship. Differing relationship types have varying expectations and cultural values associated with them.

We might understand a gay intimate relationship in a multitude of ways, but at its core is the involvement of two types of people based on identity—two men who are, because of their sexuality, incumbent of a sexual identity as gay (cf, Peplau & Spalding, 2000). Relationships are determined by the presumed configurations of relational members’ sexual and gender identities. As McIntosh (1968) argued, “Although the existence of the [homosexual] role in modern America appears to have some effect on the distribution of homosexual behavior, such behavior is far from being monopolized by persons who play the role of homosexual” (p. 192). Nearly 50 years later, we as researchers and social beings still grapple with this proposition. Not everyone who engages in same-sex sexual activity, let alone has same-sex sexual attraction, identifies as or should be labeled as gay. Nonetheless the cultural creation of the gay identity and the gay relationship permeates society. When we conduct research based on specific categories along the lines of gender, sexuality, and relationship types, we engage in a practice that risks a product of harm.

Categories are seldom solely created by the people who will later inhabit and be restricted by them. Hacking (1986) argued that categories and the people in them emerge simultaneously,
but that is not to say that the categories are then natural configurations. Hacking (1986) continued, “Numerous kinds of human beings and human acts come into being hand in hand with our invention of the categories labeling them. … Our spheres of possibility, and hence ourselves, are to some extent made up by our naming and what that entails” (p. 236). It is in this way that we confine ourselves to categorical existences. As the ways that we relate change, those who count and categorize them contribute to our process of understanding the distinctions of occupying a particular category. And although there are infinite ways of being relationally, our possibilities are bound by the categories that we co-create with society and its institutions (Hacking, 1986). Consider friendship.

We value friendships as some of our most important life relationships (Rawlins, 1992, 2009). Nardi (2007) noted the complexity and variants of being friends and friendship. There are many ways to be friends. And there are just as many ways to not be friends, including sex. Friends with benefits relationships have emerged as rich relational terrain for relationship study in which relational members of a friendship include sexual relations in their friendship (Hughes, Morrison, & Ascada, 2005). The idea of friends is augmented with benefits to create another category of relationship replete with implications and expectations. Sexuality and the erotic are likely not characteristic of only friends with benefits friendships. Rubin (1985) found:

Best friends are drawn together in much the same way as lovers—by something ineffable, something to which, most people say, it is almost impossible to give words. … [P]eople often talk as if something happened to them in the same way they “happened” to fall in love and marry. (p. 179)

If best friend relationships are drawn together in similar ways to those of romantic lovers, Seiden and Bart’s (1975) argument that “there is probably an erotic component in most close
friendships” (p. 220) makes sense. Nonetheless, sexuality and/or the erotic remain generally unexplored or unconsidered in friendship scholarship (Nardi, 2007). Both the existence of categorical understanding of gender and sexuality in particular relationship types and the lack of exploration of sexuality and the erotic in other relationships contribute to the way that we experience and participate in relationships in life. Consider a close friendship between two men. If these two men identify as straight and friends, acting on an erotic desire moves them in “danger” of a social labeling as gay in terms of both their identities and relationship. Dean (2000) emphasized, “How we talk about sex profoundly affects how we experience it” (p. 20).

Herein lies the problem with current friendship research. In concern of the example I’ve just given, it quickly slips into research on gay men. Fixed, categorical understandings of personal relationships in research and life delimit the discourses of possibility and impossibilities in relationships.

**A queer relationship by any other name.** Conceptually, queer relationship coverage in the current literature is scant. In some instances, such as Warner (1999), queer relationships emerge through implication as a result of the criticism of heteronormative relationships on the sexual level and the level of marriage. In these cases, relationships that vary or subvert the heteronormative construct could be potential queer relationships, though are not named such. However, while both allude to the hierarchical achievement of heterosexual marriage as dominant to other forms of sexual or intimate relationships, neither approaches the implications of this hierarchy on relationships that might otherwise be labeled friendships. Moreover, it appears that the scant research that exists calling queer relationships into being is undergirded with heteronormativity. Often times when the phrase “queer relationship” is used it refers to gay (and/or lesbian) relationships (e.g., Elia, 2003; Lannutti, 2005; Monsour, 2006; Weeks, Heaphy,
Further, queer is often used to define a gay coupling’s embracing heteronormativity in what Duggan (2003) called homonormative. Indeed, not everyone who is gay identifies as queer (Halberstam, 2005) and not everyone who identifies as queer is gay (Thomas, 1999).

**Theorizing queer relationships.** A queer relationship exists in a liminal space—continually resisting the social constructions of the bindings of other stratified and accepted social relationships. A nudge in any discursive direction (e.g., towards monogamous coupling) can see the relationship pushed into a normative category. But this possibility does not underscore the nature of a queer relationship, nor is it a limitation or negatively defining quality of a queer relationship—it is symptomatic of a society that pines for definition and stratification along the line of labels. Consider cross-sex friendship. While the possibility exists that the relationship might move to another normative category, the friendship is permitted to occupy the platonic territory.

Indeed, by virtue, a queer relationship defies definitions and labels, making those who are not part of the relationship susceptible to reducing the relationship to a more settled existing construct of relationship. Perhaps this possibility is a strengthening agent in the queer relationship. So like queer theory, with a queer relationship,

the aim is not to abandon identity as a category of knowledge and politics but to render it permanently open and contestable as to its meaning and political role. In other words, decisions about identity categories become pragmatic, related to concerns of situational advantage, political gain, and conceptual utility. (Seidman, 1996, p. 12)

In order to theorize queer relationships, the same attention to openness and contestability toward relating must exist with an awareness of the social constructs that surround them. Forming and/or
maintaining these relationships requires relational members’ constant (re)negotiation of the expected fixity that accompanies a certain type of heteronormative relational construct.

**Articulations of queer relationship.** By its very design, queer theory lacks linguistic transparency. If queer theory’s thesis is resisting classification, discipline, etc, then proffering the definition of queer theory is its antithesis. The antithesis of queer theory is its raison d'être. When queer theorists define queer theory, they generally are clear that they are offering a definition or their definition or something positioned as a definition that actually highlights the inability to define it. It would be beyond contradictory (perhaps even incendiary) to attempt to describe and delineate all queer relationships. Actually, it would be contradictory to attempt to label any queer relationship because of fluid, resistance to labeling, ever changing, etc. premises of queer. Demands for operationalization of queer relationship or a succinct definition for the purpose of research are ever-present. In response to this, I offer articulations of queer relationship. That is, three ways that a relationship may be queer. These articulations are not necessarily mutually exclusive of each other. Because queer relationship is conceptually infinite, these articulations are not complete, rather incompletable. I offer three articulations of queer relationship: (a) incontradistinction to normative/normal relationships, (b) as missing from the canon of relationship stories, and (c) as disciplined, denied, unknown.

**In contradistinction to normative/normal relationships.** The first articulation of queer relationship requires an articulation of the normative/normal—there is no shortage of this in research. In fact, it could be said that anyone living a social life is ostensibly an expert of sorts of the normative/normal, despite (sometimes in spite of) their location in it. To have knowledge of normative/normal relationships is the starting point for conceptualizing queer relationship in this articulation. For Halperin (1995), queer “acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to
the norm” (p. 62). Queer does not describe anything specifically concrete or finite; instead, it is emergent in the shadows of the normative/normal. Because the normative/normal are culturally specific and situated in time, queer is fluid in its oppositional relation. This project, like most others, considers only the culture and time in which it is located, so normative/normal can be understood as such.

Consider Rubin’s (1984) delineation of “the” sex hierarchy in the form of the charmed circle and outer limits (Figure 2). The figure illustrates a hierarchy of sexual behaviors through positioning “good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality” (p. 281) in the center of the circle. These include heterosexual, monogamous, procreative, private (at home), etc. Sexual behaviors in the center of the circle are juxtaposed with “bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality” (p. 281). These include homosexual, promiscuous, non-procreative, public (in the park), etc. The inner circle is charmed while the outside circle is just that, the outer. The items in the outer circle are understood as being positioned there because they are in opposition with what is normative/normal by way of naturalness, religion, and/or social norms. In this hierarchy, two sexual behaviors are (un)necessarily placed in false dichotomies based on social constructs. Similarly, queer relationship can be articulated in contradistinction to the normative/normal. The distinction of queer relationship may be made because the distinction of normative/normal exists. In that fashion, queer relationship can be articulated in contradistinction to “a certain type of heterosexual relationship style [that] is often promoted as the best, most respectable, and cherished sexual lifestyle that provides social currency and status” (Elia, 2003, p. 62). It is important to note that the normative/normal do not necessarily account for the majority. As Elia (2003) continued, “This notion continues to be promoted and reproduced despite the fact that many people—both heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals—actually do not fit into such neatly
categorized and narrowly defined sexual relationships” (pp. 62-63). This means that relational configurations, including those of self-identifying heterosexuals might not be normative/normal.

![Figure 2. Rubin’s (1984) “The sex hierarchy: the charmed circle vs the outer limits” (p. 281).](image)

Warner (1993) explained that each individual’s coming to a queer identification likely involved a specific knowledge of self, society, and the relationship between the two. Extending this understanding to queer relationships goes something like this:

Every person who comes to a queer [relationship] self-understanding knows in one way or another that her [relationship] stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity,
truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about bearing the body. (Warner, 1993, p. xiii)

Obviously most people probably do not articulate their relationship as queer, so it goes without saying that individuals may understand their relationship as a queer relationship without using the terminology. What is of importance is that the areas that Warner identified as being key in a self-understanding as queer are all areas that can be understood to be comprised of false dichotomies with juxtaposed values similar to those in Rubin’s (1984) sex hierarchy. Understanding one’s self as queer, like queer relationship, can be articulated in contradistinction to normative/normal.

As missing from the canon of relationship stories. The second articulation of queer relationship is based in narrative and the narrative nature of social life. First used to describe the organization of religious texts, the biblical canon was assembled by theologians of Christianity out of scriptural writings, which excluded writings of the Hebrews (Guillory, 1990). This action created a collection of texts, or canon, that crafted and controlled “truths” through not just what it included, but what it excluded. In the organization, orthodox texts were distinguished from heretical. Canonization in literature is “the selection of what are conventionally called the ‘classics’” (Guillory, 1990, p. 233). This practice led to the exclusion of certain classes of people (race, gender, religion, etc.) in favor of the dominant group of people and homogeneity of canonized texts. This raises issues in terms of representation of people, culture, and writing that become especially salient in the teaching and proliferation of canons. Instead of a diverse and rich landscape of literary work from a multitude of perspectives, readers are at risk of only being exposed to and allowed to engage with only one type of text produced by one group of people.
Based on Bruner’s (1990) conception of canonical relationships and expectations, Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, and Bochner (1995) and Bochner, Ellis, and Tillmann-Healy (1997, 2000) forwarded a conception of canonical stories pertaining to relational life. Predicated on our dependence on both being told and telling stories as a means living life and making sense of our experiences (cf., Fisher, 1984), canonized stories are taken-for-granted orthodox truths that represent life and how to live it. Canonized stories “function to legitimate dominant forms of understanding and organizing reality and subsequently operate a form of social control” (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 2000, p. 19). Contained within these culturally specific stories are the expectations for what is right. Canonical stories “prioritise one group, culture and identity over others, and provide one essential or foundational truth over and above others. In many ways it is the politics of the past, still alive in the present” (Plummer, 1995, p. 162). In terms of personal relationships, “canonical stories express the boundaries of acceptable relationship and family practices against which alternative stories are judged” (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 2000, p. 20). These stories contain the details (some generic, some quite specific) for how you should experience relationships, in what configurations, through performing what roles—what to expect, what is expected of you, and to what end. We hear these canonical relationship stories from birth until the time we die.

Bochner, Ellis, and Tillmann-Healy (2000) further offered, “To have or be in a relationship is to have or be in a story and, usually, to want to tell about it” (p. 17). Needless to say, there is much pressure to perform relating in the fashion portrayed in canonical stories of relationships. One popular canonical relationship story told is that of marriage. According to this story, one should engage in monogamous romantic relationships (hopefully only one) with another with the ever-present possibility and/or goal of marriage. Although not the first to do so,
Hillis Miller (1990) said, “A good story has a beginning, middle, and end” (p. 66). Following this proposition, a story cannot be good without an end. If the end of the story is vital, then what other story to learn and live than that of the happy ending. In personal relationships, this is accomplished in marriage. Lurking right below the surface of that fairytale (or is it looming above?) is heteronormativity.

As another example, consider conceptions of the traditional family. Plummer (1995) decried the traditional family story as “one narrow option from a range of possible strategies for living together” (p. 153). And while Plummer went on to note that by the 1970s alternative notions of family had emerged, the traditional family remains “heavily reflected in many media stories—TV sitcoms, soaps, romantic novels, popular film, and it finds a daily voice in personal narratives, harbouring a sense of nostalgia for romantic times past” (p. 152). These portrayals of traditional family illustrate a canonical story of relating and relationships. While the convention of family has changed in life, the canonical story of traditional family is still well understood. In fact, some people remain oppressed because of their family configuration’s failure to conform to something akin a traditional family arrangement (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). It is in this space where articulating a queer relationship as missing from the canon of relationship stories emerges. A multitude of social entities coalesce to impart the canonical stories of relationships upon us. Canonical stories are depicted in media portrayals on television, in movies, through music and books. This articulation of queer relationship can be understood through an absence of depictions of such relational configurations in dominant media. However, there may, possibly, be scant depictions in independent, non-mainstream media.

**Disciplined, denied, unknown.** The third articulation of queer relationship is comprised of three inequalities, which may overlap or intersect. First, *disciplined* refers to relational
configurations that include behaviors deemed illegal or improper by standards of society. As a result of being classified illegal or inappropriate, one or all relational members face the possibility of discipline for their engagement. Discipline can encompass many forms ranging from legal punishment to ramifications within an organization. For example, at a place of employment one might be put on leave with no pay or fired from the organization altogether. Disciplined relationships might be understood in terms of Duck and Vandervoort’s (2002) scandalous and forbidden relationships.

Scandalous relationships occur when “formal role ascriptions are violated, codified rules or practices are broken” and “punishment may include social ostracism, and legal or institutional reprimand” (Duck & Vanderloot, 2002, p. 18). Examples of scandalous relationships might include doctor-patient intimate relationships, teacher-student intimate relationships, or boss-employee relationships. Discipline might include job loss or legal action. Forbidden relationships are considered “reprehensible, taboo, illegal, and usually leaving to significant formal punishment” (Duck & Vanderloort, 2002, p. 18). Examples of forbidden relationships might include statutory rape relationships or incest. Discipline likely includes legal action. In research, disciplined relationships are relegated (e.g., Goodwin & Cramer, 2002). It is important to note that this articulation of queer relationship, or any other, does not promote or advocate any forms of relationship contained within.

Second, some relationships fail to embody certain socially expected characteristics. The result can be relationships rendered socially trivial. This rendering represents a relationship that is denied. For one reason or another (or many), denied relationships are not granted importance and go socially unrecognized. These might be relationships that some do not consider real. For example, a relationship developed with another online via the Internet might not be considered
real to others. If the relational members have never met in real life, others might trivialize the relationship. Others might ask questions like, “When will you meet in real life?” The criteria imposed by others for rendering the relationship true or real in this case would be moving the relationship from online to offline face-to-face (Lea & Spears, 1995). Parasocial relationships might be another relationship that is denied by others. A parasocial relationship is a relationship in which one of the relational members knows all about the other who knows nothing. For example, the relationships that individuals have with characters from television shows (e.g., Cohen, 2004). In research, denied relationships might not be deemed important enough for study so they may go un/understudied. However, they might also be sought out for study because they evince a certain novelty.

Finally, unknown refers to two possibilities of not knowing. The first possibility of not knowing implies the existence of a relationship whose ways of relating are socially unknown. These unknowns are situated in time and culture. Perhaps best understood through an illustration, there was a time not so long ago when knowledge as to how people who would now be understood as gay accomplished relating and relationships was rare. As time passed, knowledge of the doing of these types of relationships became more widespread. The relationships would eventually come to be socially understood through the existing relational structures of heterosexual modes of relating (Warner, 2012). This leaves only a few questions remaining such as, who is the man and who is the woman (referring to established gender roles)? This is not to say that everyone understands how the relating goes, but there is a certain social knowledge of it. Of course, in my own Women and Gender Studies classroom, questions are still levied against lesbians concerning how they have sex without a penis.
The second possibility of not knowing refers to knowing that escapes the imagination and for that reason is currently positioned as unknowable. By this I mean there are certainly relationship configurations that exist that go without knowing because they exceed the limitation of what we can imagine of relationships. Moreover, there are obviously relationships that do not yet exist and therefore cannot be known and/or are beyond the scope of imagination.

These articulations of queer relationship do not serve as criteria for a queer relationship. My articulation was not meant to “define, purify, puncture, sanitize, or otherwise entail” (Berlant & Warner, 1995, p. 344) queer relationships. Instead, I offer these articulations as spaces for thought about relationships that could reside in such spaces and the associated implications in terms of research, society, and relational life. Just as not everyone who identifies as gay is queer, not everyone who might be identified in a relationship in one of the above articulations may experience it as queer. Ultimately, I strongly hold Warner’s (1993) position that queer identity must be come to in one’s own terms. Labeling the relationships of others as queer is as problematic or more so than the current imperative toward labeling and categorizing in the dominant paradigm of personal relationship research. Likewise, it is problematic to challenge another’s self-identification or relational identification as queer. And yet with everything that has been said, I do not merely offer this as a critique to the end of sensitizing.

**Queer Critique to Queer Methodology and Method**

Research has been done with the aim of “inviting interpersonal communication researchers and teachers to be more reflexive in the way they operationalize commitment and relationships in general” (Foster, 2008, p. 84). While queer critiques can draw attention and create space for change, they fall short in creating queer accounts (Browne & Nash, 2010). The current project is an effort toward transcending the limits of queer critiques and toward
articulating a queer theory inspired methodology and method for studying personal relationships or relational inqueery.

In the dominant paradigm of personal relationship studies, generalizablility is a standard for judging value. In other words, the more relationships that can be described by one research study the better. Engaging queer in relational inquiry offers an unfettered perspective of the (im)possibilities of both relating with the other and the dominant mode of how we relate in our society. Halberstam (1998) described a queer methodology as:

A scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidently excluded from traditional studies of human behavior. The queer methodology attempts to combine methods that are often cast as being at odds with each other, and it refuses the academic compulsion toward disciplinary coherence. (p. 13)

Indeed, in the study of personal relationships (and elsewhere), “it is illogical to ‘count’ subjects once one has argued that a ‘countable subject’ does not exist” (Browne & Nash, 2010, p. 11). It is for that reason that the queer methods that have been established are almost entirely qualitative.

In studying relationships, queer invites relational inquiry that involves all of the relational members to contribute to the conversation on what would be considered the intersubjectivities that is their relation as subject. All queer projects include a reading of the self to varying degrees (Plummer, 2011). In recognition of unfinaliziability and fragmentation, queer relational inquiry should include readings of the selves. The fragmented contestable relational productions should be participatory and imaginative in their construction. Gender, sexuality, and relationship should not be portrayed as fixed states, but instead as becoming.
Summary

Where Chapter Two presented an idea of the dominant mode of researching personal relationships, Chapter Three presented queer theory and then applied it to the fixity and hierarchically organized social construct of relationships in the dominant culture. Queering the study of personal relationships creates space for articulating queer relationship. The articulation of queer relationship serves not to establish a new category for personal relationship research. Instead, it acts as a space to understand the relationships that might occupy these spaces and the implications that are associated. Instead of inviting new ways of thinking about the approach to researching relationships in the dominant paradigm, the articulations of queer relationship invite endeavors in developing queer methodology and method for relational inquiry.
Numerous definitions of autoethnography have been proffered. Often, autoethnographers point to the slippery terrain that is naming, defining, and/or pinning down autoethnography. Many then point to Ellis and Bochner’s (2000) description: “Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). Parsing autoethnography reveals writing and researching (graphy) about culture(s) (ethno) through one’s experience (auto) (cf, Bochner & Ellis, 2006; Reed-Danahay, 1997). This chapter offers a methodology of autoethnography through exploring narrative (or story), reflexivity, aesthetic style, and the writer-reader-text relationship it invokes. Next the methods of the current project will be outlined: (a) meta-autoethnography, (b) personal narrative, (c) co-constructed narrative, and (d) writing-stories. Finally the chapter will end with a summary.

A Methodology of Autoethnography

Methodologically, autoethnographic inquiry is a postmodern approach (Richardson, 2000) and considered by some a form of new ethnography (Goodall, 2000). Born out of the crises of legitimation and representation, autoethnography as new ethnography addresses the questions “who can speak for this culture?” and “how can you speak for this culture?” (Davis & Ellis, 2008, pp. 284-285). By rejecting objectivist notions of the researcher’s self as separate from research in favor of an embrace of and engagement in the inextricability of researcher and researched, autoethnographers are both researcher and researched. Ellis and Bochner (2000) offered,
Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (p. 739)

Autoethnography is a way, through reflexively writing about experience and research, of positioning self within culture and culture within self. Four defining characteristics of autoethnographies are narrative (or story), reflexivity, aesthetic style, and the writer-reader-text relationship it invokes.

**Narrative.** Narrative pervades even traditional science. Data can be understood as narrative constructions (Maines, 1993). In short, even the most scientific research monograph tells the story of why the research was done, how it was done, what was found, and what the importance (if any) is of it. However, the voice of the researcher is made to be irrelevant through the expectation of standardizing writing. The importance of the inclusion of narrative in research comes through recognizing the roles that researchers play in the *production of knowledge*. In its narrative quality, autoethnography works to encourage (if not empower and privilege) the voice of the researcher while simultaneously presenting research in a way that is accessible for more than just those who specialize in reading research monographs (Richardson, 2000).

Bochner (2001) asserted, “Narrative is both about living and part of it” (p. 153). In the same vein, Richardson (1990b) and Fisher (1984) believe that story is the best way to understand life, because that’s how people understand it. The stories that people tell are theories (Bochner, 1994). In pursuit of understanding personal experience, the stories that we tell (ourselves and others) to make sense of past, present, and future life are theories called into being from our own life experience. It is likely for these reasons (and more) that the social sciences have been
experiencing a narrative turn toward qualitative research (Banks & Banks, 2000). Recognizing
the ubiquity of narrative in life has encouraged (and in some instances, demanded) researchers to
move to paying increasing amounts of attention to story and the inter/subjectivities that surround
it. In what Geertz (1983) described as the blurring of genres, narratives previously relegated to
the humanities have become increasingly of interest to some in the social sciences.

In autoethnographic texts, “The autoethnographer’s story theorizes personal experience.
And that theorizing is both personal and cultural” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 115). The stories
we tell in autoethnography should reflect “the process of personally and academically reflecting
on lived experiences in ways that reveal the deep connections between the writer and her or his
subject” (Goodall, 2000, p. 137). It is in this way that autoethnographies, through narratives, are
not just project but process. Whereas the conventional narratives of science monographs depict
subjects in final states, autoethnographies show people doing and becoming. Narrative in
autoethnography shows that people are not done products; rather people are in constant states of
becoming. Narrative in autoethnography shows people in process (Bochner & Ellis, 2006).

**Reflexivity.** To create narratives for autoethnography, researchers engage in reflexivity.
Autoethnography is a reflexive method; “to be ‘reflexive’ means to turn back on our self the lens
through which we’re interpreting the world” (Goodall, 2000, p. 137). Researchers work to make
sense of a/the (depending where you’re situated) world, and reflexivity enables one to make
sense of one’s self making sense of a/the world. Hertz (1997) elaborates,

To be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experience while
simultaneously living in the moment. By extension, the reflexive [auto]ethnographer does
not simply report “facts” or “truths” but actively constructs interpretations of his or her
experiences in the field and then questions how those interpretations came about. (p. viii)
Reflexivity is a personal process of locating the self and positioning (and repositioning) the self in culture and life. Reflexivity is the ongoing practice of critically accounting for and examining one’s position in time, culture, and relationships. To be reflexive is to interrogate where it is that you are in terms of where it is that you have been and to understand the locations and relationships between then, now and where you are going. While autoethnographers vary in their understanding and approach to doing autoethnography, reflexivity remains a constant in creating narratives and accompanying autoethnographies. The narratives or stories produced through reflexive endeavors construct the theories of the self doing life. Just as they are brought into being using reflexivity, they call to be read and reread with the same reflexive attention.

Aesthetic style. Accepting Bochner’s (1994) notion of story as theory and treating it as such in social research inspires methods of inquiry that are less scientific-based and more artistic. What this means is allowing story to speak for itself instead of writing the story and then speaking for the story or (over)analyzing the story (Denzin, 1997). Whereas the dominant research paradigm is consistently the same stylistically, aesthetic style of text is central to autoethnography (Boyle & Parry, 2007). Style should “remain faithful to the experience” (Scott, 2009, p. 258). Autoethnographic projects should be styled as the autoethnographer is so moved.

Although many of us were first trained in scientific tradition and style (Richardson, 2000), we are seldom just academics (cf. Bochner & Ellis, 2002). We are living and breathing and creating entities of and in the world. We know (or know of) other ways to convey our thoughts and experiences aside from conventional prose. The other ways of conveying are what constitute autoethnography’s aesthetic style. Our words can take shapes in sentences or fragments that may be entirely unlike how we’re supposed to write. We write poetry (e.g., Purnell, in press), plays (e.g., Pelias, 2002), prose (e.g., Richardson, 2007), and performances
Alongside (or instead) of our words, we may include paintings (e.g., Scott-Hoy, 2002) or pictures (e.g., Picart, 2002) or photographs (e.g., Denzin, 2008). When we construct our autoethnographic projects, they are marked by our unique aesthetic styles.

Constructing autoethnographies that break from the inaccessible traditional monograph standard is paramount because autoethnographies are meant to make “experience available for others to witness, encounter, and engage” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 117). One of the important aspects of narrative-based research is the preference and preservation of individuals’ voices and the presentation of those voices to others in a meaningful way that complements the associated experience. Autoethnographic texts are born out of reflexivity and interpretation through the writer’s aesthetic style, which invites the beginning of a new process whereby readers interpret and engage the text in new ways.

**Writer-reader-text relationship.** Through personal narrative we work to “create a dynamic interplay between [our]selves and others” (Corey, 1996, p. 57). Autoethnographies connect readers to cultures similar to their own but through someone else’s eyes or to cultures unlike their own. Often, the experiences in autoethnographies “are experiences that are not easily accessible” (Jorgenson & Bochner, 2004, p. 530). For instance, Ronai’s (1995, 1996) accounts of childhood abuse and molestation provide access to a reader who doesn’t share similar experiences. A reader may take his/her encounter with the text beyond the page and find a range of ways to combat child abuse, from sharing the story with others to getting involved with an organization. Or if a reader has had similar experience, autoethnography can “offer readers companionship when they desperately need it” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111). Boyle and Parry (2007) argued for autoethnographic texts as a superior method for conveying content, which enables the possibility for “vicarious learning” (Parry & Boyle, 2009).
Behar (1996) advocates writing the vulnerable. We write autoethnography to say, “I feel alone” and/or “You aren’t alone” (Bolen & Bolen, 2012). By writing the vulnerable, personal experiences can be made political (Denzin, 2000; Holman Jones, 2005). In writing this autoethnographic account I can orchestrate “impossible encounters” by “bring[ing] people in contact with ideas, situations, or others that appear to be totally different” (Cohen-Cruz, 2001, p. 105). And with that, this account “struggles to open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin on the binary of opposition between theory and practice” (Conquergood, 2002, p. 145) in the contexts of relational communication research, gender, sex, and sexuality. Despite the vulnerability that writing such an account necessarily calls for, I am hopeful that my experiences will “no longer just [be my own]; for better or worse they [will] become part of a community experience” (Nudd, Schriver, & Galloway, 2001, p. 113).

Recalling Gergen and Walter (1998), my interest in relationships grew from “the soil of personal experience” (p. 110)—a certain type of non-normative relational personal experience (that has recurred too often in my life). The stories in this dissertation will (re)construct a certain type of relationship that defies the essentialist, reductionary modes of seeking to predict and control. Indeed, what is at stake is sense making and on the line are relationships.

Methodologically, autoethnography is continually criticized along lines of value. Whereas a traditional empirical approach to research generally remains fixed on predicting and controlling, an approach like autoethnography is generally more concerned with how people make sense of the world (Bochner, 2002). The difference between the two can be understood as researching “the” world verses researching “a” world. In this case, my and our world(s) encompassing my and our (queer) relationship. This project comes from and moves beyond my experiences within the field of relational communication through engaging constructions of
experience in queer relationships to forward an applied communication research type of relational inquiry.

**Autoethnography Here, Now**

My conception of autoethnography is queer, it “embraces fluidity, resists definitional and conceptual fixity, looks to self and structures as relational accomplishments, and takes seriously the needs to create more livable equitable, and just ways of living” (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008, p. 384). It resists a standardized “academic” way of writing in favor of a writing style that is befitting of sharing the personal experience that it (re)constructs. This undertaking engages a queer scavenger method (Halberstam, 1998) comprised of narratives of selves (Plummer, 2011) and other(s), which are layered (Ronai, 1992, 1995, 1996) and composed of multiple and fragmented texts (Markham, 2005). This bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005) of narratives may be disruptive in flow, layout, tense, and voice.

Autoethnographers (e.g., Ellis, 2004) often echo Behar (1996) in saying that autoethnography “that doesn’t break your heart isn’t worth doing” (p. 177). As a result, confronting and engaging one’s own vulnerability becomes a key component of autoethnography that moves personal experience to the surface, then enables it to be made public. This project contains several autoethnographic approaches embedded or layered throughout. Four approaches are elaborated upon here to present the relevance and importance of their inclusion: (a) meta-autoethnography, (b) personal narratives on personal relationships, (c) co-constructed narrative, and (d) writing-stories.

**Meta-autoethnography.** Carolyn Ellis coined the approach she used in her second autoethnographic novel, *Revision: Autoethnographic reflections on life and work* (2009), meta-autoethnography. In *Revision*, Ellis works to connect where she was with where she is now.
through re-examining older texts and revising and re-visioning them in light of today. Ellis (2009) explained:

My goal is to turn the narrative snapshots I have written in the past into a form more akin to a video—a text in motion—one in which I drag and drop in new experiences as well as revised interpretations of old storylines, then reorder and thus restory them. (p. 13)

In this way, it is possible to take advantage of autoethnography to a fuller extent. Stories that previously sat ostensibly ended, stories that were never meant to be ended, can be restored to account for time and self (and likely other and cultural) changes as well. Meta-autoethnography is an opportunity to enhance autoethnography. Ellis (2009) elaborates:

In writing autoethnography and meta-autoethnography, I attempt to integrate the complex, sometimes contradictory, components of my life and scholarship—personal with the professional; family with academia; work with play; heart with head; homogenous small town with cosmopolitan urban life; literary writing with social science observation and critical analysis with compassionate care—into a meaningful and coherent story: one that frames, yet continues to honor, the diversity of the concrete details in a life being lived; one that stays open to revision and re-visioning. (p. 18)

It is in this capacity of integrating seemingly separate, yet entirely intertwined parts of life, that meta-autoethnography takes a role in the current project.

Meta-autoethnographic work, as Ellis (2009) forwarded, is scant. Some pieces reference the idea of meta-autoethnographic to imply the connection of past and present (Hurd, 2010; Sughrua, 2010) without fully realizing a meta-autoethnographic approach. Other work, like that undertaken by Rambo (2007), were written prior to Ellis coining the term, yet fully embody the meta-autoethnographic form. Rambo accounts her experience with the IRB (the university
Internal Review Board) and an autoethnographic project about a teacher-student relationship that the IRB prohibited her publishing after it had been accepted. The piece is written using layers of narratives and correspondences. It very much is an autoethnography on her experience with her autoethnography. She offers both an argument against the power of the contemporary IRB and cautions submitting autoethnography to IRBs, which she asserts should have no authority over autoethnography.

This project could be characterized as a meta-autoethnographic piece. The whole of this project is narratives of one kind or another embedded or layered with other narratives. Some of them are more traditionally based social scientific narratives reviewing literature (in the beginning). Some of these narratives are personal narratives. The narratives that comprise Chapters Five and Six of this dissertation are a variety of old narratives and new narratives. Some of the narratives are co-constructed. These co-constructed narratives are the focal point for another meta-ethnographic method, discussed later, writing-stories.

**Personal narrative on personal relationships.** Bochner (2002) said, “Stories are the narrative frames within which we make our experiences meaningful” (p. 73). Personal narratives on personal relationships function to make our relational experiences meaningful. Narratives on personal relationships “show people in the process of using communication to achieve an understanding of their lives and their circumstances” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111). Just as we find value in our own narratives or theories of life, sharing these narratives is valuable because they “depict people struggling to overcome adversity—you know, going though bad times” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111). Readers are able to engage the relational experiences of others.

Bochner, Ellis, and Tillmann-Healy (2000) described the relationship between canonical and personal stories. Canonical stories are the stories that act as exemplars for a culture; for
instance, the story of an engagement and wedding. These stories “express boundaries of acceptable relationship[s]” (p. 20). Personal stories do not necessarily fit with canonical stories because canonical stories are cultural productions of hierarchical value. Not everyone has the storybook romance. Our personal narratives on personal relationships are a way of storying the relationships that are not seen on TV, movies, or heard about in music. Personal narratives in this project take the form of short stories and vignettes (Humphreys, 2005) layered among co-constructed narratives and writing-stories.

**Co-constructed narrative.** Personal narratives implicate relational others but focus on only one’s experience (though the experience is of the self and other). Narrative that represents (or acts as) communication between relational partners is important for several reasons. As Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson (1967) forwarded, communication occurs on levels of content and relationship. While one level of communication is the intended literal message, the other level contains information about the relationship between those communicating. It is in the latter that co-constructed narrative finds its importance.

Co-constructed narratives provide accounts of relational experience without privileging one person over the other. The same relational experience may be recounted in differing ways based on individual points of view (Duck & Sants, 1983; Surra & Ridley, 1991; VanderVoort & Duck, 2000). Developed by Ellis and Bochner (1992) as an interpersonal research collaborative method of inquiry, co-constructed narrative is the process of relational members separately constructing personal narrative accounts that generally surround a relational turning point (Denzin, 1989) or epiphany (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Denzin, 1989). Then, through bringing these individual accounts of a shared experience together, a “dialogic” (p. 80) narrative is co-constructed, respecting the dynamic interplay of the relationship. Co-constructed narrative is
often an “empathic and evocative text that incorporates both partners’ voices and subjectivities and invites outsiders into the intersubjective world of the narrators” (Bochner & Ellis, 1995, p. 205). This enables the constructions of relating or the process of making sense of relating to remain highly personal.

Vande Berg and Trujillo (2008) co-constructed a story of their relationship through a battle with cancer, which shows the relational interplay between love, grief, life, death, loss, and survival. Outside of intimate, romantic relationships, Toyosaki and Pensoneau (2005) offered their co-constructed narrative “to seek ways in which we participate in constructing our intercultural friendship” (p. 54). They continued, “we localize our research by valuing our own friendship as a subject of study” (p 54). Where Bochner and Ellis (1995) intended their method of co-constructing narrative for interpersonal communication in intimate relationships, Toyosaki and Pensoneau (2005) argued that such a method is useful for any “sort of meaningful, interpersonal, intercultural relationship” (p. 59). They concluded by recognizing the vast array of possibilities in exploring other cultural differences, including gender and sexuality. Nonetheless, Carolyn Ellis (personal communication, November 5, 2011) expressed surprise at how little has been done to forward co-constructed narrative.

There are three co-constructed texts in the current project. Chapter Five has two co-constructed texts while Chapter Six has one co-constructed text. These co-constructed texts are included to illustrate their (im)possibilities and potentials through writing-stories (discussed below) and later theorization in the final chapter.

**Writing-stories.** As another meta-autoethnographic approach, Laurel Richardson’s (1995, 1997) writing-stories are a genre of “narratives about the writing process itself” (2000, p.
Postmodernism’s influence on social scientific qualitative inquiry reminds us that the texts we write are purposeful, situated, and contestable. Richardson (2000) continues:

They evoke new questions about the self and the subject; they remind us that our work is grounded, contextual, and rhizomatic. They can evoke deeper parts of the Self, heal wounds, enhance the sense of self—or even alter one’s sense of identity. (pp. 931-931)

Writing-stories are critical, reflexive narratives about the interplay between the contexts and processes that were at play when a specific text was written. They allow authors the ability to resituate their writing in the blurry landscape between personal and work. Richardson (2000) concludes:

Writing-stories sensitize us to the potential consequences of all of our writing by bringing home—inside our homes and workplaces—the ethics of representation. Writing-stories are not about people and cultures ‘out there’; —ethnographic subjects (or objects)—they are about ourselves, our work spaces, disciplines, friends, and families. What can we say? With what consequences? Writing-stories bring the danger and poignancy of ethnographic representation up close and personal. (p. 932)

It is through writing-stories that our work can come to have (or have again) personal value in repositioning where we’ve been with where we’re going. It gives us the chance to make right the contestable truths we write as only autoethnography could do (or want done).

Wyatt (2010) engaged in writing-stories in an exploration of mourning his father after writing three previous papers on it. Through layers of vignettes, Wyatt adds dimensions of depth and interrogation to his previous endeavors. The co-authored writing-stories of Tierney and Hallett (2010) explored the process of writing a dissertation. Through the stories, negotiations between advisor and advisee are illustrated.
I construct writing-stories to provide accounts of the process of co-constructing narratives and constructing personal narratives of and on personal relationships. These writing-stories precede and/or proceed narratives, co-constructed and personal. Richardson (1997) named each of her writing-stories, in part, “forewords” and “afterwords.” While Richardson never fully explains this choice, I presume it to be a play on the writing convention of “foreword” and “afterword” by adding “s” to implicate the writing process and the temporality of forwards and afterwards. In my writing-stories’ titles I invoke Richardson’s “forewords” and “afterwords” in their literary forms of “foreword” and “afterword.” I do so to conjure the convention of foreword and afterword pieces generally not being written by the same author who wrote the larger piece in which they appear.

Of course I wrote the writing-stories in Chapters Five and Six, but the otherness that I suggest in conjuring a writer other than that of the piece that it is referencing recognizes the situated and contestable nature of narratives and the writer’s constructions of them. It recognizes the unfinished business of sense making and illustrates thinking (Tamas, 2011a, 2011b). Writing is purposeful; these writing-stories make known previously unknown purposes of the past to make the move to today and look toward the future.

**Summary**

Methodologically, autoethnography is a postmodern method of inquiry characterized by its use of narrative, reflexivity, aesthetic style, and writer-reader-text relationships. Autoethnography positions personal experience of its author as central. Experience is brought to life through narratives, which are accounts of life. These accounts theorize living life in terms of culture, relationships, society, and self. The construction of these narratives relies on reflexivity, an ongoing positioning and repositioning of the self among where it has been, where it is, and
where it is headed. Autoethnography transcends the academic/real world barrier by allowing the construction of texts that can be read and engaged by audiences outside of the academy. Writers of autoethnography have their own aesthetic style driven by self and experience. Autoethnographic texts have unique relationships between writer, reader, and text. Experiences of the writer are interpreted and experienced in new ways by the reader. Autoethnography has the ability to move the private to the public in a most political way, engaging audiences to do more than just passively read.

This dissertation project incorporates four autoethnographic approaches: (a) meta-autoethnography, (b) personal narrative, (c) co-constructed narrative, and (d) writing-stories. Meta-autoethnography (Ellis, 2009) is autoethnography about autoethnography. It gives autoethnographers the chance to (re)engage with old texts in new ways. In this way, this project is largely meta-autoethnographic. Personal narratives (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) are written to show the self making sense, doing, and becoming in culture, relationships, and society. Co-constructed narratives (Bochner & Ellis, 1995) take this endeavor further through bringing two individuals together to co-construct one dialogic narrative based on two individual narratives of personal experience. Co-constructed narratives show relating and are texts where relationships become. There are two co-constructed narratives in Chapter Five and one in Chapter Six. Finally, writing-stories (Richardson, 1997) are meta-autoethnographic narratives about the process and context of pieces of writing. These stories offer writers a chance to examine the context, pretext, and process of old pieces. The goal is to continue inquiry through the old pieces by writing the new pieces. Writing-stories are the glue that holds together Chapters Five and Six—positioning this project meta-autoethnographic.
CHAPTER 5
BAD ROMANCES AND/OR RAD BROMANCES
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY OF CO-CONSTRUCTED NARRATIVES

The Basic Course Directors Conference isn’t like other conferences. What do I see? A bunch of basic course directors—not very many of these people look like me. Like me, whatever that means. The few people who do look like me (according to me) don’t look like fun (everyone knows what fun means), save one. Brandon.

Brandon looked like me for a few reasons. No one will care about most of the reasons, so I’ll cut to the moneymaker—he looked gay. But not gay like flamboyant. Gay like me. Well, not like me because I am a slob. He obviously takes time to get ready. Me, not so much. So probably he looks gayer. Is that fair? Well, it’s what I thought. Oh, and it’s what everyone else with me thought too. After the conference ended for the day, we hit the bar. When Brandon came in, I was only with one other person from my school, a gay person. He was even more certain that Brandon was gay than I was.

Brandon approaches me in the bar and we have some lame conversation about… I can’t remember. The not remembering is important because that means that it doesn’t matter now. Unless of course it scarred me in some way and it’s repressed, but I am not sure this is the right venue for that as I’d hate for anyone to think autoethnography is nothing more than self-help or therapy (although I think it possible that self-proclaimed autoethnography with no therapeutic value might not be autoethnography at all). We headed off to another bar. After a few minutes, Brandon left. My classmate from school is the only one still out at the bar that I know and has managed to (somehow) become more inebriated than myself. He’s insistent that I follow
Brandon back to the hotel. So I do. For a few reasons: (a) I was over being with my drunken classmate and (b) I was sort of curious (but not like crazy curious).

I catch up with him. We make our way back to the empty conference “hospitality room” scene. Convenient. An empty hotel room equipped with all the usuals—and a full, open bar. Drinks are poured. Pseudo-intellectual conversation flowed with an air of healthy masculine competition in displaying said (pseudo)intellectual prowess. When we finally call it a night we also decide to take some booze (withhold judgment, we’re poor graduate students, geez, you probably were, too). He reaches for Johnnie Walker (black label, I think). I grab it. He tries to take it from me. I put it behind my back. *Yeah, really embarrassing.* He calls me out, “Oh, I get it, you’re flirting with me.” Caught. And Brandon is straight. *Being verbs like “is” imply permanence.*

We keep in touch after the conference. I read an autoethnography he writes about masculinity and his experiences being bullied. I like it a lot. I admire his ability to write… and his ability to write his vulnerability. At this point I am not interested in masculinity, academically. That comes. But first we barely keep in touch.

* The Basic Course Directors Conference rolls around again. I decide to go. Brandon is also going. This means little to me initially because at this point I really just consider him an acquaintance. *I never use the word acquaintance, but I really never use the word colleague.*

I approach Brandon (on Facebook) about combining a paper that I wrote about my masculinity/ies with his that I had read a year before. He likes the idea. We throw some ideas around. I get really busy. I feel terrible. I realize that Brandon’s views of autoethnography are very similar to my own. I tell him about a proposal I submitted for a journal. We quickly agree.
that we need to do it together. (Read that how you want, you’ve got my permission [not that you need it].) Emails are exchanged (and saved). We decide to begin the writing process when we see each other at the Basic Course Directors Conference in Las Vegas.

Finding (Our) Autoethnography: Academic Conferences, Las Vegas, and “The Strip” (with Brandon Hensley)

Trying to make some sense of it all, but I can see that it makes no sense at all. Is it cool to go to sleep on the floor ’cause I don't think that I can take anymore? Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right, here I am, stuck in the middle with you.

—Stealers Wheels (1972)

Sometimes these things start in the beginning. Sometimes these things start at the end. And when people think that they are being the most creative, sometimes these things start somewhere in the middle. As it turns out, we’re not really sure where this begins. The end is tricky because the ending really makes the autoethnography (through not ending). With that said, it’s just going to start (purposefully).

*(Co)constructing (the) meaning (of conferences, the Vegas “Strip,” autoethnography, us). We get indoctrinated into the whirlwind that is the academy early on. The first endeavor of moving “scholarly” work from the safe haven of your school is usually a conference. Once we realize how doable this is (not to mention how good it feels), we keep it up. Then after some time goes by it manifests as an addiction; “Gotta get something together for NCA.” A bit more time goes by and the social comparisons start happening. You realize that you need these conferences to set yourself apart from others. This is when we become conference animals. (Maybe you’re a conference animal, too?)
The conference in Las Vegas in which we frame our account isn’t like other conferences. Sure, names are in a program and they become the obligatory lines on vitaes, but beyond that the format is much different. Everyone sits in one room, in a circle (rectangle, really). There’s only one room. Maybe the assumption is that everyone is interested in everything that everyone is talking about. It’s difficult to feign interest in a room where seventy-five percent of everyone in the room can see you at anytime, but forced fake eye contact and casual looking around the room persists. *Do we really need/want to be here? Let’s backtrack.*

*[re]construction – layer from voicemail 2:01 pm 1/25/2010]*

Hey Derek, what’s up? It is Brandon, your counterpart for this upcoming Vegas trip and I was calling because I am getting hit from all sides by all types of plans. Apparently Wednesday night my colleagues are wanting to go see Penn and Teller, I guess, or something like that go to the Rio buffet, which is supposed to be a good buffet. I was wondering if you would a) like to come along with us or b) do our own thing. You know go to bars get some ideas down. Because I know they’re going to want to make a lot of plans and they need to know this one kind of quick so if you’re interested in just tagging along with us to Penn and Teller and all that, that’s cool. If you’d rather maybe we just go check out some other stuff, go to a few bars and start talking about this project of ours, then that would be cool too. Just give me a call or a text and let me know what you want to do. Talk to you later. Bye.

*
I am getting very keyed up, both at the prospect of losing my “Vegas virginity,” and to be co-authoring a piece with Derek. I have seen some of his writing, and I feel that we are both coming to autoethnography through the same stream(s) of thought, and for important reasons. We both have issues with lifting up masculinity and are exploring autoethnographic narrative as a venue for reliving/rendering/reconstructing our lived experience with(in) the hegemonic masculine center.

* 

It’s a surprise that Brandon called. This is the first time that I have heard his voice in almost a year. Although, I would never recognize his voice so I am not sure how relevant that is… It’s as if this voicemail (re)constituted his existence. I ponder the message in my fleeting moments of free time before class and end up ruminating on his naming of us as counterparts. I am well aware that he could have just as easily thrown out any number of other words, but chose to read into his word choice so that I could feel a level of comfort in regard to the paper that we are going to be working on together. It fosters a feeling of strength, safety even, knowing that someone has got my back. Thinking about having someone else’s back, that feels pretty good, too.

I am not particularly interested in seeing Penn and Teller. I am more interested in getting together with Brandon to spend as much time up front to determine how well I think we’ll be able to work together. How doable this all is. I call him back after my class is over and leave him a voicemail. I take the easy way out and say that I am game for anything. What I hope is that he chooses not to go to Penn and Teller. I hope that he chooses possibility (me, him, our paper) over predictability (his colleagues, cliché Vegas). I know that I will read his choice to spend the
night out with me as a positive commitment... even though I also know that it could be for a host of other reasons. I am good at overanalyzing things—especially to see what I want/need.

*

[(re)construction – layers from text messages]

7:27 pm 1/26/10
I opted out of the show. My plans are wide open tomorrow nite.

8:50 pm 1/26/10
I think it might be cool to kick off our first night with some metanotes, and drinks

8:52 pm 1/26/10
Agreed. I mean, I think drinks honor both traditions of arriving in Vegas and the personal experience that is creating ae.

8:53 pm 1/26/10
Yess… im excited, the ideas will be flowing

9:04 pm 1/26/10
I am pretty excited too. I can’t wait to get out of here and (re)focus.

*

I arrive in Las Vegas uneventfully (which is a good way to fly, especially from the snowy Midwest), finding my overstuffed luggage and catching a cab with my colleagues. Well, not exactly “colleagues,” in the academic sense of the term. These are my fellow TA’s and our director. I will not see much of them from now on.

*

While I have been to Vegas more times than is acceptable to disclose, this is the first time that I am taking the trip and anticipating hanging out with a guy. Other trips have been with family, female best friend, and lest we forget an assortment of boyfriends. And then there is the autoethnography, which I (and later he) lovingly refer to as “ae.” Please don’t get the idea that I don’t think autoethnography is sexy enough as is... because it is. For sure. The ae’ing of
autoethnography turns the method into part of my posse. I say things like, ae = autoethnography (duh), ae’er = autoethnographer, and ae’ic = autoethnographic. Brandon will speak this language soon enough as we converge upon building our dyadic dictionary, share experience, and (co)create meaning and the subsequent reality.

* 

The first night in town is a whirlwind of walking and talking the entire length of the strip, most of the time with some kind of drink in hand. We take this first night to talk casually about our “project,” telling each other about pieces of/on autoethnography that initially drew us in and called us to this methodological mess of reflexive narrative/performance/praxis (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008; Crawford, 1996; Dillard, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Fassett & Warren, 2007; Goodall, 2000; Ronai, 1995; Ronai, 1996). Derek talks some about queer theory, which I have been interested in since a panel at Central States Conference last year. He fills in some of my “gaps.” I fill in some of his.

I am still new to these things (queer theory and the academic conference “scene”), and not exactly comfortable with them. I see first-night conference receptions as amped up performances of impression-making, identity management, (re)acquaintance, and perfunctory social lubrication. Of course, maybe it will be different for me someday. Maybe when I’m (more) published, (extra) credentialed. Maybe when I have those three letters behind my name on my “calling” card (that I don’t have yet). Maybe not.

* 

We’re walking the Vegas Strip talking about autoethnography. Among the crowds and clicks of callgirl cards, the chatter and drunken banter, we are discussing the trap of justifying our work. Las Vegas is sexy-ugly at night. On one hand there’s all the allure, the excess, the
capitalism, the greed, the money, etc… on the other hand… well, more of the same. But still, it appears simultaneously desirable and repulsive.

We hit the strip in search of alcohol. We jet out through Paris because I decide that it will provide the closest shop in which we can buy “marked for individual sale” alcoholic beverages. *Actually, I want to show him the ornately crafted identity that the building called Paris Las Vegas performs in looking like Paris, France.* I believe it is important that we get alcohol and take it outside to walk around because it is legal and is fun for the first time. *Which ends up being fun each night that we do it, even though in previous trips the drinking lost its appeal quite quickly.*

We finish our first beer quickly and are on to our second, third, etc. in no time. We walk the strip aimlessly. Untrue. We walk the strip with purpose. We are talking. A lot. What began as phatic communication (i.e., small talk) turns into vulnerable dialogue. And as lame as it may be, with each gulp of alcohol and each step down the strip our performances of hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1987) (that’s what Brandon calls it, I call it heteronormative [Warner, 1991] masculinities) gave way to meaningful relationship building communication. *The kind that guys aren’t supposed to have. Over the next few days we will gradually stop being “Brandon” and “Derek” and gradually become “us.” There is us and there is everyone else. This is unexpected.* We bond over stories of family, music, performance of masculinities, our positioning in the academy, autoethnography, and some talk on sexuality.

* * *

**Autoethnography.** As scholars/writers/instructors/autoethnographers, we have options (*Do we?*). Options of attempting to cover everything, covering what we deem relevant, or
choosing not to write about this at all (not to mention all of the options we are incapable of conceptualizing).

The call for papers for this special issue recognized an apparent emerging continuum along which autoethnography exists—ranging from artistic and evocative to scientific-based and analytical. The results of the acceptance of such continua are hapless debates of what does and does not constitute good autoethnography (see *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 2006, Volume 35*, Issue 4 where analytical autoethnography is championed by Anderson [2006] and challenged by the likes of Ellis and Bochner [2006]—others, such as Denzin [2006a], weigh in). Dissenting scholars (of all varieties, some accepted more than others) are reduced into basic two groups: those who attempt to validate autoethnography through some form of the post positivist approach to research and those who outwardly reject said criteria on the basis of stark difference and attributes that cannot be qualified (let alone quantified).

It matters not who is right or more right because ultimately both types of scholars are met with resistance. Scholars who attempt validity through adapting autoethnography to the terms and conditions of post positivism never quite make it because it essentially doesn’t fit. Those who defy attempting validity on the basis of commonly accepted traditional lines have no credibility for attempting a rationale outside of the accepted language and practices. But autoethnography does not exist on a continuum. We hold that autoethnography exists in a multidimensional space that is not dependent on one continuum; rather it takes into account three continua.

A continuum has a way of invoking linear value. Regardless of the labeling of each end (e.g., evocative or analytical), one end will be viewed as better than the other (dependent upon one’s epistemological view). Ellis and Bochner (2000) delineate three axes, or continua, on
which autoethnographies exist: the “auto” continuum (the degree to which the autoethnographer focuses on self), the “ethno” continuum (the degree to which the autoethnographer focuses on culture), and the “graphy” continuum (the degree to which the autoethnographer focuses on the research process). We contend that the companionship between all three axes is critical in autoethnographic worth.

Autoethnographic worth cannot be found on one axis (e.g., the “graphy” axis). Binding autoethnography to one axis undermines the unique opportunities in inquiry afforded by autoethnography as a result of the interchange between all three continua (“auto,” “ethno,” and “graphy”). The relationship created between the continua as a result of the interplay constitutes a multidimensional space for autoethnography.

Before seeking acceptance of autoethnographic pursuits from the prevailing paradigms and the dominant social scientific paradigm of communication research, autoethnographers might first work to find salience in each other’s endeavors. Embracing a multidimensional existence of autoethnography allows for diverse facets of inquiry to emerge, complement/supplement this type of inquiry, and (collectively) reflexively challenge the method. Regardless of the “results,” in the multidimensional (and permeable) constitution of autoethnography, no one pursuit is preferred over another because it can be (generally) accepted among the community that no work is without value, whether that value is personal, political, and/or social.

So autoethnography exists on a multidimensional landscape of performance, (re)presentation, and critical awareness—awareness of (and possibilities for) nuanced personal/political understanding of the messiness that is lived experience and inquiry into the rich story-power of such experience. As Ellis (2004) notes, “The stories we write provide a
snapshot that holds us in place for others—and ourselves—to interpret from multiple points of views, locations, and times” (p. 343).

When we get to the Stratosphere we are unabashedly uninhibited. We talk about anything we want. We even talk autoethnography. We sit at a video blackjack adorned bar and write some notes on napkins to include overworked metaphors of autoethnography. The dealer always wins. Clearly, the dealer wears many hats (from editor to reviewer to administrator, the list goes on).

* * *

We either look ridiculously cute talking about autoethnography in the early morning in this deserted bar or like drunken slobs.

* * *

We have decided that no “definition” of autoethnography will be proffered here. To define this increasingly contingent and broadening practice/perspective of inquiry would not only constrain the directions autoethnography is moving toward (in terms of performance, scope, and constitution), but it would also be a rehashing of previous definitions that have aptly (tentatively, even ephemerally) defined this hybrid assemblage of personal narrative, ethnography, autobiography, and self-reflexive (re)construction (see Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997 for definitions of autoethnography).

Many scholars from varying academic backgrounds and disciplines have written seminal pieces on the messy term “autoethnography,” what it is (not), and its “place” in qualitative inquiry (Crawford, 1996; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Goodall, 2000; Spry, 2001). Interest in autoethnography as method, creative venue of expressing lived experience, and “methodology of the heart” (Pelias, 2004) has proliferated in the first decade of the 21st century, and as the community of autoethnographers has grown, so too has the (begrudging) acceptance
into publication, into the “scholarly dialogue” that takes place in academic journals, conferences, bars at conferences, and elsewhere in academia and everyday life.

However, as new pieces of autoethnographic scholarship emerge, rejoinders and rebuttals of autoethnography also mount with recycled concerns of representation, validity, the “site” of study, and ethical issues of storying “reality.” The critics are familiar (in a friendly, post positivist sort of way), and so are the rejections and effacing questions: “What are your research questions?” “What is the actual contribution to knowledge here?” “What about validity/reliability/predictability?” “Where is Cronbach’s Alpha?” (Well, maybe not that last one). So we echo Bochner’s sentiment that, “[qualitative researchers] hide behind the terminology of the academic language games we’ve learned to play, gaining some advantage by knowing when and how to say ‘validity,’ ‘reliability,’ ‘grounded,’ and the like” (2000, p. 267).

The purpose of this manifesto/meta-autoethnographic piece is not to declare autoethnography as epistemic, free of value(-laden construction)s, generalizable, or unproblematic. Denzin (2006b) states, “Ethnography is not an innocent practice. Our research practices are performative, pedagogical, and political” (p. 333). Goodall (2000) writes of three additional P-words that inherently “plague” the autoethnographer, in that our writing/research is always/already partial, partisan, and problematic. So, mindful of these issues, our purpose is to elucidate (our vision of) autoethnography as we read it, write it, co-construct it, and form a relationship from/with it. Our account is layered (Ronai, 1995), polysemic, and fluid, but we remain reflexively recursive, striving to find (our) voices and our place(s) in the autoethnographic and (larger) academic community.

* * *

* * *
We leave the Stratosphere for downtown Las Vegas. I am drunk. He’s drunk. We’re uninhibited. We’re becoming friends. When we get out of the cab I wonder what I was thinking. Fremont Street is dead. I didn’t realize how late it is. We go in and out of bars and casinos. Drinking more. Talking to people. Asking people where we should go. Playing off of each other’s behaviors like two people who have been friends for years. Telling taxi drivers and bartenders that I am from Canada. I know you don’t think it’s funny, but it’s hilarious to us. This is the meaning that we’re making. How we do this. How we are (together). These are the foundational experiences of our relationship. They are (in)significant. Meaning little now, but more later.

*   *   *

Day quickly becomes night; night bleeds into day. It feels like I am the most alive when the light is fabricated for my pleasure—courtesy of the strip. In Vegas, there is little regard for time (no clocks to be found in casinos). My accounts of Thursday and Friday are more of a composite. Like Ellis and Bochner’s (2000) composite character Sylvia. The date of occurrence matters far less than the significance of the events.

* 7:40 pm 1/28/10
Haha. Do you want to meet me out here? We are at the 4 queens now

7:47 pm 1/28/10
Perhaps. Why is this horrible hotel sooo far away from everything…especially downtown?

7:48 pm 1/28/10
Suck it up tough guy

7:58 pm 1/28/10
Don’t try to trick me into being a man.

*
Derek and I like to make fun of masculinity. We like to cast off the shell (even if only temporarily) and laugh at it. I suppose it makes it easier (?) for us to question and critique our performances of masculinity and sexuality in our everyday lives as instructors, as students, as scholars, and as growing conference animals.

* 

When we meet at Four Queens we both express that we’re having a rough night. For petty reasons, but this is important because we both support each other’s reasoning and work to make it better. The way we have so far. We retrace our footsteps from the night before. We end up at the same bars. We talk a lot.

Tonight’s talk is different from previous talk because it is re(ve)al(ing). We are vulnerable, mutually. We also aren’t drunk. Working on it of course. I believe the bartender thinks that we’re on a date. Beyond that, Brandon said he thinks that his “friends” from school think that we’re together. He makes a joke about changing Facebook relationship statuses to “it’s complicated.” This is funny, but what’s funnier is how complicated it’s going to get. I don’t have the faintest clue. I admire Brandon’s lack of concern for what his cohorts think of him/me/us. Whether or not he clarifies the tenets of our relationship with them doesn’t matter.

* 

We drink more. Talk/theorize more. We go to a strip club. This might be the biggest mistake of the night, as my heteronormativity comes to a head.

* 

I convince Derek to buy the tickets to get in, and we enter the dark, smoke filled “highly rated” club. Derek wants to sit around the stage where the performers were dancing, but I insist that we sit at some lounge chairs further away from the stage. Perhaps he doesn’t want the
contact of the women walking through that space. I want that contact. In my altered state of mind I want to send Derek a blunt signal that I am still deeply entrenched in my masculine/heteronormative underpinnings. My insecurity is peaking in the strip club—insecurity with my(sexual)self.

After talking to several of the women and declining private dances, I notice that Derek has his head down on the table. Is he drunk (we have been drinking a lot)? Is he disgusted/ashamed of my performance, my reversal of the direction we had been heading in (a direction of openness and nuanced understanding)? He makes his way for the bathroom, and after a few minutes I go in to see if he is okay. “We have to leave now,” he (st)utters.

We have gotten to know each other more, but my performance at the club strips the bond down to two (troubled) autoethnographers, separate in their masculine struggles rather than united. We know more about each other as writers/theorizers, but less about the relational identity we are (re/de)constructing. I/we am/are lost in (mis)translation, (mis)representation, missed opportunity (for me) to get beyond my ego and my insecure sense of sexuality.

When we arrive and find the cover to be $60, Brandon insists on going in and I pay for it. I am not sure why I don’t say, no. No to paying. No to the strip club. Brandon gets drinks at the bar. I want to sit by the stage. I have seen Showgirls (1995) plenty times to know how this works—I know how to perform in this space (that was/is not designed for my being). These half naked women seem like used-car salesmen. They harass you until you buy, they wheel and deal if necessary. They are manipulative of (my) sexuality—of (my) identity. It’s an assault on (my) being.
He wants to sit at a table. It is a bad idea to move to the tables. At the tables we are guaranteed to be “bothered.” And we are bothered. *I perceive it as bothered. I can’t tell what Brandon thinks of it. I don’t know if I will be allowed to know. This is one of those places that writhes around in your lap, stroking performances of masculinity out of you—right through your jeans—all over the purple crushed velvet you’re sitting on. It’s a messy performance. One that will probably require some (meta-sexual identity) clean up.* I am ashamed of myself for using (a portion of) my identity to shield myself from these women. *I will later be ashamed of Brandon for allowing me to subjugate my identity like this.* The women are nice to me. They continue trying to make money. They try to bargain with me. They offer me Brandon. They believe they can get us to have sex. I am uninterested. A few moments later, I believe I am going to be sick. And it really is fitting.

* * *

Seating at conferences (like this) is critical. So coming in late complicates things a bit. There’s an open seat at the table where Brandon is sitting. *I am glad that I can sit by him.* We pass notepads back and forth.

In our yellow-pad-mediated dialogue we determine that the sole purpose of this conference is to determine whose assessment is biggest. One would gather from this conference that there is no meaning in scholarship if it does not produce a measureable product. *Please don’t get me wrong. I grade my student’s work, I understand objectives, the inescapable truth of grades, and assessments for program longevity… please don’t email my chair.*

Most of the people in this room would (probably) hate autoethnography. They would first chastise it for lack of scholarly product, they would then say anyone can do it, then they’ll reject my NCA proposals, and the moment that I even think about autoethnography as pedagogy they
will cut my thoughts off and inquire as to how I will assess it. *How do you assess life? How do you value experience? How can you determine the worth of a relationship in making sense of this life, these experiences, in making meaning about your selfhood?*

During the conference “proceedings,” we write down ruminations, critical observations of the presenters, jokes, and back-and-forth comments. These notes stand in remarkably well for (dis)remembering some of the mundane presentations and reiteration of ideas that essentially support and reify the business (and data/assessment driven)-model of higher educational institutions. We passed notes back and forth with the candor and obviousness of grad school students. I know it seems childish/juvenile to be passing notes back and forth while the “scholarly” dialogue of a conference is taking place. But I/we suspect that sometimes the illumination occurs best this way, and we’re probably not alone in this fun(ny) act, which can also constitute a serious and meaningful exchange.

*[(re)construction – a layer from dialogic notes transcribed from yellow notepads]*

“You will never have a tenured position at a university saying things like *that.*”

or writing things like *this*

We are swimming in the moat around the ivory tower, drawbridge closed, (value laden) arrows of validity and contribution coming from above. They’ll never let us in. Fuck this, let’s get out of the water. Walk away from the grounds of an epistemological/ontological/axiological debate we will never win.

IRB is the arm of institutional privilege.

data data data- collect em’ all!

going off what s/he said
to piggy back off that…
dove tailing with what s/he said

Assessment is calling at 3am. Will you answer?
Absence – AE

AE is a unifying paradigm that exists in spite of its rejection because of its undeniable metatheoretical implications that, potentially, is the comm theory. Foolhard(ly).

Yet, acceptance for autoethnographic scholarship in terms of publication is scant and perpetually burdened by epistemological and representational rejection from scholars who see no contribution to the “body” of research

Who gave hands over (helplessly) them the power to do this?

Oh, grand Professor, please enlighten us. Pass down your knowledge.

penetrate /indoctrinate

In the ivory tower of academic inquiry, ae’ers are forced to circle the moats while under fire from those who refuse to lower the drawbridge.

For the ae’er to survive it is imperative (ironically) that she engage in ‘extreme ways’ (moby, before he utterly sucked…nevermind, he’s always sucked) that undermine/obliterate authority.

AE (re)presents life (experience) in the purest/sloppiest manner that – when done well – typifies the fundamentals of the relational hinges in a form that is simultaneously complicated evocative and complex (like meaning making/sharing/checking/accepting elsewhere in real life) and also easy because of it rooting/acceptance of people.

Rationale/operationalization is dissolved for the ae’er because to participate/submit to this practice is self-reflexive suicide. ← so is normalization

*

Another “massive night.” (Hold Steady 2007 song). I mention music because we burn each other a CD (and agree that there would be no track list exchange). Through our “mix tapes,” we allow the other a glimpse into our musical tastes and leave ourselves a bit more vulnerable. I am nervous about how he will receive mine. I labor over the flow of the CD, how it would come across, where the high/low points should be.

He claims to have thrown the mix together “just from what I’ve been listening to lately.”

Before going out, we sit on the hotel room couch and listen to the CDs while checking email and
performing our grad-student-with-laptop duties. I am enjoying the feeling, just sitting here next to Derek, without need for talk. We simply listen to the music and click/type/text.

Of course, tonight we will talk. I will reveal more things about myself to him. My desire for validation/attraction from wo/men. My increasing feelings of closeness to this project/relationship. My hope to turn our narrative into a book. He will reveal more about his struggles with sexuality, his personal vision of “writing to right,” his mutual hope of writing a book with me someday.

“We need to record this.” Napkins/receipts/texts/memory will have to suffice in the bars and places where we talk so passionately/openly about autoethnography (does anyone around us have any idea what we’re getting so worked up over?).

We talk about the problematic that even though autoethnography is supposed to be open-ended, there is still some effort to work through something to arrive somewhere/nowhere. I find myself constantly wondering where “we” (Derek and I) “are.” Although we have not been physically intimate thus far in Vegas, the relational intimacy and my attraction to his way of talking/theorizing/laughing/criticizing are drawing me in.

We carry on these conversations in exotic bars, bathrooms, sidewalks/crosswalks, casino floors, and parking lots. The names and details escape me and are superfluous. We forget how much money we’re spending, pressures from school/home, and (willfully forget) to check the time. Even though it is all supposed to “stay here,” I feel like the burgeoning relationship will transcend this conference, this superficial city awash with surveillance, tourist traps, and gluttonous, numbing consumerism. I remember feeling like we were above it all, constantly poking fun at the entire situation. Yet recognizing our inextricable connection to/through the
situation. A conference in Vegas. Where the house always wins. A place made for conventions. Where academics can divide into separate rooms and carry on a “dialogue.”

* 

I am relieved the conference is over. I am no longer forced to converse, to perform the role of graduate-student-among-mostly-retiring-educators. I am starting to feel a sense of anticipation about the rest of the day. Although Derek and I have talked and scrawled numerous thoughts on padded paper/phone/napkin, we have not sat down in front of a word processor to “properly” start our piece.

Derek checks out of the hotel that afternoon, escaping to the Hilton and the other end of the strip. I hop a monorail around 4 pm, the late afternoon sun cascading down the mountains surrounding surreal Las Vegas during daylight. I bring along a backpack with laptop, notepad, books/articles, cigarettes, and iPod. He meets me downstairs near the Star Trek machines. My mind is still scattered from the conference. *What will we “get done” tonight, this last night before we depart/return to our lives as instructor/student/writer/performer of the mundane?*

We begin to talk about our paper. It feels different this time. We are both sitting—me at the desk and him on the bed—computers on laps, trying to force words/ideas. It doesn’t come as effortless as when we were out at night, fostering reckless abandon for the coming day and cherishing the (autoethnographic) moment.

Nitpicking, antsy, anxious, we start to have quarrels. I want to slow it down. We are both trying to buy more time. We are both in a shitty mood tonight. We mull over ideas, lament over the multiple papers we could write instead of being constrained by one, complain about (over)using metaphor (well, he does).
I show Derek an autoethnography I have been embarrassed to show anyone but my professor. It is about my intimate yet problematic relationship with my grandparents, a relationship that consists of them knowing only certain aspects of my life—aptly titled “conceal or reveal:…”. I feel that the piece speaks about my personhood as a researcher, as a student, as an ambiguous drifter, and as their “number one” (performing) grandson.

Derek thinks the piece is a little too theory-oriented (extensively reviewing and drawing upon Communication Accommodation Theory and Identity Management Theory and conceptualizations of cultural identity and relational culture). I agree with him in some ways, but I explain that this was the way the professor would prefer it written. *Obedient graduate student, I am.*

Derek did not think my autoethnographic voice was as present in this piece as previous pieces I’ve shown him, but urges me to send it to him anyway. He is encouraging when I tell him I might submit it to NCA. We then talk about how we will present *this.* This project between two passionate autoethnographers who have, as a result, developed a relationship. Where do we go with it?

We show each other writing (on our laptops) that we haven’t shown anyone outside of our professors. The writing is visceral, and we give each other feedback between tunes. We are both critical of our own and the other’s writing, and it is starting to show, but we are okay with that. As a researcher/writer/graduate student I’m beginning to welcome critique and suggestions for improvement. I implement peer evaluations in the classroom, so why shouldn’t I subject myself to evaluation from Derek, a peer but also a friend?

*Perhaps because I want him to think it’s good. I respect his comments and think they are good ways to further the papers he’s looked at but I find myself wanting him to like it right off. It
is selfish of me, but I want him to connect with my paper more than be critical of it, even in the most constructive sense. He is seeing “me” in ways that other important people in my life have not.

He assures me that I have a strong voice that is emerging in my writing. I assure him that I will do my best to reflexively put my positionality in this paper. I remind him teasingly that he is the “first author.”

“That means you should be typing,” he quips back.

“We have such a great working relationship,” I counter jokingly/sarcastically.

We seem to operate best in cynicism, sarcasm, and narrative. We decide to gather a few more ideas on the computer then head out for our last night together.

*

While the conference stoked my interest in teaching, I had also handled all of it that I could. Everyone has limits—even the house. I board the monorail for my new hotel. I am alone. I end this by putting my headphones in and listening to music. I think about nothing. The trip is coming to an end. It’s that point in the trip where reflexivity kicks in. Thinking about what I did. What I didn’t do. Thinking about the possibilities (and probabilities) of being able to rectify the two. Something that I cannot do alone.

*

4:00 pm 1/30/10
Here. Where shall i meet you?

*

Meet me where we always meet. Drinking is (our) ritual. We drink to have fun. Drinking is fun(ny). Drinking lowers obliterates our inhibitions. Before you judge our apparent alcohol abuse, I just want to offer this explanation, it’s not (always) our fault. It’s partly from the
pressure to perform this hegemonic masculinity (Capraro, 2000). With that said, doubles it is. After we procure our drinks we head back up to my room. We settle in to write some autoethnography… the first time that we explicitly attempt such a feat. I recognize the importance of doing this. It was supposed to be my raison d’être—at least for the trip. Shhh... don’t tell anyone.

I sit on the bed. Brandon sits in the chair by the desk. We start talking. Commence bi-autoethnographing. We hash out the effectiveness/efficiency of metaphors that we had discussed. I feel myself needing to be closer to the discussion—you know, that uncomfortable feeling where you feel like if you can just get closer to the cause of excitement/anxiety/anticipation you’ll feel better? I move from the bed to be closer. As we theorize autoethnography (in the greatest depth of the trip), I appreciate Brandon more. We share autoethnographies that we have written. Work that no one (sans teacher) has been allowed to see. We take turns reading passages to each other. We congratulate each other on autoethnographic prowess. I have a hard time complimenting Brandon, but I try harder than I try for anyone else. I am not good with giving/receiving compliments. I am good with giving/receiving criticisms. Brandon affirms my abilities as a writer. I realize that his opinions on this matter mean more to me than most.

When I read reviewer comments that he received on a rejected journal submission, I am infuriated as if the comments are for my own writing. The piece is great, that’s a given. He is a strong writer. I feel lucky to have found someone I trust. As a writer, as a reader, as a co-constructor of autoethnography, as a co-constructor of experience, as a co-constructor of life.

We stroll the strip in our final hours of Vegas togetherness. We drink from bottles of wine. We walk. It might not be how others do it, but it’s how we do it. After we finish the
bottles, we return to the Stratosphere. We return to the bar that started all the autoethnographic talking. I am aware that time is running out. I don’t want time to run out.

*

(Re)accounting of the last hours. We gamble. We flirt with women. Flirt with each other. We do what men in Vegas are supposed to do (normatively speaking). We stay up all night (again), spend money, walk through lavish casinos drunkenly, and consume. Alcohol, manhood, and straightness.

Around 5 am, we saunter up to a casino bar. We both agree that we look (and feel) like hell, which means we have been awake without sleep for too long. We order a triple espresso with Kahlúa, (“just to take the edge off,” I assure Derek) and retreat to an empty bar on the other side of the casino. Just him and I. As if even when surrounded by other people there was ever really anyone else.

That’s when it happens.

Everything slows as I scan through the pictures saved on my cell phone, pictures of my girlfriend’s breasts, pictures of New Zealand/Australia/Florida, pictures of my cat, Sage. To a picture of myself, looking in the mirror (though you can’t tell; the camera is blocking my face). The only thing covering my body is my (free) hand. I am strategically under a light that shows every defined muscle on my constructed flesh, my masculine embodiment. I select the picture for viewing. His viewing. I slowly slide the phone across the small corner table. We are alone, nobody else in the bar, 6 am, the last night of our trip.

And (for me) lines no longer exist between us. This isn’t a reason/explanation for why I give him the phone, the picture. I know that I want to do it then, there. The why is more complex,
harder for me to answer. I want him to know me, the (dis)embodied masculine mess that I am behind the performance(s) that everyone else knows me by.

Everything slows down even more, as his reaction isn’t what I expect. At all. What did I expect? Maybe for him to compliment my body, maybe for him to see me for how strong/vulnerable I am? The move was narcissistic, no doubt, but I want for him to be attracted to that picture (of my self). I want to share with him the (em)battle(ment) that is my performance of hegemonic masculinity. But all I share is a clear image reifying my dominant masculinity, perpetuating my performance, shattering the bond we have been building, the commonality we have cultivated.

I know that this was what Goodall (2000) and others call a “rich/turning point,” or “epiphany” (Bochner & Ellis, 1995; Denzin, 1989)—things will never be the same. My reflexivity in this moment constitutes a feeling of utter uncertainty, looking through multiple mirrors that fragmented my “fit” body and left me bare, vulnerable, (un)fit for a serious inward investigation on my identity/sexuality/masculinity.

Derek tells me how utterly short-sighted and disappointing my action was. My thoughts and words speed up, apologia mounting, but my senses blur and I feel disconnected. I am feeling the most disembodied that I have felt since the initial writing of my autoethnography on the lived experience of being bullied and forced to fight back with hegemonic masculinity. I feel anything but “manly” right now. I don’t know where I should end this narrative. It certainly does not end with Derek’s outright disappointment in me being such a narcissistic pig. It does not end with the nearly tearful goodbye after we talk through the picture (as I try to rationalize the whole thing and Derek tells me to stop, that he does indeed have feelings for me).
Even though it is I who insist that we cut the remaining 2 hours before my flight-frenzy short, telling him I need to move onto the airport and have some “alone time.” I tell him goodbye, force the goodbye, without any certainty of what/where the friendship/relationship is. He strongly objects. Nonetheless, I board a cab back for my hotel at 6 am. As the sun is rising. But it does not end here. I’m not a protagonist, and I’m not riding off triumphantly into the sunrise.

I feel utterly disconnected, thoughts emanating from somewhere else. I also miss him (already), not knowing when I will see him again, just that it will have to be in the next month to “finalize” our paper. As if we can somehow finalize this intertextual mess. This navel-gazing account, this...life-changing experience. This scrutinization of my sexuality, identity, and masculinity. Something that has needed to happen for a long time. Derek is there for me, as a friend, a partner, a struggling mess of masculinities. That makes two of us. I text him in the cab on the way to the airport.

*

6:09 am 1/31/10
Best conference ive ever been to, thanks to you. I actually learned something(s) about myself.

6:11 am 1/31/10
Likewise. I am probably going to miss hanging out with you alot (and by probably I mean obviously).

6:13 am 1/31/10
Well we’re not in the business of predicting and controlling but the feeling is mutual

6:15 am 1/31/10
And we’re certainly not in the business of providing closure or a happy ending… but I suppose I am okay with that for now.

6:18 am 1/31/10
I am too, and i don’t regret anything. Im glad for every moment, every conversation (silly and serious) that we had.
6:21 am 1/31/10
It was actually all really pretty awesome. And the (lack of) ending makes it better. I am into possibility…but I hope you know that.

6:23 am 1/31/10
I do. Our story is just starting.

6:41 am 1/31/10
It’s probably pretty lame, but I’ve already got stuff to tell you.

  *   *   *

(Re)accounting of the last hours, encore. There are lots of people moving about on the casino floor of Encore (sister tower of Wynn). Anyone watching us can probably see what we cannot (yet see). We are performing our last hours together. We don’t say much to each other. Maybe we don’t have to. I am getting tired and Brandon orders us our last drinks—Kahlúa and espresso. We find a closed bar off the casino floor and sit at a table. What follows is (not) our swan song.

I bet (hope) it’s easy for Brandon to confuse my melancholia with sleepiness and/or drunkenness. The way that we are sitting, slouching in my case, is not conducive to eye contact. He’s at the head of the table and I am sitting to the left of him. We’ve talked about (almost) anything. We’ve (essentially) established that nothing is off limits. The conversation that we are having is not representational of this. It’s idle chat. Until…

After fiddling with his phone for a while, Brandon tells me that he wants to show me something. I know. I am not in control of my body when I reach over and take the phone. I mean, I am, but it’s mindless. Maybe it’s trust. He wants to show me something, so I look. Like how he’s wanted to tell me things, so I listen. I position the phone so that I can see it. I look at the small screen of the phone. I have never seen this particular image before, but I have seen many like it. Well, not just like it because I (think I) know the person in this low megapixel picture. The
other guys were (no)bodies. I am sure my face does something reactionary—and it’s not affirmative. I look for a moment. In the moment(s) between my eyes meeting his naked body to when I looked away, my mind floods with questions. What just happened? Why would he do that? What have I done to make him think that this is okay? What do I do now? What does this mean for... everything? I respond with judgment. I will regret this. I tell him that he shouldn’t have done that. That it was insulting. Other stuff. Brandon apologizes. The difficult-to-make-eye-contact-because-of-positioning becomes ideal. Brandon casts his eyes toward the ground, but looks like he is trying to find a focal point below the floor. He starts apologizing. His words slow. I have never heard him talk like this before. He says lots of things. I wish he would stop because now I am starting to feel bad. And I shouldn’t, should I? Are my negative feelings the result of my inescapable performance of masculinity?

I want to be more supportive. I want to convey to him that I will help him, but I am still plagued by the script that tells me to not let the straight guy think that I am trying to get in his pants. Because I am not. I never have tried. I am not attracted to him like that. I respect him. I remember that I respect him. Wait, what? Not attracted to him like that? So... I am attracted to him—somehow. He tells me that he has never been attracted to anyone the way that he is attracted to me. I decide to stop this. I reach over and put my hand on his leg for just a moment and tell him that it’s okay. I tell him that I am attracted to him, too. I thought about this action before doing it, I envisioned me leaving my hand on his leg for sometime. But I can’t. Heteronormativity is inescapable for me. Instead, I pat his leg. Like a dog. And I am sure the words came out horridly—partly because they represented something that was an undeveloped feeling and partly because I am actually terrible at being affectionate on any level. I tell him that he needs to explore this... with someone that isn’t me. I tell him that I’ll help him how I can. I
ask him if he has any questions. *Because even though I know that I am not allowed to speak to this matter as only one person, I will disregard that and throw myself in front of the heterosexism bus if I can give him something that can convey my empathy help him feel better.*

He tells me that he thinks he will always be attracted to women. Then he tells me that he doesn’t think that he could bottom. *This boggles me because I had previously told him that I don’t like bottoming. Was he screwing with me? Was he trying to show our incompatibility? I should have told him that there are lots—lots—of ways to have sex. I am sure he already knows that. So what was that all about?* I am so tired. I don’t want this to end. There’s so much more to talk about, but I have to sleep. I want him to come back to my hotel room with me because I am worried about him. He says he needs to spend time alone to think about things. *I am very uncomfortable. He is vulnerable. I want to protect him. I never want to protect anyone. Well, almost no one.* We exchange goodbyes. They are awkward. They don’t feel like goodbyes. I see Brandon’s face and it looks like he is going to cry. We go back into the casino for a bit. I am trying to do what I can to be certain he’ll be okay. *Selfishly?*

We’re back outside saying goodbye again. As I am turning to walk away, he asks if he can have a hug. He can. We hug. It’s a hug unlike any other hug that I have ever participated in. I couldn’t understand the motivations, implications, or the emotions tangled into it. *I also didn’t understand why, for a fraction of a moment, I thought it would be a good idea to kiss him as the hug ended. I attribute this to the complexity of the hug, my inability to reason what has occurred, and maybe more.*

I walk away—sun slowly rising. It’s a long walk back to my hotel. I think about Brandon. I begin the process of reframing the weekend, reframing Brandon, based on everything (whatever that means) that has happened. I don’t know anything—except that I will miss
Brandon. I am sad, but I realize I am smiling. I don’t know how long it will take for me to make sense of this. I might never be able to, but we found our autoethnography. I get a text message. I know it’s Brandon. I know there’s possibility. I’ll see him in (our) autoethnography. Co-constructed-like. And it won’t end here because—if you remember—good autoethnography never really ends.

* * *

10:06 pm 1/31/10
[Picture Message of Eiffel Tower / Vegas Skyline]
Wish we were here

Afterword: Relating as Method or Method as Relating

My 9:20 am small group communication class asks in near unison, “How was Vegas?” I pause only briefly, but long enough for me to ponder possible responses. Do I just say good? Do I tell them that I didn’t win any money? That I spent lots of money? Or should I mention the conference—it was the reason I went after all. Or do I tell them something that they want to hear me say, like my experience at a strip club? Or they would probably enjoy hearing about me being inebriated/drugged for the vast majority of my waking hours? Finally, I wonder if I should tell them the truth. A truth that I don’t fully understand—that not even the sum of the aforementioned list begins to compare to whole of the trip. The stories. The shared meaning and the lack of shared meaning. So I opt to say, “good.” I say good because I can’t even fathom an attempt at articulating something that I am still trying to understand, something that I’ll probably need his help to make meaning of. But it was good. That wasn’t a lie.

* * *
When I reread Brandon and I’s first co-authored piece, *Finding (Our) Autoethnography: Academic Conferences, Las Vegas, and “The Strip”*, for the first time in almost a year (over two and a half years since it was initially written), I am first struck by the relational importance of this piece to my personal and academic life. I have many stories to tell about this piece. About the process. About its content. About the academy. About my co-author. About my self. About our relationship. All of these stories are particularly relational. Indeed, I find all stories to be relational. It is impossible for any story that I share on this piece to not at least implicate the myriad of stories running through it.

My trip to Las Vegas, the one that would become our trip to Las Vegas, took place at the beginning of my last semester of coursework in my doctoral program at the end of January. One of the classes that I was taking was a special topics course on relational and family communication. What we would read, discuss, and write about during that semester (along with everything else that I had read, discussed, and written about in other classes) would do very little to help me make sense of what this project would mean to my life in and out of school.

* 

Aside from notes on notepads passed during the conference and napkins scrawled on in bars, we wrote virtually nothing while we were together in Vegas. We mainly talked. I look back now in awe at how quickly we moved from being Derek and Brandon graduate students talking about school things to Derek and Brandon talking about personal things. Maybe it was because our school talk on masculinities (his) and queer theory (mine) turned out to be an illustrative case of the professional as personal. Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was the Adderall. Maybe it was Las Vegas. It was probably all of these things and more.
The first night, like all of the nights, was a wild night. We walked the length of the strip from the MGM Grand to the Stratosphere. That’s four miles. One of the stories that didn’t make the paper was his experience at an academic conference where a gay drunken 6-or-7-year-senior scholar took Brandon back to his room and got Brandon to show off his abs complete with touching. The next day as we waited for the elevator in our hotel, in the light of day, he told me that I wasn’t like other gay guys. That I was just like a regular guy, that I didn’t sexualize him. It was a resounding heterosexist moment and statement, which I welcomed as compliment about my ability to pass and be one of the guys. A non-threatening gay, changing the way people all over the world think about gay men… one straight guy at a time. **Or is that one of our tricks, one of our traps? I can’t remember.**

I hadn’t even boarded the airplane home when two songs arrived by email. “Check this out… very spot on,” he wrote. The songs were by jj (2010), *Let Go* and *And Now*. For an example, here’s how *And Now* goes:

```
And now, when the end is near
I know you meant every tear you gave to me that year
We were all alone when the sunlight hit our bones
As the stream carried us home

Take it for what it's worth
Those days that we walked the earth
Remember how much it hurts
Just a tiny taste
Don't let us go to waste
But to Hell with that time and place

And now, my heart will go on
It's blood from broken hearts
That write the words of every song

When you made up your mind
I'll be in every town
After all this, I'll show you around
```
And as if I didn’t already have enough experience to (re)account in sobriety and attempt some sense of, this song (and the many others that would follow) would continue to keep things unsettled, shaken up.

I arrived home to snow-covered roads from the airport to my brother’s house in Lansing. After picking up my rambunctious dog (Raider) from Zack, I finally return home to begin detoxing from my trip. The exchanges between Brandon and I were slow going at first. A song here, a few words there through email. Our deadline felt looming and I felt like the project I was losing Brandon’s interest. I processed my experience with Brandon excessively. I talked to my best friend, Dawn, ad nauseam. “And you’re sure he’s straight?” she would ask me. “I mean, I am not sure about anyone. But if I’ve learned anything in life about sexuality it’s that the least I can do is believe someone,” I would return. This exchange or ones just like it occurred frequently. She thought, perhaps, that he had made himself more vulnerable than I had. I began to wonder if he had expressed something that needed recognition or reciprocation. Four days after returning home, I sent him some of my initial (and private) notes that I took in the Vegas airport called *pieces of*. Pieces of narrative? Of autoethnography? Of me? All of the above.

The notes were scattered thoughts vacillating between “I won’t let the limitations of my present understandings of my life harm the possibility of doing something different or being different based solely on their appearance of incommensurability” and “I also won’t be tricked into engaging in something under a false pretense because of an ulterior motive.” It was in these notes that I first started my theorization of queer relationships.

* 

[from pieces of.doc]

He really shouldn’t have done that. [Showed me the picture of himself naked.] I was really looking forward to his friendship. It’s been a long time since I have had a boy friend. I don’t want that to get messed up. I want to stop it from getting messed up. But I
don’t get to control how all of my relationships turn out. There are two people. I am only one of them. I am being selfish. Just let…

I knew what he was going to show me. I could have declined looking at it. It wasn’t a surprise. But it was still a surprise. I was surprised that this was actually happening. Mostly, I was/am confused. So I am left (supposed) to believe he’s confused, too. Why?

He’s not really my type. I am really more into losers with no ambitions and no direction.

We have spent the better part of the last four days together. We had adventures. We got life experience together. We’ve made meaning, a lot of meaning. And now he’s not around.

I don’t know if I am allowed to say that I miss him. I don’t know if I miss him. No. I know. I know I miss him. Is that bad? It’s just, after last night, well, I don’t know… it just feels like he’s supposed to be here.

What does this mean? For me? For him? What can we do? Was this a Vegas cliché?

If Brandon is who _______ wants Brandon to be AND Brandon thinks that Derek wants Brandon in a man-on-man action kind of way THEN Brandon is struggling with his sexuality.

But why would Brandon want to be anything except for him self? Why would Brandon change/manage/navigate face like this? Does Brandon think that if Derek is not attracted to/pining/desiring Brandon in a specific way that Derek will not hang around?

And what if that’s not the case? Then queered relationship it is?

I think I’ve been here before. The undefined, unnamed, unlimited usually ends badly… for NOT the person who asking for it to be undefined, unnamed, unlimited, rather the person who agrees. Me.

On going gray—This isn’t Brokeback Mountain. You’re not Ennis. I am not Jack. Jack dies.

I wish that we had had sex because then at least I would know why he was acting weird. Plus, then I would be acting weird, too. That is if I am not acting weird. And maybe he’s not acting weird either.

*

Shortly after I sent along my notes, Brandon responded wishing that he could come up that weekend. We arranged his trip to my house in Royal Oak (432 miles from Charleston, IL
where he went to school) for the weekend of February 19, 2010. In the mean time, we continued getting to know each other through spoken and written word. Dozens of text and email messages were exchanged every day. Each night we talked on the phone for hours. Sometimes 6 hours. And then there was the continual exchanging of music. It was important that whatever music I sent to Brandon be both unique (not pop because he has a sort of aversion to pop music) and meaningful (as in thoughtful lyrics that fit our living, relating, and writing).

Adapting our method of co-constructed narrative from Ellis and Bochner (1992), we chose to each write a narrative of our entire trip in Vegas. These narratives were broken down into emailed exchanges of daylong segments of narrative. We sent our narratives for each day of the trip at relatively the same time. Often times his narratives were very similar to my own. Other times his narratives strongly contrasted mine. Whereas Ellis and Bochner wrote their narratives individually and only exchanged them when both were finished, our narrative writing was more like a spiral. At first I worried that the tone and sentiments of the narratives were not “representing” our individual experiences. I worried that because we could see what we were writing as we were going that we were able to push the direction of the narrative. As a result, I worried that we were providing inaccurate accounts of what happened.

When Brandon arrived at my house it was sort of surreal. In many ways, he was a Vegas manifestation that was brought into reality through our writing that we had been exchanging. In the flesh, it was like a whole new experience. We went out in Royal Oak and drank all over the place. Including Pronto, the local gay bar. Our last stop of the night was the MGM Grand in downtown Detroit. Don’t remember how we got there, don’t remember how we got back. We slept in the next day. In the same bed.
The next day we began working on constructing our paper. Notes were reviewed. Thoughts as to how we should proceed with our personal narratives were exchanged. And new notes were taken on the dry erase board in my room (see Figure 3). We started with our conceptions of autoethnography. Alongside a board full of metaphoric penises, we concluded with a Cartesian conception of dichotomies on x and y-axes, *analytic assholism* versus *art in the park* and *efficiently evocative* versus *pretentiously presumptions*. In the center of these dichotomies was the landscape where we situated autoethnography. Of course this never quite made it to our final paper. I now prefer to think of autoethnography as too abstract to be placed in such constraints. Autoethnography can be (and should be) simultaneously analytic and evocative. And there’s a reason why we drew all the penises and used assholism to describe analytical autoethnography and pretention to describe presumptions—that will come later.

![Figure 3. Notes on dry erase board reconstructed from layers of photographs.](image)

After we finished the methodological portions of the paper, we started to work with our personal narrative. That’s when I started to rethink my perceived shortcomings of our strategy. Because no written personal narrative is an actual account of what happened, I began to feel like
it didn’t matter. The crisis of representation positions our narratives as not representations but constructions or productions of experience. I slowly moved from feeling like it didn’t matter to feeling like, for us, in this project, it was ideal. Since we both proclaimed that we were reeling to make sense of our experience together (and each other), our method of co-constructing allowed for me to make sense of some of my experiences by understanding his experience of it. That didn’t mean we produced narratives of agreement. We still had narratives that starkly contrasted at points. I’ve come to understand these narratives as counter-constructed narratives or narratives against each other. Remembering that our stories would soon also be the readers’ stories, we made the choice to have these narratives appear in their whole, original forms back to back.

As Saturday slipped away into early Sunday morning and Brandon’s departure grew near, we reprised our Vegas goodbye performance of picking at each other. We got on each other’s nerves. The night ended with our first full on conflict turned silence. Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was the Adderall. Maybe it was the masculinities. Maybe it was the sexualities. It was probably all of these things and more, especially the impending separation.

Brandon was going to leave around noon. Instead, he woke up around 7:00am and started packing up. I was outraged. This is not how I wanted this weekend to end. I needed a proper goodbye. And Brandon would deny me just that. He left. No smiles. No hugs. Only a cold, “goodbye”. I passed back out. When I woke up three hours later I wanted to know why this all happened. His texts frustrated me. I lashed out irrationally. While I cannot remember what I said specifically, the feeling that I had when I realized that I had hurt his feelings badly sticks with me like it just happened. That night, over the phone, we forgave each other for leaving early and for lashing out. Forgiveness would become a new ritual in our relating. We had already started to look forward to the next time we’d see each other in March.
We wrapped up our paper and got feedback from advisors and friends. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive and included a “something that I wish I had written.” With that, we submitted our first paper together for review. The fledgling relationship constructed in the words of this paper is very much the starting point of my redirection of thinking about personal relationships and their study. The paper, as it appeared above, is the final draft that we sent to a special issue on autoethnography for the *Journal of Research Practice*, an open source peer-edited online academic journal. We received a promising and encouraging revise and resubmit on March 30, 2010 while I was at “Your Car Wash” on Maple Street in Troy.

The occasion was monumental because not only was I thoroughly vacuuming my car out to escort the Mark Knapp to school for his guest lecture in class, but this meant that our hard work in living, writing, and relating was closer to the ultimate academic validation—publication. We spent the next month addressing feedback. Most of it involved directing the paper toward masculinity and gender. Something that we knew was already woven throughout the paper. It was ultimately rejected. Not by the initial reviewers, but instead by the special editors of the issue. Here’s what the email said (pay special attention to the typographical and grammatical errors—I like to):

Subject: [JRP] Decline - Finding (our) autoethnography: Academic conferences...
Date: June, 23, 2010 2:35:58 PM EDT

Dear Derek Bolen and co-author

I am writing to communicate our decision to decline your manuscript after our review of the revised submission. The paper does not meet the requirements for the special issue.

a. The writing is unclear, often rambling and would require extensive copy-editing

b. Although there’s some discussion about autoethnography as a method and many symbolism about autoethnography collaboration (e.g., struggles of revealing, negotiating, and managing images between two individuals in building a relationship), this is disappointingly not a methodological reflection (at least not too intentional and explicit) on collaborative autoethnography that two researchers are engaged in. If authors are able to connect their struggles for relationship-building to struggles that may
happen during the collaborative autoethnographic process, it would be very valuable. Otherwise, it will remain as a product of autoethnography about collaboration between two autoethnographers, not as a writing of the process of collaborative autoethnography.

c. The methodological discussion is not always connected with their autoethnographic writing. For example, I’m not clear how their methodological discussion about three continua (auto, ethno, graphy) is played out in this work, except that they chose to write more of a narrative piece (again not focusing on a methodological discussion).

With these issues in mind, we decline your submission. We would encourage you to revise your manuscript, carefully copyediting it and choosing what the overall story ought to be, then resubmit it elsewhere.

Wishing you continued success in your scholarship

I share this rejection letter because its meaning transcends its intention. While I will admit that the paper needs work (and the final paper that was rejected is not included here), the criticisms of the rejection end up being life metaphors (I know, I am supposed to not be a fan of metaphors, right?) for the sort of relationships found in the paper. Our writing was criticized as unclear, as rambling, as needing much copy-editing. But the thing is, the writing was like that for a reason. That’s how we chose to construct the manuscript. Clarifying the writing isn’t possible because what it is that we’re writing about is messy. To clarify it would be to distort it. And clarify it for whom? To what standard?

Even if they had accepted the unclear writing, they would have had to have a copy editor (probably a whole team!) extensively alter it to make it publishable. Beyond our writing, we failed to directly provide methodological reflection that was “intentional” or “explicit.” But that was the story we were telling. Ours was (and is) a story, for the most part, about the unintentional and the implicit. According to the review, we failed to make connections between our methodological discussion and our autoethnographic writing. That’s why we were drawing penises on the dry erase board.
Those penises were commentary about hegemonic masculinity and the masculinity of rigor in the academy (Shank, 2000). It is because of this space, crafted by the reasoning for the rejection and the calls for analytic forms of autoethnography (Anderson, 2006), that we articulated our disdain for an academic construct predicated on conventional post positivist inspired *performances of cock*. And in social life, our relationship will face the same criticisms— it’s unclear, rambling, not too intentional or explicit, and lacking connection. Maybe we do need to “carefully … choose what the overall story ought to be.”

Aside from performing the contra-constructed narrative of the strip club experience at the Seventh International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, we have yet to do anything further with this paper. I often wonder if we ever will.

À Cause des Garçons! (All because of Boys)

There’s a particular (type of) guy that always seems to be attracted to me.

* 

Just yesterday I determined that I (finally) have friends that are gay. Some of them I have dated, had sex with, kissed, cuddled with—some of them I think about or have thought about dating, having sex with, kissing, cuddling with. I think about these sorts of things often. Recently I have started to come to terms with my inability to control who it is that I think these sort of things about, to what limit my thoughts flow, and what the reciprocity of such would look like (if anything).

When I go out to the (gay) bar in Royal Oak and meet up with my friends of varying degrees of closeness (none as close as my closest, dearest, bestest friends), we talk about lots of things. It’s mainly catty idle chat. Sometimes someone will mention something that will pique
my interest in a way that I know that I will never be able to convey fully what is on my mind because these guys just won’t get it.

**Gay guys on straight guys.**

Allen: Straight guys are horrible friends. There’s nothing to talk to them about, they don’t like to do any of the same things that I like to do, they have terrible taste, and it’s just a massive waste of time.

Brett: No, straight guys are great friends. There’s no threat. There’s no pursuit. With the drive for sex, attraction, and prospects of a relationship removed, they’re great friends. A welcomed rest from the bump-and-grind… if you know what I mean… of my usual interactions with gays.

Cody: What can you have in common with straight guys? I mean, if they’re your friends, why aren’t they here? Because they wouldn’t come here. Because part of being a straight guy means not being a gay guy. And not being a gay guy means maintaining your straightness. So your worlds can never really mesh. Maybe it’s cool in some places, at some times… but it just can’t work. Sure, there’s no worry of attraction, sex, and relationship… but how good can it really be? Why not just be friends with girls?

*Before I even open my mouth I am already frustrated with my inability to explain what I want to explain. This is undoubtedly because I don’t know what it is that I’d like to explain well enough to even approach explaining it to others. Still, I feel a drive to get my thoughts, feelings, and experiences out there. It’s no secret that we use each other to make sense of life. Maybe it will help. Maybe not.*
Me: In my life I have been friends with many straight guys. I hear what you’re all saying. And it all makes some amount of sense. But here’s the thing—for me—I have been close, like best-friend close, with three straight guys. We had tons to talk about, there was lots that we liked to do together, and they’ve all had impeccable taste. After all, they were friends with me. And it’s true. Sometimes it does feel like you can’t really be a part of their world. And worse, and more painfully, it feels like they can’t be a part of my world for all the reasons you’ve mentioned. But I can’t understand the idea of being friends with someone because it’s easier than being friends with someone else, at least not on this landscape. My relationships with straight guys have been anything but simple. They emerged, over and over, as the most complicated relationships in my life. Those complexities were usually the undoing of the relationships. Or at least they always had been.

Allen is long gone by this point. He’s still sitting at the table, but has completely departed the conversation. Bored, I imagine. People have a way of not having to hear what they don’t want to hear, one way or another. Plus, Allen is the type of gay guy that never likes me. I know that little is seldom as simple as types of guys who like me, who don’t like me, who I like, who I don’t like... but in this case I just cannot resist making this (perhaps reckless) generalization. It’s my life. I know it better than you do.

Brett: So then you’re saying that these guys were attracted to you. And you were attracted to them. That’s not very complicated. It just means that they’re not straight.

Cody: Right, I mean, do you have sex with these guys? Three, that’s not that many guys.
This is what it comes to when I try and talk about this. It doesn’t usually matter who I am talking with. It usually isn’t long before I am asked to see a picture of “this so-called straight boy.” Ultimately, everyone wants to know if there’s sex involved, kissing, etc. From then on my coincidentally straight friend will be labeled, “conference boyfriend,” “straight boyfriend,” and “your DL boy.” Of course they probably mean “boi.” I struggle at this juncture. I realize, it really is because I don’t understand it all enough myself. I also realize that they can’t help me figure anything out. These days I can’t help me figure anything out either. But it all keeps coming back to a failure to find the right words to do this justice.

Foreword: Purgatory

I grapple with readings and discussions in my relational and family communication class. I grasp to make concepts and theories fit with the experiences of my life, with my ongoing relationship with Brandon. Conventional pieces couched in empirical post positivist traditions push me away from the study of personal relationships. Theoretical pieces like Gergen and Walter’s (1998) constructionist approach to studying relationships or Sigman’s (1991) exploration of continuity in relationships drive me to think about relationships unconventionally.

After experiencing the co-construction of our first autoethnographic piece, I strain myself to think about new ways to conceive of relating. Starting with what I know, the study of gender in friendships. It doesn’t take long to reveal heteronormativity in personal relationship research. It permeates the variables and, as a result, the subjects, data, and findings. I become fixated on the erotic. Erotic dimensions of relationships are rarely explored unless in romantic close personal relationships, generally straight relationships. But what about between men? Between
men who don’t identify as gay? Where is the line between the erotic and sexual orientation in life? In research it’s quite distinct.

* 

Along with my relational and family communication course I have a queer theory directed study. Beginning with Elia’s (2003) queering relationships piece, I begin to work his conceptions to their boundaries. For my final project in my relational and family course I expressly theorize on and write about queer relationships in Finding a Queer Relationship: Reflexive (Re)Accounts of Relating to/with Guys. Through layering queer theory, critiques of literature, and reflexive accounts with three straight men from my life, including Brandon, I begin delineating a space for queer relationships in the study of personal relationships. When I turn the paper in, I know that I will continue work on the project of queer relationships. I know that I will continue to work on the paper.

* 

Following Brandon’s trip to my house in Michigan, I visited him at his parents’ house in Mount Vernon, Illinois the weekend of March 13, 2010. Five days before his birthday I drove all night with two bottles of Moscato, research for our next paper on performance and conference spaces, and his birthday gift. When I arrive we go to a gas station restaurant for breakfast. The gas station had a classic projection big screen television setup for truckers. There was a wall of brochures across from the door. I grabbed a few. After we (didn’t) finish our greasy food, he showed me around his hometown. He showed me the school where he was bullied. He showed me the parking lot where he was beat up while people called him faggot. I felt close to him. It connected his paper with the physical plane. But I don’t share my own experiences being bullied with him. I figure that as a gay man, those experiences go without saying.
As he was driving I thumbed through the brochures. My favorite was a religious tract. It had a picture on the back that, being from tract-free Michigan, I had never seen the likes of (see Figure 4). It illustrated the possibility of a good and seemingly easy life (or afterlife as depicted) by just making the right choice—out of two possible directions.

Figure 4. Heaven or hell. Easy as pie.

I gave him his birthday gift. It was a framed print of a penis that I had drawn on the dry erase board while he was at my house (see Figure 3, bottom left). He happily accepted it and displayed it prominently in the basement of his parents’ home. We spent the rest of the day working on our paper. It was edgier than our first paper, but didn’t broach the erotic or even the relational tension that we were experiencing. We drank and smoked that night. His brother had friends over, so instead of staying on the couch, I stayed in his bed with him.

The next day we headed to Southern Illinois University Carbondale for inspiration. After all, we were so close to the academic home of John Warren and Ron Pelias. We fed the meter outside of the Communications Building and ventured in for a chance encounter with John or
Ron. It was the weekend. Neither was in. Nevertheless, adequately inspired, we headed to the library to buckle down and finish our paper.

In a manner historically reserved for our last night together, we started to pick on and at each other. After surviving the ride back to his house by the grace of music, we worked to finish the paper. We were sitting on the couch editing the paper when he said, “Let’s get this done so that you can go home in the morning.” I had planned on staying until the day after tomorrow, so that comment was a blow to my feelings. With the paper finished and submitted, we turned to fighting. He left to take a shower and I packed up my belongings. I decided to leave that night. No smiles. No hugs. Only a cold, “goodbye.”

Feeling like I was doing exactly what he had done to me, I called him to return. He informed me that he had already told his parents that I left. Embarrassed and feeling awkward, I returned to his house to spend the night. We got drunk and he told me that I had to sleep on the couch. When we went to bed, I crawled into bed with him. “What are you doing?” he asked. “Sleeping in here with you.” He reached over and took my hat and glasses off of me and we went to sleep. The next morning we parted ways after discussing our feelings over breakfast at Denny’s. But nothing was resolved. Nonetheless, we looked forward to the next time we’d be together at the 2010 National Popular Culture and American Culture Association Conference in St. Louis.

* The weekend of April 2, 2010 I flew to St. Louis. Brandon made the reservations and we only had one bed. The first thing I had to do was read an article for class and post discussion questions. While I did that, Brandon went to the bar. As soon as I finished, he showed me around St. Louis. That night I went to bed early, around midnight, even though Brandon wanted to go
back out. He ended up going to the hotel bar. The next morning we woke up and he presented his paper. We bummed around St. Louis, getting lost on the expressway each time. For lunch we ate in a hotel restaurant near Bush Stadium where the Cardinals play. While we were there he became increasingly interested in his phone until I finally learned about what he had done the previous night. He met a fellow conference attendee at our hotel bar named Louise. Now he wanted to invite her out with us. I thought he was joking. I came to St. Louis to visit him and now he wanted to hang out with some girl from the bar. He wasn’t joking. Later that evening we met up with Louise at a martini bar near our hotel. I hit it off with Louise. She seemed more interested in me than Brandon. Brandon got jealous. That made me happy because I was jealous, too. I returned to the hotel room hurt. The two of them stayed at the bar.

He called me and left messages to see why I left. An answer I was certain he already knew. I listened to the first message, “Hey, why’d you leave? Come back! I want to hang out with you” and then in the background I hear Louise chime in, “Que pasa?” He repeats it. I am livid. How can he not know what he is doing? And how the hell do you think it’s going, bitch? So I make a move to inflict pain back. I text him, “Wouldn’t your girlfriend like to know what’s going on?” That’s his girlfriend of 3 years. He calls me back and apologizes more. He doesn’t know what he did wrong. Right. After an hour he finally makes it back to the room. I pretend that I am sleeping. The next morning, he takes me to the airport.

We talk on the way to the airport. Nothing is resolved. No smiles. No hugs. Only a cold, “goodbye”. But then he calls me while I am waiting for my flight. We talk. We look forward to the next time that we’ll see each other at the Sixth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. I feel like our relationship is declining. Too much goes unsaid, unknown. Too much is uncertain (eat your heart out, Berger). I think about
the religious tract from two weeks earlier (see Figure 4). I contemplate how easy it is to make one choice, to travel in one direction, and have good results. I contemplate how easy it is to make another choice, travel in the other direction, and have bad results. I dwell on what I have come to understand as the flawed logic upon which such a dichotomy is based. Turn to the left to get to Heaven. Turn to the right to get to Hell. And if you miss your turn? Purgatory.

*  
With all the zeal of predicting and controlling from the dominant paradigm, I dedicate myself to writing my relational and family communication paper on queer relationships. I thoughtfully craft narrative accounts of my past experiences with straight guys. I feel as though the work that I am doing is making a difference (in at least my own life). I am finished with the paper. Until I meet up with Brandon at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry.

**A Bad Romance, In Medias Res**

All men should strive to learn before they die, what they are running from, and to, and why.  
—James Thurber

bad romance |bad rō'mans|  
noun  
1. Song by Lady Gaga (Bad romance from *The Fame Monster*, 2010).  
2. A relationship that you know is bad for you, yet can’t help. Can be physically and/or emotionally abusive. Can just be fucked up beyond belief.

I (will) push.

I (will) run.

I (will) go back.

No, I do not feel good blowing off Tony for drinks. The thing is, I am in a terrible mood and all I really want to do right now is just be… at my house. My needs-to-be-unpacked, recently moved into house. I know, whether I like it or not, the drive will be the beginning of the onerous
albeit necessary (?) sense making process that is ahead of me. Like me, you’ve probably always wondered how many times one person can listen to Lady Gaga’s Bad Romance (2010) on a car drive from Urbana-Champaign, Illinois to Detroit, Michigan. Something that resembles the answer is contained within these pages. Hopefully along with some sense making connected to other equally important questions.

I grab my iPhone, which is already supplying what will become the repetitious trip soundtrack, and plot my course home—I-57 to I-80 to I-94 to I-75. I wonder if there will be tolls. Who am I kidding? This trip is going to be toll-laden. I start racking my mind and think about my life, my experiences. As Lady Gaga fights fading into the background, my past subsumes my present. You can’t text and drive in Illinois, there’s a law. However, you can reflex and drive. I wonder which is more dangerous. The sun is setting to my left and memories are flooding my car. They aren’t the sort of memories that I forgot about and had to work to remember, but are more like the memories that you always knew you remembered. Like passing out drunk, waking up the next day, and aside from the hangover, having no recollection of your doings the previous night—until the memories slowly (maybe quickly or instantly) come back to you. You didn’t forget. You just didn’t remember. Now I remember, in waves, in pieces. I remember the pushing. I remember the running. I remember going back. I begin (re)telling myself stories, some of which I haven’t told myself for years, but now I am mindful of the stories that I tell myself because I am starting to think that I’ve told myself too many stories that aren’t true. These things tend not to be clear or well organized. So I feel that I must warn you, things might be confusing for a moment. But as you read on with an open mind, I am confident that you’ll be able to find your footing with me.

*   *   *
I regret that we didn't have the time to talk and say goodbye. You've been a good friend and I'll miss the good times. In fact, I will cherish the good times that we have had for as long as I am able to remember them.

Alas, I have felt the impending expiration of our relationship since March when the phone calls slowed, the cryptic intimate references stopped, and you ceased acknowledging that you missed me. No matter how real any of that was it represented an effort that was predicated on caring (for me). But now I am more sure than ever that you aren't able to give me what I desire and it would be selfish and wrong for me to continue to push. And that's not a cleverly veiled remark about dating or sex. Mostly, I don't know what I want. Except that I know I cannot have a person in my life that I hold in such high regard that holds my being in such low, disposable, regard.

I am sorry that things didn't turn out the way we planned. Maybe now they can turn out better. I hope only for the best for you.

I will miss you, Sean Bateman. And whether you like it or not, I will carry you in my heart. Maybe not forever, but for as long as I can. And it won't be cumbersome, it will be with privilege from having been able to spend what little time we got to spend in this crazy world making sense of what we could. That sense making was an arduous task. The odds were against us. But we gave it our all and I am grateful for it.

Love,
Paul

* * *

MITCHELL  I hurry to my second class. My first class in college was a bust. I am not holding out much hope for my second class—English 111, Composition. When I make it to the classroom, Pioneer 154, I am not surprised that it’s in the engineering building like everyone else because I was surprised two days ago when I first located the room. I am realizing how naïve I am about college, but this is not something that I will admit to anyone. I wonder what sort of great All-American collegiate friendships I will make. No friend possibilities in my first class, I am certain. Who makes friends in Consumer Finance? And while I am certain that this class will be terrible, I believe that this class has possibilities of friend making. And I am both right and wrong.
The classroom is filled with long tables with an aisle in the middle. I try to sit near the front, but not too close. Because I am here early, I can watch each person walk in. *This is a strategy that I will use for years to come.* Class starts at 3 pm. So far, no one has come in that entices me—visually. *Because everyone knows you can tell who your friends will be based on appearance.*

I am sitting between two girls. There is a guy in front of me and a guy behind me. I don’t really know what the guy behind me looks like because he was here when I came in. The syllabus is passed out and reviewed—ad nauseam. Our first assignment is to introduce, in written form, another member of the class. The professor instructs us to pair up. The girl to my left pairs with the guy in front of me. The girl to my right crosses the aisle and pairs with another girl who will eventually become the most annoying person in the class. So I am left with the guy behind me. The professor generously gives us what is left of class, 5 whole minutes, just enough time for us to set a meeting with our partners outside of class. *College is going to be rough.* His name is Mitchell.

**CLAY**  Graduate teaching assistant training starts in the beginning of August. I think the idea is that we’ll learn how to teach the class during the summer so that they (the department) can let us loose to do so on our own when school starts. This is my second year in my masters program. When I arrive on campus for training, I am not nervous because I have already put a year in and I know someone who is going to be in training with me—Clay. We aren’t friends. I wouldn’t say that we are enemies, just not friends. We never hung out because Clay spent time with his girlfriend. I spent time with my boyfriend. And other reasons that are neither interesting, nor important. We go out that first night. Clay and I become friends. We start to spend time together.
This creates jealousy with my two roommates—one my best friend, the other my boyfriend of nearly three years.

During training it’s easy to conceal the time that we spend together. And it’s easy to conceal the time that we spend together at school once the year starts. At least, from my boyfriend. Our offices are right next to each other. We teach and hold our office hours at the same time. By day graduate students, by night alcoholics. Our friendship begins with hanging out with other graduate students. Other people in the program start to talk about what Clay and I are up to. People (females) ask me if we’re “involved.” We aren’t. I don’t think. They advise me that he’s into me. I don’t understand. Clay and I stop hanging out with everyone from our department. I guess we don’t need them.

SEAN My doctoral advisor asks me if I want to go to a conference. Living with my ex, I look for any excuse to get out of the house—even if it’s for a road trip to the middle of nowhere. I get out of the van with her when we get to the hotel, leaving behind 3 fellow graduate students, to go check in. She draws my attention to a guy standing at the counter. Turning her back toward him, she tells me three things: he’s your type, he looks gay, and he’s probably with the conference. He is (not) my type. He does look gay. He is with the conference. His name is Sean. I discover most of this in the registration room where it also becomes apparent that my advisor knows his people. She does me a favor and scores a dinner with his school. She sees to it that I sit next to him at dinner. We don’t talk—him and I. Dinner ends, I go back to my room, then I go back to the registration room with everyone else from my school. I suffer through a few rounds of Catch Phrase. I go out to the bar with my in-school turned out-of-school-friends-for-the-weekend.
The bars in the middle of nowhere are terrible. The front of the bar is all windows. 

*Terrible for dancing.* I watch Sean walk in the bar. Adam, a classmate, puts further pressure on me to talk to Sean because he’s obviously gay. And I am (obviously?) single. And that means that I am obviously looking (for sex). In actuality, what I am is annoyed. Sean comes over and talks to me. Adam walks away. A few moments of awkward dancing follows. (And by awkward dancing I mean straight guy dancing.) Sean leaves. Adam is trying his hardest to find out from Sean’s people if he’s gay. I am embarrassed. We go to the next bar and Sean is there. I am drunk. Sean leaves. Adam pushes me out the door after him. “*I guess this is sorta fun.*” *I tell myself.*

I follow Sean back to the hotel—every step feeling like a bigger creep. I catch up to him in the hotel elevator. We end up back outside at his car. The alcohol is hitting me (hard). We smoke some pot. *It’s my first time in a long time.* We return to the registration room. We’re alone. It’s well lit. I am working my hardest to reduce uncertainty and determine if he is gay. He certainly seems gay, but I am not overly interested. I make an awkward play at flirting with him, he calls me out on it. He’s straight. I am okay.

On the drive home I look at his Facebook profile on my phone. Adam takes my phone and passes it around. Everyone (girls and gays) in the van dubs Sean my conference boyfriend. They look at his pictures and make fun of his straightness. When the phone gets handed back to me, it’s on a shirtless picture. I think that he’s a very gay straight guy. We exchange a few Facebook messages. He compliments me on my music and movie tastes. He doesn’t know that that was a different person, someone who is lost. He sends me a paper. I send him some feedback. We won’t talk again for the better part of a year.

* * *
On autoethnography. I agree with Richardson (1990a), that narrative is “the best way to understand the human experience because it is the way humans understand their own lives” (p. 133). Autoethnography is a narrative method. Bochner (2002) said, “back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations” (p. 90). Bochner (1994) also said that story is theory. In pursuit of understanding personal experience, the stories that we tell (ourselves and others) to make sense of past, present, and future-life are theories called into being from our own life narrative.

Accepting story as theory in autoethnography means an acceptance of an autoethnographic approach that is more artistic and evocative than the conventions of social science. That is not to say that this autoethnography (or any autoethnography of the creative type) is without an analytical element. What it means is allowing the story to speak for itself instead of writing the story and then speaking for the story or (over)analyzing the story (Denzin, 1997).

My conception of autoethnography is queer, it “embraces fluidity, resists definitional and conceptual fixity, looks to self and structures as relational accomplishments, and takes seriously the needs to create more livable, equitable, and just ways of living” (Adams & Holman Jones, 2008, p. 384). It resists a standardized “academic” way of writing in favor of a writing style that is befitting of sharing the personal experience for which it (re)presents. This account is layered (Ronai, 1992, 1995, 1996), which means it is composed of multiple texts and is fragmented (Markham, 2005), which means that it is a bricolage of narratives that are disruptive in flow, layout, tense, and voice.
The miles are counting down on the road signs and Chicago is getting closer. It’s that orange time of night that hurts my eyes. This is the second time that I have driven away from Urbana-Champaign. The first time, last night, I was driving in the opposite direction.

* * *

“Do you think this is what it’s going to be like on the road trip,” he asks. “Us pissed at each other and driving in silence? Yup,” I fire back. Truthfully, I am not certain why I am (specifically) upset with him. Generally, I am upset with him for all the same reasons. He’s pushy, self-centered, narcissistic, and a drug mooch. None of these things would bother me too much because I can be all of the aforementioned things, but it’s the combination. And it’s also that all the while I feel like he wants me fawning over him, but there’s no reciprocation. There hasn’t been reciprocation for months. And that’s saying something since we have only been together for 4 months.

It’s on this car ride back to his house that I feel the most like a couple—a dysfunctional, unhappy couple. I have had a hard time confronting him about his choices in courting me into this relationship. By that I mean “straight” boy (cock) teasing “gay” boy. The first paper that we wrote clearly had some sex appeal. It recounted a week that we spent together in Las Vegas exploring the city, a conference, sexuality, and masculinity. The paper had a thin veil of sexual innuendos that expressed the desires that we had toward each other. It depicted an uncertainty that can be found in the upstart of most relationships (in my experience). But that uncertainty is reduced to almost nothing. Now I remain the most uncertain about when our meet ups will blow up into fights. And really, I am really not even uncertain about that. I am worried that our project
this summer won’t be as good as our others. But I can never talk to him about anything that I am concerned about. I am wrong, he’s right. I know he’s right because he’s yelling at me.

By the time that we arrive to his house I will have dealt with an argument that he punctuated with text messaging and phone calls to others—something that has always chapped my ass in conflict. That sort of disconfirming behavior is my bane. After the phone call (to his girlfriend), we sit in silence for the rest of the drive back to his house.

Once we arrive at his house he makes his way upstairs. I sit at the table downstairs. “Get ready for taking some shots,” he hollers down. I sit in stasis, fuming, thinking, “Are all men really this piggish?” I become more uncomfortable when I review my relational experience arsenal and can think of more than a few times when I have pulled this same sort of trick on another person.

He brings down his prized, aged bottle of Chivas Regal. The very bottle he said he’d open when our manuscript went to press. It appears the temptations of a good scotch whisky were a bit too much for him, but I’d never fault him on something like that as I am the same way. He bounces over to me and proudly displays the bottle. Another time, place, context, another me would be happy to share this with him. Instead, I tell him that I don’t feel like drinking. And I don’t. I ask him for his paper. The paper that he is presenting tomorrow. I hunker down on the couch and start reading. I have read this paper many times before. I have already given him some advice, “stick strictly to narrative when you present.” And the next day, he does not take my advice and probably at least partly for that reason he goes long and is asked to stop presenting—embarrassing. I thought it would feel better to see something bad happen to him.

He asks me if I want to go to the bar. “We don’t always have to be fucked up when we’re together. We don’t always have to go out,” I say (but am not sure if I believe). He says that he
knows. Then comes back into the room and says, “What if I have to go to the bar?” I say, “If you have to ask me something like that, then you should already know my feelings.” He says that he has to go and that he knows that I am going to hate him. *Something he says a lot—acknowledging that his behaviors will upset me. And they do.* “But the bars are only open until 1 am and I will be back in thirty minutes,” he forces out as he gets ready to walk out the door. I lay on the couch silently, now only marking a bevy of typos and grammatical errors in his paper. With that, he leaves. I walk out a few minutes later. I don’t answer his phone call as I am driving back to Champaign. I don’t answer his phone call as I am checking in to the Sleep Inn at 2 in the morning.

(Did) I push?

(Did) I run?

(Should) I go back?

*  *  *

**MITCHELL** We write our papers, present them the next class, and move seats to sit by each other. We gradually spend more and more time together until our friendship consumes most of my free time. We talk about the girls that we’ve dated. He talks about his girlfriend, Maggie. We take trips to the casino in Mount Pleasant. We go to lectures, movies, and concerts together. Every month we take trips to the mall in Flint so that we can redeem our Structure coupons for free merchandise. We spend nights at each other’s houses. As the semester draws to an end, I meet his girlfriend. We do not hit it off like Mitchell hopes we will. She does not like me, so I commit myself to not liking her. *The girlfriends of a certain type of guy will never like me.* The semester ends. Mitchell and I barely speak over winter break.
A week before classes resume, Mitchell stops by the restaurant that I am working at. I get off work. We pick up where we left off. We fill each other in on what has happened. Maggie has gone back to college. This semester we have public speaking together and sit together in the back of a large lecture hall. We resume spending (all of our) time together. We discuss the necessity of doing something epic for our first college spring break and decide to take a trip to New York City.

I have been to New York City two years prior with my aunt. It’s not that I know anything, but I guess I know more. I get to be the guide. We walk all over New York City for the next five days. We spend hours making a sign to take to Times Square and hold up outside of MTV Studios during TRL. The sign reads, “Calculus = Britney + Christina.” We watch the rerun of TRL that night. Carson Daly reads our sign on TV. We wake up the next morning and go to The Today Show. This time our signs don’t make it on TV. Al Roker does not read them. While walking by the Ed Sullivan Theatre I manage to score some tickets to see David Letterman. After taping is over we’re on a New York City high. We run into students from NYU. They buy us a case of Budweiser. We return to our one-bed-hotel-room, get wasted, watch David Letterman, pass out.

CLAY We tailgate (at football games), go to movies (with no gay seat between us), drink (lots), smoke (pot), play World of Warcraft, but mostly drink. Just hang out, really. As jealously swells from my boyfriend (I’ve cheated on him twice), I decide to break up with him right before Halloween. Halloween weekend Clay and I take an impromptu (read: drunken/high) trip to Chicago to party.
We stay with his friend, Julian—arriving just in time to go sleep. Clay tells me that I can sleep on the couch. He sleeps on the floor. It’s freezing cold. We end up sharing the couch and blankets to stay warm. The next day we drink beer and watch college football. When it gets dark we head to the bars. First we go out in Lincoln Park. The bar that we’re at has a $20 cover and $1 drink co-pays. We drink. A lot. When the bar gets too busy, we decide to leave. Clay suggests we go to Boystown. Julian takes us. On the way I accept a free pizza from an angel, avoid having to sit in the front seat with the taxi driver, and get high without anyone knowing.

SEAN I write a masculinity/sexuality paper and remember the paper he wrote that I had read months earlier. I send him a message and ask him if he wants to work on combining our papers. He’s excited. He agrees. I get busy. I feel bad. I don’t have time to work with him on anything—unless… I had submitted a proposal for a journal, they liked it, and asked me to complete the paper. I would have time to work with him if I asked him to co-author that paper. I ask him. He agrees. We plan for the paper. It turns out we’ll see each other at the same conference that we met at last year.

We see a lot of each other at and away from the conference. We are fast friends. He discloses that he questions his sexuality. At the end of the trip he gets weird and hands me his phone with a naked picture of himself on the screen. I get weird. We’re weird together. We move on. The goodbye is hard, but we know we’ll see each other two weeks later when we finish our manuscript.

He sends me songs. The songs are sentimental. I am not sure what to make of a request to leave the relationship open to possibilities. It seems like a bad idea. It seems like it will ruin things, but I wonder. We talk on the phone often. We express that we miss each other, sometimes
more explicitly than others. He continues to disclose his attraction to me, I don’t tell him no. I become more attracted to him. He comes to my house. We drink and do drugs when he is at my house. *Just like in Vegas.* We sleep in the same bed. The first night I sleep all the way at the edge of the bed. He sleeps beyond the middle in my space with his back to my back. I like it. We finish a draft of our paper. He abruptly leaves. I am upset. We fight via text messages.

I push.

I run.

I go back.

* * *

I carefully set my phone to the side; I’ve been giving it a break from looping one particular song so that I can talk to Dawn. I roll my window down to exchange hellos, goodbyes, and 60 cents with the tollbooth attendant. “Hi,” I say. No response. I hand him my three quarters. He returns 15 cents in his large, masculine hand. “Thanks, have a good night!” I exaggerate—to teach him a lesson. No response. I pick my phone back up. “Apparently the tollbooth workers are robots.” I resume speeding along on my way. This means I am about 4 hours from home. I look down and realize that I am not just low on gas, but nearly out. I end my conversation with Dawn and start to look for a place to get some gas and something to eat. What I find is construction—15 miles of construction to be precise. *Perfect!* Of course, I think about how I shouldn’t even be on the road right now. I should still be with friends. *One friend in particular.* And really the whole conference started going down the drain when I first got there.

*

I drive past his house when I first get to Charleston—the sort of drive past that you realize you’re doing about a nanosecond too late to do anything about it. I am looking forward to
seeing his house. He’s very proud of this house. I make my way back and give him a call as I am parking my car. “Did you park behind my car?” he asks. “Yup.” “I’ll be down in a second,” he says. I get out of my car and feel the heat of the 80-something degree weather. I did not pack appropriately. *That’s another story.* He shows me around his house. I can see why he likes it. We drink some drinks. He’s bought two bottles of wine. Earlier he had texted me and asked me what I wanted to drink. I said, “dealer’s choice.” He did good.

By the time we make it up to his bedroom I am feeling the effect of no food and, of course, the alcohol. I sit in his office chair. He sits on his bed. I look around. The room is pretty trashed. It doesn’t bother me at all because my room is usually pretty trashed, too. My eyes make their way around the whole room and settle on an errant piece of glass in a fanned out pile of paper on the floor. “Why do you have a piece of glass on the floor?” I say reaching down to pick it up. He doesn’t immediately answer and as my hand meets the piece of the glass I figure out why he isn’t answering. The glass is part of a picture frame that I gave him for his birthday. The contents of the frame have been knocked out, replaced with a cover from *The New Yorker.* *The original picture was a graphic that I spent hours transferring from a white board in dry erase marker to Adobe Illustrator. We had drawn pictures of cocks on my dry erase board when he was at my house a few months earlier.* He says, “It fell and it came apart.” But it’s clear, based on the way it was taken apart and the placement of *The New Yorker* cover print, that this required opposable thumbs, not gravity. I am sure there is a story here, but I will never be entrusted with it. And with that, I begin to recede into myself. Feeling dejected, rejected, defective. A silly faggot.

I (start to) push.

I (start to) run.
I (start to) go back.

(I am well trained.)

* * *

**Autoethnography, redux.** Methodologically, autoethnography is continually criticized along lines of value. Whereas an empirical approach to research generally remains fixed on predicting and controlling, an approach like autoethnography is generally more concerned with how people make sense of the world (Bochner, 2002). The difference between the two can be understood as researching “the” world versus researching “a” world. *In this case, my world.*

Behar (1996) advocates writing the vulnerable. By writing the vulnerable, personal experiences can be made political (Denzin, 2000; Holman Jones, 2005). Like Holman Jones (2005) says, in writing this autoethnographic account I can orchestrate “impossible encounters” by “bring[ing] people in contact with ideas, situations, or others that appear to be totally different” (Cohen-Cruz, 2001, p. 105). And with that, this account “struggles to open the space between analysis and action, and to pull the pin on the binary of opposition between theory and practice” (Conquergood, 2002, p. 145) in the context of relational communication. Despite the vulnerability that writing such an account necessarily calls for, I am hopeful that my experiences will “no longer just [be my own]; for better or worse they [will] become part of a community experience” (Nudd, Schriver, & Galloway, 2001, p. 113).

So like Gergen and Walter (1998) said, my interest in relationships grew from “the soil of personal experience” (p. 110). A certain type of non-normative personal experience (that has recurred too often in my life) as depicted in the autoethnographic short stories (Ellis, 2001) here in this paper. These stories (re)present a certain type of relationship that defies the essentialist,
reductionary modes of seeking to predict and control. Indeed, what is at stake is sense making and on the line is a relationship. *And I am not sure how much time I have to make this sense.*

* * *

**MITCHELL**  Our last day in New York is uneventful. We can’t find college students to buy alcohol, but someone comments on my Central Michigan University hat. I ask them to buy us alcohol. The Central Michigan alumnus buys us a bottle of gin. Mitchell and I head back to the hotel, drink, and talk. We get wasted. He moves down on the bed to a nearly lying position. We hate, no, loathe Celine Dion. We mock her accent, “don’t surrendurr, coz you can win, in this thing called *lurve.*” Love. It slips out, “I *lurve* you.” I don’t know why it happened, and am somehow able to think nothing of it. *I will think nothing of it until much time passes, multiple refra'mings of the story occur, and Mitchell exists only in memories.* I adjust in the bed and in the process lean over on to his side. Because he is basically lying down, I am leaning over him. We make prolonged eye contact. He stammers, “Don’t kiss me.”

I (do not) push.

I (do not) run.

I (cannot) go back.

(I wish I could.)

**CLAY**  We go to a video bar with a dance floor in back. We dance. Clay gets irritated with a drag queen grabbing at him. I put myself between the drag queen and him. We dance. We grind. *I think nothing of it.* Time passes. Drinks are drunk. We move off to the side of the dance floor. We talk about sexual arousal. Clay and Julian both proclaim their inability to be turned on by a guy. I reach over and rub my hand on Julian’s crotch. It doesn’t take long before I can feel that
he’s hard. *He loses. I win.* But I don’t know Julian, so it was easy. I turn to Clay and do the same thing. It feels awkward. Like a violation. But he doesn’t stop me. Nothing happens. And only because I am drunk (really drunk) and young (not as young as I am drunk) and because Clay isn’t getting hard, I put my hand in his jeans. I leverage past the tight waistband of his belted jeans, creating space between the elastic band of his boxers and his warm, sweaty, sticky flesh. I find the base of his cock, grab it, force my hand deeper into his pants until I reach the head, and then the tip. Now he’s hard. I pause, unsure what to do. I wait for him to pull my hand out of his pants, when he doesn’t… in the middle of Boystown, on a dance floor overrun by drag queens, I pull my own hand out in terror of what I have done. I have never done anything like this in a bar before. I have never done anything like this to my straight best friend before. We talk. Aside from them both accepting defeat, it’s like it didn’t happen. I am relieved and boggled by the masculinities and sexualities of both guys. *I don’t use those words to describe any of this, nor do I have any real interest in it beyond it occurring at the time.*

Drag queens descend on us again. I can feel the bass thumping in my core. Lights are flashing. I am drenched in sweat. Dancing. Feeling every beat. Feeling, as cliché as it may be, one with everything and everyone around me. This is a moment and I am caught in it. I don’t know how or why but Clay and I kiss—an all the way kiss. We leave the bar to head back to Julian’s house. Once outside I realize how drunk I am—obliterated.

Clay goes to Julian’s bedroom, the only bedroom. And even though we picked up Julian’s girlfriend on the way back—and it’s clear they’re planning to fuck—I follow Clay into the room. Shoes come off. Socks come off. Pants come off. I pass out. When I wake up hours later, the hangover is already taking hold. Clay’s left arm is over my side and tucked under my chest, my back is to his chest, his right arm is under my pillow—we’re cuddling. I like it. I fight
moving and go back to sleep. We wake up and drive home. Nothing is different. *Is it?* I don’t think.

In Boston, at NCA, we cuddle. But once back home, out of nowhere, Clay starts fucking the girl that everyone I know hates. After each night that Clay and I spend together, he spends the next night with her. I get jealous. He knows I get jealous. I distract myself with a fuck buddy of my own. Clay gets jealous.

I push.

I run.

I (do not know how to) go back.

He starts dating someone, a female someone. I am still distracted. We’re still friends. We don’t sleep over. We don’t cuddle. It goes on like this for a month. My roommate/best friend moves out. My ex-boyfriend moves out. My sister moves in. There’s a knock at the door. I open it. It’s Clay. He’s crying. His girlfriend broke up with him. He sleeps on my couch for a few days. He moves into my ex-boyfriend’s vacated bedroom. Shortly after that he moves away. We never share the same bed again. We never kiss again. And we never have sex. We’ll keep in touch for a while. He’ll allude to his attraction to me in text messages. I’ll wonder how it might have been (could have been) different. We’ll lose touch, indefinitely.

I pushed.

I ran.

I cannot go back.

(I think about going back.)
SEAN  We talk on the phone a lot. He tells me that he’s not doing well with his girlfriend. We find another paper to work on. We make plans for me to visit him at his parents’ house over spring break. He shares that his girlfriend is not allowed to stay over, but that I will be staying over. I go to his house. We drink. We do drugs. We talk. I sleep in his bed—with him. I wake up in the middle of the night. I am on the edge of the bed. He has moved into bed space that is clearly mine. His knees are tucked into the back of my knees. I go back to sleep feeling close(r) to him. Nothing sexual, no intentions on my part, just close. I like being close to him. What’s happening? But in the grand tradition that we established in Vegas, we get short with each other. He makes fun of kicking me out bright and early in the morning. I leave. But I am worried about what I have done.

I push.
I run.
I go back.

When we meet up in St Louis, we drink and do drugs. He shows me around town. We make it back to the hotel. Eventually, we pass out. I wake up on my side of the bed with him in my space. He has his butt backed into my crotch. I am drunk. I think about putting my arm over him, but am scared. I (think I) want to cuddle with him. I wonder if he is cuddling with me. I am not sure why, but I like it. We don’t talk about it. Our vulnerability has decreased considerably since Vegas, but we still talk. Not about this. Not about anything vulnerable. Not anymore.

After he presents his paper, he tells me about the girl he met last night. The girl he had to meet because I wouldn’t come down to the bar. He wants to meet up with her. I get jealous. I came here to hang out with him and he wants to hang out with some random girl from last night. We meet up with the girl. He thinks I am trying to steal her away from him. It’s all incredible. I
storm back to the hotel—convinced that this is the end—that I can’t do it anymore. I send vicious
text messages. He calls to calm me. Mostly, I believe, because he doesn’t want me to make
trouble for him. We go to bed pissed.

I push.

I run.

I go back.

He takes me to the airport and we half-ass, halfway patch things up. But he is so bad at
goodbyes that we can’t spend any real time understanding why it has all happened. We can plan
on this happening again. Distance is a skilled mediator for our conflicts. Distance quells the
contempt.

We’re still close. Not as close as we were. Sometimes I wonder if he wants to be closer. I
wonder if I want to be closer. Everything remains fairly uncertain with the exception of a verbal
commitment to maintaining our relationship—working through the bad because the good is
worth it. We accept that it is not normal. We accept that the things we do, the things we talk
about, and how we do it all isn’t normal. And that it doesn’t matter what everyone else does.
Early on we developed an “us” versus “them” attitude. Sometimes I miss Sean. I have thought
about having sex with him. We talk about sex... not about having sex together. I know how big
his penis is because he told me. I am not sure I should know that. He told me that he has done
stuff with guys. And none of that really matters. But I have a familiar uneasy feeling. I don’t want
our relationship to end. I want to continue exploring our relational discursivity, but I feel
familiar vicissitudes.

*   *   *

*   *   *
By the time that I parked in front of my house at 2 am, I had been caught in bad romances for 7 hours or, if punctuation is even possible, eighty times—seventy-seven times à la Lady Gaga and three times via reflexivity—of course it all blurred together into one massive bad romance. It’s been forever since I listened to a song on repeat that much. It’s been even longer since I reflexed on these defining relationships. I didn’t even own the song until 9 hours prior to my departure from Urbana-Champaign. Now that I think about, I didn’t really own the relationships either. But on that car ride, there was no one to push away, and even though I was driving 70 to 80 miles per hour, there was nowhere to run. There was only going back.

* 

I almost didn’t come down. I am not presenting anything. I paid for the conference when I had money. Just like I bought a plane ticket to St. Louis when I had money. Just like I bought Pitchfork tickets when I had money. Back when I thought our relationship had some saliency. Back when I felt like he wanted me around. Back when I believed the things he said. “We’re not really friends, we’re more than friends,” he said. “More than friends, but less than boyfriends,” I was happy to respond. I took to the initial uncertainties. I suppose I liked the near nightly 6-hour phone calls. I liked the music he sent. I liked how he made me feel. But that’s all gone. Now everything has to happen on his accord. I have to happen on his accord.

“My girlfriend is being a cunt,” the text reads. I remember a time when he hid the existence of his girlfriend from me. I knew she was there, but didn’t care. “She took the day off Wednesday and wants to spend the day together.” I am supposed to arrive on Wednesday. The conference starts at 8 am the next day. *Or so we thought, turns out his girlfriend could have come and gone Wednesday night because we didn’t need to be to the conference until 12:30 pm.* Bygones. I was peeved. I was coming down because he invited me. It immediately reminds me of
the debacle in St Louis. I no longer feel important. I don’t think it is too much to want to feel like you’re important to your best friends. And we were supposed to be better than best friends. He said so. *He lied?*

*I feared that all of this would happen when I came.* I tell him that it sounds like he doesn’t want me to come. It doesn’t. He apologizes. I tell him that I don’t know if I want to see him. He offers to pay for my hotel room. I wonder how we’re supposed to make it through a month long road trip if we can’t make it through 4 days. Knowing that we’re both strapped for money, I stay with him. And it happens…

I push.

I run.

(Only this time) I (do not) go back.

*   *   *

Long before I ever saw Carolyn Ellis speak about what brought her to autoethnography, I knew that it was okay to write something that everyone else would think was nothing more than therapy. (Partly because it just is and partly from reading *The Ethnographic I* [Ellis, 2004]). And I have written things before that I thought people would think that about. But this was the first time that I wrote something and I understood what she meant. I laughed, I cried, I was angry, and I feel better. A little better. But will I still be left pushing, running, and going back?

*   *   *

**PAUL**  He lies to me. I lie to him, too. I thought he would like me more if I told him that I had slept with girls. Something is wrong with him. But something is wrong with me, too. I used to look forward to the plans that we made—writing projects, conferences, California, London, a road trip, Pitchfork, and Passion Pit—but now, canceled, it all feels empty. He’s missing. *He’s
already missed. I don’t like what has happened. He thinks that I don’t understand. And while I will admit that he’s right, that I do not understand, he doesn’t admit that he doesn’t understand. He expects me to understand. But how can I swallow my pride and begin to understand him when he won’t even express that he doesn’t understand me.

No, I don’t want it to be over. But I don’t want it to hurt anymore. There are things that I need—things that he’ll never be able to give me so long as he doesn’t attempt to understand me. So we hurt each other. We know how to hurt each other. We learned, very quickly, how to hurt each other. And that’s where we are. Stagnating. Hurting each other.

I pushed.

He pushed.

I ran.

He ran.

I can’t go back. Not to how it was.

He’d have to come back. It’d have to be different.

**Afterword: Writing for an Other**

I arrived home from the conference earlier than expected. I had just moved, so I returned to most of my life in boxes. I headed to bed as soon as I got home. When I woke up, I started writing. Because my office wasn’t unpacked, I wrote in bed. I realized that I needed to move the narrative from my end of semester paper to the current paper. It made sense. I wrote the narratives as accounts for my paper on queer relationships. It was an understanding that I had, at the time, of the relationships in the context of the classes that I was taking. Returning from my trip, the relationships made sense to me in a different way. I named them bad romances.
I completed the paper two days after I started it. I sent it to Brandon in an email with the subject “I just finished this.” The text said only, “It’s a rough draft.” I received a response four hours later that said:

Bad romance(s) indeed. It is viscerally, excellently written. It tugged at my heart. And jerked, tossed, stomped on it. I came across as a horrible self-centered person (that I am, dramatic license notwithstanding). We won’t ever understand why, despite the sense-making attempts. Why we war. Why we go back. Why this last time was seemingly really probably likely the Last.

We exchanged emails for the next several days. Brandon thought that I should work to get it published and told me that it was unnecessary to change his name in the paper. He gave me permission to construct him like that on paper. And that meant much to me.

I continued to work on and with the paper, falling short of making any dramatic changes. I never quite get it ready for review. In the version that appears here, I changed names. The reason that I changed the names was pretty standard. I wanted to offer a certain amount of protection to both the experiences and people I wrote about. The way that I did it was a deliberate, thoughtful choice. Instead of making up names, I used names from works by Bret Easton Ellis. Clay came from Less than Zero (1985), while Mitchell, Sean, and Paul came from Rules of Attraction (1987). The choices were purposeful in my own interpretations of the characters from Ellis’s books and my personal experiences. Paul was the name that I chose for my self. He was one of the main characters in Rules of Attraction. His character’s narrative accounts in the book always contrasted, to some degree, the narrative accounts of Sean’s.

Paul’s and Sean’s accounts especially contrasted when it came to the sexuality and sexual experiences between the two characters. The reader is left to decide which narratives, if either,
are what really happened. While Paul’s narratives depict sexual relationships with Sean, Sean’s narratives depict a withdrawn, unemotional, non-sexual relationship with Paul. Situated in my own experience with/of my experiences, I positioned myself as Paul. Ironically, and for no apparent reason (considering the book and character were 25 years old), Bret Easton Ellis (the author) tweeted (see Figure 5) on March 10, 2012, “Yes, Sean Bateman is gay. Didn’t anyone figure that out?”

When I reread the paper now, just short of two years after writing it, I feel dishonest. I didn’t lie in the paper, not that I know of at least. But I lied to my self. Why did you write this paper? In May of 2010 I would have said, “For me. I wrote it to help me understand my experience in these relationships. If others were interested and/or could glean meaning for life, fantastic.” Why then was the first person that I sent it to after I finished Brandon?

Figure 5. Sean Bateman is gay.

So now, with time passed, I reread this paper and I feel dishonest because I lied to my self about why I wrote it and whom I wrote it for. I wrote it for me to give to Brandon, so I wrote it for Brandon. It reads to me as a plea, through experiences (some shared, some not) to see our
relationship from my vantage point—my vantage point of the time. In return, he validated my experience by permitting me to own it as truth, as my truth.

Because of that validation, we negotiated our future. We had plans for him to come up to my house to see a concert, to go camping. Then, later in the summer, we had plans to go on a road trip across the country. Those plans went from being ruined to back into the realm of possibility. We settled on him visiting me in July so that we could go camping in the upper peninsula of Michigan and spend some time, together, gauging our possibilities.

A Pictured Rocks Allegory

Behind me, rocks; under me, fine sand; ahead of me, water that extends further than I can see. This sunset is overindulgent. The sandy earth reflects orange as the warmth from the July sun slips away. The way this setting sun transcends the weary clouds and batters the rhythm of the rolling waves is impossible. The breeze is tactile perfection. And there’s no one around. It’s just my notepad, a pencil, and me. Will I be able to write something for me? Will I be able to write something for him? Will I be able to write something for you?

* * *

This forest is national. I’ve walked the trails that cut through these trees before, as a child. I hated it and my father for making me do it. In a mythopoetic (cf, Barton, 2000) move, Brandon and I make this trip to be together away from everyone and everything else in order to figure things out. To figure out if we can survive a cross-country road trip together, to figure out if we can survive (with) each other. We arrive late, which means fighting the setting sun. Hiking at dusk is less than ideal. Our packs are heavy. The air is thick and humid. Mosquitoes love us.
We wind with paths that respect the shoreline, sloping up and down, until we find a place to make camp. The ground and foliage are wet. Our tent is sticky like our skin. We set it up with the last remaining rays of canopy-diffused light. Losing the race against the sunset means no fire tonight. Feeling accomplished, we slip into our tent for the night. Tomorrow we can hike to Chapel Rock. I fall asleep wondering if my dad would be proud.

* 

We don’t make it 500 feet from our camp before we cut through the edge of the forest to see the water. There will be no 5-mile hike to Chapel Rock today. The water is smooth. Lake Superior is calm. Inviting even. After 10 minutes of dares, we jump from rocks to water. The lake’s reputation for coldest of the Great Lakes does not disappoint, it’s freezing. Maybe it’s because of the sun or the unfettered blue sky or the company, but we stay in the water all day. We only get out to jump back in.

* 

We sleep in on our second morning. Rain falls serendipitously on the shell of the tent. Snuggled in sleeping bags, we wake up only long enough to sneak some food. By the time we make our way out of the tent, the rain has gone and the sun has dried the terrain. We make our way down to the rocks we swam from yesterday. Before we even break free from the trees, I hear the crashing of waves. When I see the lake, I wonder what has happened to make it so angry. The sky is blue, no clouds. But the water is furious. In disappointment, we return to the trail. Before long, Brandon reveals a small zip lock bag of mushrooms. Why not?

They don’t taste the way I imagined. There’s almost no taste at all. We continue down the trail along and above the shore until we decide to backtrack to a beach. When a beach doesn’t
come soon enough, we cut through the brush and trees and ride a rooty slope down to a stretch of sand visible from the trail. I pronounce that the mushrooms aren’t working. The trip begins.

Waves collide with sand and rock. An elevated and flattened boulder in the water invites my perch. Traversing the sand, I struggle to get my shoes, pants, sweatshirt, and t-shirt off before I get to the water. Then I take comfort in realizing that if I don’t make it, it’s really okay. Splashing through the water I look back to see Brandon following. The rock is in shallow water, but the waves and distance from shore make it seem deeper. I take my place on the rock and draw Brandon’s attention to my likeness to Ariel on the original VHS cover of the *Little Mermaid*.

Out of the water we walk the length of the beach thinking that we can make our way back to our camp. When we hit rock face that meets water, we work our way onto and into it. It’s tricky. Sometimes climbing, sometimes crawling. These are slippery stones. Rocks protrude by your face. Sometimes bugs take flight when you search for your hold. Don’t let them knock you down. You’re not dressed to scale these walls. Don’t slip backward. The waves will not hesitate before slamming you into the jagged outcrop below.

His voice echoing, I hear and see my self as we assemble our selves in our actions, in our words. We talk in inane metaphors. Our vocabularies are stretched to their brinks in both sense and nonsense. Experience that escapes our lexicon fosters the creation of new words from scratch or the (re)appropriation of other words. *Jizzputum* may cover the rocks, but our diction is good. The water shimmers and shines in prisms that refract discursive possibilities for life, for living, for relating. Everything is possible when nothing really matters except for what we say and do. My being feels complete. This place, time, and moment is where potential comes to existence.
Reaching the end, we climb up the rock face figuring the trail just above us. The sloping
dirt, clay, and sand cannot be scaled. We have to jump down, but we’re up too high. We’re
trapped. Trapped on a ledge with a wall that cannot be climbed or seen past on one side and
water with sky that consumes the horizon on the other. We jump, even though we’re too high,
choosing the water and making our way back from where we came. Although we were just here,
nothing looks the same. It’s not just that it’s in reverse. It’s that it looks different. New. We move
along the rocks and shoreline until we can do so no longer. This must have been where we
descended from the trail hours, days, weeks, months, years, life times ago. But it doesn’t look the
spot. I can’t remember being here. Everything looks so similar that the only thing I can really
make sense of is him and him me. We break our way through the green and up the grey. We find
the trail. We find our camp. We decide to write—him by the fire, me by the water.

* 

Behind me, rocks; under me, fine sand; ahead of me, water that extends further than I can see. This sunset is overindulgent. The sandy earth reflects orange as the warmth from the July
sun slips away. The way this setting sun transcends the weary clouds and batters the rhythm of
the rolling waves is impossible. The breeze is tactile perfection. And there’s no one around. It’s
just my notepad, a pencil, and me.

I know that he’s looking for me to write my self. I know that he’s eager to read what I
write about him, about me, about us, and about this experience. But in the last few days I’ve
spent time righting myself. I’ve got right in so many un/predictable ways. I feel it closer, this
capability of taking the differences within my self and making momentary sense of them. I am
afraid that I won’t be able write Brandon. And I am beginning to know that I cannot right Brandon.
Can I do this?

Am I good enough to do this?

Can I write something that

 manages to displace a canon

 that will not have us?

*   *   *

The sun sets. It gets cold quickly. Just as my hand strains to shape these characters on this page, my body strains to keep me warm. This corporeal shiver from the cold does well to hide the shiver from my self. I make my way from the water to the sand slide up to the trail. The moon lights my way off of the beach. On the trail, the leaves of the lumbering trees block the moon and its glowing white, almost blue, light. I worry, for just a moment, about getting lost in the dark trying to find camp, trying to find Brandon.

*   *

Why did any of this ever start? And maybe more important, why does any of it continue? I will never be able to (nor would I try) to discredit the misadventures that we had this sunny afternoon on the rocky stones of Lake Superior. But what I do have to do is make sense of the relationship. I am compelled. It’s a compulsion. Consider it a matter of safety. I push and pull myself along a continuum of feelings that I am uncertain that I am allowed to have… mostly because I am terrifed of feelings that I am not only forbidden, but that go unreciprocated.

We left it open, like you wanted, for the better part of 5 months. Now is the time that we discover and explore the limits of our relationship. Let’s take our road trip.
Foreword: (Co-c)On(structing) the Road

We had first conceived of making a road trip across the country, out west, shortly after our time together in Vegas. Although the trip’s reality was temporarily marred by the events that took place between completing our first paper and the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, our camping trip to Pictured Rocks on Lake Superior saw us past our issues and onto the road. Brandon departed my house, now in Hazel Park, with not only smiles and hugs, but a kiss—a bona fide kiss. Not our first, our third. The first happened after our camping trip on the way back to Detroit. A layover in Mount Pleasant saw us drinking with friends of mine. At a playground on Island Park, in the tower of a wooden castle, Brandon asked me over to the window he was sitting in and kissed me. Twice. *Girlfriend be damned.* He cheated on her with other women, why not men too? *That’ll come back around.*

* * *

I arrived at Brandon’s parents’ house with a car full of books and supplies. Our road trip’s final destination before turning back to return home was the annual Men’s Studies Conference in Anaheim, California. The paper was accepted by proposal, so we needed to write it. I was certain that two weeks on the road would provide us the time and inspiration to complete it. The piece was to fill a niche and illustrate the interplay of masculinities on the page in a way that other research has generally failed to do (*cf*, Reeser, 2010). I was certain that the uniqueness of our relationship would make writing the paper easy and rewarding. In many ways I believe I thought that this was a chance to revisit the experience of writing our first paper together.

After packing up our burnt orange rental Dodge Caliber, we were on our way. We made it from Southern Illinois all the way to Denver before we had our first fight—a fight that had our
road trip over and us turning back. Silence could only last for so long before we had to talk. Midway through Kansas we were speaking. We veered the car due south and headed toward Oklahoma where our new route would take us south into Texas then back up toward Nevada and finally to California. Three days of roach motels and roaches in the car brought us to San Antonio where we abandoned motels in favor of a tent. Things were going great until…

* 

On our way out of Texas toward New Mexico, we stayed at a Howard Johnson’s with the greenest pool I have ever seen. It was here that we started work on our paper. We went out to get some beer and proceeded to relax and write. At some point we exchanged computers. I needed to check my email, so I opened a web browser and navigated to gmail.com. Instead of making me log in, it popped right up to what I thought was my email. But it wasn’t. It was his. It was his email that he used to correspond with people who weren’t his girlfriend or, evidently, me.

In the same moment that it became clear to me that there was someone who called him boyfriend and whom he called the same, he realized that I was reading his email. I hadn’t planned it. I didn’t even open a message it was just the preview. I didn’t mean to read what I saw. But it happened. We weren’t boyfriends. I had no expectation of it. We hadn’t kissed since returning from our camping trip. I hadn’t counted on or anticipated it happening again. But I hadn’t anticipated this either. What did all of this mean?

I was quiet. He was quiet. We went outside and threw a Frisbee around as best as I could. We went back inside and got into bed. We shared a bed. You see, telling motel/hotel people that there is only one person in the room often makes it cheaper. It also often leads to there only being one bed in the room. Lying next to each other in bed, in a dirty motel, in the middle of nowhere, with no thought I gave him a blowjob. He didn’t ask for it, but he didn’t stop me. I
didn’t want to do it, but I did it just the same. It was something out of character. Something that I think I did out of spite. *Who ever heard of that?*

The next day was not as awkward as I hoped. We packed the car up and headed to Vegas. Eleven hours and much reflection later, we arrived at our hotel on the strip. We made this stop in Vegas to revisit where we thought it had all began. And it was here that it all finally started to hit me.

**Co-Constructing a Queer Relationship: Vulnerably Writing Masculinities (with Brandon Hensley)**

We are both (at our most) vulnerable.

But who has more to lose?

I don’t know for sure, but here I feel like we are at one of your homes and you don’t feel “at home.” That is the thing that is bothering me in this present moment.

If I can’t cry, be hurt, and feel pain at home, then what better place? What I am bothered with is ruining this for you.

You aren’t ruining this at all. I just want you to find things to be what the gods (Goodall and Pelias) might call heartful. I have heart for you and know that you have a tremendous heart as well. I think this all can be done.

I don’t understand to what you’re referring when you say, “This all can be done.”

This living breathing relationship can be cultivated despite the fuckedupness of it all. I’m in if you are.

I really hate it, but I think it’s too much for me (now). I am not as strong as I used to be. I’ve grown weak in my mind and stronger in my heart. The things that hurt me don’t always make sense, but I’ve lived to learn that I should move away from these things that hurt. And it’s so hard. And I mean every word, until I can’t. I’ve learned that about myself.
It really saddens me that you say you have gotten weak in mind and strong in heart because I know you are strong in both. But, being the also-fucked-up being that you are, I understand what you are saying. I just wish I knew where this leaves us…

Where it always leaves us…

too much to be nothing
not enough to be something
mattering in the world
while barely mattering at all
between any constructs that will grant me the ease, peace of mind that
(I hate to think)
I finally need.

I hate to think that too.

I think you have outgrown me.

How so?

I still shun peace of mind for the adventure with you.

Hell, I haven’t had peace of mind even half the time but I keep returning to that “too much to be nothing.”
I feel like the adventure has quelled. I haven’t outgrown you… I am waiting for you to grow into me. Too much to be nothing is enough as long as it doesn’t hurt. And it hurts.

It’s going to hurt, that I know for certain. You will hurt me, vice versa. If you aren’t up for that, then you are right to think you “finally need” something else.

But things can’t stagnate in forever-hurting. I cherish the good things and parts, but with the addition of new aches and pains—it just feels like there should be an addition of things that feel good too. That’s what makes something truly epic.

I think in the most Epictetus of times we will both be laughing and in sheer contentment.

Sometimes the best of times only last so long. But I want to be a part of this for as long as you will have me.

This is something that I know and treasure—being a part of this as long as I have you—but it insinuates that changes will happen. I’ll either adapt or not adapt. At the point that I can’t, it sounds like you’re suggesting I should no longer have you. I would like to see this continue as long as both people are happy. In the last two days I’ve been incredibly unhappy about where things are. I can’t even suggest what to do because I don’t know. I really don’t know. It’s mind boggling—me not having an idea of what to do. I hate it.

I think as long as both people are happy and willing to shoulder the inevitable pain that comes with something that is this fragile, contestable, and open to change, then I am open to change, too, but only if you are willing to accept the many heavy burdens I bring as an insecure relational (destructive) being. I know it is too much sometimes. It is for me, too.

But this whole experience for the past year has been predicated on uncertainty, grandeur, and our messed up self-concepts, not to mention the relational baggage (turgid, but so
easily stowed away). I say, for now, that we go out swinging—and tripping, tipping, flipping over the people we used to be and celebrate who we are now.

I am pretty sure the feelings that I am having now are the result of accepting the “heavy burdens” you bring and the realization that I might not be able to handle it anymore without some consideration on your behalf of what it feels like. I know you’re getting restless and you really just want to go out, so let’s go.

We were meant to have epic times

and carry the collateral burdens.

**Afterword: Normalizing**

When we arrived in Anaheim two days later, our paper had barely been started. There was no narrative. Only the starts of a literature review, which would basically be useless for a conference presentation. In our hotel, across the street from Disneyland, we worked all night to forge a paper. When the morning rolled around we had written several pages of theoretical and methodological conceptualizations of what it might be like or mean to vulnerably write masculinities, but we hadn’t done any of the actual vulnerable writing. Our presentation turned out to be more of a rationalization and argument for co-constructed narratives and autoethnography than an autoethnography or co-constructed narrative. We choked. We just weren’t able to write anything together. Or so we thought. It turned out we had.

The first night that we were in Vegas, I laid in bed while he left to make a phone call. I started to cry. I tried to stop crying, but I couldn’t. Crying, at the time, was an unusual display of emotion for me, so the act itself compounded distress for my self. I was so upset for so many reasons, some that I understood and some that I could only speculate. When he returned to the
room he handed me a yellow legal pad with one sentence written on it, “We are (both at our most) vulnerable.” The exchange began.

I had forgotten that we wrote this together. In preparing for this dissertation project, I went through all of the relational artifacts that I had. When I came across the legal pad of paper, I remembered. After reading it and thinking about the whole of the context, I realized that we did write the paper that we set out to write. Even though we didn’t present it, we wrote a paper about co-constructing a queer relationship and vulnerably writing masculinities.

This would be the last time that we ever wrote anything together about our relationship—the last time that we wrote anything together at all. Several months later I would see a copy of his vitae. The Men’s Studies Conference presentation would be listed simply as, Vulnerably Writing Masculinities, forgetting what preceded an also absent colon—Constructing a Queer Relationship.

Assuaging the Polyphonic of Derek and Brandon (Part 1) or A Normative Swan Song

Let’s do a reenactment of that scene from our relational performance in Las Vegas, second trip, first night, at the Hilton. Or was it the second night? You remember, when we were asking each other burning questions. When we boiled our relationship down to a question and answer session. When we lied to each other under the guise of telling truths of truths. This part goes at the very end, right before we were finished. I’ll start…

I say: I think I sort of lied to you.

You say: How can you not know if you lied?

I say: I said something that I knew wasn’t true in words, but was true in meaning.

You say: What?
It turns out that I have thought about being your boyfriend. Whatever that means. Whatever it is that I affix to that label these days. Whatever it is that I believe being a boyfriend means to you. Nonetheless, when you asked me if I had thought about being your boyfriend, the answer was (is) yes. I chose to say no for a few reasons. I’ll elucidate those reasons now. You can be the judge of whether or not they’re bullshit reasons. This process will continue the problematizing of labeling this (our) relationship (that we have) anything but queer.

* 

Brandon: Have you thought about us dating? About me being your boyfriend?

Derek: Well, no. I wanted to respect you. I didn’t want to make any moves or treat you in any way that wasn’t in alignment with how you were identifying yourself. You identified as a straight guy, I wanted to respect that. So no, I never thought about dating you.

* 

* 

[Rewind to the end of January, to the BCDC, to the months after the BCDC]

The phone calls. The (unrecognized) crush. When I walked back to my hotel room after our very first awkward goodbye, I felt sad. More sad than I was prepared to feel about leaving you. See, up until those last hours… up until our first troubling performance of goodbye… what I thought I had was a brand new friend (someone who I would see at conferences, who I might work on a project with, someone who I would keep in contact with through passing emails). After our last 20 minutes in Las Vegas in January, all of that changed. Charting that change on my walk back to my hotel brought the sadness. I was sad because you were sad. You were sad to leave me, so I was sad to leave you. I know that now.
When I got back in Detroit I was showered with emails, songs, CDs, and phone calls. Especially the phone calls. I didn’t know what to make of them. You had a crush on me and I didn’t understand, but I loved your attention. I regret not engaging your attraction, but your attention was never wasted. I looked forward to your calls. I looked forward to spending my evenings talking with you for hours. Hours upon hours. Talking about your day, talking about my day, talking about school, talking about our paper, talking about theory, talking about nothing. I mostly loved talking about nothing with you. I remember phone calls lasting 5 or 6 hours. I remember being excited to check my voicemail when the message(s) were from you. I remember looking forward to hearing the familiarities that you would call me, the nicknames, the nonsense that was you naming me—you making me yours.

But I didn’t understand that you had a crush on me. *Maybe you didn’t understand that you had a crush on me.* No, you must have known. *Maybe I had a crush on you, too.* I thought you thought that I would only want to be your friend if you did all that stuff. It cheapens it all. It wrecks it all. I know. I am embarrassed by my persistence in systematically reassigning value to every attempt you made at conveying affection, attention, and desire toward me. I was content labeling it all insidious. Well, playfully insidious—resulting from being hurt by others. And I respected what I labeled it. *But I could have respected what it was, too.* And by “too” I mean: *instead.* So when I first thought about Brandon as a boyfriend, it was based on fantasy. The fantasy had no conception of time or space. The fantasy, like most, had no conception of reality. It was predicated on an idea of Brandon as a boyfriend that had no concrete basis in reality. An abstraction of the best possible qualities that I could imagine, my ideals combined with all the (good) things I knew you to be embodied in a Brandon that could be a boyfriend. *My boyfriend.* *The boyfriend.* Like a dream, it wasn’t really Brandon in my fantasy, but I knew that’s who it
was supposed to be. *It wasn’t until later that I conceptualized a more real idea of Brandon as boyfriend and there was nothing ideal about it. It would be a Brandon to cope the loss of something that I never knew I wanted because I never knew it existed. And I still don’t think it does. That’s okay. And if it’s not, I’ve learned to live that lie.*

**Raising the stakes.** Prior to my visit to your parents’ house over spring break, I recall a series of phone calls that, in reflexing, seemed to be (you) raising the stakes. *And I pretty much blew you off on every account, on every level. I am sorry for that on a personal level, on a person-to-person level.*

Brandon: This will be the first time that anyone has ever stayed over at my house that I was interested in, attracted to. I haven’t even had a girlfriend stay the night, but you’re going to.

*

Brandon: I think I am going to have a talk with my brother soon.

Derek: A talk about what?

Brandon: About my feelings, about my sexuality. How weird is it that you and my brother have the same name? That when I talk about you to him, I’ll be saying your name and it’s his name. The person that I am attracted to, that I am interested has the same name as him.

*

Brandon: How fitting, Pink Floyd’s “Wish you were here” is playing downstairs.

*

And for the most part, I dismissed all of this. I would think about the things you said. I would think about them so much that they would lose meaning. I fell into the same process of
reassigning meaning to the things you said. “He doesn’t know what he is talking about.” “He’s just saying that.” Maybe you didn’t know what you were talking about. Maybe you were just saying it. And maybe that still meant there was meaning to it all. But not to me. I was wrapped up in your straightness. I was wrapped up in my gayness. I was wrapped up in (im)possibility. In (im)possibilities.

Saint Louis. Or was it Saint Louise? Even though I had assigned meaning, on my own, to your touching me while sleeping together as your attempt for contact…I was still experiencing a cognitive dissonance regarding you and your professed attraction/interest toward me. I had collected all of the information that I needed to be certain of my hypothesis of Brandon-performing-bisexual-for-Derek’s-friendship in the light of the Louise debacle in St. Louis. This is the part where I theorized Brandon as never-a-boyfriend. Here I had come all this way and you had chosen to spend time with someone else, a stranger, a girl. An ugly girl even. I was certain I was supposed to be learning a lesson about your straightness. So I did. Even though I had no “real” thought of Brandon as boyfriend, this created the “real” thought of Brandon not as, never as boyfriend. And for anyone into discourse, they know that in creating the thought of Brandon as never boyfriend I created the thought of Brandon as always boyfriend. Of course I paid (and pay) no attention to that.

Brandon cannot be my boyfriend because Brandon is a whore. Even if Brandon were gay or bisexual, Brandon would be a terrible boyfriend. Brandon lives too far away to keep tabs on him. And in thinking that, keeping tabs on him, I realized… there is no such thing as Brandon as Derek’s boyfriend. Also, more important things that I couldn’t admit at the time included: Derek couldn’t be Brandon’s boyfriend because Derek is a horrible boyfriend. Derek as a boyfriend would destroy Brandon and Derek’s relationship through perpetually letting Brandon down.
Derek would not be able to be the person that Brandon thought Derek was; therefore, he could not be Brandon’s boyfriend. *What a mess.*

But don’t feel bad for me. Or grossed out even. These thoughts only ever occupied like 3% of my consciousness at any given time. They were thoughts in passing. Back-burnered feelings. I had no trouble living a happy, healthy life. None of this debilitated me in the least bit (when I wasn’t around you). *The thoughts/feelings that people (maybe even you) would pity are still to come—months later.*

**Sixth Annual International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry.** By the time QI rolled around, much distance had accumulated between you and I. I didn’t feel like I did anything to create the distance, but I also knew I didn’t do anything to minimize it. My resounding feeling of you, at that time, was that I was something you wanted to have in your court more than anything else. So I was pissed beyond belief when plans started to change about my visit. Among other dramas, I was happy to sleep downstairs at your house on the couch—away from you. Not because I was pissed, but because I had no desire to occupy intimate space with you in bed. The theorizing of Brandon as not, as never a boyfriend had worked. That’s not to say that I previously looked forward to our bedtime experiences. *That, too, would come later.*

You did exactly what I needed you to do to fulfill, once and for all (I thought), the script that I had written of Brandon as not, as never a boyfriend when you went to the bar to meet up with a friend (or friends, I don’t know). Clearly I was being an infinite asshole, but I am not sure how I could have been in any other place at that time. From showered with attention, affection, desired, to being abandoned every time we were physically together. From your expressed missing me, longing for my presence to dismissing me whenever I was around. *Of course later I would learn about other things going on during the time period of QI that would produce*
ideas/feelings that would eventually break my heart and garner the pity of any reasonable person who read my story. More on that later.

I went home and wrote about you. I went home and wrote you off. And I knew I shouldn’t send it to you, but I did. And I was drawn back in. Now I was drawn in by ideas of Brandon as (a) friend. Brandon as (a) best friend. And actually, I was never drawn in by ideas of Brandon as boyfriend, which is so ironic because I was convinced that you were baiting me with that (im)possibility to sustain friendship. How dumb is that? The pressures of the ever-present social constructions of definable relationships weighed heavily on me. On us. But I was drawn in by the (im)possibilities. Again.

Camping and kissing. After a camping experience that bordered on transcending came a kissing experience that bordered on bewildering. The whole experience had romantic qualities… to anyone who is romantically inclined. I, myself, am and have always been incapable of romance… but I’ve become fine tuned at recognizing when something is what others would perceive as romantic. And it was.

But then I immediately returned to reassigning value. It was just as important to me as it is to society that our relationship be essentialized and reduced to a nugget of something that is comprehensible to the sixth grade American reading level. And it was easy to do considering the scope of the kissing. It was light kissing: upper lip, lower lip, upper lip, lower lip. Nice enough, but nothing passionate. And like I said, I have trouble with romance… so unless it’s passionate, it doesn’t blip my radar.

I was pretty certain that the reason why the kiss(ing) happened was because I was trying to convey to you the lack of closeness we were having and that I felt like you would never understand what I understood about you and me. And you didn’t. You took my plea for closeness
as a plea for physical closeness. Being prone to mistaking one thing for another in relationships (of all sorts) myself, I obliged. However, the cuddling, that was for real. The cuddling represented the closeness that I was talking about, for me. It might be fucked up, but it is what it is.

When you left, when you wanted to kiss goodbye… I read this as the new performance of Derek and Brandon’s goodbye. I wasn’t upset or resentful about it, it was what it was. And it was pretty good. In fact, on a whole, that was a damn good goodbye in our history. It didn’t do anything for me that would see me adjusting any of my conceptualizations of our relationship. And by that I mean it didn’t make me think that Brandon would be a good boyfriend. It also didn’t make me think that Brandon wouldn’t be a bad boyfriend.

**What Howard Johnson’s taught me.** Without knowing what I was doing, I was always searching for clues that would verify that the things you said or did were sincere. With that said, it was fitting that I came across your super-secret email account on accident, without trying. I wasn’t trying to invade your privacy, it just happened. When it turned out that you had a boyfriend or at least someone who labeled you boyfriend because you allowed it (by naming him boyfriend), I finally found the verification that I needed to indicate that you might have been sincere. But it also simultaneously appeared that it was too late. *Too late for what? To not be your boyfriend? Too late for you not to be my boyfriend? Too late to engage in something that I had never really conceptualized with any real veracity? So it would seem, on all accounts. On all account that make no sense. Typical.*

And it pretty much snapped. We talked about that blow job that I gave you, but here’s the “I’ve had time to really process it and I am ready to tell you what I really think about it” truth: in the instant that I realized you had a boyfriend, I also realized that you were a sexual being. Then
I remembered that I was a sexual being. Then I was sexually attracted to you. And maybe it sounds stupid and impossible, but as surely as giving too much thought to it renders you incapable of getting off... giving too much thought to you rendered me incapable of conceptualizing you as sexual, as relational, as boyfriendable.

For the first time ever, I was incredibly turned on by you. By your being. By everything about you. Not because I felt like I couldn’t have you; I mean, I figured it was possible (and still may be) that you simply aren’t physically attracted to me. And not because you had a boyfriend, because I knew that that meant little to your ability to engage in sexual encounters with others from my understanding of you as a boyfriend to your girlfriend. I never lied, you aren’t my type. Your body and the effort that you put into it being the way it is doesn’t really do much for me. And the face that gets you the rubbernecking that you love, well, it doesn’t do much for me either. What I am attracted to about you, as it turns out, are all the things that people are supposed to be attracted to in another. So I decided to overcome your body and face (this is sarcasm and a couched compliment) and suck your cock to realize the sexual attraction that snapped into existence in that dirty, dank, disgusting Howard Johnson’s room somewhere between nowhere and everywhere.

Then I felt dirty. For the first time ever. See, a little known fact about me, I’ve never had a one nightstand. And for some reason, that felt like a one nightstand. You asked me if it was because you didn’t reciprocate, maybe reciprocation would have helped. But I think it was because when I realized you were a sexual being, I disconnected that being from what I had known about you. Which makes no sense because everything that I knew about you was what fueled my attraction. Fragments of your identity. Fragments of your self. Sometimes these things don’t make sense.
Vegas. On to the heartbreak you’re dying to read about. My heart wasn’t broken because you had a boyfriend. My heart wasn’t broken because I wasn’t your boyfriend. My heart was broken because I doubted your sincerity. My heart was broken because in realizing that I was wrong in doubting your sincerity I really just re-realized that I had been heartbroken for years. That doesn’t mean that I am not jealous, jealous of time spent with (an)other, jealous of wineries, jealous of real (im)possibilities, it just means that you didn’t break my heart. You helped me realize that it had got to the point I had forgotten about it, that I had accepted my heart as always already broken and that that brokenness led me to dismiss you the way that I did from the beginning when I told you someone else would have to help you explore the feelings you shared with me in Vegas one very early January morning.

That’s why I was crying in the room. That’s what I couldn’t stop crying about. Because once I started crying I cried for everything that my broken heart hadn’t cried for over the years because of its very brokenness. As for us…

Mount Vernon goodbyes and not getting offs. We are getting better at being us. I think. Okay, I guess I am not sure what that means. I am not sure if I’ll ever know. Maybe you know what I am trying to mean? Something that sucks about male friendships is that it’s hard to have expectations. We are taught not to have expectations of our male friends because that breeds vulnerability. Expectations reveal needs—a need for another. I don’t have expectations of you because of a longstanding and honored request to keeping things open to possibilities (which I now call [im]possibilities, but am fairly certain means the same thing). But it turns out that I do have an expectation (and I think you have the same expectation)... no matter what (and so far this has really run the gamut for both of us) we remain committed to the existence of an us. We remain committed to there being such a thing as Derek and Brandon / Brandon and Derek. For
that I am grateful. For everything else, well, that’s why we crafted this commitment because the good has always (always, always, always) outweighed the bad. The good times that we have are generally unprecedented in my life. You once told me that you cherished the time that we had spent together, I need you to know that I always cherish the time that we spend together. I cherish the commitment to (im)possibilities. I cherish the commitment to maintaining an us.

So I have. I have thought about you being my boyfriend. And I think you have thought about it, too, but I am guessing that you answered the way that you did because I answered the way that I did. The prospect of Derek and Brandon as boyfriends is really just an (im)possibility. If it happened, it would be probably be really bad… but also really great. It could end everything, but it could also be something that we work through. I am really not worried about it. Seriously.

As for our most recent goodbye, I would say that we have had worse goodbyes. For me, our goodbye had actually occurred throughout the course of the day in your bed, in embracing each other. I felt both of us fighting the inevitable, fighting the soon to be distance, and trying to get our fill of each other in a new, physical, way of our relational discourse. And that means more than any words or teary goodbyes could have. And it certainly means more than me cumming on a tree behind your house and you being embarrassed that you couldn’t get off. With that said, I look forward to continuing the exploration of the (im)possibilities that make the polyphonics of Derek and Brandon / Brandon and Derek / us possible.

So this is my vulnerable, brokenness all over these pages. It’s a work in progress and I intend to come back to this document in the coming weeks to turn it into a full paper (maybe even a book chapter). I told you I would write my relational brokenness. This is part of it. You’re part of it. You said that you’d write your relational brokenness. Here’s your (in)formal invitation
to write your relational brokenness in the polyphonic (and sometimes not so polyphonic) of Derek and Brandon / Brandon and Derek / us.

**Afterword: Just Friends**

I wrote this paper after our road trip. I intended to show some things that I hadn’t before, to tell some things that I believed would fill in gaps or make things right. I included “Part 1” in the title because I invited him to, in the fashion of our first paper, continue with writing his own narrative in kind. He didn’t. He said he wasn’t ready. I wonder now, with the time that has passed and the space that has moved between us, if he’s ready. I probably won’t ever ask him. There will probably never be a Part 2.

There was a time we wouldn’t let a month go by without seeing each other. There was a time that we’d talk 70 hours a month on the phone. There was a time that we’d exchange dozens of emails a week. There was a time that we’d mail mixed CDs to each other. But now is the time that I don’t even know what he is listening to. Now is the time that we only see each other at conferences. Now is the time that we talk on the phone once a month for 20 minutes while I am driving to school to teach. Now is the time that, if I am busy, I let his phone call go to voicemail. Now is the time that it takes me a week to return a phone call. Now is the time that I haven’t received an email from him in 4 months. Now is the time that texting, which we used to do the least, is how we mainly communicate.

You see, I’ve finally made sense of our relationship.

We’re *just* friends.
CHAPTER 6

WRITING FOR THE FUTURE:

CO-CONSTRUCTING RELATIONAL IM/POSSIBILITIES

Foreword: The Perils of Facebook

It all started on Facebook. It was innocent enough. I commented on a post that Greg made. Then a week later I sent him a Facebook message to alert him that Teddy Montgomery’s new love interest, Marco, on 90210 looked quite a bit like him. I also made sure to note that I was embarrassed to share my love of 90210, but in the interest of imparting upon him that knowledge, I had to disclose the information. The conversation quickly became flirtatious and before long I facetiously invited him to come over and watch 90210 with me. He called me out on being pseudo-serious and accepted the invitation. The rest is history.

Except that’s not really how it all started. I doubt we’ll ever know how it all really started, but a better starting point for this story is January of 2010. I was teaching my first section of a special topics course that I proposed, Speaking on LGBT Sexual Minorities. Greg was one of my students. Ironically, this was also the same time that I attempted to talk about critical pedagogy at the Basic Course Directors’ Conference in Las Vegas when someone asked me if I allowed my students to add me on Facebook. Yes, I did (and do). I explained the role that I see for friendship in the classroom (echoing Rawlins, 2000). Then I was corrected, told that I meant to say was that I am friendly with students. I did not mean that I am friendly with students, I meant that I am friends with students. Before the whole to do was over a conference attendee would belt out, “as long as you don’t fuck ‘em.” Spoiler alert, I didn’t date Greg until April 2011, long after the semester ended (over one year later). For that matter, because these things beg clarification, I have never dated or had sex with any current student. In fact, Greg is the first
student that I have dated. These things seem to always have a way prompting me to feel like I need to clear the air. It had been over a year and a half since I had (heteronormatively, or maybe more aptly homonormatively) dated anyone.

Greg was curious about what it was that I did in my research. When I explained the part about autoethnography, he shared with me that he writes for himself every now and then. That he dreamed of writing something important. Dreamed of writing something that would matter. He reluctantly chose to share some stream of consciousness writing that he had written. The writing was about life and making sense of it—and making trouble for it. In the writing he was vulnerable. In sharing the writing with me, he made himself vulnerable to me. I was moved by his choice to share his writing with me, so I shared my Bad Romance (see Chapter Five) paper with him. It was my most personal and vulnerable piece at the time. After a few days of not saying anything about it, I assumed that he read it and did not like it. I was partially right. A few weeks later he finally told me that he had read it. He said that it made him sad. Nonetheless, he told me that he’d like to write something with me one day. So one day we did just that.

Stories about Us: Now, Then, Them, and Not Yet with Greg Cook

You can ask anyone, age is only a number, a state of mind. That is until you put ages into relation. Age in relation teases out social values. Older and younger are better or worse depending how they are arranged and within what context. It might go without saying, people in personal relationships also have ages. Sometimes people are the same age. Sometimes people are different ages. And sometimes people are such different ages that it becomes of some social relevance complete with invitation of commentary. This is a story about us, comprised of many stories, some evocative narrative, some vignettes, and some social science prose.
I visit Derek in his office at school. I sit beside his desk. He is talking with another person in his program whose desk is on the other wall. She asks, “Is this one of your students?”

* 

**Two tales in texts.** After several weeks of spending growing amounts of time together, questions about what’s going on start to arise. It’s that awkward time in potential relationships where the lines seem permeable, drawn in sand, where anything seems possible. We avoid clarification for risk of being rejected. But only for so long until something inside of us propels us to figure out where it’s all going.

8:13 pm 5/1/11
It's just occurred to me that I desire your input on something... is this time we're spending together hanging out or dating? No pressure on the answer, honestly.

8:21 pm 5/1/11
I hate these blurry lines. I'm on the "hanging out" side...I very much enjoy hanging out. And to be honest, our age difference largely contributes to my hesitation to call it anything more than that.

8:23 pm 5/1/11
Thanks, this clarifies things.

8:25 pm 5/1/11
Have I mutilated our friendship along with your opinion of me? :( no pressure lol.

8:28 pm 5/1/11
Not at all! I asked because there's someone pursuing me. I didn't want to agree to going out with him until I knew that we weren't.

8:31 pm 5/1/11
It's still a real Ally McBeal moment. So maybe I should ask, Is that okay with you?

8:43 pm 5/1/11
Haha, yes that's very fine with me.

8:44 pm 5/1/11
Fantastic.

8:59 pm 5/1/11
Although, in retrospect you did imply that I am old. And that doesn't feel good. So you should be ashamed of yourself.

9:03 pm 5/1/11
I did no such thing! I simply implied that I am a fair bit younger than you. No mention of your age whatsoever, Mr. Self-Conscious.

9:06 pm 5/1/11
It's really your fault for being too young.

9:07 pm 5/1/11
You're right, and I apologize for being born in ’91. Like seriously, who does that?

9:08 pm 5/1/11
Apology not accepted. Not until you come up with some way to make it right.

9:13 pm 5/1/11
I'll just have to dedicate my life to the discovery of time travel. It's the only way.

9:16 pm 5/1/11
I think that just might make me feel better.

9:28 pm 5/1/11
If my suggesting time travel as a means to us dating doesn't make you feel old, I don't know what will.

9:28 pm 5/1/11
I do think we should forgo hanging out on Tuesday. It's not because of the whole hanging out versus dating thing, that really is cool... it's because I now feel like people will see me as the lecherous older guy. And I might be older than you, but I am not cool feeling like that. I hope you understand.

9:32 pm 5/1/11
Ok, that's cool. I understand.

9:36 pm 5/1/11
I am glad. I guess I'll talk to you later.

9:37 pm 5/1/11
Ok, don't be a stranger! Whenever you're free, I probably am too. Ttyl.

* 

**Blurry lines.** I knew we were going to have to make this distinction sooner or later. I’m sitting on the bathroom counter with the door closed. I know I won’t be bothered in here. I think
about what my mom would say if I told her I was hanging out with my former professor. I don’t think she would like it.

I wish he were younger. I’ve heard that age is just a number, but actually facing this decision myself, it doesn’t seem that simple. I like hanging out with him. It’s fun. But even the first time we hung out, I knew this wouldn’t go anywhere. I’ve maintained that mentality this whole time…mostly. I know that the only thing keeping us from crossing the blurry line is my reservation.

At the mention of his pursuer, I feel a pang of jealousy, but quickly master myself. How selfish can I be? I have no right to this emotion. He is free to date as he wishes. I tell him so.

He cancels our plans, in part because he’s afraid that people see will see him as “lecherous.” For the first time, I realize that he, too, cares about what other people think. He’s not impervious. Was I under the impression that he was? What I don’t realize is that he means he doesn’t want to see me anymore…at all.

Ignorance, this time, proves bliss. A couple days later, he texts me, and we hang out. I eventually decide the age difference shouldn’t be a determining factor in our relationship, but I realize that it will nonetheless affect it.

**Time machine.** We had been spending so much time together that I felt like we were moving in the direction of dating. This feeling was one that I welcomed. I enjoyed spending time with him. I wasn’t too surprised when he told me that he saw what we were doing as hanging out and that that was the side of the blurry line that he saw us on. I guess I wasn’t even surprised that he saw the age difference as a matter of import. I didn’t see the age difference as a problem any further than I knew that it might be a problem for him.
I tried to play it off and keep texting, but the more that I thought about it, the more uncomfortable I became with myself. If he thought there was an issue, should I? How do other people see us? And in those questions I told myself that I could never see him again. That I couldn’t open myself up to feeling bad, to being hurt by spending time with him. I told him that I didn’t think we should hang out. It was hard to do, but necessary. I told myself that I wouldn’t think about it again, that I would move on. I went on my date. It was awful because it wasn’t him. Two days later I texted him to hang out. We did. After about a month of hanging out, we moved beyond the blurry lines.

* 

On our way to dinner, we would walk by Five15, a gay coffee/novelty gift shop. The closer we got to the store face, the surer I became that it was drag queen bingo. When we made it to the beginning of the window, the drag queen on stage looked us over as only a drag queen can. Her meticulously painted fire hydrant red lips pulled tight on each side of her mouth to form a sinister grin. I just knew she was spouting off a catty dig about our age difference. The audience roared with laughter. I couldn’t hear anything, but I could see it. It happened.

* 

**Names.** We’re what personal relationship research calls a May-December relationship or age-discrepant relationship or age-gap relationship. So for what we call us, the field of personal relationships has a whole bunch of other names. In fact, Cupach and Spitzberg (2011) even decided that our relating and relationship exists on the dark side of close relationships. Of course, true to the dominant mode of research on personal relationships, Lehmiller and Agnew (2011) only bothered to explore the phenomenon that affects our relationship in terms of how it affects heterosexual relationships. They explore the topic as a paradox because, for straight people, the
age-gap in relationships is only a problem when the woman is older than the man. However, they did call for attempts to use more diverse samples in the future.

Lehmiller and Agnew (2011) made sure to note that it is just as possible for gay people to have relationships with age gaps. In fact, age gaps might be more likely in same-sex relationships (Boyd & Li, 2003). Although, in a biologically-driven study of sex (not gender) and sexual orientation (not sexuality), Hayes (1995) found that straight men preferred younger women, straight women preferred men their own age or older, and gay men were similar to that of their straight counterparts. Lehmiller and Agnew (2011) positioned the dark side of the age-gap as social marginalization. Concluding their piece, they speculated,

It could be that relationships that violate social norms in several ways are subject to increasingly negative evaluation. It could also be the case, however, that there is no such additive effect and that violating one social norm is perceived as being just as bad as violating several of them. (p. 58)

For Lehmiller and Agnew, there is either the compounding of social norm violations for worse social evaluations or no result in multiple norm violations. This begs the question, what about the richness in the intersectionality of potential norm violations in relationships?

* 

**Chris and Don.** He was a writer, until recently best known for his short novel, *Goodbye Berlin* (1939), which was adapted into a musical and then film, *Cabaret* (respectively 1966, 1972). In 2009 his novel, *A Single Man* (1964), was adapted into a movie of the same name. Christopher Isherwood was an accomplished British writer. He was also gay. After spending his formative years in self-discovery and love and loss, Isherwood moved to the United States in 1939 (Santi & Mascara, 2007). In 1953, Christopher, 48-years-old, met 18-year-old Don
Bachardy. They were together until Christopher died at the age of 81 in 1986. During their time together, Christopher and Don negotiated not only a gay intimate relationship, but also a 30-year age difference in a time, if you can imagine, even less open and accepting than today.

*I*

I see pictures of Shane’s Halloween party on Facebook. All of my colleagues from school were there. I wasn’t invited. We weren’t invited. Two months before this I was instructed not to bring Greg to an end of summer faculty party. It just wouldn’t be appropriate.

*I*

I sit at home, watching TV. Derek is at a conference in a far-away place. It’s about that time that he’d be at the bar with his colleagues. I’m jealous. I imagine alternatives to the drinking age law. Maturity would be a better standard by which to judge. I would pass this imaginary maturity test, I’m sure. The drinking age law is stupid.

*I*

**Nick.** I had met Nick at Panera Bread for lunch, the same one we met at the last time I saw him almost a year ago. In high school, I had decided that Nick was a meathead. He wasn’t stupid, but utterly immature and obsessed with displaying heteronormativity to the point of overcompensation. Last year, I had concluded that he had grown a lot, and that we may have more in common than I had prematurely judged. Ten minutes into our conversation over soup and sandwiches, by way of his stories of adventures with his fraternity, I now realize that I was wrong. Same old Nick.

I feel bad for him because I know he had a crush on me in high school, and that he’s not dating anyone and never has. I suspect that he wanted to get lunch because he might still be interested, so I need to set the record straight. This is just a friends-catching-up lunch.
“So I’m still seeing someone. Did you know that I was seeing someone?” I ask. “Yeah,” he says, “the same one?” “Yeah, his name is Derek,” I say. “How did you two meet?” he asks.

The conversation up to this point had reverted me back to my initial opinion of Nick, and I now realize that I don’t care what he thinks. I feel no anxiety for the conversation I know will follow.

“We met at Wayne. He was my teacher.” I don’t bother mentioning that it was long after the class had ended that we started dating.

“How old is he?” he asks, as I knew he would.

“Thirty-one.” No hesitation, for a change.

“Oh, I didn’t know he was so old. He’s like a dad,” he says, smiling smugly.

“Yeah, that’s everyone’s reaction,” I say. It’s not. He’s an asshole. Our lunch conversation moves over other topics. By the end, Nick has so cleverly managed to slip in a few jabs at Derek’s age. At these I just smile. I have nothing to say to them. I leave with no particular inclination to see Nick again.

*

The parking lot is packed. We’re in hurry, and Derek is anxious. We have to get inside before nine o’clock, or I won’t be allowed in.

*

Sometimes when I talk about things that Greg likes, doesn’t like, or does, Jessie says, “kids these days.” Sometimes she says it in front of him. I wonder if he notices.

*

**Graham.** Graham had invited me to the local gay bar over a week ago. When I arrive before he does, I realize that this is the first time that I’ve been out to the bar in a month. The end
of the semester was busy with a flurry of conferences, so I was out of town most weekends. The weekends that I wasn’t out of town I spent Friday and Saturday nights with Greg. Three steps in the door and my feet are already sticking to the floor. I can’t tell why because the lighting is so poor, but the blasting dance music makes up for what the light lacks. When Graham arrives we make our way to the patio where we can talk. He wants to catch up.

“I haven’t seen you in weeks. How have you been?” I’ve been happy. Content away from the bar, not that I relied on the bar for relationships. It just seemed everyone else did. As such, if I wanted to see my gay friends, I was there by their sides. “I’ve been finishing up school, going to conferences, and I’ve been seeing someone.” Statements like these, no matter how loaded, always seem to attract attention directly to matters of relationships when people are performing for gay spaces like this one. “I thought you might be seeing someone! Who is he?!” I’ve found this to be a typical response, both in my own experience and through my ongoing participant observation of a gay culture of which I continue to fail to be a complete member.

I’ve known Graham for years. Ten years to be exact. He was the first person I ever dated. At the time, he was 31 and I was 20. It lasted 2 or 3 months, depending on whom you ask. As long as geography allowed it, we’ve been friends ever since. He had met Greg at a concert that we went to together in a big group. “His name is Greg, you met him at the Robyn concert in June.” He remembers who he is. First come questions about the relationship, “Do you really like him?” and “Is it serious?” He poses these questions in a hopeful voice. It’s like he wants me to answer affirmatively. And I do. I do like him. It is serious. He seems to be happy that I am happy, which isn’t a surprise. “But do you really think that it can work out with someone that much younger than you?” That was a surprise. I was surprised to hear him, who had dated me 10 years earlier as my 11 year senior, question the potential of a relationship marked by identical
numerical configurations. Did he always know that our relationship wouldn’t work? Had he learned better from our relationship? My answer to his question is based on years of personal experience and research on relationships, “I think that we have as good a chance as anyone else. I like to think better.” He agrees with me, I assume to be polite. We don’t talk about it again for the rest of the night.

The next week I go out to the bar with a colleague who insists that we must because his partner is out of town and he’s bored to death. With no plans, I agree. I see Graham at the bar. He’s with all of our bar friends (friends who are friends at the bar, but nowhere else, save maybe Facebook). On my way back from the bar to get a new drink, I stop by to say my hellos to everyone. In place of his salutation Graham asks, “How’s your fetus?” “Who, Greg? He’s well. And not a fetus.” This prompts a conversation, of which I am left almost entirely out, concerning the sustainability of relationships with age differences. I listen for only a moment before saying goodbye right as they begin to talk about the sexual perks of being with someone younger. I think that this will be my last time to the bar, my last time with my bar friends. And it is.

* 

Chris and Don. Santi and Mascara’s (2007) documentary, Chris and Don: A Love Story, constructed an account of Christopher and Don’s 34-year relationship through combining Christopher’s diary entries with interviews of close friends, writers, and Don Bachardy himself. With literary historians filling in the gaps, Christopher’s life is brought up to meeting Don. Both Don and his brother Ted were brought up enamored with Hollywood and the movies. Initially meeting on a Santa Monica beach, Don later spent time getting to know Christopher at (and after) a friend’s dinner party. Their relationship quickly grew close and intimate. With Christopher, Don met all of his favorite movie stars and traveled the world. At the time,
Christopher was living in the guesthouse of psychologist Evelyn Hooker. Hooker is most notably known for her groundbreaking research on gay men in which she found that gay men are as well adjusted as straight men \((\text{cf}, \ 1957)\). To say that Hooker was tolerant of homosexuality would be an understatement. Yet when Don moved in with Christopher, Evelyn told Christopher that she wouldn’t allow it. They found their own house where they lived together until Christopher died.

* 

When we cuddle up in bed watching TV, sometimes Raider and Bob lay with us. Raider lies on his back between us under the covers all snuggled in. Bob curls up on the pillows by our heads. Even though the house is cold, the bed is warm. This is what safe feels like.

* 

**Mom.** I sit in the driveway, delaying. My sister has seen the Facebook update. No doubt she’s showed it to my parents. They know. What they don’t know is that I’ve been keeping this from them for months. I’ll leave that part out when I tell them. I realize I’ve been sitting here too long. *Stop thinking, start walking.*

I open the door and am greeted by my two Jack Russell Terriers. Their excitement lasts a few minutes. Meanwhile, I walk into the kitchen and set my backpack down on the table. My mom stands behind the counter preparing dinner with the TV on. My dad’s in the next room watching baseball, probably oblivious to the fact that I’ve arrived. My sister is in the basement.

“Hi,” my mom says. We talk about nothing for a few minutes. This is a good sign. She’s not too shocked. But she doesn’t know anything yet. Better to just get it over with. “So, did Stefani tell you?” I ask. “Yes! Who is he?” she replies. I am caught off guard. Not by the question, but by my lack of preparation with an answer. How do I tell her that I’m dating my 30-year-old former professor? Do I leave out the age difference? Of course I’d thought about this
conversation before, but I hadn’t figured out how I was going to word my way around the part she might find worrisome when she asked this specific question. Given my good relationship with my parents, and knowing that they trust me, I decide full disclosure is the best option. At least I hope. “His name is Derek. I met him at Wayne.” I look at the newly-installed tile floor. “He was…kind of…my…teacher.”

Too much, too soon. I realize this is going to be as awkward as when I told them I’m gay, and they’re going to respond just as negatively. My mom takes a moment to process this. I’ve already answered what I’m sure was going to be her second question before I offered that last tidbit. The standard list of questions that are asked in this kind of conversation (when we met, what he looks like, what he does, etc.) gets thrown out the window. “How old is he?” she asks. My gaze returns to the floor. “Thirty…” I drag the word out. Another quiet moment follows, longer than the first…

“Well, is he nice?” she asks. Is the hard part over? After the awkward revelation, I presume it’s safe to look up again.

“Yes! He’s nice, and funny.”

“How does he treat you?”

Nope, it’s not over. I know what she means by this. She means, are you sure about this? Is he manipulating you? Taking advantage of you? I have to answer these questions in the same way she posed hers, indirectly. “Good! Of course he treats me good! I wouldn’t date him if he didn’t!”

The conversation moves on to other things about him and us. I make sure to tell her that the class I had with him was a year ago. She needs to know that. She reaffirms that he’s “treating me right.” I try to assure her that he is. It goes on longer than I’d hoped it would. My sister
comes barreling up the stairs, and we get to start from the beginning to satisfy her annoying need to know every detail. After I’ve quenched her thirst for gossip, my dad joins us in the kitchen. He doesn’t ask for details. I don’t expect him to. The topic gets changed. I am content with the way it went. My parents are happy for me, with only a hint of reservation. I’ll take it.

I don’t dwell on my suspicions of my mom’s fear that Derek is some kind of predator. I decide that the best way to quell them is to give it time, and that I’ll ask her about it sometime in the far-off future to see how her mind has changed. *It has to.*

* * *

He’s trying to pay me back for tickling his chin or what I call, “chin diddles.” Rolling around on the bed we try to reach each other’s chin. Pillows and sheets are kicked and clutched as shields. Attempts are thwarted with free hands only to become captured. We laugh in hysterics until we fall on the floor.

* * *

**Mom.** The phone rings. I am nervous. I have decided that it’s time to tell my mom that I am dating someone. While the phone rings, I am thinking two things. First, go to voicemail. Second, am I going to tell her about the difference in our ages? She answers.

It’s been a few days since I have talked with her, so, as I expect (and hope), she asks me about what’s new. “I’ve been seeing someone,” I offer. She’s happy to hear that. And, as I expect, she wants to know all about him. “How did you meet?” I start explaining that he was a student in one of my classes. I make sure to clarify that he was a student in one of my classes *last year.* She, still happy, accepts the story that I told her about how we met. “What’s he like?” I explain to her what he’s like, through my eyes. I tell her that he’s smart, funny, and kind. She is happy to hear this. “What sort of stuff do you do together?” I explain to her that we go out to eat,
go see movies, and lately we have been watching *Ally McBeal* on Netflix. She is genuinely happy to hear all about the person that I am seeing and that we’re building a relationship. I know this because she tells me, “I am happy to hear that you’re seeing someone.”

Ever since the beginning of the conversation when I told her that he is a former student, I’ve been distracted, in the back of my mind, as to whether or not she is wondering how old he is. I suppose a student from one of my classes could really be any age. Plus, she knows that I have been teaching upper-level classes. Maybe she just assumes that he is my age. The distraction in the back of my mind moves to the forefront. I feel like I need to tell her that he’s 10 years (I’ll say 10 because 10 isn’t as bad as 11 and it’s not lying because people always round) younger than I am. However, the conversation has moved on.

The weather has been so beautiful that she’s been spending quite a bit of time in her garden planting flowers. Every year my mom spends countless hours in her flower gardens. They’re gorgeous. But I am compelled to snap the conversation back to my new relationship. I, ineloquently, alert her that I have a question for her, “I have a question for you.” This was my best effort to be tactful? I feel stupid for the way that I’ve elected to shift the conversation, I feel stupid for feeling like I need to talk to her about this at all. “What do you think about age differences in relationships?” She tells me that she thinks age differences can be good in relationships. She reminds me that my dad is older than her. *Two whole years older.* I can tell that I need to approach this a different way. I come out with it. “Greg is 10 years younger than me. For some reason, which I can’t put my finger on, I feel the need to tell you that. Like I would be lying if I didn’t tell you right now.” I don’t have to wait for a response. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that as long as it works for you two,” she approves. But did I need her
approval? After talking about the flowers in the garden, dinner, and the weekend, we end the conversation. I wonder why I was compelled to do what I had done.

*

We sort the DVD’s alphabetically, but then decide classics such as *Little Miss Sunshine* and *Adventures in Babysitting* deserve their own shelf. We go through the DVD’s again, deciding which ones are top-shelf worthy.

*

**Chris and Don.** Their 30-year age difference had both negative social consequences and, at times, relationship consequences. Christopher had been forthright with his adventures of youth. For a period of time, Don felt as though he was missing out on what Christopher had experienced in terms of sexual relationships and experiencing aspects of culture that Christopher no longer had interest in, namely the Los Angeles nightlife. Don would eventually come to feel like he was nothing without Christopher. He needed to assert his independence and do it all on his own.

*

We’re driving to my friend’s party, where Derek will meet some of my friends from high school, who are now juniors in college. We stop so we can buy alcohol, or rather, so Derek can buy alcohol. We get to the party. We play beer pong and then stand in a circle to take shots. I wonder if Derek has already been to this party.

*

**Marginalized.** Lehmiller and Agnew (2006, 2007) found that individuals in non-traditional relationships (including same-sex and age-discrepant) perceived their relationships to be more marginalized than individuals in traditional relationships, which makes sense. From this
body of investigation, another name for *us* in the research of personal relationships emerges, *marginalized*. According to Lehmiller and Agnew (2006), the more one perceives one’s relationship as marginalized, the less commitment one has to it. So, not surprisingly, perceiving one’s relationship as marginalized increases the likelihood of breaking up (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007). As if that wasn’t a damning blow, it turns out that perceiving one’s relationship as marginalized has been associated with poor physical health and lower self-esteem (Lehmiller, in press). If being in marginalized relationships is bad, should everyone who is in them just abandon their relationships now?

*  

**Chris and Don.** Early on in their relationship, Christopher and Don would, in play, liken themselves to a horse (Dobbins) and kitten (Kitty) then later cat. They would playfully draw stick figure horses and kittens in various situations (see Figure 6). Don explained, “We devised stories about Kitty and Dobbins and they had all kinds of adventures which were just full of symbolic meaning” (in Santi & Mascara, 2007). A few years later, Christopher and Don would use the simple black and white cartoons to negotiate issues in their relationship, including those surrounding age. Don continued,

All kinds of very real problems between us could be so effectively dealt with in our animal personas because I could give voice to my feelings of my being deprived of this or that experience because of my life with Chris, my life with someone so much older than myself. I could voice it in terms of a poor little kitten struggling against insurmountable odds and how brave that little cat was and how dear and deep his love, that despite everything, that he was giving up he could still take care of that horse.
Through moving themselves into the beings of their animal personas, Christopher and Don were able to imagine ways of relating that saw them overcoming social and personal problems both separately and together.

![Illustration of Dobbins and Kitty](image)

*Figure 6. Christopher Isherwood’s birthday card illustration of Dobbins and Kitty as depicted in *Chris & Don: A Love Story* (Santi & Mascara, 2007).*

Don largely attributes their relational longevity to their ritual of storying and illustrating Dobbins and Kitty. During their roughest time, Christopher had moved to San Francisco to teach while Don explored a relationship with another. Keeping in touch, they exchanged letters voiced by their animal personas until they eventually reunited to spend the rest of Christopher’s life together as Dobbins and Kitty turned Cat.

*  

After we flea-bomb the house, we drive through Indian Village with Raider and Bob in the backseat while the fumes dissipate. We see fancy houses and imagine our future home.

*  

One day, *in the not too far off future, the place that I call home will be the place that you call home. Home will be wherever we find ourselves together.*

*
Writing the future. Vignettes and narratives accounting past experiences offer hope for future experiences. In reflexing on what has been, we can envision what can be. New vignettes about what has not yet happened come to mind—snap shots of imagined futures influenced by our constructions of the past. If sketching moments from our past experiences create layers of impressions that constitute our process of becoming (Rambo, 2005), then maybe sketching imagined moments of our futures is an extension of that endeavor predicated on hope.

We offer our vignettes of our future. Some clearly inspired by accounts of the past, others situated in implied and unwritten past accounts. Either way, they offer possibilities for our future. In postmodern fashion, many question researchers’ ability to construct factual research (cf, Banks & Banks, 1998). In that way, research constructions can always already be considered fictional. In our vignettes, the future exists as fictions, manifestations of hoped possibilities and potentialities. They are the product of the ongoing process of reflexivity when it looks forward. As they come to us in contestable order, they appear in contestable order. They are marked by the spaces, gaps, between them. “Through inference, the reader constructs what is not there” (Rambo, 2005, p. 571). And we do the same.

*  

Over a lovely dinner at a restaurant of their choosing, my parents meet you and are nothing but happy that we’re happy.

*  

While you’re in graduate school, I support you in all the same ways that you supported me. I bring you dinner while you work, I help you stay on track, I keep the bed warm while you work late into the night, I listen to your paranoid theories of how you’ll inevitably fail, I am not surprised when you’re successful.
After a rough day, we join our friends for a drink. One drink turns into a mini-pub crawl, which turns into a cab ride home. Rough day, forgotten.

Using a conference as an excuse to travel to London, we scrimp and save for a year to afford the trip. On a whim we catch a train to Paris for a night and fall in love all over again with the twinkling lights of the Eiffel Tower on the horizon. We note the cliché, but enjoy it just the same.

We go to my best friend’s wedding and finally understand what it means and feels like to dance like no one is watching. Then we learn what it looks like when we see the video on Facebook the next day and swear off ever dancing again.

Taking a break from the everyday of life, we walk our dogs in the park. The sun feels so good. It’s hot, but the constant breeze offsets it. You wish we had packed lunch to have a picnic. One day we do.

We present a paper, maybe this one, at a conference. Afterward we enjoy intellectually stimulating conversation with researchers from all over the world.

Holidays are toss-ups between your parents’ house and mine. We argue every year about staying home and making our own holiday traditions. That is until we realize that we already have our holiday tradition.
I let my class out a few minutes early so I can walk across campus to visit you in your office before your class starts. Your colleagues, our friends, ask us to join them for dinner. They’re in the mood for Chinese, and they know it’s our favorite.

You remember the sleeping pills for the plane that I forgot on the counter. I remember the camera charger you thought you left plugged-in in the office. We see things around the world so old it puts the difference we once saw in age to shame.

At some point, without even knowing it, we outgrow our age difference because we grew into each other. Sometime before then, people’s concern of our ages gave way to interest in wanting to get to know us.

We know this doesn’t mark the end of naming or marginalization by society. However, like drawing Dobbins and Kitty for Chris and Don, it offers a chance for transgressing them by creating possibilities. In writing and imagining the future, we accept what we’ve learned from writing and imagining the past—it might not happen the way we’ve envisioned it. Nevertheless, creating relational futures can increase commitment (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2002), which can see people overcoming the social stigma of their relationship (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007) and find new ways of being together. And if desired, staying together.

Afterword: After Futures and Writing with Relational Members

More than any other piece, this piece makes me think about my writing relationships. I have co-authored papers for classes, to present at conferences, and that have been published. I’ve
found that every writing relationship is unique not just to the person, but, unsurprisingly, to the project. What the paper is about, whom the paper is for, how the paper will be evaluated, and the relational dynamics between co-author and myself are a few things that play a role in the writing relationship.

When I write theory and discussion for empirical classroom connectedness studies (Sideling, Bolen, Frisby, McMullen, 2011; Sideling, Bolen, Frisby, McMullen, 2012), my personal investment is low. I perform the role of “objective researcher studying subjects to co-produce knowledge to be presented in dislocated voice” well. I know all of my lines. I am personally unattached to the productions of knowledge we submit for others to validate. There is no heart on the line. But when I collaborate in narrative, storying my personal experience, my personal investment is high. My performances of critical interpretivist researcher are always partial, fragmented, situated, and contestable, just as the products of my performance are. Co-constructing with an other amplifies my vulnerable self and stories as they meet to complement, coalesce, acquiesce, repel in a polyphony of voices. Co-constructing implicates my self, other(s), and our relationship(s). At risk are heart, soul, self, and other. Ellis and Bochner (1992) once suggested that it takes a certain kind of relationship to accomplish co-constructing narrative; rereading this piece reminds me why they feel that way.

*  

I’ve come to enjoy a certain relationship with certain people in my life. In 2006, wrought with melancholia, my brother Zack and I set out to write our first autoethnography. Both my and our first autoethnography. This was back before I had read books and articles or seen conference presentations and performances of autoethnography. To say that my methodological handling was weak would be kind. Nonetheless, we worked to co-construct an account of experiencing
simultaneous break ups and our processes of coping together. We feigned an autoethnographic method well, but the result was, in hindsight, unfortunately vacuous. The completed paper would go on to be rejected by the interpersonal division of NCA (what was I thinking?). Over the years since we first wrote the paper, we’ve spent several days together tinkering with it. Reuniting with our words from then, the subsequent words we have written since then, and each other. Although the text was never presented or published, it very much illustrates Ellis’s (2009) conception of a text in motion. Acknowledging autoethnography as both process and product, Zack and I have long recognized the process of working (and reworking) on that text together. Perhaps the most important thing to come from my first venture into writing co-constructed autoethnography was finding a co-author in my brother. Although it’s been nearly two years since we’ve spent time to reread and revision our paper, I think of the experience often when I am working with another.

* 

In the past several years, my sister, Erin, and I have co-constructed three autoethnographic projects. The first of those projects was a performance piece accounting our family’s ritualistic blowing up of the top of her wedding cake the Christmas following her divorce. The stories came quick. We wrote in flurries of emails, text messages, and huddled around laptop screens. It was layered, evocative, and relational. It showed our family becoming. We performed our paper at the Eastern Communication Association’s annual conference. The feeling of performing with my sister as we had performed to co-construct the piece was exhilarating and affirming. Ours was a happy autoethnography, so we basked in recounting family and happiness.

Our next two projects seemed more complicated and less happy. We worked to co-construct two meta-autoethnographic pieces. The first was a reflexive piece about our processes
of writing together. The second combined pieces of autoethnographies that we had written
together and separately. We reflexively theorized co-constructions of family in/through/with/of
autoethnography. In layers of theory and narrative vignettes from other pieces, we created an
account of writing together, co-witnessing, witnessing for the first time, and re-witnessing
already knowns in new ways of each other’s lives though new autoethnographic voices. Drawing
on pieces of Erin’s spousal abuse, my messy performances of gender and sexuality, and our co-
constructed autoethnography, we constructed a meta-autoethnographic account of hope and
possibility. Writing with Erin, like Zack, is easy—as if it is meant to be. In all instances, the
process brought our relationships closer together. Autoethnography has tightened the bonds I
have with my brother and sister through negotiating vulnerability and exercising creativity.
Writing, co-constructing narrative and autoethnography, is something I’ve come to expect from
the relationships I cherish the most.

*  

As Greg and I set out to write our first paper together, I became anxious. I knew I wasn’t
worried about being vulnerable or about making experiences of our relationship vulnerable,
though I worried about his first engagement with autoethnographic vulnerability. I realized the
base of my anxiety as it was alleviated. The first narratives we exchanged were our narratives of
disclosing our relationship to our mothers. As I read through what he had written, I was relieved.
I realized I was worried that we wouldn’t be able to collaborate, co-author, and co-construct. I
think I understand why.

This paper really is a relational construction. The process of co-constructing it was,
obviously, a relational endeavor. I’ve become comfortable with being able to engage in co-
constructing narrative or autoethnography with those I love and cherish most. This expectation is
born of privilege—I understand that. After having had such relational success writing together with Erin and Zack, I am reminded that not everyone can write autoethnography (Ellis, 2004). Between the place where my relationships with Erin and Zack have grown and been fortified writing and co-constructing narrative and the place where not everyone can write autoethnography, lived my anxiety that Greg and I wouldn’t be able to write and co-construct together. In that anxiety, I worried that our relationship would be rendered incomplete. What does this say about my relationship with collaboration and autoethnography? Are these feelings unfounded and unfair? Are they symptoms of a privilege that I should address? Still, I would have been heartbroken by an inability to write and co-construct with my other, Greg. Indeed, there’s something so symbolic about the process.

* * *

There was no pretext to this paper. We wrote it because we wanted to. It wasn’t written to meet the criteria for evaluation for a class assignment, it wasn’t constructed because a paper proposal was accepted for presentation, and it wasn’t co-authored to be submitted to a journal for review. Yet, there was definitely a CFP (call for papers). Our writing was purposeful and important (Richardson, 2000). We responded to an internal call for papers to engage a highly relational process of co-constructing our relationship for each other for our relationship.

We settled on writing about our age difference only to find that that was still a broad topic. I imagine it was a predisposition, but the choice to write about our relationship’s marginalized status seemed fitting. So we agreed. We’d story experiences with our age difference in our relationship with the goal of constituting a space in which our relationship could be imagined in new ways.
Early in the writing, Greg would ask me for clarification about what sorts of experiences he should be storying. He’d want to run things by me that he was working on or ask me what I thought about sharing this or that experience. I started to become aware of my role in this project. I was worried that he was trying to please me on the project, that he was trying to actualize my vision. When he asked questions, I would tell him that he should write whatever he’d like. The story through stories we told was about how our relationship is situated within culture, society, and context. The dynamics and interplay between relationships and social context is rarely studied (Allan, 1993). The narratives show relationships between culture, society, context and our relationship.

When we choose to tell a story it is deliberate and purposeful. To tell one story is to not tell another. Such choices are innately analytical. When I reread the paper and reflexively think about the experience of writing it with Greg, I can piece together a story that we didn’t tell. I find a story that I think he may have been interested in telling. We talked about writing a paper before we committed to anything in particular. I remember Greg talking about what our difference in age meant in terms of the future in health and longevity. In choosing to tell a story about how culture, society, and people see our relationship, we construct stories of our selves relating with others over stories of our selves relating with each other. It became clear that the story that Greg may have been inclined to tell was about what the age difference meant to him, to me, to us and then culture and society—not what the age difference meant to culture, society, context and how we related with them. I suppose it’s ironic that Isherwood’s (1964) *A Single Man*, a semi-autobiographical imagining, tells the story of a middle-aged professor attempting to cope with and adjust to the unexpected death of his much younger partner. Isherwood wrote the novel to cope with the possibility of losing Don while they were going through their separation. In that
way, he was writing a future. Not necessarily the future death of his partner, but the hope in possibilities of moving on. Maybe Greg would like to tell another story.

* * *

After we finished constructing stories from our personal experiences (evocative narratives and vignettes), research (social science on age discrepant relationships), and culture (Chris and Don documentary), we began working our stories together. We read and reread pieces, situating and resituating pieces next to others. We would complete the paper only to shuffle it around. When we’d finally get things where we thought they needed to be, something was still missing, still undone. I thought that what might be missing was possibility.

I think all autoethnography embodies possibility, if not explicitly, then in the hands of the reader. As a relational piece on the role culture, society, and social context plays in marginalizing our relationship, it’s coupled with prescriptions of relational hopelessness from social science research. So we revisited Chris and Don to see what they could tell us. To see what we could learn from their stories about their relationship. It was like advice from one “May-December” relationship to another. It came in the form of relationship vignettes about moments that hadn’t yet happened (and might not). We reread the paper and then began writing vignettes. Writing vignettes prompted me to dedicate thoughts to not just dreaming about what will happen to or for me in the future, but what it will be like to get there together. When we finished, we read them to each other. It was cheesy and endearing to hear how Greg imagined possible futures. Sharing our vignettes with each other co-constructed possibilities for our future. Obviously we know that not everything we wrote down will happen the way we wrote it (if at all). But it wasn’t really about that for us, not for me at least. It was a move to even things up, to seek balance, to write to right, to interrupt the present, and to inspire a future—our future.
CHAPTER 7

REVISITING RELATIONAL INQUEERY:

OUTSTAYING MY/YOUR/OUR WELCOME AND/OR BREAKING AND ENTERING

Early in this dissertation, in Chapter One, I explained that this project is filled with stories. Stories of my self and of my relationships set within blurred contexts of my personal life and academic life. In Chapter Five, through writing-stories, I worked to provide narrative context for my motivation to undertake this study. I also couched my motivation in the more academically conventional arguments of Chapter Three (building from Chapter Two). After setting up the argument and forwarding possibilities for (a) a queering of the study of personal relationships and (b) calling for a queer- and relational-driven relational inqueery, it was clear to me that any approach in forwarding and furthering these concepts that was not personal would not just be an affront to the essence of this dissertation project, but verge on hypocrisy.

In many ways, my own personal and academic crisis of representation (i.e., who can make claims to representation of whom) has been an undercurrent in my life and research. Periodically, I hear other researchers talk about collecting data from their subjects as if it is their right (if not duty) to do so. This has best been in focus when I’ve been asked (or directed) to recruit specific types of people for studies—people with whom I am believed to have access to because I identify as gay and/or people with whom I am assumed to be a better, more empathic choice as researcher of contact. Reflexively, this has been a struggle for me throughout my academic career. I’ve come to claim this crisis and subsequent struggle as personal. This dissertation is my move to make it political.

In Chapter One, I argued that this dissertation project was fitting for me because “the ethnographic life is not separable from the Self” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 965). As I
move to call the field of communication studies my academic home, I’ve undertaken this project as my formal entry to my academic field. Among many other accounts, this dissertation project is an account of the ways in which I make and cannot make my scholarly work fit into the field. It is an account of how I’ve found myself where I am today through personal, theoretical, conceptual, and methodological roads less traveled. It is an account of what I have learned and how I am situated among and away from it. Finally, it is an account that constructs a place for my self in the field of communication through presentations of change for the field of personal relationship study, new challenges in thinking about relationships in communication research, reimagined approaches for relational inquiry, and communication research methodological contributions.

This final chapter serves as a discussion of this dissertation and provides direction for the future. First, the goals declared in Chapter One are reviewed. Second, in light of the goals of the dissertation, contributions to the fields of communication and qualitative inquiry are discussed. Third, methodological considerations are presented. Fourth, limitations of this dissertation project are offered. And finally, I end with directions for the future.

The Goals of this Dissertation Project

In Chapter One, I declared three goals for this dissertation: (a) creating a space and terrain for queer relationships in the study of personal relationships and relational communication, (b) founding and beginning to further a field of relational inqueery, and (c) offering an applied communication approach within queer relational studies that stands to benefit both the field and the queer on social and personal fronts. To begin the discussion of this project, I will review these goals.
Space and terrain for queer relationships. One of the main questions that I’ve been asked throughout the process of completing this project has been, “What is/isn’t a queer relationship?” I initially attempted to proffer an answer to that question. The answer, though always evolving, was never good enough. It would bring more questions, prompt more qualifiers, and quickly turn into a messy answer that left me looking like I didn’t know what I was talking about. At the time, the conversation that these questions would lead to had me second-guessing what I had been working on. Elia (2003) called for a queering of relationships, but did little to advance such a shift. It was from his call that I began my inquiry.

As I proceeded with the project, I came to understand queer relationships through a series of three articulations, which are discussed at length in Chapter Three. Briefly, I articulated queer relationships in contradistinction to normative/normal relationships; as missing from the canon of relationship stories; and disciplined, denied, unknown. In offering these three articulations of queer relationships, it is my hope that I have articulated a space to not just think about relationships, but challenge researchers who study personal relationships, interpersonal communication, and relational communication to create new ways of engaging in relational inquiry.

I have not presented these articulations to be used as viable categories for new typologies or as variables for measurement. That would defy queer intentions (Seidman, 1996). Instead, these articulations and their theoretical space are meant to invite critical reflection on how one approaches the study of relationships (and, indeed, relating in general). This space is one for researchers to interrupt their aggressive impulse toward essentializing and categorizing relational configurations in order to make relationships fit and the exclusionary, marginalizing, and oppressive side effects of when they do not. It is also important when working with queer as an
identifier, that researchers defy the impulse of labeling others relationships as such and, perhaps more importantly, resisting the urge to deny such a label from those who have come to identify with it.

Within that space, I’ve offered a nuance in terrain through the autoethnographic inquiries of Chapter Five and Chapter Six. The texts in those chapters provide accounts of: what has brought me to this dissertation project, nuancing a terrain of queer relationships, and the incitement of relational inqueery. To invite and encourage others to continue to nuance (and re-nuance) the terrain, I offered a brief sketch of what a move from queer critique to queer methodology and method might look like at the end of Chapter Three. In the following section, I will continue to explore and further a field of relational inqueery.

A field of relational inqueery. The second goal of this dissertation project was to found and forward a field of relational inqueery. Through autoethnographic engagements, as outlined in Chapter Four, I’ve participated in co-constructing two accounts of relationships that I (re)experience as queer in Chapter Five and Chapter Six. I position relational inqueery as predicated on two concepts: relational and queer. First, it is relational because it demands the participation of all relational members. In doing so, it answers calls for inclusion of both (or all) relational members in studies of personal relationships and relational communication (Monsour, 2006). Second, it is queer because it is guided by queer theory. Queer theory in its typical form of queer critiques is limited in its reach. Like bell hooks (1994) explains, “Theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary. It fulfills this function only when we ask that it do so and direct our theorizing towards this end” (p. 61). As a form of inquiry, relational inqueery holds relationality and queer as central to endeavors of the study of personal relationships and relational communication. It asks queer theory to function as a form of
relational inquiry. In doing so, it steadfastly resists the post positivist impulse of categorization and generalization.

Centered on co-constructed narratives, Chapters Five and Six offer ways of thinking about and approaching relational inquiry. First, because of the priority of engaging and sustaining the relational in research, co-constructed narrative is critical so that both (or all) relational members can participate. Like Halberstam’s (1998) conception of a queer methodology, relational inquiry should work to combine methods that might not necessarily go together. Autoethnography is an apposite ground for queer method exploration because it welcomes experimentation. Texts of relational inquiry can be thought of as Marcus’s (1994) messy texts, which “are messy because they insist on an open-endedness, an incompleteness, and an uncertainty about how to draw a text/analysis to a close” (p. 567) because they can’t be closed or completed.

I consider a field for relational inquiry because field implicates a vast space for exploration. There are, indeed, unlimited possibilities in exploring new methods of relational inquiry—as many as there are ways of relating. As a field, relational inquiry is inviting and open to exploration. Destined to be iterated and reiterated in new ways, I offer some assumptions and tenets that I’ve operated on in this initial articulation.

Relational inquiry is characterized by what Denzin called (2010) the blurring of paradigms (e.g., postmodernism and participatory action theory, queer and interpretive/constructionist). Calling upon multiple paradigms, it knows that not everything will be able fit together. Queer projects are bound to contain contradictions (Talbut, 2000). Relational inquiry works as a sort of critical participatory action approach within personal relationship research. By calling upon all relational members’ participation, it recognizes that “to be
responsible to relationships is, above all, to sustain the process of co-creating meaning” (Gergen, 2009b, p. 364). Relational inquery can be thought of as praxis-oriented; it sees theory and practice working together for the good of self, relationship, and other.

Relational inquery is a critical autoethnographic approach because it is a reflexive engagement with personal experience and culture for the purpose of problematizing and interrogating systems of oppression. Personal experiences are (re)presented with special care to not create reifications of existing heteronormative constructs. To that end, accounts “are challenged to confront the facts of injustice, to make the injustices of history visible, and hence open to change and transformation” (Denzin, 2010, p. 115). The transformative power of the text lies not solely in the authorship, but in its readership. For that reason, and perhaps idyllically, “a text must do more than awaken moral sensibilities. It must move the other and the self to action” (Denzin, 1997, p. xxi). Texts of relational inquery are written to be read, to inspire, to move.

In terms of personal relationship research, texts of relational inquery are concerned with relational becoming. They recognize that “our words constitute forms of action that invite others into certain forms of relationship as opposed to others” (Gergen & Gergen, 2002, p. 13). For that reason they fight the compulsion to necessarily understand relationships in relation to other relationships. Texts of relational inquery are reflexive, they “make reader[s] work while resisting the temptation to think in terms of simplistic dichotomies” and foreground “difference, not conflict” (Denzin, 1997, p. 225). Nuances of difference in relating are central to relational inquery.

Contributions to personal relationship research come in the form of engaging a goal of nuancing the terrain of queer relationship. Relational inquery recognizes the push of poststructuralism, “it frees us from trying to write a single text in which we say everything at
once to everyone” (Richardson, 2000, p. 929). For that reason, it’s accepted and expected that a typology of queer relationships will not be produced. Nuancing the terrain of queer relationships operates against a call for generalizability because it responds to the crisis of representation. It might be considered “a vast patchwork of plurality of experience and ways of living” (Plummer, 2009, p. xii) with local contestable knowledges that are fixed and situated in time, culture, and relationship. Relational inqueery continually asks, “What kinds of new stories are in the making around our bodies, our reproductive capacities, our relationships, our ways of raising children, our feelings, our representations, our identities, our genders, our sexualities?” (Plummer, 1995, p. 152) and then it invites our relational engagement in writing the texts of these stories.

I think it’s important to note the relationship between writing about queer relationships and naming/normalizing. In Chapter Five, I openly wrote about the ongoing process of becoming normalized within my relationship with Brandon. In this sense, writing served as a sense making exercise that un/intentionally (and seemingly) culminated in normalizing the relationship—hence the last lines of Chapter Five, “We’re just friends.” Chapter Six, for me, emerges as writing that co-constructs sense differently by creating possibilities instead of narrowing down the possibilities.

The relationships of this dissertation, particularly my relationship with Greg, might be read by some as normal/normalized. For me, and my conceptualization of the larger project of queering relationship study, this is not bad. For too long researchers have named and labeled others’ relationships. Those who come to understand their relationships as queer should not have to worry about others charging that that the relationship is normal. I would argue that in the cases where this occurs the reader might be missing the proverbial moral of the (co-constructed relational) story. The attempted denial of queer by another may very well illustrate just how
queer a relationship is. In some cases it may be that the writing does result in normalization (like Chapter Five). This nonetheless gives account to and on relationships becoming in new and nuanced ways. It isn’t bad or problematic for relational inqueery for a relationship to normalize. Nothing says that a queer relationship must always be queer. If a relationship normalizes it really means nothing more than that—it have become normalized. This in no way makes the trekking that relational inqueery does any less important or valuable.

An applied communication approach. The third goal of this dissertation was offering an applied communication approach within queer relational studies that stands to benefit both the field and the queer on social and personal fronts. The acceptance of the field of applied communication research within the field of communication was partially motivated by its dedication to “contributing to solve social problems, and informing the public of the potential uses of communication knowledge” (Cissna, Eadie, & Hickson, 2009, p. 20). Exactly what constitutes applied communication research remains contested among scholars (Frey & SunWolf, 2009). Two characteristics of applied communication research are social relevance and practical theory.

Practical theory, a negotiation between theory and practice, has been a hallmark of applied communication research for the last 10 years (Barge & Craig, 2009). Like applied communication research itself, what it is that constitutes practical theory is widely contested. Barge and Craig (2009) explored three perspectives: (a) practical theory as mapping, (b) practical theory as engaged reflection, and (c) practical theory as transformative practice. As mapping, practical theory creates a map or vivid description of a problem. As engaged reflection, practical theory reflexively situates and resituates theory and practice in terms of a specific problem. Through a systematic process, practical answers emerge. As transformative practice, practical
theory has researchers collaborating directly with those it concerns to construct potential outcomes. None of these approaches to practical theory must necessarily be quantitative (Cissna, 2000). However, the whole of applied communication research journals and conference divisions still tend toward post positivist approaches, but there are no set rules of generalizability. In terms of empirical evidence, even where it is presented, Motley (2008) suggested that the reader of an applied communication research piece be the judge of what it offers, specifically concerning the quality of evidence on which it is based. So, in some ways, the value of applied communication research is up to the reader.

It is likely that in such a spirit that Goodall (2004) called for engagement with autoethnography and personal narrative in applied communication research. I position relational inqueery as an applied communication approach. As an approach that calls for both (or all) relational members to participate in the co-construction of texts for the good of the relationship, relational inqueery is a sort of participatory action research. For instance, in Chapter Six our co-constructed text ends with a sort of resolution to our relational problems (as levied by social contexts). Working together, we co-constructed (re)solutions.

In endeavors such as co-constructing narratives of relating and becoming, relational members systematically co-construct possibilities, which are sorts of practical answers or resolutions along the lines of whatever has prompted the narrative co-construction be undertaken. At minimum, the outcome is applied communication through practical theory’s transformative practice for the relational members who construct the text and resolution. However, when made available to others, it’s possible that readers can find practical answers or resolutions in the relational texts of others (Motley, 2008). In this way, autoethnography and relational inqueery’s process (the co-construction and collaboration of) is an applied
communication approach just as the product (text) is applied communication research. Showing others the value of it and encouraging and empowering them to do their own is applied communication. Like Goodall (2004), Herrmann (2012) called to get autoethnography out of the academy and on bookshelves, into people’s hands to make the difference it claims it can.

In Chapter Two, I spoke of advancing a change in the study of personal relationships. It is through articulating space to think about queer relationships in new ways with the intent of inspiring new forms of relational inquery, an applied communication approach, that such a change is advanced. Apart from and in addition to the goals declared, this dissertation makes contributions to the fields of communication and qualitative inquiry.

The Field of Communication

Although this dissertation is embedded in the field of personal relationship research, it is founded in the field of communication. I situate my own scholarship within relational communication, which is an area within interpersonal communication. Relational communication focuses on the dynamics of meaning co-construction (e.g., expression and interpretation of messages) in personal relationships. The field of personal relationship research is interdisciplinary. As one of the many fields that contribute to it, relational communication is both a part of the field of personal relationship research and influenced by it. Advancing a change, such as queering personal relationships and their study, in the field of personal relationship research also advances a change in the field of relational communication because of the overlap and intermixing of the two fields. So the successful creation of a space and terrain for queer relationships in the study of personal relationships is also a primary contribution of this dissertation to the field of communication.
Other contributions to the field of communication include methodological elucidations and elaborations on co-constructed narrative and applied communication research. As Richardson (2000) argued, “There’s no such thing as ‘getting it right’ — only ‘getting it’ differently contoured and nuanced” (p. 931). So not only does this project advance autoethnographic methods for communication, in the vein of Richardson’s postmodern proposition, this dissertation contours and nuances several areas in the field of communication.

**Relationally writing relationships in communication.** Gradually beginning to appear in communication research textbooks (e.g., Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Lindlof & Taylor 2011), autoethnography has been claimed as a communication research method (Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011). Scholars from the field of communication have published many autoethnographic works on personal relationships in qualitative research journals (e.g., Adams, 2006; Bochner, 2012; Herrmann, 2007; Tillmann, 2010). However, it remains quite rare to find such works in communication publications (e.g., Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Foster, 2008; Toyosaki & Pensoneau, 2005).

Exploring relationship dissolution, Santoro (2012) provides a compelling relational account of his relationship disengagement and the cultural negotiations of finding himself single and socially stigmatized for not embodying the normative gay body. In another autoethnography of personal relationships, Herrmann (2007) employed a layered account exploring the multiplicity of tensions in his relationship dissolution through the lens of relational dialectics (cf., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Both of these autoethnographic texts do well in answering Duck, West, and Acitelli’s (1997) call for research that shows “the fluid and uncertain quality of relationships” (p. 3) and Perlman and Duck’s (2006) call for “more attention to the socially
constructed nature of relationships and the way we tell our stories about them” (p. 26). However, there are other calls that haven’t been answered.

Although he likely wouldn’t have been a fan of autoethnography, Miller (1976) long held that while the goal and interest is in the relationship, research often ends up focusing on one person. The field of personal relationship research is dominated by self-report methods like questionnaires and surveys (Charania & Ickes, 2006). Research on dating relationships is more likely to include the perspectives of both relational members than friendship research (Monsour, 2006). This is partially attributed to the wide range of relationships that are considered friendships and individuals’ varying perceptions of what their relationship is. Monsour (2006) called for creative and collaborative approaches to studying relationships.

In some senses, Monsour’s (2006) call has long been answered. Bochner and Ellis (1992) introduced co-constructed narrative as a social approach to interpersonal communication—a method for individuals in intimate relationships to engage with relational experience. Ellis (2004) offered that the process of narrative co-construction was best based around an epiphany or relationship turning point. The text that Bochner and Ellis (1992) produced was a stirring account of two people making sense of the choice to have an abortion. With the exception of a few other texts (e.g., Toyosaki & Pensoneau, 2005), co-constructed narrative in the vein of Bochner and Ellis (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Bochner, & Ellis, 1995; Ellis & Bochner, 1992) has gone largely under-explored and under-extended in communication studies. Hence the ongoing call for collaborative and creative approaches to the study of relating.

Between Chapter Five and Chapter Six are three co-constructed narratives that provide accounts of, among other things, relationships becoming, an interplay of masculinities and
erotics in relating, and social contexts and perceived relationship marginalization. These accounts present different contours and nuances of relationships in the field of communication.

**Becoming.** The field of communication has a way of reporting on relationships that makes them seem done or finalized (Duck, Lee, & Acitelli, 1997). Instead of conventional a priori ways of seeing relationships, these co-constructed narratives show accounts of relationships becoming. The co-constructed narratives of Chapters Five and Six invite us to think of relating as less about following the established dominant how-to-heteronormative script and more about becoming (and even remaining) open to new possibilities of relating. Relating is not just doing, relating is becoming. “Instead of talking about communication, [these co-constructed narratives] show people in the process of using communication to achieve an understanding of their lives and their circumstances” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111). Doing-relating-in-relationships is tangled with normative expectations of relating, but relating-as-becoming envisions new possibilities that may be outside of existing categories or typologies.

**Interplay of masculinities and erotics in relating.** The co-constructed narratives of Chapter Five depict an interplay of masculinities becoming. They answer Monsour’s (2006) call for creative and collaborative approaches that show gender and relationship developing and interacting together. In doing so, our accounts also answer Reeser’s (2010) call for texts that show the dynamic interplay of masculinities, complete with an account of the erotic. As we write and rewrite our open and fluid relationship in the co-constructed narratives of Chapter Five, we show an erotic dimension of men relating and navigating relationship. The erotics of men’s relationships, outside of gay intimate relationships, has gone largely under examined in research (Nardi, 2007). The erotic often slips through our tools for measurement or is simply overlooked un/intentionally. Bochner (2000) suggested, “We have to work to overcome our conditioned
fears of erotic knowledge” (p. 271). In response, our accounts of becoming vulnerable construct an erotic of our relating.

**Social contexts and marginalized relationships.** There has been an ongoing and persistent call for more attention to the social context of personal relationships in communication research (Allan, 1993; Felmlee & Sprecher, 2000; Roloff, 2008). In particular, the study of personal relationships should not continue to “overlook the importance of ‘context’ in modifying and influencing the ways in which relating is carried out” (Duck, West, & Acitelli, 1997, p. 2). While the co-constructed narratives of Chapter Five account a relationship internally negotiating within the confines of heteronormativity and becoming through those negotiations, the co-constructed narrative of Chapter Six offers an account of relationship becoming as it interacts with social context.

The co-constructed narratives of Chapter Five show a relationship negotiating in social context. They offer a construction more about what goes on within the relationship, of course as affected by the social context. In contrast, the co-constructed narrative of Chapter Six interacts with social context and the marginalization that it imposes. Through layering narrative from the field of personal relationship research on May-December relationships (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2011) with related research on perceived marginalized relationship statuses (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006; Lehmiller & Agnew, 2007), the co-constructed narrative provides nuance and contour to the social scientific knowledge through relational experiences and questioning. Nuancing an impersonal field of “age discrepant” and “perceived marginalized” relationship research, the co-constructed narrative extends what is known and accepted by offering a means of thinking about and overcoming the social context’s pressures in the form of writing relational futures or creating relational futures (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2002). By the end of the co-
constructed narrative, we have theorized relational futures. In doing so, we have highlighted the process and product advantages of co-constructed autoethnographic inquiry.

It could be argued that Ellis and Bochner’s (1992) co-constructed narrative has always been a form of applied communication research. Co-constructioning narrative is a highly relational process. In many ways, writing after an epiphany or turning point can limit the extent of relational good that the process can invoke. It’s undeniable that the process has strong positive relational potential in the form of making sense, sharing meanings, and addressing differences that may have otherwise gone unaddressed. However, co-constructed narrative that writes toward an epiphany (such as in Chapter Six) makes a move that transcends sense making, sharing meanings, and addressing differences by writing relational futures. In writing relational futures, relational members participate in creating relational futures (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 2002). In an answer to Perlman and Duck’s (2006) call to do research so that we can have more successful relationships, narrative co-construction is a highly relational, participation-demanding, applied approach to that precise end.

One of the emergent strengths of co-constructed narrative is its ability to show relational conflict in new ways. Breaking from the conventional co-constructed narrative and dialogically resolving conflict in narrative, contra-constructed narrative shows conflict becoming unresolved between relational members—lending credibility to the narrative by presenting more than one person’s narrative truth. It also has the potential to strengthen the integrity of the work as personal relationship research in terms of the relational aspect including multiple contributing constructors who are also relational members.
The Field of Qualitative Inquiry

As a meta-autoethnographic undertaking, this dissertation stands as an example of what it might look like to do autoethnography on our autoethnographies. As autoethnography continues to grow as a form of qualitative inquiry, the contours of autoethnographic landscape are shaped and reshaped. Meta-autoethnographic projects give autoethnographers an important space to think and rethink the possibilities of their own inquiry. Of equal importance, they also give other autoethnographers a look at the workings of the autoethnographic processes of an other. As a form of inquiry founded on reflexivity, the practice of meta-autoethnography is imperative in answering postmodernism’s call to continue to question the ways in which we seek to understand and conduct inquiry (Richardson, 2000). In my own meta-autoethnographic undertaking of this dissertation, I can see a number of autoethnographic practices that I have worked with and on that have potential implications for the larger landscape of qualitative inquiry as well as autoethnography.

Contra-constructed narrative. When Bochner and Ellis (1992) first offered their methodology and method of accomplishing co-constructed narrative, the product of their undertaking (a performance) presented one narrative that accounted for both relational members’ individual narratives. At times the narratives of each author would be contradictory, but the contradictions were generally resolved dialogically within the text. In the co-constructed narratives in which I’ve participated, particularly the narratives of Finding (Our) Autoethnography in Chapter Five, we engaged in a process that began like Bochner and Ellis’s (1992), but departed in the way that the final narrative was rendered. Instead of using the final co-constructed narrative to show how sense was made and the process of doing the relationship, two competing narratives appear back to back. These two narratives contradict each other in
minor or major ways. Rather than showing how sense was made, they show how sense has not
been made. When readers come to these portions in the text, they are left to make sense of the
contradictions in narrative in their own ways. To do so, I suspect they use previous narratives of
the paper and their own experiences in life. The goal is engaging the reader to take part in the
relationship. In Chapter Four I asserted that readers are able to engage the relational experience
of others. Through contra-constructed narrative, this is accomplished in new ways.

Whereas Bochner and Ellis (1992) position co-constructing narratives as a process that
has potential for healing a relationship, the method that is undertaken in the co-constructed
narratives of Chapter Five is the result of the co-authors having been unable to put their
individual narratives into dialogic motion. Or, more simply put, the co-authors were not able to
make sense of their experience. Leaving the contradictory narratives as such and putting them
next to each other presents the reader with the (im)possibilities that the co-authors are faced with.
As I previously stated in Chapter Five, I have come to know these narratives as contra-
constructed narratives. After all, not all narratives can be made sense of, nor can two narratives
always be dialogically worked into one.

Contra-constructed narrative, as I’ve forwarded here, varies from duoethnography in a
variety of ways. Principally, they differ in that the relational members of contra-constructed
narratives are marked by at least some similarity in their relating, primarily their relationship.
Duoethnographers are marked by their differences, at least two researchers electing to come
together because of a defining difference (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). For instance, the first
duoethnography, written by Norris and Sawyer (2004), was based on the difference of sexual
orientation: one researcher was gay, the other straight. Such identity claims are counterintuitive
in the relational approaches of co- and contra-constructing narrative because these approaches are based on becoming as opposed to states of fixity.

**Writing the future.** The notion of writing the future in autoethnography had been rattling around in my head since winter 2010. I first conceived of the idea by thinking through a few of the key concepts autoethnographers hold central: the possibility of writing autoethnography and the process of reflexivity as I had been writing and rewriting it.

**Writing.** If we write autoethnography to make previously unknown local knowledges known, then we’re constructing texts that encapsulate hope and change for others/reader who engage them from the moment they’re written for as long as they’re still being read and/or remembered. When we write, we write about our lives (Richardson, 2001). Our writing is at once a method of self-discovery (Richardson, 2001) and relational discovery. Denzin (2010) argued, autoethnographic texts “bring the past and the future into the present allowing us to push against the present” (p. 115). Our autoethnographic engagements with our past in the present are driven by the potentials and possibilities of the future. Denzin (2010) continued, “As critical scholars, our task is to make history present, to make the future present, to undo the present” (p. 115). It is in this way that we already work to write the future.

**Reflexivity.** In Carrie Fisher’s (2008) memoir, *Wishful Drinking*, of stories, she writes, it’s all about “location, location, location” (p. 26). Fisher is basically saying that our stories have different meaning at different times. But what I also get from her “location, location, location” metaphor is that our (re)experiencing of experiences as stories has qualities that implicate the past, the present, and the future. For me, this bears a striking resemblance to reflexivity.

There are as many conceptions of reflexivity as there are scholars engaging in it in their scholarship (*cf*, Berry & Clair’s [2011] special issue of *Cultural Studies <=> Critical
Methodologies on ethnographic reflexivity). If reflexivity is an ongoing process of looking back at the past and then looking at the present to continually situate and resituate your self in where you’ve been and where you are with an eye on where you’ll go, then reflexivity is begging for us to situate and resituate ourselves in the futures that we eye. Alexander (2011) described reflexivity as “potentially empowering and transformative; offering embodied methods that help others to generate their own critical reflexive processes of knowing self in relation to cultural context and experience” (p. 105). In the spaces of empowerment and transformation, the future is once again clearly implicated. Indeed, hooks (1994) elaborates, “Without the capacity to think critically about our selves and our lives, none of us would be able to move forward, to change, to grow” (p. 202). The process of reflexivity is inherently linked with implicating the future in a variety of ways. For Alexander (2011) and hooks (1994), the future is implicated in the way of empowerment, growth, and transformation. So if reflexivity reveals selves situated in oppression and victims of harmful marginalization, then reflexivity is also the starting place where selves can envision a place unlike this, the future.

To make the move from reflexivity to writing the future, at least in the process we undertook in the co-constructed narrative of Chapter Six, we relied on what I consider a critical reflexive imagination. We embraced hooks’s (2010) assertion that “what we cannot imagine, cannot come into being” (p. 59). The vignettes of the future that we wrote were a way of calling the possibility of a relational future into being where others might not see one. In a relationship marked by judgment from the social context surrounding it, we’ve written a relational future that resists the forces of an oppressive social imperative of heteronormativity and relating. Hooks (2010) offered, “Imagination is one of the most powerful modes of resistance that oppressed and exploited folks can and do use” (p. 61). And that is where we’ve found and situated our future.
**Becoming the future.** As we stated in our co-constructed narrative (in Chapter Six), we understand that just because we wrote it, doesn’t mean that it will necessarily come true. Instead, we wrote it thinking, along with Richardson (2001), “What you write about and how you write it shapes your life, shapes who you become” (p. 36). So while we may have not written our future per se, we’ve written something toward the future, something to shape the future. And if we’re lucky, then it will be like Ellis (2007) described, “You become the stories you write” (p. 22). It’s likely these same concepts of writing and becoming future are what drove Goltz (2009) in his generative project on queer futures.

Goltz (2009) undertook an interesting project he called, the *Queer Futures Project*. In a focus group-like setting, seven undergraduate students that self-identified as gay, queer, lesbian, or bisexual worked together to identify “queer” futures marked by heteronormativity. The futures that were developed were broken into two types of futures, one for gay men and one for lesbian women. For gay men, the future meant loneliness and undesirability. For lesbian women, the future meant having a family of some sort. Goltz decried the embedded heteronormativity in the futures and cited it as the potential cause for difficulty in queer youth’s grappling with the future. As a means of resistance, the group creatively generated alternative ways of constructing the future. The goal was to get the students thinking about alternative futures. Like our writing relational futures, writing alternative queer futures would create hope and possibilities.

**Writing to right.** Writing is never innocent (Richardson, 2000). How could it be when we, as qualitative researchers, “have an obligation to change the world, to engage in ethical work that makes a positive difference” (Denzin, 2010, p. 115)? To that end, autoethnography should incite change that makes life better (Ellis, 2007). It is with such purposes that I endeavor *writing to right*. Writing to right aims toward the construction of autoethnographic texts that seek to
make things right in relationship, in life. In critical qualitative inquiry, writing to right is the critical reflexive practice of recognizing wrong (e.g., social injustice) and your positionality among it as a point of entry for your construction of an autoethnographic text that intends to right.

It is from our situated positions within our specific disciplines of the academy that we recognize that upon which we seek to effect change. From our positions in the academy and personal life, we write to draw attention to social problems with the intention of making them right. Right for our selves, right for others, right for our discipline, and right for society. I offer this dissertation project as an endeavor in writing to right. Based from my experiences within the field of communication and my personal relationships, I write recognizing a wrong that exists in our research practices. From my specific location in the field and my own life, I write to right the circumstances that privilege a certain kind of relating in living and research practices.

In *Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-Sex Attraction* (2011), Tony Adams interrogates the metaphor of the closet. Motivated by the death of a lover, Adams writes to effect a social change of the circumstances that he believes lead to his lover’s death. In this way, I situate Adams’s (2011) autoethnography as an endeavor in writing to right. In kind, Adams (2012) discerned making life better as a joy of autoethnography.

Writing to right is obviously not a conceptually new idea. It finds its roots in many other concepts such as making the personal political (e.g., Holman Jones, 2005) and qualitative inquiry as social justice (e.g., Denzin, 2009; Denzin, 2010). However, it is a new articulation of these concepts that draws attention back to our situated points of entry (experience, academy, etc.) in identifying social problems, and recognizes our personal stake in making things right. It provides
our own anti-alibi acting as evidence as to exactly where we were when acts of injustice were
taking place, writing to right.

**Methodological Considerations**

The foundation of this dissertation is very much my personal experience and a queering
of the study of personal relationships. In reflecting upon the methodological considerations of
this project, I recognize that Chapter Two and Chapter Three of this dissertation, which outline
the study of personal relationships and queer both the study of and relationships, would have
remained the same. They are and have always been the heart of this undertaking. However, my
methodological approach for completing the project might have varied. For instance, I also
considered doing this study based on interviews, focus groups, or interactive interviews. As I
conclude this dissertation, I recognize that the co-constructed narrative and then meta-
autoethnographic approach of (re)visioning is better, more useful, and provides more unique
contributions to the fields of personal relationship research, communication and relational
communication, and qualitative inquiry than any of the other approaches I had considered. As
this dissertation comes to an end, I’d like to reflect on my chosen methodological approach by
revisiting alternatives approaches.

In order to complete interviews or focus groups, I would have had to recruit participants
for the study. From the beginning of these studies, I would have faced complicated issues.
Finding participants for the study of relationships that defy definition (and naming and labeling)
in complex ways would have not only problematized recruitment, but would have limited the
scope of possibility for the study based on my in/ability to concisely and clearly articulate a call
(my queer articulations took eight pages in Chapter Two and that doesn’t include the backing
queer theory of theorizing of queer relationship). For example, making a recruitment call for
individuals in “queer relationships” would have likely yielded individuals in gay and lesbian relationships, which are not necessarily queer. In Goltz’s (2009) call for queers, he only ended up with one self-identifying queer person. The rest were gay, lesbian, or bisexual. And I wouldn’t have been looking for queer people; I would have been looking for people in queer relationships. Recruitment posters have a limited space for explanation, so participants would have to decide whether or not to respond to the study based on a specific and fixed set of parameters that I provided. People who read the poster might just walk away confused. If I did get participants, they would already be products of the dominant paradigm’s impulse to name, label, and categorize based on the criteria that I set from the fixed set of parameters that I provided. This incites the crisis of representation that, in many ways, characterizes the current study. Even if the recruitment of participants was not problematic, both interviews and focus groups would have likely failed to provide relational accounts of relating. Meaning, I would only be talking with one member of any given relationship, so the data that I collected would have been accounts of relationships from one relational member.

Interactive interviewing (cf, Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997) would have included myself and several co-researchers who were familiar with the area and topic academically or personally. It first might seem like finding co-researchers would be easier than participants for interviews or focus groups, but in a narrow area of research and of a certain kind of relationship not easily found, it likely would have proved just as difficult. Very early on I had considered the prospect of interactive interviews with myself, Brandon, and Greg (the two relational members that I co-constructed narratives with that appear in Chapters Five and Six). We might have all met on several occasions and reflexively discussed relationships and social contexts. I supposed that that would possibly work. But the more I thought about it, the more I
found issue in the relational ethics of bringing the two of them together to be vulnerable and open in each talking about their relationship with me and each other. Not only did this make me uncomfortable, but I also wondered how much would actually be discussed and in what reflexive depth. Even if I had found co-researchers, aside from Greg and Brandon, to participate in the interactive interviewing process, they would have likely failed at providing relational accounts just like interviews and focus groups. It became clear to me that co-constructed narratives would not only be the best and most useful approach, but they would also make the most unique contributions to the fields that I am working with.

Unlike interviews, focus groups, and interactive interviews, with co-constructed narrative I would be able to show accounts of relating and becoming that were highly relational because they included both of the relational members. Additionally, co-constructed narrative accounts are mindful of the crisis of representation because the people who are providing accounts are doing so of their selves. This is partially what makes doing such a personal project so important. Because this dissertation project is founded on personal experience with both relationships and the field of communication’s treatment of those relationships, it follows that the method of inquiry needed to account for the tenets outlined in queering the field of study. That is why this dissertation offers the co-constructed accounts of Chapters Five and Six, which (re)construct a certain kind of relationship that defies the essentialist, reductionary modes of seeking to predict and control. If the essentializing and generalizing impulses of the dominant paradigm are being criticized for their drive of normalizing, then disrupting that impulse with situated, fixed, and contestable co-constructed narratives of fluid and open relating and/or becoming makes sense. Beyond that, if a goal of the project is to forward a method for people to undertake in their own forms of resisting heteronormativity, if only to the end of engaging in relating as they so desire,
then it was integral that this dissertation engage an approach that could be conceived of as just that. Through a meta-autoethnographic approach, the co-constructed narratives were able to be situated and resituated among stories of process, writing, contexts, and pretexts. Methodologically, co-constructed narrative situated in meta-autoethnography was the only approach that could have accomplished this project, its goals, and contribute to the field so uniquely. Engaging co-constructed narrative in this project has also led me to contemplate the politics of single-authored dissertations.

**Politics of single-authored dissertations.** Gale, Speedy, and Wyatt (2010) constructed an account in the form of a play about Ken Gale and Jonathan Wyatt’s (2008) joint dissertation, *Between the Two: A Nomadic Inquiry into Collaborative Writing*. Jane Speedy, the second author of the dissertation play, served as their dissertation supervisor. The account depicts their struggles to have a co-authored dissertation accepted by a system that didn’t know how to handle it. The play is set up as a nomadic journey (cf, Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) to the Oasis or academy where they seek access and membership.

When they initially inquired into the possibility of a joint dissertation, they were told that while there was no explicit rule against it, the rules were designed on an implicit assumption that dissertations are solo-authored (Gale, Speedy, & Wyatt, 2010). They would need to thoroughly justify their project, which would have to be twice the length of a solo-authored dissertation and clearly indicate that both authors contributed. Finally, they would have to undergo individual and joint examinations. Other than that, they found that they were “pushing at an open door” (p. 22). Although the system didn’t know how to initially handle the dissertation, they adapted the conventional standards to what they believed would be “rigorous” enough to validate two individuals’ entry to the ranks of the academy.
Gale and Wyatt’s (2008) joint dissertation and accompanying account (Gale, Speedy, & Wyatt, 2010) on the process of gaining approval from their university calls into question the politics of single-authored dissertations. The tacit knowledge that dissertations are single-authored indicates a prevailing and dominant paradigm replete with assumptions, some explicit, some implicit, as to what it is that constitutes scholarship/research, how it is that that is accomplished, and to what end. The paradigm that outlines and regulates the normal operations of the institution of graduate education is presumably influenced by (if not the same) as the dominant paradigm of scientific inquiry or the social sciences.

Gale, Speedy, and Wyatt’s (2010) account would have us believe that co-authored dissertations are rare, but I am not so sure that that’s the case. What does it mean to write alone? From a constructionist’s point of view, our understandings of life are relational or constituted in relation and relationships (Gergen, 2009a). Even when we are ostensibly writing alone, we aren’t. The voices and narratives of others are always with us and permeating our writing, consciously and unconsciously. For instance, when we work with old theories in new ways, we work with the voices and narratives of others. In fact, when we participate in research, we are expected to listen to and pay homage to those voices and narratives in the form of citations and reference pages. We are expected to learn from and build our ideas off of the voices and narratives of others. One’s writing is pervaded by other(s).

In research, collecting data from subjects (or participants) is a common convention. The data that is collected from participants can be understood as narrative constructions (Maines, 1993). These narrative constructions are the processed voices and narratives of the participants from collected data. Consider interviews. When interviews are conducted and then engaged in a grounded theory analysis, the results that the researcher will present will be interpretations of
others’ voices and narratives. So literature reviews, theoretical frameworks, and data are all pervaded by the voice and narratives of others.

The co-constructed narrative in this dissertation calls into question the idea that we should write “alone” in research. First, I have openly positioned the social science prose of this dissertation (Chapters One through Four) as types of narratives. They are very much a polyphony of voices of others, but accepted and expected as a scholarly exercise in reporting what has been and, in one way or another, identifying a gap to fill. Like Gale and Wyatt’s (2008) dissertation, the co-constructed narratives of my dissertation (Chapters Five and Six) explicitly draw attention to the quality that they were written by my self and others. For what it was that we (Gale, Wyatt, and myself) set out to accomplish, it was necessary that we openly accepted that our writing could not be (and is not) done alone.

Accepting that our dissertations are always and already not single-authored (by way of literature review, participants, advisor’s direction, etc.) opens a space where we can engage in more ethical research with our scholarly others when they can move from subject or participant to co-author. Co-constructed narrative circumvents many relational ethics by repositioning those who might have been participant(s) or characters in relational stories as co-authors (Ellis, 2007). Interrogating the politics of single-authored dissertations is important because “how we are expected to write affects what we can write about” (Richardson, 2000, p. 927). I wonder how often doctoral students have been and are steered away, implicitly or explicitly, from doing collaborative projects. I wonder at what cost this has occurred. Like Gale and Wyatt’s (2008) joint dissertation on/of collaborative writing, I would not have been able to accomplish my dissertation without abandoning the myth of the single-authored dissertation in favor of naming those who I have co-authored with. (A few of them, at least.)
**Limitations**

No project is without limitations. I acknowledge that I have narrative privilege (Adams, 2008). In doing so, I recognize that this dissertation project is not accessible to everyone. Because this is a dissertation, it will not be widely released or received. I am not even required to have a paper hardcopy bound for the library like they were just a few years ago, so the chances that this will ever find its way physically into someone’s hands are slim. However, a digital version of the manuscript will be archived in Wayne State University’s digital archives. Anyone who has access to library services at Wayne will be able to download a PDF version. Other libraries may have lending agreements with Wayne to “loan” my dissertation out, but even this requires access to a library and knowledge of how to use it. In its current form, this project will not make it outside the walls of the academy, which challenges the spirit of this dissertation and its dedication to the applied communication research possibilities or relational inqueery forwarded within its pages. This narrative inaccessibility also marks a limitation of the dissertation.

As a dissertation digitally housed in a university library, I suspect that it will be accessed by some masters students and doctoral students. Supposing that the dissertation was widely physically accessible, acknowledging narrative privilege reveals other ways that this text is inaccessible. First, while I worked to write in ways that were more accessible than conventional texts, I recognize that I’ve only succeeded within the realm of what I felt would be deemed acceptable for what this project is (Richardson, 2000). Second, and building from the previous, this project was partially grown from queer theory. Works that fall within the realm of queer theory have been heralded as some of the most conceptually inaccessible, not to mention difficult
to read (Turner, 2000). With various concentrations of queer theory running throughout this dissertation, it’s likely inaccessible for some.

The word *queer* also evokes different meanings for those outside of the academy (Talbut, 2000). For many outside of the academy, queer endures as a slur that implicates a certain idea of sexuality and gender in the most heterosexist of ways. Even within the hallowed halls of the academy some people may be triggered to enactments of heterosexism from encountering *queer*. For example, I presented a version of Chapter Three in a department research colloquium. To prepare for the event, I was asked to create a poster for my presentation. A week after my presentation I was exiting the fifth floor of Manoogian by way of the stairs. I noticed one of my posters on the door, modified. It read, “How I sucked my way through grad school” (See Appendix).

As autoethnographic text, this dissertation wants to be more than just read (Holman Jones, 2005). It wants to incite action (Denzin, 2010). It even forwards an autoethnographic approach for studying personal relationships: relational inqueery. Presuming the content of the dissertation is accessible, the action to which the dissertation invites the reader, writing autoethnography with others, may not be. Not everyone can write autoethnographically (Ellis, 2004).

Along the same lines of the complexity of queer and queer theory (as both words and theories), I recognize that this dissertation project espouses a queer perspective and then proceeds to use a myriad of words that queer challenges me not to use (e.g., guy, men, gay, straight, etc.). While the use of such words in the narratives of Chapters Five and Six are part of providing accounts, the use of such words elsewhere is problematic. However, I have done so, at times, for lack of better words. Even within this final chapter, I enacted the dominant paradigm
as I categorized co-constructed narrative accounts to offer contributions to the field of communication.

Finally, echoing Denzin (1997), “All texts are shaped by the writer’s standpoint” (p. 220). And this is a limitation inherent in all research projects.

The Future

I’ve been writing this paper for years. Drafting was underway long before I started graduate school. And it isn’t finished. I am certain I’ll be writing this paper for the rest of my life. In this dissertation project, I have offered a queer critique of the dominant paradigm of personal relationship research and the hegemony of heteronormativity as it pervades our conceptualizations of relating. From there I offered articulations of queer relationship to create space for researchers and relaters alike to think about and explore relating and relationships in new ways. To forward new ways that resist the essentializing, categorizing, and normalizing imperatives of the dominant paradigm, I offered an elaboration of an applied communication approach through relationally co-constructed narratives called relational inqueery. Relational inqueery has been conceived as a means of relational inquiry that includes all relational members and answers the crisis of representation. I’ve argued its uses and potentials both inside of the academy and out. But when I think about the future in terms of the work that I’ve done in this dissertation, with the assistance of three co-constructed narratives, I am confronted first with the limitations that I identified in the preceding section by way of narrative privilege.

The propositions and arguments made in the pages of this dissertation must find audience with the larger peer-reviewed fields of personal relationship research and communication. Quite simply, the changes that this dissertation advocates and forwards for the academic disciplines it is intended cannot be impacted by this work unless it is presented to them. Of particular
importance is beginning the process of disseminating the ideas articulated in Chapter Three about queer theory and the study of personal relationships. Seeing the study of personal relationships changed means effecting change first at the paradigmatic level. This can only be accomplished by moving this work to where it can be seen and engaged by others in the fields. Perhaps first through conference presentation, but with a focused eye on publication. However, although not previously noted, the propositions that I’ve presented in this dissertation aren’t meant to articulate an autoethnographic approach or method that I believe everyone should do. I’ve offered the arguments and articulations of this dissertation to engender a space for such inquiry—not as a substitute for other methods of inquiry, but rather, as a supplement.

Aside from the field of relational inqueery that is forwarded in support of queering relationships and their study, relational inqueery has been offered as an applied communication approach. Like autoethnographic undertakings before it, it promises to bear potential benefit for readers outside of the academy. As I addressed in the limitation section, in its current form it remains inaccessible to those it claims to have the potential to benefit. The field of communication has long been talking about moving our work out to the larger public for consumption (cf, Goodall, 2004). Because of the current limitations of the queer discourse within the text, a positive first move toward seeing this work in the hands of other people is through the college classroom. While the college classroom and inhabiting students are certainly not without privilege, having this work and its arguments reach the hands, minds, and lives of college students would meet Elia’s (2003) call for queering relationships in the classroom and potentially effect change through education.

In addition to bearing potential benefits for those who would read texts of relational inqueery, the approach is forwarded as a practice that people can engage to explore possibilities
for personal relationships and relational futures. With the direction outlined in the previous paragraph positioning even the texts of relational inquery inaccessible, even more distance is rendered between the call to relational inquery and practices like writing relational futures for those outside of the academy. With the exception of potential narrative therapists engaging patients in its practice, the dissemination of relational inquery is marked by a bevy of hurdles. However, if success is realized in effecting change at the level of studying personal relationships and a queering of relationships in the college classroom is undertaken, progress will have been made toward getting relational inquery into the hands of readers outside of the academy and college classroom.

The reason this chapter is subtitled, Outstaying my/your/our Welcome and/or Breaking or Entering, is as direct response to the future that I presented above (which reads bleak). Denzin (2010) recognized that those who engage in critical qualitative inquiry, such as that of relational inquery, do so from a paradigm that will always see itself continually under fire. However, those who engage in critical qualitative inquiry in the face of such criticism do so with passion and determination for important reasons, political and personal.

Every now and then our work does manage to make its way in with the work of the dominant paradigm. For instance, Art Bochner offered increasingly postmodern contributions over the course of three editions of The Sage Handbook of Interpersonal Communication (Bochner, 1985; Bochner, 1994; Bochner, 2002). Bochner’s chapters stood out against the handbooks’ post positivist landscape until the fourth edition came out and his chapter was replaced by a much more conventional method-centric approach to qualitative methods (Tracy & Muñoz, 2011).
Similarly, Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (1992) introduced co-constructed narrative to the field of communication in a special issue on social approaches to interpersonal communication of the journal of *Communication Theory* (Craig & Leeds-Hurwitz, 1992). Versions were reprinted in the field of communication (Bochner & Ellis, 1995) and in the field of qualitative research (Ellis & Bochner, 1992). Since then, very few researchers have engaged the method, at least to the extent of enjoying publication (e.g., Toyosaki & Pensoneau, 2005). When I explained my dissertation project to Carolyn Ellis (personal communication, November 5, 2011), she first conveyed her excitement and then her surprise that co-constructed narrative never “caught on” or enjoyed development.

In one last relevant example, Yep, Lovaas, and Elia (2003) edited a special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* that focused on queer theory and communication. The issue is a wonderful overview of queer theory in various fields of communication. In the piece meant to cover interpersonal communication, Elia (2003) called for a paradigm shift in the form of queering relationship research and teachings. Although his piece has been important in bringing me to the work in this dissertation, queer theory in interpersonal communication goes widely unexplored with few exceptions (e.g., Foster, 2008).

The reason I recount this extant research is of consequence to outstaying my/your/our welcome and/or breaking or entering. As I researched and read more and more, I began to see the landscape of the field of communication and personal relationship research more clearly. I wondered why it was so easy for me to trace the lineage of the content, theory, and approaches that interested me most from first appearances through vanishing. And then it dawned on me. The dominant paradigm of research humors “alternative approaches” every now and then. A sole chapter in a handbook is offered and special issues of journals are contracted, but when your
time is up, you should be prepared to experience methodological and theoretical symbolic annihilation. Like houseguests, it would seem that approaches other than the dominant paradigm receive occasional invitations to visit. And just as with houseguests, that welcome is only for so long.

When I look to the future, I recognize the critical importance of my dedication to earning an invitation to visit. Upon receiving that invitation, I pledge my intention to outstay my welcome and, if need be, symbolically break and enter. In order to write this future, I have to be prolific and committed. I offer the same direction for anyone else who has come to see our world of research in a similar light.

As I write that future, I see a field of co-constructed narrative that needs exploration and development before post positivist infused conceptions of collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Wambura Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, in press) are proliferated and marginalize co-constructed narrative further. When people ask me what I see in the future of autoethnographic inquiry, I tell them that I see researchers exploring the relational possibilities of vulnerably co-constructing together. I’ve come to believe that all autoethnography should recognize its relational nature explicitly. I am interested in writing relationships with others. After completing this dissertation, I am motivated to get back to (re)writing with Brandon. And after reading this dissertation, he has made clear his interest in doing so as well. I am also driven to continue work with my brother, Zack, my sister, Erin, and my relational partner, Greg. As a future direction, I would encourage researchers to find ways to relationally engage their own relationships in their research. Of course, I’ve presented one such articulation here in the form of relational inqueery.

As I return to writing with my previous co-authors, co-constructors, co-laborators, I will do so encouraging our engagement in co-constructing meta-autoethnographic texts. As clearly as
I see a rich space for exploring the relational nature of autoethnographic inquiry, I call for autoethnographers to engage in meta-autoethnographic practices. I think it likely that meta-autoethnography has critical implications for the future of autoethnographic inquiry. In one way, it produces texts of autoethnographers rewriting and revisioning their own work for the good of others. In another way, though vastly underappreciated, meta-autoethnography embodies a potential for authors to improve their own writing while providing a space for conceiving of new ways to engage in autoethnographic inquiry.

Finally, for the future, I see the growing importance of writing relationally about relating and its relationships. Especially for queer relationships, “for writing is re-naming” (Rich, 2001, p. 21). And though personal relationships aren’t often written of in the social justice oriented field of critical qualitative inquiry, I see a potential. Especially when considering Richardson’s (1992) sentiment, “Like other cultural groups, academics fail to recognize their practices as cultural/political choices, much less see how they are personally affected by those practices” (p. 126). Now is the time to write and rewrite. We’re always really re-writing, aren’t we? Re-writing the field, re-writing our experiences, re-writing our autoethnographies, re-writing our relationships.
EPILOGUE

It’s not possible to tell stories about relationships of which I am a part without telling stories of others who are outside of the relationship. I suppose in that way the relational nature of personal relationships is highlighted further. By that I mean no personal relationship is of just two people (or three, four, etc.). Personal relationships are also very much products of the relationships with others around them. This is especially evident in Chapter Six where relationships outside the personal relationship are focused on to construct an account of the relationship between Greg and myself in social context.

It’s debatable how real any character can be in a story. We accept the stories that we tell to be sorts of fictionalized accounts of truths and/or realities. In a sense, they’re the best that we can do in an existence socially constructed and relationally realized. In this dissertation some characters appear by their real names, some were thoughtfully given pseudonyms, and some are composite characters. Characters who appear by their real name include Brandon and Greg who each co-constructed narratives that are included in this dissertation. They appear not as subjects, but as co-authors. To be true to their co-authored contribution and give them the credit they deserve, their names appear in full as they asked for. Other real names used were by people who asked to be named in the project. That includes my brother (Zack), sister (Erin), and friend (Dawn). Each expressed interest in appearing in this project saying things like “I’d be honored.”

Pseudonyms were given, by my co-authors and me, to other individuals to protect them and their stories. For instance, Louise was a pseudonym for the woman from St. Louis. Other pseudonyms include: Adam and Maggie (Chapter Five), Nick (renamed by Greg in Chapter Six) and Graham (renamed by me in Chapter Six). As explained in Chapter Five, pseudonyms were carefully given to those who appear in the Bad Romance piece based on characters from Bret
Easton Ellis novels: Clay, Sean, Mitchell, and Paul (a pseudonym for myself). In addition to changing their names, I went to great lengths to alter the stories in ways to make them less specific and more general. In that way, some stories verge on being composites or medleys of sorts. This leads me to the final type of characters who appear—composite.

Chapter Five has one section of narrative, *À Cause des Garçons!*, that strictly uses composite characters. These are stories about experiences that were so similar or fit so well together that I told them through the composite experience of three characters and myself. Allen, Brett, and Cody are each composite characters representing several different experiences that I have had with gay men in gay bars.

Whether considered real or fictionalized, all these characters are implicated because they appear in the dissertation project. But they appear in the dissertation project because they are implicated in the relationships. It would not be possible to tell these stories without the cast of supporting characters that appear within these pages.
APPENDIX

“How I Sucked My Way Through Grad School.”

Derek Bolen, Doctoral Candidate
Department of Communication

Wednesday, April 25
11:30 am
Japanese Room, Manoogian Hall

The field of personal relationship studies is dominated by post-positive and post-positive-oriented research perspectives. While the result may be a wide variety of approaches and theories, the overall body of extant research remains methodologically homogeneous and heteronormative. Research of this nature reifies erasure of non-normative relationships in relationship studies while subjugating such relationships as “understudied” or “inappropriate.” This presentation offers a queering of the study of personal relationships by critiquing the oft-accepted modes of operation through reviewing and re-imagining the impact and limitations of the dominant paradigm in relational understandings and inquiry. A queer treatment is applied to existing relationship research constructs creating a space for queer relationships. Methods of relational inqueery are forwarded in the hope of creating new ways to talk about relationships in order to promote new relational futures.
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jj. (March 9, 2010). Let go. n° 3 [Audio CD] Sincerely Yours.


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ABSTRACT

TOWARD AN APPLIED COMMUNICATION RELATIONAL INQUEERY: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY, CO-CONSTRUCTED NARRATIVE, AND RELATIONAL FUTURES

by

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August 2012

Advisor: Dr. Sandra Pensoneau-Conway

Major: Communication

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

Born out of my personal relationships with others and the field of communication, particularly as it overlaps and intersects with the field of personal relationship research, this project begins with an exploration of research practices in personal relationship inquiry, offers a queer critique on research and relating, and forwards a queer applied communication approach—relational inqueery. This dissertation was directed by three goals: (a) creating a space and terrain for queer relationships in the study of personal relationships and relational communication, (b) founding and beginning to further a field of relational inqueery, and (c) offering an applied communication approach within queer relational studies that stands to benefit both the field and the queer on social and personal fronts. To those ends, I offer a queer criticism of research and relating, engendering a space for queer relationships. I then offer a meta-autoethnographic approach of personal and co-constructed narratives and writing-stories to engage, contour, and nuance the aforementioned space for queer relationships imagining new ways of thinking about research in the study of personal relationships and relational futures. This project contributes to the fields of personal relationship research, communication, and qualitative inquiry.
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Derek M. Bolen attended Saginaw Valley State University in University Center, Michigan where he received his B.A. in Professional and Technical Writing in 2004. He completed his M.A. in Interpersonal and Public Communication at Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, Michigan in 2009 and his M.A. in Communication and Multimedia at Saginaw Valley State University in 2009. His research interests include relational communication, queer theory, gender and sexuality, co-constructed autoethnography, and critical pedagogy. He has been teaching courses in communication and gender studies at the university level since 2005. He has co-authored and published articles in Communication Education and The Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota Journal. Beginning Fall 2012 he will be an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication, Mass Media and Theatre at Angelo State University.