

## 7. Autoethnography and Queer Theory

### Making Possibilities

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#### Just Stories

I am invited to speak at the critical methods pro-seminar my department offers for Ph.D. students in communication. These invitations are a matter of routine, and I welcome the opportunity to participate, along with the students, in a seminar. This time, I am invited as the guest on the evening slated for a discussion of queer theory. I wonder about this invitation. My work happens at intersections: of performance and feminism, ethnography and fiction, personal writing and critique. I imagine that, if you're reading this book, your work also happens at intersections. I consider myself an auto/ethnographer, a performer, a writer, and a critical scholar. My work includes queer theory, but queer theory is not the center of my work or my identity as a scholar. Experience is the center of my work. Maybe the invitation was more about me, personally. If I am queer, then I should know about queer theory, right? Rather than decide, I embrace both options: My experience is queer theory and queer theory is me. I choose to critically engage—in text and in world—margin and center, experience and theory.

Along with the invitation to participate in the discussion of queer theory, I am asked to assign one of my essays for the students to read. I have always been shy about this, uncomfortable with the compulsory knowledge students are supposed to have of their faculty and with how knowing the work collapses into, rather than complicates, knowing the person. Still, I comply,

assigning an essay I wrote about adoption (Holman Jones, 2005b), about the intersections of performativity and performance, about how lives and the connections among us manifest in their telling and in the ways we tell on canonical narratives of what is and should be. The essay doesn't comment on queer theory directly, though it works to "redeploy" and "twist" from "prior usage" (often derogatory, accusatory, violent) the normalizing view of adoption, and does so in the "direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" (Butler, 1993, p. 228). And so it is—as I am—most certainly queer.

The students in the seminar tell me the essay is moving, even haunting. They also tell me my work is elliptical, referential, theory-laden, and overtly and overly scholarly. It is as if I am at once present and unavailable in my work, my words an apparition, a vanishing act. *I* cannot be read, known, or understood. My ideas, too, are abstract, undetermined, and difficult to decide. As the students tell me—tell of me, tell on me and my work—I think *yes*, that's *it*. The essay, my work, I—in its and my most compelling moments—ask the "unanswerable," seek indeterminacy, consider my own "unforeseen" (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005, pp. 311, 312). And when someone asks the question the essay (my work, I) inevitably inspire(s)—"Why not just tell the stories? Why weight it down with all of that theory?"—I am ready.

"Because theory is a story. Theory tells us a story—in non-ordinary language (which jolts us out of our complacency and into attention)—of how things are and helps us discover the possibilities in how things might be. The intersections among theory and everyday language are crucial to our ability to tell and re-imagine not only what we can say, but also who we can be" (Butler, 1997, p. 144).

When we say, "No theory, no politics, just stories," we forget the differentiating, strange-making impulse of critical inquiry and scholarship. Instead of stories *or* theory, emotionalism *or* explanation, seeking *or* representation, aesthetics *or* knowledge, we need a language that unsettles the ordinary while spinning a good story. We need the shifting, refiguring, and excessive talk of *maybe*, about what *matters*, that says something *queer*. This is why autoethnography and queer theory are good for each other. Told

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together, autoethnography and queer theory make stories—just stories—into insurrectionary acts (Butler, 1997, p. 145).

## Good for Each Other

At parent-teacher conferences, I am told that my child is bright and a good student, but that he lacks focus. Thinking that he doesn't understand the lesson or that he's having trouble finishing his work, I ask about these things, but that's not it. Lacking focus means talking to his classmates when he's supposed to be listening, moving around the room when he's supposed to be sitting, sharing too much when he is called on, and—this last item jolts me back into my own second grade classroom—asking too many questions. Of course, I ask questions about all of these things, morphing my knowledge of docile bodies (Foucault, 1995 [1977]) and institutional structures (Bourdieu, 1977 [1972]) into parent-teacher conversation. But when we get to the questions, I am stuck. My child's questions aren't off-topic or meant to deflect attention from the teacher or the lesson. Rather, there are simply too many. I pause, reflecting on the self-imposed ban on asking questions that persisted for much of my second-grade year, then ask, "Would you rather he didn't ask questions?" This question is answered by a generative, open, and affirming silence.

When I get home, I retrieve my home-made grade school scrapbook from the attic and give my second-grade progress report to Noah. "Distracted by others when doing seatwork." "Participation in discussion good, but leaves little room for others."

"What does 'leaves little room for others' mean?"

"I think it means I asked too many questions and no one else got a chance."

"How can you ask too many questions?"

"I don't think you can. I think that without questions we can't talk and we certainly can't live" (Butler, 1997).

"Do I ask too many questions?"

"What do you think?"

"I think no."

"I think no, too. Do you know what else I think?"

"What?"

"I think we're good for each other."

Noah reminded me that asking questions is essential to living a free, peaceful, and *good* life. He reminded me that we must, as Butler (1997) reminds, interrogate "the terms that we need to live" and that we must take "the risk of living the terms that we keep in question" (p. 163). Autoethnography and queer theory are good for each other because they interrogate the terms that we need to live and live the terms we keep in question—recently, swinging, penetration, catastrophe, heresy, and closets, to name just a few (Adams, forthcoming; Berry, 2007; Holman Jones, 2009; Minge & Zimmerman, 2009; Spry, forthcoming). And like Noah and me, and Tony and me, and you and me, we are not good for each other when we are the same, interchangeable, never questioning. Rather than a mirror providing a self-affirming reflection, autoethnography and queer theory work together through and around the fulcrum and tension of the hinge. The hinge is an instrument of transitivity, a moral movement that is inspired and linked, acting and acted upon. The hinge asks us to align divided perspectives and provides a metaphor for promoting purposeful movement—to bring together the purposes and practices of autoethnography with the purposes and practices of queer theory.

In particular, we illustrate the possibilities of what can happen when a method and theoretical perspective are put into conversation, when we hinge experience and analysis, ambiguity and clarity, dialogue and debate, accessibility and academic activism, "just stories" and high theory. We are not after a homogenizing blend *or* nihilistic prioritizing of concerns. Rather, we want to try to "remap the terrain" of autoethnography and queer theory without "removing the fences that make good neighbors" (Alexander, 2003, p. 352); we want to ask what autoethnography and queer theory do, should do, and do to, for, and in research methodology and scholarship. We want to ask what autoethnography and queer theory do, should do, and do to, for, and in our efforts to honor the sanctity of life and human dignity.

Throughout this chapter, we use "I" to tell our stories to combine us, as authors and readers, into a shared experience. My experience—our experience—could be and could reframe your

experience. My experience—our experience—could politicize your experience and could motivate and mobilize you, and us, to action. Our “I” is fashioned after Pollock’s (2007, p. 246) “performative ‘I,’” and away from a first-person scholarly narrator who is self-referential but unavailable to criticism or revision. By contrast, our performative I is “made real through the performance of writing,” particularly in performances that link autoethnography and queer theory (Pollock, 2007, p. 247). Our I hinges us—Stacy and Tony—to “we,” a community of scholars ready to write ourselves into new ways of being and becoming. We begin by taking a kind of relational inventory, exploring what joins and holds apart autoethnography and queer theory and asking about why these practices and politics are good for each other.

## Inventory

One way to assess the goodness—of fit, of purpose, of goals—of a relationship is to think about commitment. Commitment is both personal and political; it is an investment in the now that anticipates a future based on common goals and cooperation (Foster, 2008, pp. 84–85). Commitment can also be an unquestioned value that elides difference and denies nonnormative identities and lives (Foster, 2008).

Autoethnography—a method that uses personal experience with a culture and/or a cultural identity to make unfamiliar aspects of the culture and/or identity familiar for insiders and outsiders—and queer theory—a dynamic and shifting, theoretical paradigm that developed in response to a normalizing of heterosexuality and from a desire to disrupt insidious, social conventions—share cooperative ideological commitments:

- Autoethnography, as a research method, rubs against and tries to disrupt canonical ideas about research and methodological orthodox, particularly ideas of what research is and how research should be done (Colyar, 2008; Ellis, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Rambo, 2007; Slattey, 2001). Although not necessarily a research method, queer theorists advocate a similar sensibility in their attempt to deconstruct, pollute, and diffuse what passes as “normal” (Belkin, 2008; Bennett, 2008; Cobb, 2007; Gamson, 2000; Plummer, 2003).

- Queer theorists (re)appropriate extant research, language, texts, practices and beliefs in novel, innovative ways (Alexander, 2008; Hilfrich, 2006; Koro-Ljungberg, 2004; McCreery, 2008; Yep & Elia, 2007). Similarly, autoethnographers try to tell, recast, personal experience in inventive, tradition-breaking and -remaking ways, simultaneously critiquing and filling the gaps in existing scholarship (Aoki, 2005; Boylorn, 2006; Davis, 2009; Defenbaugh, 2008; Jago, 2002).
  - Autoethnographers consider representations of identity and experience uncertain, fluid, open to interpretation, and able to be revised (Ellis, 2009; Goodall, 2006; Tillmann, 2009; Wyatt, 2005, 2008). Queer theorists share such a sentiment, all the while working against fixity and firmness, certainty and closure, stability and rigid categorization (Butler, 1999, 2004; Henderson, 2001; Plummer, 2005; Sedgwick, 1993).
  - Queer theorists advocate for equitable, political change and conceive of ways research, texts, and bodies can serve as sites of discursive “trouble” (Butler, 1999, 2004; Chavéz, 2009; Irving, 2008; Muñoz, 1999; Solis, 2007). Such a desire constitutes much of current autoethnographic work as many autoethnographers do their best to make ideological and discursive trouble while, simultaneously, work to create humane and equitable ways of living (Berry, 2007; Dykins Callahan, 2008; Foster, 2008; Minge, 2007; Myers, 2008).
- Autoethnography and queer theory are also good for each other because they share interrelated criticisms and deploy complementary responses to address their limitations:
- Queer theory is criticized for being too theoretical and impractical (Butler, 1999; Halberstam, 2005) yet praised for being able to make movement and motivate political action (Gamson, 2003; Wilchins, 2004). Autoethnography is criticized for being atheoretical (Atkinson, 1997) and poorly written (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005; Moro, 2006) yet praised for being applicable to lived realities (Goodall, 2004; Tillmann, 2009).
  - Autoethnography is criticized for being self-indulgent, too personally messy, too easy, and too narcissistic (Anderson,

2006; Buzard, 2003; Delamont, 2009; Fine, 2003; Gans, 1999; Madison, 2006); queer theory is assumed to be not personal enough and especially dense and difficult (Butler, 1999; Halberstam, 2005). Autoethnographers (Adams, 2009; Boylorn, 2006; Denzin, 2003; Holman Jones, 2005a; Neumann, 1996; Spry, 2001) and queer theorists (Butler, 2004; Corey & Nakayama, 1997; Glave, 2005; Nakayama & Corey, 2003) have replied by emphasizing the reciprocity of the I and the we, the reciprocity of story and theory, the reciprocity of the personal and political.

Queer theory is considered elitist, Western, colonialist, and white (Alexander, 2008; Halberstam, 2005; Johnson, 2001; Lee, 2003; Yep & Elia, 2007); autoethnography is considered a method dominated by theoretical colonialists and solipsists, patriarchy, and the tenured (Anderson, 2006; Buzard, 2003; Gingrich-Philbrook, 2005). Queer theorists have responded by refiguring queer and queer theory to signal, signify, and sound the concerns of diverse subjects and subjectivities on questions of race, ethnicity, class, sex, desire, gender, and ability (Alexander, 2008; Johnson, 2001; Lee, 2003; Moreman, 2009; Sandahl, 2003; Solis, 2007). Autoethnographers respond by appreciating the use of different media to represent "findings" (Adams, 2008), valuing embodiment, performance, and other so-called alternative ways of knowing (Denzin, 2003; Holman Jones, 2005a), embracing the cultural standpoints a researcher embodies (Boylorn, 2006; Marvasti, 2006), and respecting the relationships a researcher has with those she or he studies—no longer can a researcher enter a setting, mine others for data, and leave without empathetically acknowledging these others (Ellis, 2007; Tillmann-Healy, 2003).

Autoethnography and queer theory: complementary and in tension, accessible and able to engage complicated concepts, disruptive and open-to-revision, political and practical, humane and ethical—good for each other. By hinging autoethnography and queer theory, we work to be out and queer in autoethnography and work to use autoethnography to be out and queer. Being out and queer in autoethnography means making ourselves vulnerable to critique, by risking living—in language and in life—the terms we keep in question by embodying their possibilities (Madison, 1998). A focus on possibilities asks everyone involved in our

exchange (writers and readers, performers and spectators, theorists and novelists, queers all) to claim and remake the terms we need, from the inner spaces of texts to the outer domain of society, so that we might make a material, concrete, and cathartic difference (Madison, 1998; see also Alexander, 2005; Holman Jones, 2005a; Madison, 2005). More specifically, we work to create possibilities by theorizing story and storying theory, embracing vulnerability while taking a political stand, creating conversation and trouble, and taking chances to make movement.

### Possibility: Revising and Becoming

Hinging autoethnography and queer theory means making work that *becomes*, like a perpetual horizon, rather than an artifact of experience—making work that acts *as if* rather than says *it is*, recognizing that a (published) text fixes and solidifies experience but that experience is not fixed or solidified; it is always "partial, partisan, and problematic" (Goodall, 2001, p. 55). Such recognition means understanding, and embracing, the importance of being tentative, playful, and incomplete, and conceiving of experience as "overdetermined" (Wolcott, 2010), always in motion, and in need of (perpetual) revision (Ellis, 2009).

For instance, in May 2003 I received a call from my dad:

"I heard a rumor about you," he says. I become nervous. "I heard that you're living with a guy. In fact, not just living with, but fucking this guy. Is this true?"

"Weeelllll," I stutter, "no, it's not true. Who would say something like that?"

"That doesn't matter," he abruptly suggests. "I'm just glad it ain't."

"Yeah, me too, Father. That's silly. I'll talk to you soon." The conversation ends.

I realize that I can't stay silent any longer. I'm tired and I lied to my father. Guilt devours me. I pick up the phone and call him back.

"Hello," he answers in an upbeat, much happier tone.

"Yeah, Dad, it's me. I just wanted to tell you that it's true—I am living with a guy, my boyfriend in fact. Sorry to burst your bubble."

I hear nothing so I decide to make the situation better by making up a lie, telling him that his recently deceased mother, my grandmother, knew about my same-sex desire.

"And Grandma knew about my sexuality and my boyfriend but she thought it would be best if I didn't tell you. She was always fine with it, but realized, as did I, that you would not accept it. Sorry if I'm a disappointment."

"Shheee knneww?" he stutters.

"Yeah, she did, Father."

"Well," he utters more fluently, "I guess I'll call you soon."

"Bye, Dad. Take care."

Silence between us for the next six months (Adams, 2006).

Prior to my dad's call, I never thought I would tell him that I fit—and did not fit—particular labels, that is, gay and straight respectively. I planned to live my life not informing my father of significant others such as Brett (the guy I lived with) or of my same-sex desire. I feared being disowned and hated and did not feel I could deal with my father's response.

However, what I don't (or forget to) mention: Brett was with me when my dad called.

"Call him back," he pleaded. "This is your chance."

I don't mention Brett, a person who came into my life, loving me, teaching me the value of openness, giving me the strength to do what I never imagined doing before. I called my dad back.

However, I couldn't mention two events that hadn't happened yet: a call and a visit.

March 2006: a call.

"Tony?" I hear when I answer the phone.

"Yes?"

"It's Lynn. I can't believe I'm the one to tell you ... I'm so sorry, but ... Brett's dead," she says. "His sister just called me. You should call her."

We hang up; I call Brett's sister.

"Hi, Sarah?" I ask, unsure of her name. "This is Tony Adams. I lived with Brett in Carbondale."

"I've heard about you" she says through tears. "Brett died last night of diabetes. I've been calling people listed in his cell phone. I'm sorry. I didn't want to have to tell you this."

Brett's family—people I never met—told me that Brett died of diabetes, a condition he had since his early teens. But later, two of Brett's friends told me that on the weekend prior to his death, Brett told his dad that he fit—and did not fit—particular labels, that is, gay and straight respectively. Brett not only had diabetes, but also a history of attempted suicide.

Brett was 29. Before our relationship, he lived with a man for four years. Since he lived near his parents, I *assumed* he had come out to his family, assumed he told them he was gay. But prior conversations with Brett replay in my head:

"Are you 'out' to your family?" I ask.

"They know," he responds.

*and*

"How do your parents feel about your sexuality?" I ask.

"We don't talk about it," he responds.

*and*

"I'd like to meet your family," I say.

"Maybe one day," he suggests.

Brett never told me he had *said* anything to his family about his sexuality. He only said "they know," nothing more. What did "they know" mean?

To think that Brett may have died after telling his father that he found men attractive, that he identified as gay, makes me ill. I could contact his family and ask if diabetes really was the cause, but this might make for unnecessary, painful controversy. Even if they confirmed the diabetes story, I know an alternative, story exists. Besides, why would they tell me? Besides, Brett is dead. I miss him; nothing will bring him back.

March 2007: a visit.

My father visits me in Tampa, Florida. During our time together, I approach our coming out interaction.

"Dad," I say. "Do you remember when I told you that I was gay?"

"Yeah," he responds. "You lived in Carbondale."

"You called and said you heard that I was living with—*fucking*—a man. Remember?"

"Yeah."

"And I denied the rumor at first but then said it was true?"

"Yeah, I remember," he says. "That was a difficult time."

"That was a difficult time for me too," I reply.

Even though we didn't speak for a few months, I wanted to thank you for your response. You never told me I was bad. You didn't physically harm me. You didn't kick me out of the family. Some fathers respond to gay children in terrible, more drastic ways. Some force their children into therapy to change their same-sex desire. Some kick their children out of the family. Some children kill themselves because of their parents' negative reactions. You didn't do any of this and I appreciate that.

He said:

I heard you were gay a few days before I called. I was upset that you hadn't called in more than a month. I thought I had made you mad. I mentioned this to a friend and she said that you probably didn't call because you were gay and were scared to tell me. I asked her why she thought you were gay. She said she heard a rumor you were.

"So you didn't call me immediately after hearing I was gay?" I ask. "I assumed you did."

He continued:

No. I first called Jack [one of his friends] whose son came out to him a few years prior. We met for dinner and I asked him, as a father, how he responded to a gay son. Jack said that at first he was upset and angry, but knew that he did and should still love and support his son. He told me that even though I may be angry, I should love and support you as best I could. The best that I could do was unfortunately to not speak to you for six months.

By thanking my father, I get a glimpse of his processing of my gay identity, a glimpse of the person who I perceived to have reacted negatively to my coming out. An act of silence that made me mark him as homophobic and irrational I now learn was an effort to understand my same-sex desire, an effort that I cannot disregard when thinking about our relationship. My father stifled his own anger and decided not to express it openly; he waited until he could better accept it. My story of the call and of us, a story that changes with every writing of the event and with every interaction with him, and a story that only focuses on one call in the relationship, thus disregarding the numerous times we speak every week and month and the numerous times we have

spoken in all of our years together. My story of the call and of us: overdetermined and destined for revision, a series of becomings, time after time.

## **Possibility: Talking Politics**

Hinging autoethnography and queer theory means using—conversing about—our experiences in practical ways for political purposes. For me, it means talking about an aunt who, after I said, "I am gay," no longer allowed me to visit her home; Brett, an ex-lover, who may have killed himself after coming out to his father; and a student who reported me to the president of the university for being out in the classroom—the student and the president didn't think "gay" had any part in a college curriculum. It means talking about the man who interviewed me for a job and who told me, during the interview, that he was gay but no one else at his university knew (out of his fear that his same-sex desire would tarnish his case for tenure); the female student who, the week after I came out to the class, wrote in a paper that she liked women but refused to talk about it with anyone (as of this writing, three years later, she has only told one other person); and the high school acquaintance, who, after inferring from my Myspace.com webpage that I date men, emailed me for advice on getting out of reparative therapy, therapy required and funded by his parents to "correct" his same-sex desire.

For me, it means punctuating casual conversations with political questions and listening to the answers. It means repeatedly interrupting students' casual conversations before or after class, in my office or in the hallway, when they say, "That's so gay" to ask that they consider and revise their language. When they object—because they didn't mean any harm, because the phrase doesn't mean anything, I keep the conversation going by asking more questions: "Would it be okay for me to say: 'That's so black,' 'That's so Jewish,' 'That's so Asian,' 'That's so deaf, dumb, and blind,' 'That's so white, middle-class, suburban kid who wants to study hard and get a good job after college' and listening for answers?" It means asking one of my best students why he swings his hips and punctuates "s" sounds when rehearsing a monologue

about the difficulties of coming out as a gay man that he's written as part of a performance about freedom of speech on university campuses and it means listening to his reply. It means staying on the line when my father calls to tell me that my mother ran into Cary, my junior high boyfriend, at the nursery where he works; when he tells me that Cary's best friend George is dead; when I hear my mother in the background correcting him, saying, "George isn't dead, he's gay; when my father repeats this information to me; when I say, "Well, gay is a whole lot better than dead"; and when my father says, "Depends on who you ask," so that I am able to ask in return, "Are you asking me?" and it means listening to his silent reply before telling him I love him and hanging up.

### **Possibility: Bearing Witness**

Hinging autoethnography and queer theory means conversing about ways that we—as teachers, writers, researchers, activists, humans—try to document, ease or eliminate, and bear witness to harmful social practices, occasions of relational violence, and the trials and tribulations of (desiring) normalcy. For instance, soon after I share my autoethnographies in the classes I teach (e.g., Adams, 2006, forthcoming), I often get students who come to my office to share their stories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer experience. "I'm not out to anyone," one says; "My parents disowned me," says another. The sharing of my politicized, practical stories motivates some people to share their stories with me. Together, we bear witness to the possibilities wrought in that telling.

For instance, sharing my open-ended, question-filled stories motivates other students to write their own queer experiences. Some say, "Your work gave me permission to do my research and my writing my way." Others say, "I am afraid of making myself vulnerable in my research as a young scholar—before getting a job, before tenure—but your work helps me see how I can take risks without being afraid." My stories and their stories, our stories and yours, together, make conversations about harmful situations go, make possible the ability to improve the world one person, family, classroom, conference, and essay at a time.

### **Possibility: Making Change**

Hinging autoethnography and queer theory means conversing about what it means to live as a realistic and idealistic activist, as able to recognize limits while trying to push limits further to make something new. Consider, for instance, a conversation I often have with others, typically students, who identify as Evangelical, born-again Christians—people who have adoration for a typically anti-queer religion.

"Do you believe in Jesus?" a student will ask, in my office, at least once a year.

"I believe in being a good person," I respond. "I try to respect everyone. I try not to lie, or cheat, or do harm to others."

"But don't you find homosexuality, your lifestyle, a sin?" the other probes.

"I find it impossible to separate a lifestyle, a sin, from the person, the sinner," I say. "I consider communication constitutive—one is what one says and does, one is what one experiences, one is what one believes. Consequently, calling homosexuality, my lifestyle, a sin is no different from calling me and my existence a sin [Adams, 2009]. Furthermore, I value love, any kind of love, stemming from mutual consent. Love doesn't see categories or mixings of race, class, age, sex, ability, or gender."

"Yes, but what if you don't go to heaven?"

"All I know is that I want, and try, to be the best person possible."

"You model this well, particularly in the classroom," the other says. "But I find it difficult to believe that you don't follow Christianity or embrace Jesus explicitly."

"I could tell you that I follow Christianity and embrace Jesus, and that I find homosexuality a sin if that's what you want to hear," I say, "but I also value our relationship, and, in this conversation, honesty. I don't want to lie to you."

I often hear friends—and, most recently, a noteworthy queer scholar—say that these religious others are not worth our (queer) time and should be disregarded. However, for me, being a realistic and idealistic activist means keeping difficult conversations going (Ellis, 2009) rather than pretend these people don't exist

or are not worthy of acknowledgment. It also means trying to engage in productive conversation, rather than something like

"Don't you find homosexuality, your lifestyle, a sin?" the other asks.

"No. And you're wrong, and homophobic, for thinking it is," I respond.

"But it is a sin ..." the other says.

"It is not ..." I reply.

Hinging autoethnography and queer theory means working our politics, innocently, into mundane conversation and refusing to chastise others' beliefs or make them out as monsters. It means recognizing, realistically, that people against same-sex desire exist, while, idealistically, find ways to productively question their beliefs—to make dissonance and trouble—together. It means recognizing that change happens in mundane conversation (hooks, 2000), and, in the words of Art Bochner, a refusal to "alienate the people we want to persuade."

## Possibility: Moving

Hinging autoethnography and queer theory means trading in the debates around legitimacy, value and worth and for conversations about practicality, necessity, and movement. It means twisting autoethnography and queer theory from prior usages, whether diminishing or valorizing, and put them to use for innovative, politicized purposes. It means never becoming comfortable, always already wanting and being ready to (re)create. It means asking questions about now and making conversation on the way to somewhere else. For me, it means talking and listening to my father.

We are watching college football. Well, he is watching college football and I am reading and keeping an eye on the television. Every now and again I ask a question, keeping myself in the game.

We are sitting in the living room of the house I purchased when I left my husband after I fell in love with a woman.

We are sitting in the living room of the house I am renovating from just this side of wrecked, just this side of despair.

We are sitting in the living room of the only house I could

afford in the neighborhood where my old house—the house I shared with my former husband—sits. I am renovating this house, *my* house, so that my son and I might start a new life that resembles, however modestly, the old one.

My father is here to help me with the renovation. On the few occasions that he has visited me without my mother along, he has come to work: on the kitchen, on the yard, on the windows, on the porch. And today, as we take a break from our work, our renovation of my life, I want to talk. I want to ask him something, but I am afraid.

"Dad," I begin, feeling clumsy, but determined, "We've not talked about the 'gay thing.' I feel like we should. What do you think about it?"

My heart is pounding. Why is it so hard to get the words out? I watch him. He studies the screen. "Well," he begins, his eyes fixed on the blur of grass and uniforms, "I don't understand it. I don't think it's right. But it's your decision and I want you to be happy."

"I *am* happy, Dad."

"That's all that matters."

I wait, but that's it. He doesn't speak. I try again. "Anything else you want to say?"

"No. As long as you're happy, your mother and I are happy."

Not wanting to push him, not wanting this stiff discomfort, I say, "Okay. I'm glad to know that. If there's ever anything else, or you want to talk some more. ..."

Halftime begins and my father changes the channel, looking for another game.

Exactly a year later, I am visiting my parents at their home in Iowa. I haven't seen my father since he had a stroke a few months before. A *stroke* a year after he'd been in Tampa, strong and sure, helping to renovate my house. He'd had heart attacks before. He'd had bypass surgery before. But this time was different. This time, he'd had a stroke, left side paralyzed for several months, emergency surgery to repair a perforated bowel, the fall in rehab, the colostomy bag, the emptiness in his eyes and speech. There's a clear and sure line that demarcates before and after the stroke. Before: active, opinionated, capable, kind, a caretaker,



body in the grip of unrelenting heart disease. After: dependent, angry, affable, unable to use his left arm but able to walk with a cane, forgetful in the immediate but a keen memory of the past, mind unsure of the structure and strictures of language and talk. During the visit, I sit with my father in the living room of his house, watching the evening news. My father is talkative and uncensored; speaking whatever comes into his mind. Sometimes this is funny, as when he needles my mother about the promises that "dinner will be ready in 15 minutes" she makes three times in 2 hours. Sometimes, this is enraging, as when he informs me that most states in the United States—including Iowa—have declared Spanish their official language, his racism seeping through his matter-of-fact delivery. And sometimes, my father's talk surprises, as when he asks about Noah and how he likes living in the renovated house. I tell him "Good," and "Yes," and he says, "Does he know you're a queer?" using a word his grandmother—my great grandmother—and not he, at least not before the stroke—would have used.

"Noah?"

"Yes, Noah. Does he know you're a queer?"

"Yes, Dad. He knows I'm gay."

"You can't be *gay*. You were married for 15 years for Christ's sake."

"Twelve."

"Twelve what?"

"I was married for 12 ... never mind. Yes, he knows I'm a queer," I say, then revise. "He knows I'm *queer*."

"Your mother and I should have known," he says, eyes on the set. "You were always strange."

At this, I smile. When I return home I'll tell Noah that he—that we—must keep asking questions and remember that our words imagine who we are and want to become. I'll tell him that our stories and our questions can be insurrectionary acts if we can just make room for movement, for what matters, for something more. And maybe you will ask and tell yourself—and your parents and children and students and teachers and readers and spectators—these questions and stories, too.

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