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SEXUAL DESIRE(S) AND THE DESIRE FOR INTIMACY: AN
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Nikolaos D. Kiskiras

August 2016

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Nikolaos D. Kiskiras

2016

SEXUAL DESIRE(S) AND THE DESIRE FOR INTIMACY: AN
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

By

Nikolaos D. Kiskiras

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ABSTRACT

SEXUAL DESIRE(S) AND THE DESIRE FOR INTIMACY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

By

Nikolaos D. Kiskiras

August 2016

Dissertation Supervised by Leswin Laubscher, Ph.D.

Sexual desire has traditionally been approached and investigated through reductionist lenses that have usually overlooked its complexity. In the past 150 years, it has mainly appeared articulated within medical and sexological discourses that have actively attempted to demarcate, categorize, and medicalize it. As a result, “healthy” and “pathological” forms of sexual desire have been constructed, whereas the social, cultural, political, and ideological forces that structure and shape it have been largely ignored. Furthermore, the conceptualization of distinct forms of sexual desire has given rise to the construction of equally distinct, ostensibly fixed, “healthy” as well as “pathological,” sexual identities.

This dissertation represents an attempt to resist the aforementioned hegemonic discourses of sexual desire. Far from articulating a coherent theory, it aspires to challenge fixed notions of sexual desire; historicize it and highlight its contingent, time- and

context-dependent nature; pose ethical questions as to how we sexually desire and what this means for our relationships to others; encourage others to engage into similar, ethical explorations; and ascertain whether such explorations can promise less violence to one another on the grounds of how we sexually desire and use our bodies. To these ends, its guiding research questions explore the cultural/social/political forces that shape our psychological and corporeal experience of sexual desire as well as our ability to feel sexually intimate with our lovers.

In an effort to better serve the purposes of this dissertation, the author draws on a wide variety of ideas and theoretical perspectives (Darwin's theory of sexual selection, Queer theory as loosely represented by Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler, Irigaray's feminist theory of sexual difference, and Lacanian psychoanalysis) and uses an autoethnographic method. Autoethnography allows the author to delve deeply into his personal history and provide detailed, critically examined, vulnerable narratives of social exclusion, psychological violence, stigmatization, and isolation. The author's autoethnographic stories explore the constitution of his sexual desire within the context of the Greek culture and describe his efforts to overcome his sense of dehumanization and pursue sexual intimacy. They also emphasize the importance of experiencing our emotions, exploring the materiality of our bodies, openly acknowledging and grappling with our internalized violence, and critically engaging with the idea that the personal is almost always social, cultural, and political. Finally, and most importantly, the author's stories invite the readers to temporarily forget about generalizability and, instead, focus on the elements that render their sexual desires unique, fluid, and porous.

DEDICATION

Στη μνήμη του πατέρα μου

Dedicated to the memory of my father

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this dissertation represents the culmination of a long, challenging, but, in the end, emotionally enriching and rewarding process. The beginning of my PhD in the United States almost coincided with the beginning of the financial crisis in Greece. Therefore, my dream to spend six carefree years, fully devoted to studying, honing my clinical skills, and immersing myself in new cultures, friendships, and relationships was shattered quite early in my stay in Pittsburgh. My constant concern over the situation in Greece would often leave me feeling drained, exhausted, and lonely and, on numerous occasions, I would contemplate quitting my PhD and going back to Greece. Yet, I have somehow persisted in reaching the end of the road and this is mainly due to the unwavering support of many people whose significant contribution I wish to acknowledge in this section.

First and foremost, I wish to thank my family. My late father, Dimitris, despite his ill health, never ceased to encourage and support me financially and psychologically throughout my stay in the United States. His generosity and emotional availability during the last years of his life were beyond words and I hope he knows, wherever he is, how grateful I will always be to him. My wonderful mother, Alexandra, has never ceased to amaze me with her ability to listen to, unconditionally love, and constantly encourage me to widen my horizons. Above and beyond anything else, she has always inspired me to become a better person; a truly priceless gift. Finally, my amazing sister, Nicoletta, has constantly made sure to keep me grounded and down to earth, always reminding me in

her own special way that there is a world which feels, lives, and loves beyond the strict, sterile confines of the Academy. Thank you all. I feel so lucky to be a part of our family.

I wish to offer my gratitude to my director, Dr. Leswin Laubscher, and my readers, Drs. Suzanne Barnard and Lanei Rodemeyer. Dr. Laubscher's caring support, perceptive guidance, intellectual openness, and wide erudition has allowed me to write the dissertation I've always wanted to write. There are no words to express how thankful I am to Leswin and how lucky I've always felt to be under his mentorship. To my readers, Drs. Barnard and Rodemeyer, I owe my warmest thanks for taking a genuine interest in my dissertation and coming up with wonderful suggestions for its improvement. I am fairly certain that I couldn't have hoped for a better dissertation committee. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

The Duquesne University (DU) psychology department has been an indispensable part of my life over the last 8 years. Its intellectual legacy, I suspect, will be following me and shaping my clinical thinking and practice for the rest of my life. Therefore, I wish to express my gratitude to all of its faculty members, clinical supervisors, and administrative staff. In particular, I wish to thank the following individuals: Dr. Russell Walsh, our Director of Clinical Training, for supporting me every step of the way through my clinical training; Dr. Jessie Goicoechea, the Director of the DU Psychology Clinic, for being constantly available whenever I needed extra supervision; Dr. Will Adams, for being a very compassionate supervisor during my first two years in the doctoral program; Dr. Stanton Marlan, for introducing me into Jung's thought and transforming our supervisory sessions into mystical, intertwining experiences of personal discovery, theoretical exploration, and clinical wisdom; Dr. Bruce Fink, for teaching *Case*

Formulation, the best clinical seminar I have ever attended, and introducing me into Lacan; Dr. Susan Goldberg, for being such a warm human being and repeatedly inviting me to present my clinical work in her *Forensic Psychology* classes; Linda Pasqualino, assistant to the Director of the DU Psychology Clinic, for being the wonderful person she is and always making me feel at home away from home; and Marilyn Henline, administrative assistant at the DU psychology department, for always having answers to my endless list of questions and relieving my anxiety. In addition, I wish to thank the staff in the DU Office of International Programs for making my transition to the United States much smoother than I had ever expected. Special thanks go to Joseph DeCrosta, Michelle Janosko, and Philomena Bolea.

There are no words to express my appreciation and gratitude to Dr. Robert Coufal. Apart from teaching me the lion's share of what I know about psychotherapy with sex offenders and providing me with excellent supervision over a period of three years, Dr. Coufal and his wife, Donna, have always made me feel like I was part of their family. Their kindness, warmth, and vast knowledge of individual and group psychotherapy represent a legacy that will always stay in my heart. In addition, I wish to express my warmest thanks to: John Benedict, one of the most accomplished clinicians I have ever known, for being such a wonderful co-therapist and generously sharing his group therapy wisdom with me; Janice Collins, for her invaluable administrative assistance, wit, warmth, and kindness; and Rechanda Willis, for sharing so many laughs and good times with me while working at Dr. Coufal's office.

I am deeply grateful to my dear friend and colleague Ibrahim Kurdieh, an incredibly courageous man with a heart of gold and a truly gifted clinician, who has

generously offered me the precious gift of a true friendship that (contrary to the now dominant trend of a relational, vacuous, totally superficial political correctness) has involved long discussions about and raw, emotional experiences of almost everything—joy, sadness, politics, happiness, soccer, conflict, philosophy, the Super Bowl, depression, psychoanalysis, companionship, gratitude, anger, loss, women, men, sex, desire, rejection, companionship, the Wall Street, Greece, the Palestinian people, Jordan, family, cars, food, psychotherapy, Rorschach, Buddhism, dreams, hope...this list is endless. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Ibrahim's friendship was among the main motivating factors for me to remain in Pittsburgh and keep moving forward. Thank you, Ibra. I've missed you very much and am looking forward to visiting you in Portland.

My life in Pittsburgh would have been far less emotionally enriched without the presence of my dear friend Chris Gorman. Apart from being my steady, most faithful, cinematic and gastronomic partner in crime (we must have been to every single Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, Vietnamese, Polynesian, Thai, and Greek restaurant in Pittsburgh), Chris has taught me in a most poignant way the tremendous importance of asking for help and pursuing meaningful, deep relationships with others. It fills me with immense happiness to know that I was there when Chris most needed me and that he was there when I most needed him. Thank you, my Chris. I've missed our cinematic expeditions and discussions about all the films we used to watch together. I've missed *you*.

I wish to express a deep sense of gratitude to my dear friend and colleague Carl Carman. I was fortunate enough to meet Carl at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital (TPH) during the first 2 months of my clinical internship there and I was deeply impressed by

his sincerity, humility, and sensitivity towards difficult psychiatric patients. We eventually became friends and, when my father passed away halfway through my time at TPH, Carl's gentle, supporting presence helped me go on and complete my internship. I will never forget our delightful meals at the *Mykonos* restaurant in Ewing, NJ as well as our endless discussions on "Megastars" (ha-ha!) and romantic relationships. In addition, I will never forget Carl's genuine interest in my dissertation and his encouraging words when he finally read the first draft. I've missed you, Carl, and, hopefully, I will be able to visit you soon and spend some time with you in New York City before you eventually go back to your "spiritual homeland," Kansas.

Apart from Carl, however, I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by a number of supervisors and colleagues at TPH who, in their own special way, also supported me when my father passed away. Hence, special thanks are due to Drs. Nicole Waldron, Claudia Viggiano, and Glenn Ryer as well as the wonderful interns in my cohort, Bradley Beckwith, Chris Bell, and Marisa Friedman.

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Chapter 1

Shame and Fear: An Introduction

*Che Fece...Il Gran Rifiuto*¹

*For certain people there comes a day
when they are called upon to say the great Yes
or the great No. It's clear at once who has
the Yes within him at the ready, which he will say*

*as he advances in honor, in greater self-belief.
He who refuses has no second thoughts. Asked
again, he would repeat the No. And nonetheless
that No—so right—defeats him all his life.*

—C. P. Cavafy², *Complete Poems* (2012, p. 189)

*Suddenly, Last Summer*³

The time has come to submerge myself into the deep oceans of writing. Yet, everything lures me away from making this formidable commitment. Summer is here and the heat of Greece is already writing intoxicating messages on my fat body, inviting me to beaches where my fatness, I presume, would be looked down on. What's more, Greece is on the brink of one more financial crisis. Newscasters' voices perpetually invade into any attempt at peace of mind, carrying messages of an imminent financial default that would doom the country to further catastrophe and isolation. Refugees from Syria and other war-torn, politically turbulent countries try to avoid their deplorable living conditions and build a better life for them and their children in Europe. They attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea in overcrowded boats that usually sink, often drowning

¹Following Daniel Mendelsohn, "The title—which means 'who made...the great refusal'—is a partial quotation of a line from Canto III of Dante's *Inferno*, which describes Dante and Vergil as they pass through the gates of Hell ("Abandon hope, all ye who enter here")" (Mendelsohn, 2012, p. 505).

²The exact transliteration of the poet's last name from Greek into English is "Kavafis." However, he is widely known as "Cavafy" in the Anglophone literary world and in order to avoid possible confusion I will follow that representational convention in this dissertation.

³ The title of this section references the play of the same title by Tennessee Williams.

everybody on board. For our part, we just watch without reacting. It's business as usual; which, of course, it is anything but.

As I am preparing to write an autoethnographic dissertation on sexual desire, I find myself enveloped by a sense of guilt. How dare I, in the midst of such global pain and misery, focus on sexual desire—a topic of such seemingly apparent, secondary importance in the broader scheme of things? More importantly, how dare I employ a methodology—autoethnography—which makes use of the researcher's autobiographical elements as its main sources of data (Ellis & Bochner, 2000)? That's right; the personal/social/cultural/political/sensual experiences of *my* sexual desire will make up the main body of this dissertation. Disgraceful, I know—not only is the topic an inconsequential one, but the manner of the topic's address a selfish indulgence.

But then I am struck with another thought.

I am wondering whether my sense of guilt is genuine. It is true that criticisms and charges of narcissism and self-indulgence are often leveled against autoethnography (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). It also makes complete intuitive sense that calamitous situations such as war, poverty, forced migration, and other humanitarian disasters are of inestimably greater importance than a bourgeois exploration of sexual desire. Are these, though, enough reasons to make me feel guilty about writing an autoethnographic dissertation on sexual desire? Or even, are these the “real” reasons for my guilt? And, following this thought further, given that I am already hesitant about writing this dissertation anyway, is guilt the true (t)reason? Despite the fact that I am far from indifferent towards the global reality that surrounds me, I feel that the answers to the aforementioned questions are “no, no, and no.”

I have been struggling to write this dissertation for the past 8 months (it is currently June, 2015) and I can readily call up a number of practical reasons and emotional problems to account for such delay. I had to successfully complete my clinical internship (first reason). My father died in January 2014 and I needed time and space to mourn his loss (second reason). Upon completion of my clinical internship I had to plan my move back to Greece (third reason). I had to say farewell to my life in the United States and readjust to my life in Greece (fourth reason). I had to do extensive reading for my dissertation (fifth reason). I settled back into a country on the precipice of economic ruin and uncertain about its future (sixth reason). All these reasons, especially my father's death halfway through my clinical internship, were serious enough to warrant a degree of delay and emotional withdrawal. These reasons certainly make explanatory sense. It was my visit to an Athenian theater, though, that added another dimension to my predicament.

On the 26th of December, one day after Christmas, I was invited to attend the premiere of a new production of Tennessee Williams' play, *Suddenly, Last Summer*. This play, for those unfamiliar with it, involves the mysterious death of a poet, Sebastian Venable, and its far-reaching repercussions on the lives of the other characters. Throughout the play, Sebastian remains present in absence and his story is gradually revealed through the characters' narrations and dialogues. Thus, we learn that Sebastian's relationship to his authoritarian mother, Violet Venable, was characterized by a high degree of psychological enmeshment. Each year they would choose an exotic destination to spend the summer, during which Sebastian would try to write poetry. When Violet suffered a stroke and could not follow her son to their regular summer vacation, Sebastian took his beautiful young cousin, Catherine, with him. Tragically, Sebastian

died during the vacation and Catherine returned back to the United States from Spain in a state of psychological disarray. What's more, she would claim that Sebastian was a homosexual who would use Catherine (and Violet in the past) to procure young, underprivileged men for him to sexually exploit. Towards the end of the play, Catherine reveals that Sebastian was killed and literally devoured by the young men he had sexually exploited earlier, a confession that redeems her but drives Violet insane.

A thorough, critical appraisal and analysis of Williams' important play falls beyond the scope of this dissertation. What is pertinent to my discussion here, though, is derived from a review of the same play, written by the Greek theater critic Minas Christides (1999) for the now-defunct Greek newspaper *Eleftherotypia* (*Free Press*). Specifically, Christides asserts that *Suddenly, Last Summer* represents a poignant exploration of the constant, tormenting terror felt by people whose desires threaten to "devour" them. The moment I read this phrase I knew...I have always felt in danger of being "devoured," almost annihilated, by my (sexual) desires. I painfully recall moments of desiring other men in the Athens metro (or elsewhere) and waiting for a hideous retribution in the form of beating by other men or social exclusion and marginalization. And now I feel utterly trapped. I am supposed to write a dissertation on *my* sexual desire and endure the constant threat of being "devoured" by my "[Lacanian] jouissance: a pleasure that is excessive, leading to a sense of being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet providing a sense of fascination" (Fink, 1995, p. xii).

It was not because of guilt that I have not been able to begin this dissertation—at least not guilt about some or other narcissistic academic indulgence in the face of the world's calamities and disasters; nor where the sensible reasons for my delay to "blame,"

even though they remain “true.” The fact of the matter is, though, that I have used those reasons and that guilt as smokescreens behind which the real culprits hid. Shame and extreme fear were—are—the masked culprits, lurking in the wings. And with this recognition—dare I say this unmasking—now, I am called like the people in Cavafy’s poem that opened this chapter, to utter the great Yes (I go on) or the great No (I give up).

But...what do the words “yes” and “no” mean? If, as Lacan claims (Fink, 1995), we are introduced into a state of radical alienation from ourselves the moment we learn to speak, whose “no” and/or “yes” will I utter? What if I want to simultaneously say “yes” and “no”? What if I am unable to decide whether I want to say “yes” or “no”? What if, by saying “yes,” I say/mean “no” and vice versa? What am I called upon to agree or disagree with? What am I saying yes and/or no to?

Trauma

The Windows

*In these shadowed rooms, in which I pass
gloomy days, up and down I pace
that I might find the windows.—For a window
to be open would be a consolation.—
But there are no windows, or I can’t
find them. And perhaps it’s best I don’t.
Perhaps the light will be a new oppression.
Who knows what new things it will show.
—C. P. Cavafy, Complete Poems (2012, p. 190)*

I do not know the answers to the above questions yet. Nor is there any guarantee I will ever have any. Perhaps I am not supposed to. Perhaps I am like Cavafy, fearing that opening newly found windows will only lead to uncharted territories, new forms of oppression, actual and symbolic. But I *must* commit myself to writing this dissertation. I

must understand that the choice of sexual desire as my topic was far from accidental. I *must* earn this PhD...

The presence of so many musts speaks to the magnitude of my fear, I suspect. I am at pains to convince myself that exploring the trauma of my sexual desire will not necessarily lead to psychological disintegration. But there are no guarantees of survival. Could, perhaps, Ann Cvetkovich comfort me a little? In her book *An Archive of Feelings* (2003) she writes: “I would like to see encounters with the traumatic past forge a path between a debilitating descent into pain and the denial of it” (p. 6). What a wonderful aspiration to have! Yet, I am wondering...to what end? Why should anyone undertake the task of exploring their trauma? Why should a gay/queer/whatever man (?) like me get involved with this process of soul excavation? Ann Cvetkovich responds:

Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that call into being collective witnesses and publics. . . . In its unorthodox archives, trauma resembles gay and lesbian cultures, which have had to struggle to preserve their histories. . . . Forged around sexuality and intimacy, and hence forms of privacy and invisibility that are both chosen and enforced, gay and lesbian cultures often leave ephemeral and unusual traces [that] offer alternative modes of knowledge (2003, pp. 7-8).

Carolyn Ellis once wrote about autoethnography: “Just when you think you can’t stand the pain anymore—that’s when the real work begins” (2004, p. xviii). This is the reason why writing this dissertation goes above and beyond earning my PhD in Clinical Psychology. My sexual desire, along with its pleasures, has been a source of immense pain. This pain has often rendered me silent, deprived me of words, and left me in psychological and mental states of meaninglessness and fear. And, although I have come to recognize that meaninglessness, pain, and fear are inextricably linked to life itself, I

always crave for opportunities to further appease them. Definitively appeasing them, I consciously know, is an illusion (I am not sure whether my unconscious is equally realistic).

In an attempt to put together Cvetkovich's and Ellis's quotes, I would suggest that, in writing this dissertation, I aspire to utilize my traumatic experiences in order to unsettle monolithic conceptions of sexual desire that result in marginalization and exclusion. Nevertheless, although a more detailed exposition of the aims of the dissertation will follow in a later section of this chapter, it is appropriate to issue a caveat here. My use of the word "trauma" in this dissertation is intended to encompass multiple meanings. Apart from the conventional ones (damage, loss, mourning), I agree with Cvetkovich who claims that "[t]rauma [. . .] embraces a range of affects, including anger, shame, humor, sentimentality, and more" (2003, p. 48). Additionally, again following Cvetkovich, I tend to view trauma not so much as a clinical entity in need of psychotherapy behind closed doors but "as a social and cultural discourse that emerges in response to the demands of grappling with the psychic consequences of historical events" (2003, p. 18). Therefore, trauma becomes the meeting point of processes involving affective reactions, social/historical developments, and forms of remembering.

There is, moreover, one more important conception of trauma that will permeate the pages of this dissertation. This conception is derived from Lacanian psychoanalysis and differs somewhat from Freud's notion of trauma which is marked by "an event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization" (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988, p. 465). Lacan understands trauma as the

encounter with “what resists symbolization absolutely” (1991, p. 66), in other words the encounter with what he calls the “real” (Evans, 1996). Dyess & Dean write:

[The Lacanian real] is the aspect of psychic functioning that constantly undermines cultural and symbolic functioning. . . . It disrupts meaning by inherently resisting adaptation to any imaginary or symbolic universe. Far from offering the assurance that its colloquial connotations might lead us to expect, the real allows us to account for the impossibility of such assurances or certainty of objective truth. In other words, what Lacan means by the real has nothing to do with what we understand by “reality”; instead, the opposite is the case: the real acts to subvert reality (2000, p. 738).

Lacanian psychoanalysis will be further explored in a later chapter of this dissertation. Suffice it to say here that, in referring to the Lacanian real, my intention does not consist in symbolizing those aspects of my experience that have resisted symbolization. Such an attempt would be naïve because it always requires the presence of a trained psychoanalyst. Rather, my intention is to point to the fact that a great deal of what we call “sexual desire” resists meaning and, as Derrida would probably conjecture, “suggests [an aporia], an absolutely impassable situation, one which cannot be resolved through rational analysis or dialectical thought” (Wortham, 2010, p. 15).

Invocations to Masculine Figures

Voices

*Imagined voices, and beloved, too
of those who died, or of those who are
lost unto us like the dead.*

*Sometimes in our dreams they speak to us;
sometimes in its thought the mind will hear them.*

*And with their sound for a moment there return
sounds from the first poetry of our music—
like music, in the night, far off, that fades away.*

—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, p. 180)

I will not be able to travel all the way to the end of this dissertation without help. Homer invoked muses and goddesses for help and inspiration. I will invoke masculine figures with penises and virile bodies, many (most? all?) who may well be ashamed or afraid of me. Gay or straight...it doesn't matter; I feel I have betrayed most of them. I dread most of them. One minute I feel I want to be accepted by every single man in the world and the next I just desire to punch them all. One minute I want to lie down on the floor like a bleeding cat and plead for help and the next one I just wish to disappear. Things would be so much easier if I knew what I want to tell them... Things are so much easier with women whose compassion towards me has always been so generous. Should I ask for men's compassion too? What if they scorn and beat me? Unresolved Oedipus complexes (Deleuze would disagree, of course...) are painful but there is no way back; I need to appease them (in my mind) and maintain a degree of illusory certainty that my words will not strike me back fatally. I will try to be as dignified as possible but, still...they have the upper hand. Here we go.

Invocation to my Father

Dear Dad,

In all honesty, I don't know how to start...I am embarking on writing a dissertation about my sexual desire and I want to ask for your help. Yet, we had never talked about my sexual life; you had never asked me and I had never broached the subject. Were you, perhaps, suspecting I am gay and you didn't want to face it? Were you indifferent to all matters sexual? You know...I never had the chance to tell you this but I was wondering about your experience of sexual desire. You had always seemed to me so sexually...dead. You were only interested in food, politics, and work. Even when you

were younger, you had never given me the impression of a man to whom sex could be slightly important. I could never imagine you having sex with mom or anybody else. Your main concern was food...food...food... You would always tell me “It’s extremely important to have food to eat!” Then, being the family breadwinner, you would always come back home carrying bags with all kinds of food. Were you, perhaps, having sex with food? I am joking, of course, but I swear I’ve had this thought several times in the past...

Dad...I love you and don’t want to be unfair to you. I know what you had gone through during the Nazi occupation; I am fully aware what food represented to you. You had never talked to me extensively about the great famine in Greece back then but I’ve always admired your tenacity and courage to survive on raisins for more than two years. This is why raisins had always made you feel nauseous ever since. This is why food had become the alpha and the omega in your life. Of course, unlike me, till the end of your life you had managed to remain fair and slender as a reed. I am still struggling with fatness...even more after you died. You see, when you died I was still doing my clinical internship in New Jersey where I knew almost nobody. I had to, somehow, comfort myself. So, I devoured incredible quantities of junk food and now I am paying the price. To be accurate, I’ve always been paying the price for my fatness even though, in my opinion, my fatness represents one of the greatest proofs of my love for you. I literally embodied every word you had uttered about food. And I did an excellent job...

Dad...ever since I realized I am gay at the age of ten I was afraid you would throw me out of the house. You had never given me any signs of brutality or aggression; you had always been so gentle, so sweet-natured...almost dead. But still...I was scared to

death, constantly preparing for the worst-case scenario: homelessness. As a matter of fact, even nowadays, whenever I feel sexually stimulated or touch the body of another man, an ominous sense of homelessness still haunts me to an extent; to a great extent, actually.

Dad...I need help (I already told you that). I won't be able to go through this "homelessness" without some comfort from you. You may ask, "What do you need all this 'sexual desire' stuff for? Why don't you put everything aside and make sure you have enough food to eat? Back then, during the war, I didn't have the time to think about my...sexual desire? Is that what you called it? Right...I didn't have the time to think about sex, I was just starving; pure and simple." I know dad but still...the riddle of my sexual desire is bleeding like an open wound. I feel incapable of sexually welcoming and hosting other bodies next to/near/in me to the extent I would like to..."I don't know what that means." I know you don't, you had always been so uncomfortable with physical touch and intimacy...I was literally craving for your hugs but, every time I hugged you, your body would feel tense, rigid, and petrified. It was obvious you were suffering and I gave up wanting to hug you. I wanted to cry out, "You have nothing to be afraid of; I won't hurt you" but I never did. Honestly, though...I've missed your affection so much. I know you loved me. But you never explicitly told me so except through generous offers of food and money...Am I being unfair to you?

Dad...your illness broke my heart. I need to tell you a secret, though. Deep down, a part of me felt closer to you when your anguish and suffering ultimately broke the shield of your masculinity. The prospect of mortality shattered it all to a million pieces. Two persons you will never meet (Loizos & Papataxiarchis, 1991) have claimed that

“men [in Greece] live in constant fear of being tainted by feminine attributes, an identification that results from losing control or entering a passive role” (p. 223). You had never been the typical Greek macho man. However, you would always make it clear that a man has certain attributes that differentiate him from women: soccer, math, science, and desire for women. As we both know, I failed resoundingly in all of the above. But your illness made all of this refreshingly insignificant.

Dad...I am grateful to your illness. It brought tears to your eyes and allowed you to soften up and accept my caress on your hair. I will never forget the look in your eyes; it was an amalgam of phrases and questions: “What is he doing? Am I losing control? I like this...Do I deserve your kindness? Don’t overstep my boundaries! Who are you? Am I masculine enough? Keep caressing my hair. Are you sorry for me? I am so old. I love you.” I kept caressing your hair, enjoying the reluctant blurring of boundaries and identities. We were gradually distancing ourselves from what our penises had been symbolically invested with. They were always there but not as obstacles to our mutual affection anymore. It was great. Thank you.

Dad...I sexually desire other men. Sometimes, less often, I desire women as well. I am gay, though; I consider myself a gay man and this has made me be fearful and ashamed for such a long time. Such feelings will always haunt me but I want to tame them a little. Psychotherapy has helped but I want more. Can you help (one more plea for help)? I suspect this journey into my sexual desire will also entail a journey into Greece and I can’t make it all by myself. Would you mind if, as I am increasingly digging into my sexual desire, I invoked your voice for help and inspiration? I won’t take up much of your precious time, that’s a promise. A caress on my hair and a few encouraging words

would suffice. Consider this as a retroactive gift; an overdue life lesson to your son who would always long to see you desire unreservedly but, instead, received the death in your eyes.

Dad...my plea is coming to an end. I love you. I miss you so much. If you only knew how many days I stayed motionless in bed, after you died, listening to Marvin Gaye's songs. I was away; I am sorry I could not have been there for the final farewell. But we have a chance now; we have the chance to dig some life out of death. I know that the wound of my sexual desire under no circumstances could compare to the horror of the Nazi occupation and political oppression in Greece. I want to assure you, though, that I won't succumb to arrogance and hubris. I simply desire some breaths of fresh air in my life. I also want to ask you for a last favor: as you are watching me write this dissertation, no matter what you feel, no matter what you think of...don't call me a queer. I will.

I love you,

Niko

Invocation to Marvin Gaye

Dear Marvin,

I have always been a great admirer of yours. Needless to say, I have always wanted to have sex with you. You don't need to protest, I know you were straight and I respect that. I have no intention of trying to convert you into a Gay⁴ man. I just need to talk to you for a moment.

Even though you may feel somewhat surprised, I wish to thank you. Your help during one of the most taxing periods of my life was invaluable to me. Your music, your

⁴ Marvin Gaye was born Marvin Pentz Gay II on 2 April, 1939 (Turner, 2000). However, "[in 1961 his] début single was released under the name Marvin Gaye rather than Gay because he was tired of people calling him 'Mr. Faggot' and 'Mr. Faggot Gay'" (Turner, 2000, p. 58).

silky, velvety voice, your body, your sex appeal, your songs...everything related to you infused life into my body and soul and kept me from plunging into a severe depression. You see, I was simultaneously grieving for my father's loss and working in a psychiatric hospital. I could have gone insane very easily and snapped at everybody but you were there; my guardian angel.

I don't want to lie to you. Your black skin has also been very appealing to me. I generally like Black men but I am not going to expand on this issue now. I just want to be honest with you and admit that my sexual desire for you, apart from your music and personality, has been triggered by your black skin as well. In a way, you would be right to accuse me of having fetishized you, turning you into a thing that only consisted of your Blackness (Hall, 1997). But that would not be the whole story.

As I was grieving for my father and was spending endless hours in bed, in my small room in New Jersey, I became very curious about your life. I even read one of your posthumous biographies (Turner, 2000)⁵and was horrified to discover the exact details of your murder by your father. He shot you with a gun that you yourself had given him as a Christmas gift. The age-long dispute between the two of you, your father's constant brutality towards you during your childhood years, your anguished efforts to gain his approval and recognition, all culminated in a single act of violence that tragically took your life. The detail of your murder that shook me the most was that your father shot you after you had tried to defend your mother. "You can't talk to my mother that way" you said to him (p. 207) and things just escalated quickly.

⁵All the biographical details on Marvin Gaye in this section have been derived from *Trouble Man: The Life and Death of Marvin Gaye* by Steve Turner (2000).

When I first found out about this exchange between you and your father, I remember, I was gasping for air. More than fifteen years ago I had been involved in a similar altercation with my own father. I had just come out to my mother as gay, her reaction was more than positive and accepting, and my gratitude to her was immense. She was the most important person in my life. One night, after going out with her friends, she was late and my father was upset. "You were supposed to call, why didn't you?? Who do you think I am, waiting here like an asshole? I was worried!" He was right but he was the enemy and my mother was my closest ally. "Don't you dare talk to her like that again! I'll kill you!" I still remember my father's disbelief and astonishment at my attack. He composed himself quickly, though. "Get lost! How dare you? I have every right to talk to her like that, you are in no position to dictate what I am or I am not allowed to say!" Our dispute ended there. He didn't shoot me but I still remember my terror, that pervasive sense of threat.

We both struggled for our fathers' recognition, Marvin; we both wanted to be loved by them, to be considered their equals; masculine enough. My impression is that we have both failed to an extent. People who knew you have described you as a very insecure heterosexual whereas, I know that very well, I am a very insecure homosexual myself. Is this the reason why we have both glorified sex so much? What was the motive behind our endless sexual encounters? Were we trying to compensate for our shared sense of failed masculinity? And yet...I am wondering my sweet Marvin...have we really failed? What keeps tormenting us? And what stands between us? Is there anything that unites us?

Don't be alarmed at my words, Marvin; there is no need. I won't touch you. I desire you, that's a given, but I am fully aware of your desire for women and I respect it. My desire for you will not contaminate you; my love for your music guarantees that. But I am asking you once more: have we really failed? Are we "failed males"? You may, of course, object to my question and claim that, as a gay man, I am the only failed male here. You desire women; your sense of masculinity is perfectly intact; complete; secure. Fine (I am angry and scared now but I want to keep up the dialogue with you. In my opinion, the opposite would be **the** true failure). If this is the case, why did you have problems with impotence and premature ejaculation? Why did you prefer looking to doing (you know what I mean!)? Why were you constantly worried that your father's cross-dressing was an inherited condition? Why were you always at great pains to find submissive sexual partners? Why were you always trying to appear macho despite your, as is commonly agreed upon by everyone knowing you well, mellow, gentle disposition?

I apologize, Marvin. Please, don't hit me...I know I was harsh with you and I won't pretend I didn't mean to. I wanted to hurt you! But, honestly, I have run out of patience with this "true, authentic masculinity" fucking shit! I feel fed up with all these "pure forms of being" which dictate how, when, and whom I should sexually desire! Enough with all these conceptions of sexual desire which ignore the historical, cultural, social, and emotional complexity of our desires! Honestly now...enough!

Forgive me, Marvin. My words were hurtful, I know. Life hasn't spared you problems, brutality, and abuse. I wouldn't like you to think that I do not recognize that. It's just that...I have also been a recipient of abuse and brutality to an extent. You are absolutely right; being black in the 50's and gay in the 21st century is a completely

different thing. Being brought up by a father who abuses you ad infinitum bears no resemblance to being brought up by an emotionally distant father. Our situations are far from comparable; the pith of your trauma is different than mine. Yet, we are both traumatized, Marvin. You are a traumatized heterosexual man and I am a traumatized homosexual man. If you had the chance to get to know me better, you would realize that I am not a firm believer in such categorizations. But we have to start somewhere. Consider these words:

The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression. The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base. Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place (Moraga, 2002, p. 26).

We have both suffered, Marvin. We have both been oppressed. I may never be able to fully comprehend the exact nature and degree of your suffering. You may never partake of my excitement of getting off with a man. I nonetheless extend an invitation to you. As Cherrie Moraga said, let us not rank our oppressions and sufferings. This does not necessarily mean we should gloss over our differences. No. Instead, it is an invitation to recognize the inevitable reality of our vulnerability; to acknowledge the elusive nature of our desires; to take a closer look at our fragmented selves; to be pleasantly surprised at not knowing; to embrace the unavoidable negativity of intimacy; to understand that “masculinity” or “femininity” are just words; and, finally (for the time being, at least), to realize that being in contact with our splintered selves, the impossibility of possessing absolute, meaningful truths, could, perhaps, safeguard a greater degree of peace among us.

Marvin, I want to make peace with straight men but I am not sure they want to make peace with me. This is not correct, though. I want to make peace with all men but I am afraid I am being ridiculous and utopian. You see, one of the aims of the dissertation I want to write is to dismantle simplistic, fixed conceptualizations of notions such as “men,” “women,” “gay,” “straight” etc. through a close, personal exploration of (sexual) desire. This goal, though, implies that what we call “manhood” is multiple and elusive. Therefore, who are the men I want to make peace with? Are they, perhaps, the ones who adhere to hegemonic forms of masculinity (Connell, 2005) that threaten me so profoundly? And what chance do I have of convincing them to look at masculinity from a different angle? What if they claim that such an endeavor would only be to my advantage? What if they call me an “abomination of nature” and preclude any possibility of a dialogue? What if they want to humiliate and exert violence on me?

Are you one of these men, Marvin? I would be heart-broken if you were because you are very important to me. Don't get panicky; I won't make a pass at you. I am gay, I know, but people matter to me a lot. My life does not revolve around sex. You are not important to me simply because I find you attractive. Rest assured; I won't touch you (I already told you that). May I proceed? May I explain why you are so important to me? Thanks Marv...

Each time I hear you sing I find it difficult not to cry. I don't just mean the music and the lyrics of your songs. It's you; the raw emotion you inject into every single interpretation; the way you offer your body, as if you are always ready and willing to participate in self-sacrificial ceremonies; the dizzying succession of lust, playfulness, excruciating pain, cry for help, ecstasy, sensitivity, jealousy, desire; your social

awareness; your descent into drugs and violence; your effort to heal yourself; your final resignation. Your vocal chords could—can—amalgamate it all into one and, at the same time, shatter it all into tiny pieces. A philosopher once said that “[when we speak] there is an implicit rhetorical question posed [. . .], a question of whether that speech will be received, but since speech is an action of the body, there is an added question: will that body be received as well” (Butler, 2004, p. 172). I am wondering whether, through singing, you were also trying to be received by us, your audience, as a body. I guess this question will always remain unanswered. What I know with some certainty, though, is that, in writing this dissertation, also being received and accepted as a body is one of my principal desires.

However, Marvin, as we both know, bodies are difficult to be ascertained. Your black skin and my fatness have taught us in the most poignant ways that our bodies are far from simply being “bodies” (Grosz, 1994a). We have been discriminated against and excluded because of our bodies; they carry meanings which are beyond our control. Most importantly, though, they are the means through which we relate to and communicate with others. They would, nonetheless, be utterly useless if “the links between [our bodies] and the social world [could not be] clearly drawn through emotion” (Lyon & Barbalet, 1994, p. 48).

That’s right Marvin. We need emotions to communicate with others; our bodies are not enough. Now, do you understand why you are so important to me? My earlier apotheosis of your ability to express raw emotion was not unintentional. I admire and envy you for that because you don’t give a fuck; you just do it. And this is a skill I want to master if I am to write a dissertation that is meaningful to me and, hopefully, a few

others. This is a talent I desire to cultivate if I am to get closer to other bodies. And I will definitely need your help, Marvin. I lose heart easily and you will need to remind me of my duty to remain faithful to my personal truth. You see, I have always tried very hard to conform to all kinds of norms. It's second nature. Therefore, each time you feel I am tempted to betray my inner truth in order to be accepted by the Academy, whistle or, even better, sing (preferably "Let's get it on"). I will get back on track immediately.

As this plea for help is slowly coming to an end, I am reminded of something you once said: "Fear is a horrible thing that we're faced with. But to overcome and conquer all fear is very dangerous as well as beautiful. It can cause your death because you become reckless. It takes a very wise man to conquer those things and then to exist" (Turner, 2000, p. 220). You know what, Marvin? I partially agree with you; fear is a horrible thing. However, I don't believe there is anyone really capable of overcoming and conquering all fear. This is something of a chimera, if you ask me, a symptom of our era that persistently demands that we be invincible; invulnerable. Thus, you may feel relieved to learn that your help (if you agree to help me, of course) will not consist in encouraging me to overcome my fear. On the contrary, I would appreciate it if you urged me to be more and more vulnerable and overwhelmed by my fear and shame. Advocates of autoethnography (don't worry about them, Marvin) claim that "the choice to make a self vulnerable [. . .] is often made with the hope that audiences will engage with and respond to our work in constructive, meaningful—even vulnerable—ways" (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013, p. 25). Marvin, I think this statement sounds familiar to you, doesn't it? You still remember, I guess, how your audiences were emotionally carried away each time you'd sing. Help me do the same and...who knows? Sharing our

vulnerable parts might inspire others to do the same. This would by no means resolve everything. Nevertheless, it would, perhaps, make life somewhat less of a lonely journey.

Before I leave you in peace, I want to go back to this “failed male” issue for a moment. I am in no position to know what your sense of masculinity had felt like. I’ve only heard rumors which, quite harshly, I mentioned to you earlier. There is one thing I know, though: if a “successful male” is typically considered someone who remains unendingly uptight and suppresses his vulnerability, then I am happy you have repeatedly failed to satisfy this model through your songs. And I would be more than delighted to have you as my ally in my personal struggle to also fail as a “successful male.” Of course, you may protest that your songs had nothing to do with failed or successful males and masculinities. It’s too late, Marv. Your songs do not belong exclusively to you. They never did.

So long my friend,

Niko

P.S. Rumor has it that “[you] thought sex could be a healing thing” (Turner, 2000, p.179).

What did you exactly mean?

Invocation to the Poet

Dear Mr. Constantine Cavafy,

First of all, I need to tell you that I am in a real dilemma as to how I should address you. Your poetry has been an indispensable part of my life since my early teenage years. I don’t think, though, that my familiarization with your poetry would justify my using your first name. Not to mention that I find the name “Constantine” too formal for my taste; I prefer its shorter version, “Costas.” Again, though, calling you

“Costas” doesn’t come naturally to me. You have been dead for almost eighty years now but you are always remembered as an exceptionally dignified member of the Greek community in Alexandria, Egypt. “Mr. Cavafy” would, perhaps, be more fitting. Yet, I am wondering: would it ever have occurred to me calling you “Mr. Cavafy” had I met you cruising for young male Egyptians in disreputable districts? No need to feel offended. What I mean is that, in my case at least, sexual desire does not usually go hand in hand with unnecessary formalities.

To me, you have always been “Cavafy, the Alexandrian poet.” Therefore, I am simply going to call you “Poet” since my primary acquaintance with you has been through your poetry. Needless to say, your poems are of great importance for the dissertation I aspire to write; your help will generally be needed in various ways. Before we talk about my dissertation, though, I wish to touch upon another issue which has been brewing in my mind for some time now. Hopefully, your experience as a writer yourself will guide me wisely.

Futility

Earlier in this chapter, I referred to my difficulty starting the writing process of this dissertation due to feelings of fear and shame. David Halperin (1995), though, has convincingly argued that there may have been one more reason for this delay. I beg your pardon? Yes, you are absolutely right my dear Poet, how could you have known? David Halperin is an English Professor and queer/gender theorist teaching at the University of Michigan...Michigan is in the United States...You don’t know what a queer/gender theorist is...Well, neither do I exactly but if you will be patient with me we could explore these issues later in this dissertation. Can I go back to what I wanted to tell you? Thank

you. (By the way, I forgot to tell you that Halperin is a gay writer. Yes, I know you don't know what "gay" means but I am sure you'll understand right away: he is a man having sex with men, OK?).

Halperin claims that all gay writers and intellectuals (all non-heterosexual writers, I would suggest) "share [. . .] the problem of how [as gay men, academics, and public intellectuals, they] can acquire and maintain the authority to speak, to be heard, and to be taken seriously without denying or bracketing [their] gayness" (1995, p. 8). In other words, he claims that non-heterosexual writers and intellectuals are much more vulnerable and exposed to "accusations of pathology and partisanship" (p. 8) that could potentially lead to disqualification of their work. Furthermore, such accusations render the writing process futile and necessitate non-heterosexual writers' constant struggle to repeatedly claim their authority.

It's my conviction that Halperin is making a valid point, my dear Poet. This sense of futility regarding the writing process of this dissertation has been following me since the initial stages of the dissertation proposal. The idea lurking in my mind, I guess, is, "What's the point of writing it? I am not going to change anything; the sociopolitical establishment that orchestrates my and other minorities' oppression is too strong and rigidly built. It's true; a lot of progress has been made during the last decades. Again, though, why should I bother?"

A weird thing has just happened, my Poet. It's the first time I am sobbing ever since I started writing the dissertation. If you only knew how tired I feel...I am tired of defending myself, explaining, trying to explain again...I just want to live a normal life but I don't know what "normal" means to me. Even the fact of choosing this dissertation

topic feels like a sort of defeat to me...as if I have chosen, once more, to explain myself and beg for crumbs of love and understanding. It's humiliating. And yet...I am also crying because I do bother. I can't help but bother. I don't want to bother but I do. And, quite paradoxically, I am crying because I haven't bothered enough. I haven't defended myself to the extent I would have liked to. I haven't allowed myself to love and be loved as much as I have wanted to (the part of myself which feels I don't deserve to be loved is quite strong, mind you). I haven't welcomed pleasure as much as I have desired to. In short, I am crying because I bother and because I don't want to bother anymore. I want to live a "normal" life, the "heterosexual" life, but I am painfully aware of my inability to contain myself in and dwell on it. And if I don't bother, I will die desiring a space that will never be mine instead of discovering what's out there for me...

Is there anything out there for me, Poet? I am asking you because you are more experienced and because, despite your closeted life, you kept writing poetry. However, poetry did not seem to significantly help you. You died as isolated and lonely as you had always been. As you see, it is of vital importance to me to understand what kept you writing; otherwise, I won't be able to devote myself to writing this dissertation...

You remain silent. Is that a faint, sarcastic smile touching the corners of your mouth, Poet? Do you think I am being naïve and childish? Am I, perhaps, harboring grandiose illusions about the connection between writing and emotional recuperation? Should I lower my expectations? You still remain silent, always looking at me through your elegant glasses, and smile. I want to understand you but you refuse to reveal your secrets. Would you mind if I tried alternative pathways to reach you?

Attempts at Interpreting the Poet

It may come as a surprise to you but, nowadays, you are considered among the most famous and widely translated Greek poets of the 20th century. I was fourteen years old when I discovered and took refuge in your poetry. My fascination with you skyrocketed when I found out you were a gay man. I remember thinking to myself, “If a gay man like Cavafy is so highly respected in Greece, then I shouldn’t be worried about my future as a gay man.” Nevertheless, your homosexuality was very rarely mentioned in Greece. What’s more, your openly homoerotic poems on sexual love and desire were heavily overshadowed by those describing social and political life in the ancient world. As usual, in Greece we prefer to bask in the glory of Ancient Greeks; it’s painful to face the emotional and social division, the wars, the political violence and oppression of our modern history.

In seeking to understand you, my dear Poet, I have resorted to a number of literary theorists who have attempted to interpret your work. That’s right; you are, nowadays, studied all over the world. Two of the most important interpreters of your work are Daniel Mendelsohn and Dimitris Papanikolaou. You don’t know them but they have both devoted a great deal of their scholarly activity to deciphering the significance of your poetry and its relevance to the modern world. Mendelsohn (2012) has recently published a new English translation of your published, unpublished, repudiated, and unfinished poems along with an illuminating introduction to your oeuvre. Papanikolaou (2014), on the other hand, has offered us a fascinating study of your poetry through the interpretive lenses of Michel Foucault’s and Queer theories (I am going to explain these theories in detail in a later chapter of the dissertation. For the time being, to facilitate the

process of your understanding, I am going to explain everything in plain language). In examining the work of these scholars, my hope is that a parallel will be drawn between the purpose of your poetry and the objectives of my dissertation. Shall we begin with Daniel Mendelsohn? Let's go!

You would be proud of him, Poet. Mendelsohn's English translation of your poems is among the best I have ever encountered. Years of patient toil have produced, in my opinion at least, a work of emotional precision and interpretive clarity. The details of your life will not be emphasized here (I think you would appreciate that, given the fact you mostly lived your life in relative secrecy) but a few biographical elements wouldn't hurt. You were born in Alexandria, Egypt, to Greek parents in 1863. You spent some of your childhood years in England before you went back to Alexandria where you spent the rest of your life and died in 1933 at the age of 70. Your father's death, when you were 7 years old, marked you psychologically and caused your family financial problems. You were especially attached to your mother who, I have heard, would dress you in girls' outfits. You mainly worked as a clerk at a government office under the Ministry of Public Works of Egypt (Woods, 1999).

As Mendelsohn would say: what a relatively uneventful, unexceptional life! Yet, my impression has always been that, behind the serene façade, oceans of passion were lurking. Do you remember my reference to your "cruising" nights at the beginning of my invocation? Well...there have been people—acquaintances of yours—describing you as going through a trance state during those moments. You would wait in quiet, dimly lit corners of Alexandria for handsome Egyptians to appear. In case a friend saw you, you would just mumble "hello" and keep scanning the space, instantly shutting out of your

attention field anything unrelated to your sexual desire. Where and whom you met...nobody knows. To this day, your sex life is still covered under a mantle of mist and secrecy. We can only deduce your thoughts about it from your poems...

Mendelsohn (2012) writes that your oeuvre is ostensibly divided into two categories of poems: a) historical poems set in the past, and b) poems on sexual love and desire set in the present. His view, though, is that this division is deceptive and he bases his argument on your self-description as a “poet-historian.” He claims that you “[saw] history with a lover’s eye, and desire with a historian’s eye” (p. xxi). What could that, possibly, mean? Mendelsohn says that, regardless of their content or setting, your poems are permeated by the unifying element of Time. In other words, your poetry does not espouse a one-sided attitude towards an interpretation of events; instead, it attempts to explore and articulate the transformation of our understanding of life through the passage of time. It also conveys the message that, no matter how hard we may try to understand our present thoughts and actions, “only time reveals whether the play is a tragedy or a comedy” (p. xxxvi). The past always dwells in the present which can only be understood through a glance in the past.

Specifically referring to your poems on sexual love and desire, Mendelsohn (2012) points out that, upon reaching your late forties, you came to write about your homosexuality in the most overt, unapologetic way. It was more than evident that the lovers in your poems, although they had been unidentified in the past as regards to their sex, were both male. What was the reason for this radical change? Was that the time when you came to understand who you truly were in relation to your sexual desire? Could it be, perhaps, that you had to reach the age of fifty before you finally overcame

your fear and shame of directly articulating the intricacies of your sexual desire in their full specificity and complexity? Let's see what Dimitris Papanikolaou (2014) has to say on this issue.

Papanikolaou does not dispute the existence of potential feelings of shame and fear during your life in Alexandria. After all, you were a closeted gay man, living at the turn of the Twentieth Century in a conservative country of the Arab world. What he contests, though, is a widely predominant literary understanding of your poetry as the effort of a gay man to articulate his sexual desire through intricately secretive means in order to avoid social marginalization and exclusion. He also opposes the view that explains your subsequently explicit reference to homosexual desire as the result of a eureka effect; a sudden realization, in other words, of who you "truly" were with respect to your sexual desire that drastically helped you express it unveiled. Instead, he argues that your poetry represents an endeavor to situate sexual desire within its distinct social, cultural, political, historical, and corporeal contexts. Yours is not a poetry that conceals, allegorizes, or discovers the "true nature" of sexual desire; on the contrary, sexual desire, your sexual desire, inspired you to produce poems that unsettle your and our certainties and urge us to react and break out of our silence. The direct portrayal of homosexual desire in your later poems did not stem from the realization of your sexuality; you knew it all along, anyway. Rather, as Papanikolaou claims, it stemmed from the realization that, although you had always wanted to talk about your sexuality and desire, you had been positioned as a subject utterly incapable of doing it; a subject, in other words, trapped into a state of (self)-imposed silence and the desperate effort to break out of it. In fact, your predicament (mine too...) brings to mind the words of a woman who spent a great

deal of her life defending gays and highlighting the importance of emotion. I want to share these words with you:

To alienate conclusively, definitionally, from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire is a terribly consequential seizure. In this century, in which sexuality has been made expressive of the essence of both identity and knowledge, it may represent the most intimate violence possible (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 26).

Are the above ideas all Greek to you, my dear Poet? Come on! How could this be? We are both native speakers of Greek! OK, I am cutting it out... I am fully aware that there may be a huge discrepancy between the agonizing moments of writing a poem and its theory-driven, emotionless analysis by so-called experts. You are right to protest. Nevertheless, it is my strong conviction that Papanikolaou has provided us with a strong toolbox of ideas that beautifully illuminate your work as well as the purpose of my dissertation. Shall we unravel his ideas a little more? I promise I will use as little theoretical jargon as possible. I want to make sure that, before embarking on complex theoretical explorations in a later chapter, the average reader will be able to understand why this dissertation is so important to me. What is the purpose of writing a dissertation if it is to be read only by academics? Total failure!

Papanikolaou, inspired by Foucault, states that sexuality is not to be understood as a purely biological or psychological process. Even though the disciplines of biology and psychology have significantly contributed to its greater understanding, sexuality is more than that; it is equally affected and shaped by factors pertaining to the use of language; the ideological conceptualizations and management of the body; the political and social circumstances of a distinct historical period and society; and, finally, issues of knowledge and power. In short, sexuality and sexual desire, whatever these terms may signify (this

problem will be addressed later), are not entities waiting to be solely discovered in an individual's body and/or mind. Instead, they occupy liminal positions to be traced between the personal and the social domains of an individual's life; positions that are subject to construction and reconstruction and that consist of words, pleasures, desires, bodies, ideologies, regulatory practices, and varying degrees of access to knowledge.

Papanikolaou claims that the aforementioned ideas were known to you, Poet. That's why, he writes, homosexual desire in your poems is never presented as detached from the concrete reality of the world and the historical context within which it is experienced. It is always connected to social norms that reject and to a form of power which always regulates; it is linked to memory that tries to understand and interpret as well as to a body that is transformed into a site upon which norms of all sorts are inscribed; it is inextricably associated with the loss of others as well as the loss of ourselves as we try to navigate ourselves, name, and experience our sexual desire through a dense network of existential givens: time, body, society, power, absence. According to Papanikolaou, sexual desire in your poems is never about sexual desire per se: it is about sexual desire as experienced through and connected with the above-mentioned network. It is about our effort to surmount that network, our realization that we are never able to leave it behind, and, finally, notwithstanding this awareness, our unwavering persistence in overcoming it.

Papanikolaou has more interesting ideas to share with us, Poet. He argues, for example, that your emphasis on historicizing sexual desire, on tracing, in other words, its distinct characteristics during specific historical periods, has revealed its variable and contingent character. An individual's experience, structure, and quality of sexual desire,

no matter what this individual's sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or religion may be, are necessarily bound to a specific historical moment that shapes their contour. You may ask: aren't there any stable, common attributes of sexual desire through time? After all, males and females have been experiencing physiological responses such as erection and vaginal lubrication for some thousand years now. What's more, you could also argue, we are all situated in space and time; these, despite our differences, are existential dimensions experienced by everybody. Aren't they sufficient to secure a more or less similar experience of sexual desire among human beings?

Your questions, Poet, are important; I would be the last person to claim that each one of us leads an isolated life with absolutely no common ground among us. However (I will be brief here because these issues will be further explored in a later chapter), these points of commonality have traditionally served as a vehicle for rigid categorizations of sexual desire that typically divide people between "healthy" and "pathological," and ignore the numerous, fluid patterns and pathways of convergence and divergence that invalidate them. Take you and me, for example. We are mainly attracted to and fall in love with men, right? I guess we both experience an erection when we are sexually aroused, right? There are times when we both masturbate, right? What's more, we kiss, caress, penetrate, and allow to be penetrated by other men's bodies, right? We are both Greek males, right? Yes. Now, do we assign the same meanings to our erections and sexual encounters with other men? Have our two bodies been disciplined and regulated in exactly the same way? Remember: you lived in Alexandria at the turn of the 20th century and I live in Athens at the turn of the 21st. Do we succumb to or sabotage pleasure and love in the same way? Have our sexual desires been unfolded, injured, enriched, and

metamorphosed through time in the same way? Is it possible that our sexual desires may be sharing varying degrees of affinity to and incompatibility with those of people belonging to all sexes, gender identities, cultures, and races? Who can tell where these boundaries of similarity/dissimilarity begin and end? Whose interests are served by these boundaries?

I am convinced, though, that the above-mentioned speculations are nothing new for you; your poetry gives strong evidence of wrestling, metaphorically speaking, with these ideas. In attempting to figure out the reason why you could not articulate your (homo) sexual desire, in persistently trying to historicize it and ascertain its temporary building blocks, you have exercised what Papanikolaou calls the “ethics of the vulnerable self” (2014, p. 39). In other words, you have thrown yourself into a process of constant self-definition and self-refutation in order to speak about your sexual desire in connection to history and others, elucidate your volatile speaking positions, and practically demonstrate how time, history, society, culture, and language construct and deconstruct your subjectivity. Most importantly, this endeavor has taught you that a rendering of sexual desire at a certain point in time may prove to be utterly irrelevant and/or invalid at a later time.

The “ethics of the vulnerable self,” however, has also served the purpose of expounding your views on ethics on the whole. Ethics, as Papanikolaou explains (largely inspired, again, by Foucault), refers to how we situate ourselves within a network of relationships with others; how we organize our experiences and desires that lead to this situating; how, in situating ourselves, we take up the responsibility of relating to others and ourselves; how, in taking up this responsibility, we allow others to occupy their

distinct spaces, desire, and exist; how, in other words, we practice and cultivate our freedom in order to, simultaneously, develop a sense of deep care for the others. What were the means, Poet, by which these ethical questions were weaved into your poetry? We are turning to Papanikolaou (2014), again, for help.

Your poems on sexual love and desire, he asserts, are not just poems that dispassionately portray and describe men loving and desiring other men. Although they were brought into existence by your poetic imagination and yearning to speak about your sexual desire, their purpose is neither to simply inform nor to present a version of (homo) sexual desire that revolves around itself. On the contrary, Papanikolaou argues that your poems put forward ways of experiencing love, desire, joy, and pleasure that are radiated away from the poems themselves. The above-mentioned affective experiences do not simply refer to and narcissistically return back to you, the Poet; they, instead, branch out to the characters of the poems, those who observe them in the poems, the readers of the poems, and, finally, you, the Poet, carrying all your past voices, present dispositions, and visions for the future. Your poems on sexual love and desire, in other words, trigger and invite “sharing, participation, understanding, and empathetic [. . .] involvement” (Papanikolaou, 2014, p. 290; my translation). Through articulating your sexual desire, you situate yourself, take the responsibility to relate to us (and yourself), and encourage all of us to wonder about the ways we desire, enjoy, and identify with others. Your poetry demands that we also situate and ethically involve ourselves into posing questions such as: Why do I (not) want to have sex with you? How does my body (not) relate to yours when we make love? Why am I (not) appalled by the color of your skin? How does your social class (not) prevent me from sexually desiring you? Why/how do I (not) sabotage

my sexual desire? Would I still desire you if we both lived in Nazi occupied Greece? What is the role of violence and death in sexual desire? Is there a connection between the experience of sexual desire and our ability to feel intimate to our sexual partners? Is sexual desire only “sexual” or should we aspire towards a more inclusive, broader, ever evolving conceptualization?

Therefore, my dearest Poet, rest assured. Nowadays, there are people (count me among them) who ardently defend your work against accusations of solipsism and narcissistic self-absorption. They—we—know, as Papanikolaou tellingly suggests, that the confessional character of your poetry on sexual love and desire targets the medical, sexological, and pathologizing conceptualizations of (homo) sexual desire. The concrete, contextualized, volatile, corporeal, and emotional details of sexual desire in your poems are opposed against the violence of abstract theorizations that demarcate, categorize, fix, and aim at promoting conceptions of sexual desire that are characterized by closure and finitude. Most crucially, your emphasis on the concrete nuances of sexual desire and the importance of constantly redefining it points to the fact that “the only way to expose, destabilize, and resist to external and internal forces is to, persistently and obsessively, leave [our] mark” (Papanikolaou, 2014, p. 71; my translation). In other words, our sexual desire cannot survive sweeping, pathologizing generalizations and definitions unless its unstable specificity and variability is constantly laid open, described, explored, refuted, and redefined.

Resistance

David Halperin (the philosopher I mentioned before) writes that “Foucault’s aim [. . .] was not *liberation* but *resistance*” (1995, p. 56; italics in original). This is also my

aim, Poet. I still don't feel that writing this dissertation could change anything in this world; that's true. Seeing that I won't graduate unless I write it, though, I want to clarify that liberating myself or others is not my goal. Articulating a coherent theory of sexual desire is not my goal either. Instead, I want to follow in your footsteps and embark on a literary—even psychological (am I not a psychologist?)—experiment on resistance. I have no intention of writing poetry, of course! I simply want to narrate segments of my life in order to attempt what you have attempted: challenge fixed notions of sexual desire; historicize it and highlight its contingent, time- and context-dependent nature; apply the “ethics of the vulnerable self” (Papanikolaou, 2014, p, 39); pose ethical questions as to how I sexually desire and what this means for my relationships to others; encourage others to engage into similar, ethical explorations; and ascertain whether such explorations can promise less violence to each other on the grounds of how we sexually desire and use our bodies. If some of the above-mentioned goals are touched upon in this dissertation, Poet, I will be more than happy.

But...wait a minute! I am asking for your help but you may be thinking to yourself: “I don't know anything about this guy. What has motivated him to choose this topic? What are his research questions? How is he going to structure this dissertation? What kind of help does he need from me? He knows that history is my passion (well, men too...)! How am I supposed to help him without knowing anything about the history of Greece during the last...82 years?? I died in 1933, for God's sake!” Forgive me, Poet, you are absolutely right! I will try to rectify these omissions as promptly as possible, starting with my personal motives for choosing this dissertation topic. So far, I have extensively referred to the emotional reasons behind my choice. However, I think I have

been less successful in showing how these personal/emotional reasons are linked to the social/political/cultural factors affecting our experience of sexual desire. I have a suggestion, then. How about sharing with you a short autoethnographic story like the ones I am going to write in the later chapters of this dissertation? In this way, you will catch a glimpse of the autoethnographic method as well as follow the subsequent discussion more easily. Ready?

Desiring in America

It was impossible to forget George Seferis.⁶ “Wherever I travel, Greece wounds me,” he wrote more than 70 years ago and his ambiguous poetic verse was a constant, haunting presence as I looked out of the window on my first day in Pittsburgh. A Greece that hurts by an embrace that feels poisonous...a Greece that hurts when you are absent, frantically and painfully nostalgic of its sun and the ominous blue of the Aegean Sea. Despair. And, so often in moments of suffering, sexual desire; intact, invincible, whispering enticing words and offering promises of euphoric oblivion. “Get someone to have sex with.” But more than a year passed until I found someone to have sex with in Pittsburgh. His name is not important, his skin color is. Black; he was my very first black date. I approached him like an exotic fruit. Reluctantly, excitingly, my mind was already generating ideas of what it would feel like having sex with him. Would his penis be huge? How would his skin smell? Questions...there were so many questions in my mind when I first met him...and fantasies. But the prevailing sense was that of a bitter-sweet, poignant connectedness. We both belonged to minorities in more than one way. I was a fat, gay Greek. He was a Black, gay American. What a wonderful opportunity to open our hearts, connect, and share our despairs. I fervently desired to be with him because he would

⁶ George Seferis was a Greek poet (1900-1971) and Nobel laureate in literature (1963).

understand me without my uttering a single word...his black skin could guarantee that! He started telling me his story. He was the child of a racially mixed couple: Caucasian mother, Black father. He was working for an advertising company. He was single. He didn't like hookups. He hoped to find and love a nice white guy...A nice white guy? Yes, he liked white guys better; Black men didn't seem attractive to him. Why? He didn't know. We changed the subject. He brought me back home and we kissed in his car, black and white kissing lips in the process of opening salivary channels of interracial communication. And hands touching skins that promised to maximize sexual desire. A sexual desire that is so much more than erect penises and tactile sensations...That night we left each other with the vague promise of seeing each other again and, going up the stairs leading to my apartment, I experienced a bizarre feeling of anger and pain. Then, thoughts...I didn't want him to like me for my white skin, was that all he wanted? Couldn't he see all the other internal qualities I possessed? Furthermore, what did it mean he did not like black men? How could a black man not like black guys? It felt to me like he was rejecting his own identity! And then...if I saw him again, what would I represent? The white trophy? But my anger subsided soon and I was flooded with a feeling of sadness mixed with profound affection for both of us; because, after all, I was not innocent. There were a number of reasons why his black skin had intensified my sexual desire towards him, ones I was utterly ashamed to admit. Yes, I was emotionally moved by him being gay and Black at the same time, him being obliged to fight two battles at the same time. But I was also pulled toward him because of my assumption that black people in America are poorer than whites and, thus, it would be easier for me, a poor graduate student, to be accepted by a black man without being snubbed and

considered a member of the “white trash.” And, no matter how difficult it was to admit it, he was also my black trophy, a man from a different race added to the list of men I had slept with, a spicy topic of discussion with my friends back in Greece. As I was looking at the empty street outside my window that night, I was wondering whether I would have been attracted to that man had he been white and the answer was clearly no. But this negative response was unfair...It was unfair toward that man not because political correctness dictates that we think otherwise but because, ultimately, I never, not even a single moment during the three hours we spent together, went beyond the black color of his skin. That was the focal point of our encounter; who we were as human beings didn't matter that much. Our skin colors, this undisputable fact of our mutual otherness, also constituted the common denominator of our sexual desire, burdened by different significations but leading to a similar outcome: the fetishization, almost exploitation, of the other and his difference for reasons which have to do with sexual desire as well as with a zillion other factors. Still looking outside of my window, I couldn't help feeling lonely and trapped in a spider's web I desperately wanted to break out of. And that relentless question kept tormenting my body and mind: What/who do I desire when I sexually desire another human being?

“Bears” and Other Species of the Animal Kingdom

Poet, the aforementioned incident represents only a small fraction of my personal navigation through the conceptual, physical, and emotional mazes of sexual desire. Through the years, being sexually attracted to someone has propelled me to experience a multiplicity of emotional reactions: shame, fear, joy, anger, compassion, affection, hatred are some that come to immediate mind. What's more, the perception of my sexual desire

has been highly dependent upon the person who, each time, exemplified the embodiment of my sexual satisfaction. Body shapes, mother tongues, social classes, skin colors, political affiliations, cultural backgrounds, character traits, life experiences, sexed bodies, and gender identities represent some of the subtle and less subtle factors that have constituted the form and quality of my sexual encounter with another person.

The story, though, doesn't end there. How could it end there when my sexual desire has often symbolized different things in different circumstances, such as an act of subversion and emancipation during my military service or a pull toward life during my first year of psychic deadness in the United States? Again, how could it end there when my sexual desire is constantly negotiated with, defined, and redefined by my overlapping roles as a human being, living in gendered societies that are shaped by political and ideological forces? Let us count: biologically male, Greek (corrupt? lazy?), Caucasian (Black according to Northern Europeans?), middle-class (bankrupt?), homosexual (bisexual? queer?), hairy (reminiscent of earlier human species?), fat (gluttonous?), clinical psychology trainee, officially Christian Orthodox (unofficially an atheist)...the list is endless.

Yet, my dear Poet, the above-mentioned multiplicity of roles and interactions with society and culture has not been translated into a corresponding conception of multiplicity as regards my sexual desire. Time and again I have been (“politely” and violently) forced by various groups of people to conceptualize my sexual desire as fixed and unaltered. In addition, I have been subjected to various forms of violence each time my desire would be expressed. All my efforts to achieve this “fixity” as well as my fear

to express myself have rendered my sexual desire as *the other*, an indispensable part of myself which is simultaneously *in me* and *in exile*.

As a result, if I tried to describe in brief how I have experienced my sexual desire through time, it would be encapsulated in the phrase “distinct species.” As a self-identified gay man, I have always been the *other* for heterosexual men and, to a lesser degree (!), heterosexual women. Surprisingly enough, though, my “otherness” has also played a pivotal role in my relationships with people who also identify as non-heterosexual, be it gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender etc. One of the most characteristic examples that attests to my being perceived as other by my fellow non-heterosexual “comrades” is my hairy, chubby body and my, at times, facial hair. These bodily features automatically classify me as a member of the “bear culture,” a subculture within the gay male cultural strata that rose to prominence in the late 1980s (Cornelius, 2000). My classification as a “gay bear” affiliates me with a distinct group of people (gay, male, hairy, chubby men) and simultaneously excludes me from being identified as a member of others.

Reactions to my “bear” physical appearance have varied somewhat. Other “bears” typically perceive me as “one of them,” supposedly projecting an image of rugged masculinity and adopting an easy-going and laid-back approach to life. It goes without saying that I become “other” to them when they realize that I am not exclusively attracted to hairy men or that I do not slavishly follow the “bear” lifestyle. “Non-bears,” especially gay men who regularly exercise, shave their bodies, and meticulously take care of their appearance, view me as a sexual being of a lesser God, the representative of a “gay species” who is fat, clumsy, sluggish, potentially dirty (so much hair!), and sexually

undesirable, almost inadequate. Paradoxically, these same “abominable” features are glorified by a number of those “other non-bears” who seek in me the representative of a paternally protective sexual partner.

Overall, though, in a culture like the Western one which worships beauty, well-built bodies, and power my status is that of a second class sexual being who possesses a second-class sexual desire. For a great majority of heterosexuals, even nowadays, I embody a desire that is despicable, sick, alien, inferior and distinct. For a great majority of non-heterosexuals, on the other hand, I represent a model of sexual desire that is insufficient and, again, distinct. It is important to note, though, that these qualifiers do not simply address the quality of my erection or my ability to experience physiological arousal. On the contrary, they point to fixed psychological qualities. *I am* despicable, sick, alien, inferior, insufficient, and thus, prone to always being miserable and lonely, either because of my homosexuality or because of my fat, hairy body. And, of course, there would be no reason for me to ponder on these issues had they not been silent and steady companions of my psychological life for many years. Furthermore, I would not insist on talking about “sexual desire” had I not been convinced that it not only signifies my physiological and psychological arousal but an indispensable modality of my human existence that affects all facets of my life and the ways I physically and psychologically act, feel, and relate to others—even when the possibility of sexual intercourse is inexistent. Most importantly, it symbolizes my subjective sense of whether I deserve to sexually love and be loved.

My lifelong struggle to have my bodily existence match my inner self has always been a salient issue and has often led me to take up overlapping and largely conflicting

roles in my effort to reconcile aspects of myself that always proved to be irreconcilable. Being heterosexual for society meant that I had to sacrifice my homosexual yearnings and my body. Being accepted by the dominant gay culture meant that I had to, once more, disavow my fat body. Defending my right to sexually desire and love meant that a part of me should necessarily oppress and silence another one.

Identity

Yet, my dearest Poet, things are not necessarily as they seem to be. As I am rereading the last paragraph of the previous section, I am wondering about the meaning of the words I have used to describe my experiences: overlapping, conflicting, irreconcilable. The words themselves are fine. What bothers me the most is the negative meaning I have assigned to them, as if my experiences should have never been or felt overlapping, conflicting, and/or irreconcilable. I now understand that, in making sense of my sexual desire, I have adhered to a concept of identity which, as Stuart Hall describes it,

[signals] that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; the bit of the self which remains always-already “the same,” identical to itself across time; [. . .] that collective or true self hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed “selves” which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common and which can stabilize, fix or guarantee an unchanging “oneness” or cultural belongingness underlying all the other superficial differences (1996, pp. 3-4).

In other words, Poet, instead of following your direction and looking at my sexual desire as an ever-unfolding process, I fell prey to conceptions of identity that emphasize rigidity, strict boundaries, and changeless, psychological, inner cores. I was looking in me for a singular, fixed identity that could tame and contain all those unruly sexual desires that would acquire distinct qualities, depending on each single place, each single

moment, and each single person. I failed, of course. Thankfully, I failed. At the time, though, this failure felt devastating; the more my “identity” was slipping through my fingers, the more I would feel like a pathological outcast. I was supposed to be a lean, built, virile, athletic male with proud erections, singular sexual attraction to females, and eternally eager tendencies to conquest, penetrate, and dominate. Occasionally, I could be and feel some of the above (except, of course, the athletic, built body...). More frequently, though, I would fail the test; I would represent an assortment of feelings, sexual attractions, thoughts, and bodily senses that went beyond the identity expected from me.

At this point, of course, someone could argue that my failure to achieve a stable, changeless sense of identity with regard to sexual desire does not necessarily mean that it does not exist. For the time being, the theoretical and autoethnographic exploration of this question will be postponed. Instead, I will return to Stuart Hall (1996) and briefly highlight his main points on identity. Seeing that singular, fixed conceptions of identity will not be defended in this dissertation, its alternative reconceptualization is warranted. Hopefully, Hall’s ideas will provide a theoretical platform upon which the discussions to follow will be solidly based.

Hall does not advocate totally giving up the concept of identity. He argues that, notwithstanding its weaknesses and inadequacies, as yet there is not a satisfactory concept to replace it. Additionally, he claims that completely invalidating or rejecting the concept of identity would preclude the discussion of a number of significant issues which have been considered in response/relation to it. Instead, he suggests that we reconceptualize identity within the framework of a new paradigm. More specifically, he

puts forward a notion of identity that is always bound to history, culture, and language (does that ring a bell, Poet?); that is, a notion of identity that, despite “its determinate conditions of existence” (Hall, 1996, p. 2) is always in the process of becoming, carries a significant degree of contingency, and espouses difference. In his own words,

The concept of identity deployed here [. . .] accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation [. . .] [A]ctually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not “who we are” or ‘where we came from,” so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves (Hall, 1996, pp. 3-4).

The connection between the formation of identity and difference in Hall’s theoretical exposition is crucial and necessitates further explanation. More explicitly, Hall maintains that identities do not represent the culmination of a “naturally-constituted unity” (1996, p. 4) but, on the contrary, correspond to the outcome of a process that excludes and obliterates anything different; that is to say, anything that does not match the desired features of a specific identity construct. Therefore, identities *are something* because they *have already excluded something else*. For example, I am a Greek because I exclude and obliterate anything non-Greek. If all national identities (American, French, Italian. . .) were to disappear, my Greek national identity would disappear as well. It would be utterly meaningless to define myself as a Greek if there were no other national identities to compare myself with and exclude. It becomes evident, then, that the formation/construction of identities is achieved through excluding and, at the same time, relating to the other. Hall writes:

Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render “outside,” abjected. Every identity has at its “margin,” an excess, something more [. . .] [T]he “unities” which identities proclaim are, in fact, constructed within the play of power and exclusion, and are the result, not of a natural and inevitable or primordial totality but of the naturalized, overdetermined process of “closure” (1996, p. 5; italics in original).

It goes without saying, Poet, that the above-mentioned views also apply to identities which are claimed to be naturally derived from and associated with specific forms of sexual desire. For example, heterosexuality, that is sexual attraction and desire for the opposite sex, acquires its ostensible cohesion through comparing itself with and excluding everything related to homosexuality. Yet, I have personally encountered many seemingly “heterosexual,” married or unmarried, men who regularly had sex with other men without disrupting the façade of their heterosexuality or giving up having sex with women too. Could these men’s identity be claimed to be “bisexual” instead? Without having any intention of providing an adequate response here, I would provisionally answer in the negative. This would be so because identities, apart from actions, behaviors, bodies, and cultural/linguistic/social practices and norms, also involve emotions; that is to say, a strong psychological component that is ever elusive and volatile.

This last argument is also offered by Hall himself (1996). More specifically, he explains that throughout our lives we become the recipients of a number of ideologies, which we are called to adopt as our identities, abide by, and enact in a variety of ways (social, cultural, corporeal, linguistic, behavioral, etc.). However, these ideologies possess the capacity of being incorporated by us as identities because we can also experience them as psychological identities. In other words, in making an effort to

acquire a sense of internal cohesion and emotional stability, we psychologically invest in the received ideologies and understand them as inborn, changeless, fixed, psychological characteristics which are supposedly intact and secure. This illusory sense of intactness and security, though, is, as already mentioned before, constantly safeguarded through excluding undesirable identity features and characteristics.

That's why, my dearest Poet, our world is so overwhelmingly plagued by all sorts of exclusionary, discriminatory, and racist attitudes and practices. We desperately strive to adhere to our constructed and psychologically invested identities. The moment we understand that we may be sharing some degree of affinity and affiliation with an individual we generally define ourselves against, instead of welcoming this osmosis of identities, we strike and kill. Nevertheless, if we carefully read Robert Solomon who says that "insofar as one's identity arises and is defined only with other people, killing the other is self-defeating for one loses precisely that source of recognition that one has come to require" (1983, p. 450), we understand that the price we pay in terms of violence, trauma, and loneliness is immense. This is why I believe, along with Hall (1996), that the formation and deconstruction of identities should be explored not only in terms of social/cultural/political/linguistic practices and norms but in terms of psychological investment as well. This is also why I deem autoethnography to represent such a fitting method for this dissertation on sexual desire. It evokes emotion. Emotions melt our iron shields and armors. The porous boundaries of our identities are slowly revealed. We reluctantly understand that getting attached to people possessing different, multiple identities can be threatening but enriching. Our ability to be compassionate to others and ourselves is strengthened (?)..

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Poet, I happen to be one of those people who believe that every relationship to people we love involves an erotic element. If we are lucky enough, we are born, taken care of, and caressed by loving parents who safeguard our survival, our existence itself. The physical pleasure of being fed, rocked, embraced, and kissed becomes a dream (or, in its absence and misuse, a nightmare) that haunts us and forces us to go back to that state, that bond which consoles, although temporarily, the detrimental truth of the separateness of our bodies. Desiring another person, wanting to experience the illusion of an inseparable physical and psychical connectedness which ephemerally marks a victory over the prospect of a lonely death, provides the platform for a more bearable life; one whose meaning is better experienced silently than explained through words. And this desire, the desire to experience ourselves sexually dancing with the otherness and the sameness of our partners, is worth being lived through as dynamic an identity as possible.

After this very poetically written first paragraph (!), I am composing myself and making an effort to adopt a more academic voice in order to discuss the purposes of this study along with the research questions that will guide its writing. I am fairly aware that these (the purposes and questions) have been already stated in various sections of this, rather lengthy, introductory chapter. For those of my readers (hopefully not you, Poet!) who have been allergic to my literary style, though, here is a wonderful opportunity to understand what this dissertation aspires to achieve.

This dissertation wants to tell a story about sexual desire and the quest for intimacy. It will tell an autoethnographic story and explore the possibilities of feeling sexually close to another—*the other*—in ways that promise lesser violence on that other's

(sexual) identity. In the process of telling this story, I will be drawn to narrate segments of my experiences as a sexually desiring human being and my struggle to achieve romantic intimacy.

As the review of earlier and contemporary conceptualizations of sexual desire will show in the next chapter, it (sexual desire) has been largely viewed through a solipsistic prism, almost detached from the psychological, social, cultural, and ideological forces that structure and shape it. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to interrogate this literature and complicate it in the direction of a new conceptualization of sexual desire. This purpose will be served by a number of research questions that pertain to sexual desire and its interface with corporeality, emotion, gender identity, and sexuality in general. These questions are as follows:

- **How do social and cultural factors affect the way we experience our sexual desire?** More specifically, how does belonging to a specific sex, race, class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, or religion shape one's understanding of his/her sexual desire? Can we speak of strictly demarcated senses of sexual desire— Black, Caucasian, male, female, heterosexual, homosexual, Christian, Muslim etc. —or are the boundaries among the various groups of sexually desiring people more permeable and unpredictable?
- **What is the role of the body in sexual desire?** Does it only constitute the physiological carrier of sexual desire or is it shaped and structured to materialize sexual desires that reflect hegemonic ideologies and values? If yes, through which mechanisms and processes do these materializations take place? Furthermore, are specific bodies—fat, built, slender, etc—shaped to sexually desire in specific ways or are the boundaries, again, more porous?

- **How is one's sense of sexual desire affected by another person's manifestation of sexual desire?** Does it remain static and fixed or is it always in a state of becoming? If it is always in a state of becoming, how can we pursue sexual intimacy in a time of loneliness, supposedly eternal scientific truths, emotional armoring, and imposed fixed identities?

Outline of the Dissertation

In this section, Poet, I wish to provide you and the potential readers of this dissertation with a brief outline of the chapters in which the aforementioned research questions will be investigated. As you may have already noticed, thus far this **first chapter** has tried to present the main constituents of this dissertation. In other words, I have made an attempt to present the topic of the study—sexual desire—as well as its purpose and research questions. Most importantly, though, I have tried to explore the personal reasons lurking behind the choice of this topic, offer a first experience of what an autoethnographic text feels like, and lay out the theoretical context within which this investigation will take place. Finally, as I have already mentioned elsewhere, my hope is that this dissertation will be able to reach audiences beyond the narrow confines of the Academy. This is why I have tried to keep everything as jargon-free as possible. Time and again I hear philosophers and theoreticians claiming that the exploration of tough, philosophical questions indispensably necessitates the use of obscure language. I am not fully convinced, though, that this obscure language is not a sign of academic elitism and narcissism...

Moving on to **Chapter 2**, a review of earlier and contemporary sexological and medical conceptualizations of sexual desire will be offered. Problematic aspects of these

conceptualizations will be identified and addressed. **Chapter 3** will be heavily theoretical and will involve an overview of the theories that will be utilized in order to challenge the solipsistic conceptualizations of sexual desire exposed in Chapter 2. These “alternative” theoretical movements emphasizing the diverse and multiple character of sexual desire will involve a) Kinsey’s pioneering research on sexuality, b) evolutionary and Darwinian ideas, c) Queer Theory (as loosely represented by Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler), d) Luce Irigaray’s philosophical ideas on sexual difference, and e) Lacanian Psychoanalysis.

Seasoned readers of philosophy and psychoanalysis may be thinking that the above philosophical theories are very complex and, to a certain degree, incompatible with one another. Therefore, two caveats are needed at this point. First, I wish to emphasize that a thorough coverage of these theories is beyond the scope of this dissertation; such an effort would represent a highly unrealistic endeavor. Instead, my intention is to focus only on those aspects judged to be pertinent and relevant to this dissertation. Second, I will not aspire to integrate the aforementioned theories. As I am taking Queer Theory to represent the central theoretical axon around which this dissertation will revolve, an effort will be made to identify points of convergence and divergence between Queer Theory and each of the other philosophical systems. However, a rigorous, thorough integration of all five theories and paradigms is, again, beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Chapter 4 will be devoted to a detailed exposition of autoethnography as a qualitative research method. Its connection to validity will be rigorously discussed and important questions such as “What is a narrative? What is a story? Why am I using these

terms and why are they important to me?” will be asked and addressed. This chapter could be utilized as a transition to the following two chapters which will be purely autoethnographic, even as they are also “theoretical”. **Chapter 5** involves an exploration of the ideological forces that shaped my sexual desire within the social/political/cultural context of Greece. This narrative will be enriched with theories and explanations pertaining to the ways sexual desire and pleasure are conceptualized and experienced in Greece. **Chapter 6** continues in an autoethnographic register and explores the issues of lust, promiscuity, violence, and intimacy. More specifically, this chapter will investigate what my sexual promiscuity as well as the avoidance of and quest for sexual/romantic intimacy have meant to me in the midst of the social/cultural/political contexts I have found myself in. The main purpose of this chapter will be to explore the connection between the constitution of my sexual desire and my (in)ability to feel intimate to people I am sexually attracted to. **Chapter 7** will attempt an integration of the theories explored in chapter 3 and my autoethnographic stories through posing and reflecting on the following questions: After having worked through a number of theories and autoethnographic stories, what am I left with? What am I offering to the academy? Finally, **Chapter 8** concludes with suggestions for future research, gaps and omissions (even limitations) in this study, and final thoughts to be shared with you, my dearest Poet, and the readers of this dissertation.

Conclusion: Back to the Poet, Back to Greece

Now that this introductory chapter and, consequently, my invocation to you, Poet, are coming to an end, I feel I owe you an apology. My sense is that I haven’t found a way to strike a balance between my literary voice and the academic one. If I could, I would

have already abandoned my academic voice altogether; it sounds utterly pretentious to me. However, as you already know, this is an academic dissertation and I have to keep up appearances. As a result, I am afraid the text of this dissertation is destined to read awkwardly split, as if it originates from two different persons. What I just mentioned, though, may not be totally untrue. If you remember my previous discussion on identity, its multiplicity as well as its ever-evolving nature, perhaps it is our (human beings') destiny to always sound awkwardly split. I understand, of course, that your artistry may have been more capable of transforming this awkwardness into high art than my humble writing skills could ever be. Be merciful, though, Poet. As opposed to you, I am writing in a language other than my own and my audience does not necessarily consist of poetry lovers. In any case, please accept my apologies.

It has just struck me, however, that there may be one more reason that warrants an apology to you. I have promised to clarify the nature of help I will need from you and, instead of that, I am happily chattering! So...do you remember Mendelsohn claiming that you were a poet-historian and that you “[saw] history with a lover’s eye, and desire with a historian’s eye” (2012, p. xxi)? This is exactly what I want you to help me with. In other words, I would like you to show me the way to love and deeply delve into my personal history and, at the same time, look at my personal ways of loving and sexually desiring through a historian’s perspective. Please, Poet, provide me with all the necessary tools to oscillate between these two positions without being fully absorbed by any of the two. I wish to write a balanced autoethnographic dissertation, able to stimulate both hearts and minds. Without your help, though, without *this* kind of help, I am afraid failure is what awaits me.

I forgot. You have been dead for almost 82 years...and you have made it clear enough that, without some basic knowledge of Greece's modern history, the history of the country in which I was shaped to sexually desire, you can be of no help at all. After all, you silently remind me, your poems on sexual love and desire have always been connected to their cultural and historical surroundings. How could my sexual desire be detached from its own specific surroundings?

You are absolutely right, Poet. And I am more than willing to spend some time concisely recounting to you what has happened in Greece during the last 100 years. Seeing that some of my readers may be completely unfamiliar with Greece's modern history, though, allow me to begin from an earlier point: that is, the Greek Declaration of Independence in 1821 and the beginning of modern Greece in 1830, after having been subject to the Ottoman Empire for almost four centuries. My reference to this period does not aspire to provide a plethora of historical details that would be irrelevant to the goals of this dissertation. My intention, instead, is to shed some light on the construction of modern Greeks' identity.

Cultural anthropologist Neni Panourgia writes: "For [Western Europeans] modern Greece usually exists only as the symptomatic site of Greek antiquity" (2009, p. 212). The way I understand this phrase is that modern Greece cannot exist unless it is firmly and irrevocably connected to its glorious ancient past. Panourgia goes on to explain that, when the Great Powers of that era (Great Britain, France, Russia) supported the Greek Declaration of Independence and the establishment of a Greek state (taking into consideration, of course, their own political and financial interests), they demanded that the Greeks confirm their Greek essence (1995). In other words, Western Europeans

implicitly (and rather romantically) required that the then Greek population prove that a) despite 400 years of Ottoman rule, they shared a line of cultural continuity with ancient Greeks and were ready to swiftly modernize themselves and follow on the footsteps of Western Europeans or, b) in case they did not share a cultural continuity with Ancient Greeks anymore, they were at least capable enough to imitate, absorb and incorporate Western Europeans' customs and traditions.

Then, it becomes evident that, despite the ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural heterogeneity characterizing the then Greek population, a unified, sovereign, Greek identity had to be constructed. Heterogeneity should be sacrificed on the altar of a Greek essence revolving around the Greek language, the commonly shared ethnic (modern defined through ancient) Greek heritage, and Greek Orthodoxy. It was a matter of life and death; a fixed, changeless, singular, Greek identity was in urgent need of being constructed, essentialized, and confirmed, otherwise independence would be in peril. Anything beyond what was conventionally considered to be Greek was deemed to be alien; non-Greek.

It is my strong belief as a Greek national that the circumstances under which modern Greece and its ethnic identity were established and consolidated have given birth to social and psychological characteristics and anxieties that still cast their long shadow on the present. For example, as Neni Panourgia (1995) says, the Greek population in 1830 was completely unprepared to follow on the Western Europeans' footsteps. Nevertheless, they tried to imitate them based on a fragile sense of ancient Greek identity that helped them perceive themselves as being of equal worth and stature. This was, of course, an illusory, psychologically overcompensating self-perception given that Greece

had been isolated from the rest of Europe for almost 400 years and, consequently, detached from the scientific, social, philosophical, and artistic advancements brought forth during the periods of the Renaissance and the European Enlightenment.

If I now focus on the Greek society as it is today, I personally discern the same ambivalence towards the Western Europeans. We always want to imitate them and be like them but, the moment we adopt their lifestyle, we feel as if something is forced on us and we react. It is as if our fragile sense of ethnic identity feels snubbed and fatally threatened by Western Europeans. At the same time, during the last 25 years Greece has welcomed thousands of migrants from Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Asia, and Africa. Our psychological predispositions along with the latest social and financial problems have intensified ethnic nationalisms in Greece, nationalisms which masquerade the agonizing questions always asked by modern Greeks since their independence: “Who are we? Do we belong to Western Europe; the Balkans; Russia; Turkey; or the Middle East? What does the Greek identity consist of? Is there such a thing as a Greek identity? If yes, what should it include or exclude? What is our relationship to ancient Greece; the Byzantium; the Ottoman Empire; the European Union? Have we ever achieved a somewhat secure sense of Greek identity? If yes, why do we always make sure to keep it fixed and intact instead of allowing its volatility to come forth and connect with other identities? What are we afraid of?”

In my view, what we Greeks are mostly afraid of is the absence of any sense of consolidated Greek identity; the realization that we have based our dreams and self-conceptions on something inexistent. This is why, again in my view, Greece has been plagued by so much violence and political oppression during much of the 20th Century.

We have been so irreversibly haunted by the question “Who are we?” and so desperately afraid of the answer; so frightened at the prospect of a fragile sovereignty and so fearful we might discover more attributes that keep us apart than unite us. We have tried to appease these anxiety-provoking questions through the imposition of totalitarian regimes and, at the same time, we have undergone a number of national tragedies.

You had been wondering, Poet, about the history of modern Greece ever since you died in 1933. There has been a lot of pain and division...Neni Panourgia (2009) has explained everything in the most eloquent way in her book *Dangerous Citizens*. I will follow her timeline. In 1936 a dictatorship was imposed in Greece by a general called Ioannis Metaxas. His authoritarian regime, apart from seizing and maintaining political power, was also interested “in form(ulat)ing whatever it was that he understood as ‘the Greek psyche’ and ‘the Greek mind.’ He held that [. . .] psyche and mind ought to constitute a monolithic, monadic, singular articulation of an imaginary shared by all ‘Greeks,’ an imaginary that started in Greek antiquity, extended through Rome, and developed into the Byzantine Empire” (p. 34). Metaxas’s dictatorship lasted until 1941; that is, the year when Germany invaded Greece and the Nazi Occupation began. It lasted almost 4 years and left Greece and Europe in a state of utter devastation. Panourgia (2009) writes:

On October 12, 1944, the Germans left Athens. A few days later they crossed the borders and dispersed into the chaos of the collapsing Reich. Greece was left with 250,000 dead from famine, 15,700 dead from the Italian war, 8,000 dead from the week-long German invasion, 3,000 dead from the German bombings, 50,000 dead from Allied bombings, 40,000 dead from the Bulgarian forces, 30,000 dead from German and Italian retaliation to acts of resistance, 4,000 military deaths abroad, 1,000 dead in the merchant marine, 60,000 disappeared Jews. In a country of fewer than eight million, there were 415,300 dead between October 28, 1940 and October 12, 1944 (p. 62).

But the nightmare was not over for Greece, Poet. As soon as the Germans left, a civil war started between the Greek Government Army, supported by the United Kingdom and the United States, and the Democratic Army of Greece, supported by the Greek Communist Party (Panourgia, 2009). I will spare you the political and military details of the war and simply tell you that it lasted for almost 3 years (1946-1949) and involved, once more, a question on Greek identity: “Where do we belong to? Should we follow the West or the Soviet Union? Are we capitalists or communists?” The Greek Government Army won; the Democratic Army of Greece surrendered; Greece became a member state of NATO and was firmly tied to the West. The country and its people, though, came out of the civil war even more devastated and split into opposing factions. Allow me, Poet, to quote extensively from Panourgia (2009) because she describes the post-civil war situation in Greece in words I could never think of in English.

We know the terrible effects of a combination of civil war, concentration camps, and oppressive and authoritarian governments on the everyday lives of citizens. We know of the dismantled families, the maimed relationships, the broken bodies, the poverty, the devastated infrastructure. A civil war, however, has lasting effects that are not so immediately apparent. It produces psychopathologies, mistrust, and resentment in addition to economic and political devastation. There is nothing “civil” in the civil war. In such a war, siblings fight against each other, children are tortured in front of their parents, parents are killed in front of their children. When it ends, no one can get up, dust off his clothes, and shake hands. The effects are lived for generations, long after the war has ended and decades after the winners and losers have settled down (curiously comfortably) in their respective positions. The Greek paradigm acquires particular importance here, because in Greece, though the civil war ended in 1949, its effects are only now being discussed (pp. 31-32).

It is true, Poet. We Greeks are still tormented by the devastating effects of the Nazi Occupation and the civil war that followed. Before I jump to the present and describe how, though, I would like to stick to the post-civil war Greece a little longer

because important political events took place then. Let me remind you, once more, that we (the Greeks) are always preoccupied with the question of our ethnic identity; its purity is very important to us and anyone “scheming” against it automatically becomes our enemy. Post-civil war Greece, as Neni Panourgia (2009) argues, easily found its enemies: Communists and, generally, supporters of the Left (the defeated of the civil war) were transformed into political and social scapegoats (enemies of the Greek state) in need of “reeducation and rehabilitation” (p. 9). Vast numbers of “returning and captured soldiers of the Democratic Army, their families, friends, relatives, and fellow villagers” (p. 85) were transferred to concentration camps that had been established in isolated, dry, arid islands of the Aegean Sea like Makronisos and Yaros by democratically elected governments. These concentration camps were in full operation from 1947 to 1958 and the “reeducation” taking place in them consisted of well-planned and brutally executed tortures that aimed at converting the camp prisoners into repentant ex-Communists.

But, my dearest Poet, as you may be suspecting, the political nightmare of Greece was not over yet. One more military dictatorship was imposed in Greece on the 21st of April, 1967 that lasted till the 24th of July, 1974. Again, I will spare you the details, the rumors, and the potential reasons behind the imposition of this dictatorship. After all, I am not a historian. I can tell you, though, that the same story was repeated: the concentration camps in Makronisos and Yaros reopened; supporters of the Left were arrested and transferred to the islands for “reeducation”; the art of torturing reached new heights; opposition newspapers were shut down; and extensive censorship was imposed on all forms of art. Brilliant!

I was born on the 7th of April, 1976, Poet. You could easily claim that my generation has been very lucky. After all, Greece has been steadily democratic since 1974 and a member state of the European Union since 1981 (our membership in the Eurozone, of course, is still in jeopardy but this is a different story...). The time when “half of the [Greek] population [had] been in the prisons and the camps [. . .] simply because of their political thoughts” (Panourgia, 2009, p. 133) is—hopefully—irreversibly gone. Yet, although I have never experienced any form of political oppression and persecution like millions of my compatriots in the past, I have been brought up within a social and cultural environment that still tries to come to terms with its wounds. I fully agree with Panourgia (2009) who, as mentioned before, claims that the trauma inflicted on the Greek population by the Nazi Occupation, the civil war and, in general, the political oppression in Greece has passed down from generation to generation. I have experienced and participated in my father’s dread over the prospect of having nothing to eat. In addition, I know how it feels to be a member of a deeply divided society in which supporters of the Right and the Left have been cultivating distinct, fixed, political identities and treating each other as deadly enemies. As a matter of fact, I would like to argue that Greece’s inability to successfully overcome its current financial crisis stems from its inability to face its past and present wounds and divisions. We prefer to pretend that everything is all right instead of experiencing our mourning. We desire to remain faithful to our beloved “Right, Left, and Greek identities” instead of following and adjusting to a world that is rapidly changing. We wish to adhere to our “I know better!” convictions instead of admitting to ourselves how traumatized, insecure, angry, and depressed we feel behind

our jolly façades. Whoever claims that the effects of political oppression in Greece ended with the oppression itself, they are deluding themselves...

This last discussion on Greece's history during the last 80 years has just reminded me of something that Papanikolaou (2014) has recently claimed about you, Poet. More specifically, he argues that your homosexuality has always caused a considerable degree of anxiety to those Greek literary critics espousing somewhat ethnocentric and nationalistic ideas. Your homosexuality, he explains, induced you to engage into the "ethics of the vulnerable self" and, therefore, point to the contingency and historicity of sexual desire. However, this accomplishment laid the groundwork for also showing that the supposedly stable Greek identity was (is), in reality, not stable at all but, instead, highly contingent and historicized as well.

I presume you would not feel surprised if I told you that, in recounting my sexual desire in this dissertation, I would also like to challenge the hypothetical stability of the Greek identity. In a way, this would, perhaps, represent my triumphant revenge against a country, a homeland, *my homeland*, which has never missed an opportunity to remind me that I am too fat, too sluggish, too soft, too flabby, and too gay to earn a place in the Greek pantheon. And, as you already know, I want you by my side. Will you please help me? Have I provided you with enough information about the modern history of Greece or do you need some more?

...Silent. You remain silent. You are always so silent and I can't stand it anymore! Say something, for God's sake! Don't ignore me like that! Do you have any fucking intention of helping me or not?? You make me feel like I did at the beginning of my invocation to you! Weak, small, defenseless, powerless, futile...Give me a sign...a

reason that it's worth writing this fucking dissertation!! Give me some hope!! I won't be able to travel all through the end of the dissertation without some hope that I can change something, someone... You may have been perfectly capable of keeping the fire burning in your soul without any support but I am not you! I am not like you... I am not a naturally-born writer and I need guidance and constant encouragement. I could make an attempt to follow on the footsteps of philosophers such as Michel Foucault who claims that "[t]he first text one writes is neither written for others, nor for who one is: one writes to become someone other than who one is. [It] is an attempt at modifying one's way of being through the act of writing" (Ruas, 1986, p. 184); or Hélène Cixous who states:

Writing: a way of leaving no space for death, of pushing back forgetfulness, of never letting oneself be surprised by the abyss. Of never becoming resigned, consoled; never turning over in bed to face the wall and drift asleep again as if nothing had happened: as if nothing could happen (1991, p. 3).

Beautiful words, I must confess. I am not a philosopher, though. I am simply a clinical psychology trainee, struggling to complete my PhD... I function much better with troubled people during psychotherapy sessions than in front of computer screens, wrestling with philosophical concepts, the English language, and the depths of my sexual desire... Help me, Poet...

I close my eyes and try to visualize you. I can't see you. I can't see anything. I can only hear the wind blowing, carrying otherworldly voices from places lost and forgotten since time immemorial. What are they whispering? What is the message they are trying to convey? Dad... is that you? Marvin? Poet? Who are you? Speak to me... comfort me... acknowledge the existence of my sexual desire. Don't kill me... I know I am gay but... don't kill me. My sexual desire wishes to speak and form beautiful

friendships with you; it wishes to coexist with you but...what is the word you are whispering? Speak a little louder...Ithaca? Is that the word? Ithaca? Yes...it's Ithaca! Odysseus's island...Ooh Poet! Ithaca...I still have my eyes closed but I can see you! I see you looking at me and whispering! I can hardly hear your whisper but I can clearly read your lips reciting a poem! Wait! Let me write it down...

Ithaca

*As you set out on the way to Ithaca
hope that the road is a long one,
filled with adventures, filled with discoveries.
The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,
Poseidon in his anger: do not fear them,
you won't find such things on your way
so long as your thoughts remain lofty, and a choice
emotion touches your spirit and your body.
The Laestrygonians and the Cyclopes,
savage Poseidon; you won't encounter them
unless you stow them away inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up before you.*

*Hope that the road is a long one.
Many may the summer mornings be
when —with what pleasure, with what joy—
you first put in to harbors new to your eyes;
may you stop at Phoenician trading posts
and there acquire the finest wares:
mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
and heady perfumes of every kind:
as many heady perfumes as you can.
Many Egyptian cities may you visit
that you may learn, and go on learning, from their
sages.*

*Always in your mind keep Ithaca.
To arrive there is your destiny.
But do not hurry your trip in any way.
Better that it last for many years;
that you drop anchor at the island an old man,
rich with all you've gotten on the way,
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.*

Ithaca gave you the beautiful journey;

*without her you wouldn't have set upon the road.
But now she has nothing left to give you.*

*And if you find her poor, Ithaca didn't deceive you.
As wise as you will have become, with so much
experience,
you will understand, by then, these Ithacas; what
they mean.*

— C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, pp. 13-14)

Thank you, Poet. I will try to follow your advice... Thank you.

Chapter 2

Sexual Desire: The Literature

Walls

*Without pity, without shame, without consideration
they've built around me enormous, towering walls.*

*And I sit here now in growing desperation.
This fate consumes my mind, I think of nothing else:*

*because I had so many things to do out there.
O while they built the walls, why did I not look out?*

*But no noise, no sound from the builders did I hear.
Imperceptibly they shut me off from the world without.
—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, p. 191).*

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to offer a concise literature review of how sexual desire has been conceptualized during the last 150 years within the academy, notably within the disciplines of sexology and medicine. The ways in which psychology—historically and recent—has taken up some of these conceptualizations are commented on in the review, but I will also return to a more deliberate examination thereof later. The first part of the chapter, *The Demarcation of Sexual Desire*, charts attempts at separating sexual desire into distinct categories, whereas the second part, *The Medicalization of Sexual Desire*, explains how these attempts have been appropriated into disease narratives and turned into a problem in need of medical treatment. Throughout, I also challenge, critique, and contest several problematic aspects of such conceptualizations and propositions. Finally, it should be noted that this review confines itself to discussing only the conceptual vicissitudes of sexual desire in the so-called Western democracies.

Non-Western notions of sexual desire and/or medical/sexological developments, although they are tremendously important, are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

The Demarcation of Sexual Desire

Without a doubt, an exploration of the various ways in which sexual desire has been conceptualized through time would be incomplete without a consideration of when and how the word “sexuality” was first coined. To this end, Joseph Bristow (2011) writes that sexuality first appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* in 1836. Its meanings back then were rather surprising, though. Unlike the current association of the term to an exclusively human domain, the OED entry of 1836 primarily referenced sexuality as pertaining to botany and the sexual reproduction of plants! Even the secondary association, when sexuality referred to human activity, was radically different from its contemporary one, principally associated as it was with “the cognitive powers of the mind [such as] recognition of or preoccupation with what is sexual” (Bristow, 2011, p. 3).

The modern usage and meaning of sexuality was first adopted towards the end of the 19th century when anthropological, scientific, and sociological studies of sexuality surged and abounded in Europe and the United States (Bristow, 2011). These studies culminated in the formation of sexology as the specialized discipline for the scientific study of human sexuality, including human sexual interests, behaviors, and functions. Janice Irvine (1990) points out that sexology initially attempted to examine aspects of sexual disease and classify sexual types of person (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual etc.) as well as forms of sexual desire (sadism, masochism, fetishism etc.). One of the most prominent figures of the early growth of sexology was the Austro-German

psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing who was also the author of the seminal work *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1922).

Divided into five sections, *Psychopathia Sexualis* adopts a medical perspective and attempts to ascertain the psychological and physiological foundations of human sexuality as well as to classify all its “pathological manifestations.” Regan and Berscheid point out that Krafft-Ebing’s goal in writing his treatise on sexuality was “to inform legislation and jurisprudence about the nature of certain sexual aberrations” (1999, p. 3). Indeed, his work abounds with graphic descriptions of case histories pertaining to rapists, pedophiles, sadists, transvestites etc. Such an approach does not come as a surprise if we take into account the fact that Krafft-Ebing’s conceptualization of sexuality was that of a constant threat to civilization. He writes that “[s]exuality is the most powerful factor in individual and social existence, [. . .] a passion [which] is like a fire that burns and consumes everything; like an abyss that swallows all, - honor, fortune, well-being” (Krafft-Ebing, 1922, pp. 1-2).

Nevertheless, apart from the demonization of human sexuality, Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* has also been instrumental in promoting the notion of clearly demarcated categories of sexual desire according to sex and sexual orientation. Adhering to the predominant Victorian morality of his era, he postulates that men’s sexual desire is innately aggressive, whereas women’s is characterized by “modesty, passivity, [and] a desire for protection by a husband, which is met in return by the care and attention she devotes to the man’s every need” (Bristow, 2011, p. 27). As regards homosexuality, he clearly draws a dividing line between “pathological homosexual desire and healthy heterosexual love” (Krafft-Ebing, 1922, p. 30), proposing that same-sex desire is

biologically anomalous, originating in the embryonic and fetal stages of gestation and evolving into a “sexual inversion” of the brain (Krafft-Ebing, 1922, p. 189).

It could be claimed, as Foucault maintains (1990), that Krafft-Ebing and all other early sexologists have bequeathed to modern society a contradictory legacy. On the one hand, they have enabled a wider and more open discussion of sexuality. On the other hand, though, they have largely contributed to, and structured, modes of inquiry which have ignored the historical and cultural contexts within which knowledge about sexual desire is produced and disseminated. Bristow writes:

Time and again, one finds sexological writings – all the way from the 1890s to the present day –seeking to produce some everlasting truth about the sexual capacity of human beings. Such works are habitually filled with deceptive ideas about what is supposed to constitute average performance, in terms of frequency and intensity of erotic sensation, implying there is a common standard against which our sexualities might be measured. Sexological writings are frequently so preoccupied with the quantification of data regarding sexual behaviors and functions that they rarely pause to consider how or why sexuality might resist the structures of categorization that sexual science multiplies at an exponential rate [. . .] Although the first sexologists may well feel to us like relics from the distant past, their conceptual and narrative structures in many ways endure to this day. In these founding texts of sexology, one sees an exhaustive effort being made to derive natural truths from cultural phenomena. Rather than advance the idea that Western society developed customs and practices that emerged from specific historical conditions, these writers often believed that their culture provided a wholly intelligible map for interpreting human nature (Bristow, 2011, pp. 15-17).

Is Bristow’s assertion correct? Let us begin to unravel the answer to this question by taking a closer look at some contemporary works on sexual desire. For reasons of narrative continuity, I will first simply describe and summarize the views of a number of authors on this subject and postpone questions and criticisms till the end of this section.

In his book, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* (1958), Fritz Heider (who was

one of the first in the field of social psychology to explore the meaning of desire, which he defines as a motivational state that arises from within the person, representing his or her wishes and wants) proposes that desire stands for a subjective, psychological condition that is not necessarily reflected by an individual's behavior in view of the fact that "a wish may exist long before a specific action is taken to satisfy or without its ever being actualized in action" (Heider, 1958, p. 128). In addition, even though desire is not always accompanied by actions or behaviors, its fulfillment is always linked to pleasure.

Heider writes:

Wish fulfillment always leads to pleasure, or, in the language of logic, that desire and obtaining x are sufficient conditions of pleasure. But, you may argue, what if the anticipated pleasure is not forthcoming? Is not this a common experience? Our reply is that even under these circumstances we never doubt for a moment that there is an a priori connection between desire and pleasure (1958, p. 130-131).

If we focus on the issue of *sexual* desire, we will find that, up to 1979, references were sparse and it was only vaguely taken into consideration in order to account for the physiological, genital, and behavioral dimensions of the human sexual experience. The first person to emphasize its role more deliberately and specifically was Helen Singer Kaplan who published her book *Disorders of Sexual Desire* in 1979. Kaplan's contribution was significant because, for the first time, considerable importance was assigned to sexual desire as an indispensable constituent of human sexual experience. On the other hand, though, Kaplan also initiated a mode of scientific inquiry that viewed sexuality in fragmented and solipsistic ways. For example, she proposed a triphasic model of human sexuality that consisted of three physiologically *related* but *discrete* phases: desire, excitement, and orgasm (Regan & Berscheid, 1999). Her major purpose in differentiating between the desire phase and the genital phases of excitement and orgasm

was to enable clinicians to more effectively target and treat the various dysfunctions associated with each phase.

More recent efforts to define, categorize, and differentiate sexual desire from other physiological and psychological states have followed along Kaplan's lines. One of the most noteworthy debates concerns the issue of whether sexual desire and sexual arousal constitute different and/or discrete experiences. Masters, Johnson & Kolodny (1994) suggest that they are indeed distinct and they further distinguish a physiological-genital component of sexual arousal from a psychological, or subjective, one. They specifically write that "physiological-genital arousal [. . .] is a state of activation of a complex system of reflexes that involves the sex organs and the nervous system" (p. 25). In other words, physiological-genital responses such as an erection, vaginal lubrication, or an elevated heart rate constitute qualitatively distinct indications of sexual arousal from those of its subjective/psychological component which "[i]s conceived to be an affect-cognition blend, consisting of awareness of physiological sexual arousal, sexual affects, and affect-cognition blends, which is transmuted into consciousness and deepens involvement by amplifying the perception of sexual stimulation, sexual cognitions, sexual behavior, physiological sexual response, and itself" (Mosher, Barton-Henry, & Green, 1988, p. 412).

According to Regan and Berscheid (1999), sexual desire as a psychological state is clearly different from physiological-genital arousal since the former represents a subjective, psychological state whereas the latter is defined in terms of specific physiological and genital events that may occur without conscious awareness. The

distinction between sexual desire and psychological sexual arousal, though, proves to be more elusive, a point Regan and Berscheid elucidate as follows:

Both are subjective experiences and therefore both are assessed via self-report. Nonetheless, the subjective awareness that one is interested in sexual activities or stimuli, wishes to engage in sexual behavior, or craves sexual contact with another is arguably different from the subjective awareness that one is currently experiencing the physiological-genital indicants of sexual arousal [. . .] Sexual desire implies the wish to obtain a sexual object that one does not now have or to engage in a sexual activity in which one is not now engaging. Subjective sexual arousal, on the other hand, is the awareness that one is *now*, experiencing certain physiological and/or genital reactions. Both phenomena (i.e. sexual desire and subjective sexual arousal) can occur concurrently and also in the presence of physiological-genital arousal; however, sexual desire does not *depend* on physiological or genital reactions for its occurrence in the way that subjective sexual arousal does (1999, pp. 17-18).

Having summarized some contemporary views and assumptions on the subject of sexual desire, I believe that a number of criticisms and questions could be raised.

Beginning with Heider's ideas on desire, I do not wish to contest the notion that desire represents a subjective, psychological state that is linked to pleasure. However, I do wish to suggest that the aforementioned theoretical explanation is limited insofar as it fails to capture the emotional complexity that desire often embodies. First, Heider's construct fails to acknowledge cultural forces and ideological pressures that shape our desires and, often, dictate what is considered pleasurable or not. In my opinion, though, the most significant weakness of Heider's conceptualization is that pleasure as an emotional state is not adequately explored. What do we mean by pleasure? Is my pleasure when I eat an ice-cream qualitatively similar to that of an individual who accedes to indescribable hardships in order to secure a sense of heroic reputation? Is there any pleasure involved when an OCD sufferer surrenders to repeated hand washings that often cause pleasure

and/or pain *and/or* fear *and/or* shame? Thus, it seems plausible to suggest that a generalized, monolithic view of the relationship between desire and pleasure, perhaps, precludes the discovery of further dimensions that could significantly expand our conceptualizations of both.

Coming to Kaplan's view of sexual desire, we should first bear in mind that, even though the primary focus of her work was on the physiological aspects of human sexual response, her model aspired to provide a theoretical framework that would also allow sex therapists to successfully treat psychological difficulties related to sexual functioning. At this point, though, several important questions arise. First, if her triphasic model of human sexuality is physiologically and psychologically valid, what happens to desire when, or after, we experience excitement and orgasm? Her model describes these three phases as linearly related but distinct: sexual desire → excitement → orgasm. It could be claimed, though, that this distinction is highly problematic. How can we keep being sexually excited if desire is not present? Furthermore, does sexual desire have the same meaning for all individuals at all times and under all circumstances? Finally, given that Kaplan principally describes a physiological process, is sexual desire lived as such by *all bodies*? In sum, I believe that the only goal that Kaplan's view on sexual desire accomplishes is to homogenize a human existential experience that stands among the most complex, and resistant to generalizing definition.

Lastly, as regards the differentiation between sexual desire and sexual arousal, significant questions arise as well. Mosher et al. (1988) define psychological sexual arousal as depending on physiological or genital reactions (physiological arousal) and, to a great extent, rightly so. They also mention (p. 412) that people usually describe their

subjective sexual arousal as *feeling passionate, lustful, horny, turned-on, sensual, or sexy*. Do these affect adjectives, though, solely refer to the subjective experience of the physiological arousal? It seems to me that they eloquently describe people's physiological stimulation *along with* the fact that they are physically and psychologically in a state of desire. They might or might not seek to engage in any form of sexual activity (masturbation included) but, as soon as the arousal, both physiological and psychological, is present, the message conveyed is one of wanting, or wishing to act. The authors state that "Both phenomena (i.e. sexual desire and subjective sexual arousal) can occur concurrently and also in the presence of physiological-genital arousal" (Regan & Berscheid, 1999, p. 17). Conversely, I suggest that psychological sexual arousal is difficult to distinguish from sexual desire and that the boundaries between the two (if we accept that they, indeed, represent two distinct entities) are subtle and elusive.

Similarly, when reading the phrase "Sexual desire implies the wish to obtain a sexual object that one does not *now* have or to engage in a sexual activity in which one is not *now* engaging" (Regan & Berscheid, 1999, p. 17) one wonders about the fate of sexual desire when actual sexual gratification is readily available. Is it automatically substituted by psychological sexual arousal and, ultimately, fades away? And, if this is the case, what is it that keeps someone being sexually aroused when engaging in any form of sexual activity? Do we, in the final analysis, talk about a sexual (physiological or psychological) arousal that exists in and by itself, as if in a vacuum, propelled by nothing?

Thus far, our discussion has revolved around the problematic categorization between sexual desire as one's subjective experience of wishing to engage in sexual

behavior on the one hand and psychological sexual arousal as one's subjective awareness of physiological arousal on the other. At this point, I would also like to introduce the idea that a dichotomized conceptualization of sexual arousal between its physiological and psychological components is equally problematic. Such a view would be justified if "our bodies [began and ended] at the skin" (Haraway, 1990, p. 178). In other words, we could, perhaps, theorize about physiological sexual arousal as such if we could accordingly think about the body solely as a natural object. Yet, as Judith Butler points out (1993), such a view is problematic in, at least, two ways: first, because we usually tend to forget that nature is not ahistorical and value-free but, instead, is colored by how we subjectively think about it, and, second, because, even if we accept that we all share some fundamental bodily experiences, a natural science perspective sheds no light on why we affirm or disavow our bodies. In sum, I claim that physiological arousal cannot be theorized as such because our bodies, by skin color, size, sex, or physiological responses are inscribed with meaning through culture and social structures.

Consequently, when we experience physiological arousal we do not simply perceive an erection or vaginal lubrication; we simultaneously enact all the significations that have shaped the materiality of our bodies as well as their psychological ramifications; ones that include but, in my view, go further and beyond the rigid definitions of sexual desire that are proffered by modern sexology and which, to a large extent, condemn alternative views to silence.

The Medicalization of Sexual Desire

Conrad & Angell explain medicalization as "a process by which non-medical problems become defined and treated as medical problems, usually in terms of illnesses

or disorders” (2004, p. 32). This section aspires to describe this process in reference to three facets of sexual desire which have been heavily medicalized through time: homosexuality, Inhibited Sexual Desire (ISD), and sexual addiction. Conrad & Angell (2004) will guide us through the discussion of homosexuality, whereas Janice Irvin’s (1995) rigorous exploration of the diagnostic categories of ISD and sexual addiction will shed light on the process of their appropriation by medicine and sexology as well as their construction as medical problems.

Homosexuality

According to Conrad & Angell (2004), the medicalization of homosexuality took root simultaneously with the invention of the term “homosexuality” by the Hungarian physician K. M. Benkert in 1869. Benkert thought of homosexuality as a medical pathology existing from one’s birth and advocated against laws and punishments aiming at eradicating it. He, like Kraft-Ebbing, believed that homosexual desire could not be changed into heterosexual one and they both tried to discourage homosexual individuals’ treatment as criminals. Instead, they supported the idea that homosexuality should be medically treated.

Psychoanalysis added a second stepping stone on the way to the medicalization of homosexual desire (Conrad & Angell, 2004). Despite Freud’s relatively open-minded approach towards homosexuality, regarding it as a “variation” of “normal” sexual development not amenable to change, his heirs pathologized it and undertook the task of devising appropriate psychoanalytic treatments for it. Psychoanalytic psychiatrists such as Edmund Bergler, Irving Bieber, and Charles Socarides “insisted all homosexuals experienced a deep sense of guilt from their ‘perversion’ [. . .]. [They also] saw

homosexuality as a pathology with its roots in flawed relationships in childhood and the family, [. . .] [or as] a form of mental illness with ‘pre-Oedipal origins’” (pp. 32-33). All three believed that psychoanalytic treatment could be effective in helping some people get rid of their homosexual impulses.

The inclusion of homosexuality in the American Psychiatric Association’s (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* in 1952 and 1968 completed its medicalization in the most official way possible. Conrad & Angell write: “Without offering a specific definition of what constitutes the ‘condition,’ the DSM-II categorized homosexuality under ‘Personality Disorders and Certain Other Non-Psychotic Disorders,’ specifically under ‘Sexual Deviation’” (2004, p. 33). As we will also see in our later discussion of Inhibited Sexual Desire (ISD) and sexual addiction, the difficulty in precisely defining a “condition” related to sexual desire would not confine itself to homosexuality. Staying on topic with what is relevant to this section, though, it should be noted that the inclusion of homosexuality in the DSM subsequently sparked concentrated efforts at demedicalizing it. These efforts were firmly supported by the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) liberation organizations, formed after the Stonewall protests⁷ in 1969 (Conrad & Angell, 2004), and culminated in the removal of homosexuality from the DSM in 1974. Claiming, however, that the official demedicalization of homosexuality has gone unchallenged during the last 40 years would be a mistake.

⁷Hall mentions that on June 28, 1969, “in the middle of a routine raid by vice cops on a gay bar in New York, several hundred incensed patrons, tired of harassment, resisted by throwing bottles, rocks, and other objects at police. Skirmishes between the law and groups of angry lesbian, gay, and transgendered individuals continued for several days...[T]he Stonewall riots are important as a marker and as a common point of reference [for the ‘birth’ of the gay civil rights movement]” (2003, pp. 40-41).

Conrad & Angell (2004) have identified a number of medical, social, cultural, and political factors that, to a certain extent, have threatened to remedicalize homosexuality. The National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), for example, is an organization that offers reparative therapy to individuals feeling uncomfortable with their homosexuality and desiring to become heterosexuals. The NARTH therapists claim that homosexuality is changeable and, despite the fact that their overall influence on the field of psychiatry is limited, they persistently advocate for the remedicalization of homosexuality.

Ultimately, though, it was the HIV/AIDS crisis during the 1980s that mostly threatened to render homosexuality a “medical condition” again (Conrad & Angell, 2004). Gay men were among the first to be diagnosed with the disease and, consequently, AIDS was inextricably associated with homosexuality and its lifestyle. As a matter of fact, the sociologist Steven Epstein has argued that “being gay was perceived by popular culture as a ‘symptom’ of AIDS” (Conrad & Angell, 2004, p. 35). Taking into consideration that the first scientific name for AIDS was “Gay Related Immune Disorder (GRID),” it could be argued that the above-mentioned cultural belief had found its medical counterpart. In general, during the first years of its emergence as a deadly disease, AIDS would be routinely linked to homosexuality and non-gay AIDS sufferers would be systematically overlooked. As Conrad & Angell write, “scientists and physicians constructed AIDS as a ‘gay disease’ because they perceived the ‘homosexual lifestyle’ as unhealthy in the 1970s” (2004, p. 35).

The “homosexual lifestyle” and its presumed connection to AIDS served as vehicles towards further and tighter medical surveillance and stigmatization of

homosexual people. These goals were principally accomplished through the adoption of “two frames, both of which promoted the view of AIDS as a ‘gay disease’” (Conrad & Angell, 2004, p. 35). The first frame explained the emergence of AIDS as the outcome of homosexual people’s “excessive lifestyle,” including multiple sexual partners, drug use, and anal sex. As a result, homosexuals’ patterns of choosing sexual partners, their sexual practices, and, in general, their ways of relating to each other were targeted by the medical community in the name of health and disease prevention. Upon publicly acknowledging the fact that homosexuals were not the only victims of AIDS, though, the medical community adopted the second frame which explained AIDS in terms of risk groups (homosexuals, drug users, immigrants etc.). Gay men’s “lifestyle,” though, remained a target of medical surveillance and social stigmatization; these attitudes prevailed among “average” heterosexual people long after the cause of AIDS had been discovered to be viral and linked to specific behaviors (Conrad & Angell, 2004).

Conrad & Angell (2004) state that the HIV/AIDS crisis “tapped into a reservoir of existing moral fears of homosexuals” (p. 36) and, supported by the general public’s health fears and the early lack of research on the disease, significantly increased discriminatory attitudes and behaviors against the LGBT population. However, as they also note, in the end, this increased stigmatization against homosexuality did not lead to its remedicalization. This was mainly due to gay activists who persistently emphasized the necessity of conducting more research on the treatment of AIDS, of providing AIDS patients with free treatment, and of explaining the concerns of gay people to and collaborating with the medical community. Nevertheless, “while the most overt AIDS-

related discrimination abated by the late 1980s, the fears of the contagion of the disease reinforced the stigmatized link of AIDS and homosexuality” (p. 36).

Moving away from the HIV/AIDS crisis, the early 1990s were marked by a number of research studies on the genetic and biological origins of homosexuality (Conrad & Angell, 2004). These studies, although they were less influential compared to the HIV/AIDS crisis, have also challenged the demedicalization of homosexuality. Specifically, they have suggested that the manifestation of homosexuality or heterosexuality may be due to hypothalamic or genetic differences among people. Despite the fact that the above-mentioned hypotheses have yet to be proven, they have already stirred fears that the discovery of a gene linked to homosexuality could lead to terminated pregnancies or the development of genetic therapies for the eradication of undesirable, non-heterosexual orientations.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned fears, Conrad & Angell (2004) observe that a significant part of the LGBT population has endorsed biological/genetic explanations of homosexuality. They maintain that these explanations provide their supporters with the comfort of a fixed, changeless sense of identity that is able to “silence claims that homosexuality is treatable [. . .] [and to appease the uncomfortable thought of having chosen] the oppression and ostracism that comes with being homosexual in our society” (p. 38). Of course, it should be noted that these explanations have also been received with a high degree of skepticism by an equally significant part of the LGBT population who claims that adhering to stable notions of identity “could open the door for the remedicalization of homosexuality” (p. 38).

Towards the end of their article, Conrad & Angell (2004) evaluate the possibility that homosexuality could be remedicalized in the future. They argue that, as opposed to psychiatry, the field of genetics could potentially generate research data that could be interpreted as indicating the existence of biomedical disorders. They admit that homosexuality still carries a considerable degree of stigma but they are quick to note that “[its] demedicalization shows no real erosion at the moment” (p. 39). However, they conclude, the perception and interpretation of homosexuality (along with its likelihood to be de- or remedicalized) largely depends on political and cultural changes, as well as on broader societal shifts, such as the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, or the US Supreme Court ruling on gay marriage in June, 2015. As a consequence, we should remain vigilant for signs of increasing intolerance and pathologization.

Inhibited Sexual Desire (ISD) and Sexual Addiction

Inspired by Foucault’s work on medical diagnosis and sexuality, Janice Irvin (1995) writes that “diseases are artifacts with social history and social practice” (p. 314). As with the case of homosexuality, the diagnostic categories of ISD and sexual addiction⁸ have been largely constructed from the intertwined elements of cultural anxieties, individuals’ experiences, and disease narratives. It is true; the question of how much sexual desire is too much or too little has, to a greater or lesser extent, preoccupied all of us. However, the recent transformation of these concerns into two distinct diagnostic categories and, to some degree, identities has been supported by a number of cultural and ideological forces. This is the process Janice Irvin undertakes to elucidate.

⁸The most recent editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5, 2013)* and the *International Classification of Mental and Behavioral Disorders: Clinical Descriptions and Diagnostic Guidelines (ICD-10, 1992)* designate specific criteria for the clinical diagnosis of ISD and/or sexual addiction.

ISD was first reported as an increasingly frequent sexual problem towards the end of the 1970s. Common symptoms included “sexual boredom, low libido, sexual malaise, and even sexual aversion and sexual phobia” (Irvin, 1995, p. 316). Sexologists of the era had suggested that chronic failure to respond to sexual stimuli should be named ISD and constitute a new diagnosis. It is still considered as one of the most difficult problems to treat and typically affects more women than men (Laumann et al., 2005).

The concept of sexual addiction was first developed in 1977 by individuals also treated for other types of addiction such as drugs, alcohol, and gambling (Irvin, 1995). Its treatment followed on the footsteps of 12-step groups and nowadays there are 7 “nationwide fellowships for sex addicts and co-addicts” (p. 317), organizing approximately 2,000 meetings per week across the United States. A few years after it was first conceived, sexual addiction acquired the status of a diagnostic category and its treatment was undertaken by mental health professionals such as addiction and sex offender specialists. There are currently numerous outpatient and inpatient programs specifically designed to treat sexual addiction and men are more likely to be diagnosed as sex addicts than women.

Nonetheless, Irvin (1995) asserts that ISD and sexual addiction, apart from their different beginnings, have also been marked by the ideological differences between sexologists and addiction specialists. As she claims, the field of addiction is traditionally characterized by a spirit of “vigilance about excess and admonitions for control and management” (p. 318). This philosophy was firmly in opposition to sexologists’ encouragement towards greater sexual expansion and freedom. As a matter of fact, the beginning of the 1980s found the two professional cohorts on a collision course, with

addiction specialists accusing sexologists of leading sex addicts to relapse, and sexologists ridiculing sexual addiction and claiming it to be invalid as a diagnostic category. The HIV/AIDS crisis, however, forced sexologists to modify their rhetoric and adjust it to an atmosphere of widespread fear and terror. Irvin writes that “the sexologists’ exhortations to sexual pleasure and experimentation [looked] increasingly unwise and unhealthy, and sexologists [. . .] [began] integrating some of the ideas, if not the wholesale diagnosis, of the sexual addiction field” (p. 319). Yet, despite the narrowing of the ideological differences between the two professional groups, the problem remained: how should ISD and sexual addiction be defined?

Admittedly, as Irvin (1995) points out, exactly defining “diseases” linked to sexual desire represents a task of formidable difficulty. A dense web of professional, cultural, and personal factors has generated a wide array of conflicting, etiological hypotheses as to the origins of ISD and sexual addiction. Despite having taken environmental, biochemical, and familial factors into consideration and having conducted a number of research studies, the scientific community is still debating the exact etiology and definition of ISD and sexual addiction.

The above-mentioned etiological and definitional ambiguity, though, has not deterred health professionals from attempting to trace “the etiology of sexual conditions within a biomedical tradition that quantifies [. . .] [and maps] desire and its varied disorders in the body itself” (Irvin, 1995, p. 320). In fact, as Irvin argues, despite their ideological and philosophical differences, sexologists and addiction specialists are united in their commitment to perpetuate a reductionist view of sexual desire as solely residing in the body. Additionally, they encourage a bifurcated, philosophical perspective that

regards sexual desire as a biological drive that is in danger of being either uncontrollable or diminished. As a result, although strict biological explanations of sexual desire are not prevalent anymore, there is always a strong tendency among health professionals and members of the general public to locate sexual desire “within regulatory mechanisms of the brain that are alternately perceived as impervious to change or quite vulnerable to disruption” (p.320).

To further understand the extent of reified essentialism characterizing the brain-centered theories of sexual desire, a few concrete examples could, perhaps, prove to be enlightening. Irvin refers to prominent sexologist Helen Singer Kaplan who asserts that sexual desire

[represents] an appetite or drive which is produced by the activation of a specific neural system in the brain. [It] is a drive that serves the biologic function of species survival. It instills a strong erotic hunger that prods us to engage in species specific behavior that leads to reproduction. It moves us to find a mate, to seduce, to excite, to impregnate, to be impregnated (Kaplan, quoted in Irvin, 1995, p. 321).

At this point, I believe a clarification is warranted. In quoting the above passage by Kaplan, I do not wish to contest the view that sexual desire *also* has an important biological component that, among other goals, aims at reproduction. The brain, the nervous system, our genes and biochemical reactions, the undeniable, natural processes of our bodies...all these are not my enemies. What I wish to contest, though, is the view that our physiological processes—especially in relation to sexual desire—unfold through time in universal, singular ways, undeterred from historical, political, and economic developments, social circumstances, and relational factors. I also wish to oppose theories which, apart from wholeheartedly espousing reductionism, also propose that sexual desire

carries a number of specific, predetermined, relational, and expressive possibilities. Such is sexologist John Money's "lovemap theory" (Irvin, 1995), to be discussed next.

Money argues that the brain contains a limited, fixed number of sexual possibilities which are shaped during the early childhood years and, subsequently, affect our behavior. He calls these programmed sexual possibilities "the lovemap" and defines it as "a developmental representation or template, synchronously functional in the mind and the brain, depicting the idealized lover, the idealized love affair, and the idealized program of sexueroetic activity with that lover, projected in imagery and ideation, or in actual performance" (Money, quoted in Irvin, 1995, p. 321). Needless to say, of course, that Money's "lovemap" theory has been extensively utilized by addiction specialists treating sex addicts because it allegedly explains why individuals find it difficult to get rid of or why they go back to specific sexual behaviors. An individual's emotional complexity, issues of poverty, violence, or trauma, his/her potential for change, the unpredictability of every single sexual encounter...these are simply factors that are not taken into consideration.

At this point, though, someone could ask: have the so-called "desire disorders" and, in general, sexual desire only been explained in such reductionist ways by the disciplines of sexology and medicine? Janice Irvin (1995) responds in the negative but she is quick to point out that, even when cultural and idiosyncratic factors have been taken into account, the concept of sexual desire as an inner force that is capable of overcoming sexual norms, social regulation, and the mediation of culture and history has been rarely doubted. Therefore, she argues that the occasional espousal of culture by sexology and medicine still "retains determinist assumptions" (p. 322).

Where does the previous discussion of homosexuality, ISD, and sexual addiction leave us with regard to the medicalization of sexual desire in general? Janice Irvin (1995) maintains that the ways through which sexual desire and its “disorders” have been recently conceptualized by sexology and medicine “reinscribe historically familiar themes of morality, regulation, the ambivalence of pleasure, and the ruin of excess and depravity” (p. 327). These themes had already been salient objects of scientific investigation during the 19th century and, nowadays, due to the power of medical ideology and its endorsement by popular culture, have reemerged and are increasingly legitimated and promoted as the most culturally appropriate and medically sanctioned forms of sexual expression.

Nevertheless, the recent, medicalized conceptualizations of sexual desire and its “disorders” have also taken root in modern Western culture because of one more important reason; that is, they have instilled hope in and have promised individualized treatments and cures to a large number of individuals who experience their sexual desire as perplexing and painful (Irvin, 1995). The high degree of acceptance enjoyed by the medical model along with the increasing levels of alienation and loneliness in Western societies have created the necessary circumstances for a thriving therapeutic industry to develop. Therefore, given the fact that the power of diagnostic constructs such as ISD and sexual addiction lies in their therapeutic promise, it would be worth examining the extent to which they have come up to the general public’s expectations. Pertinent to this discussion are the following questions:

How does the existence of ISD and sexual addiction as disease entities shape individual experiences of sexuality? Has the creation of these diseases either limited or expanded other options for thinking about sexual desire? What does it mean to someone to take on the identity of a sex

addict? If one feels little sexual desire, is it helpful to define that absence as a disease (Irvin, 1995, p. 328)?

In her attempt to provide some preliminary answers, Irvin (1995) makes an important point that my personal experience as a clinical psychology trainee has proven to be true: a very large number of individuals are often relieved to receive a name, a medical or psychological diagnosis for their suffering. Especially when issues of morality or personal failure are involved, conceptualizing one's pain in scientific, neutral terms can endow a person with a sense of legitimacy and blamelessness. In other words, the pained individual is absolved of the responsibility of providing any explanations why his/her sexual desire is too much or too little. The symptoms are usually attributed to brain abnormalities or biochemical imbalances, cultural factors are ignored, and the suffering person is happily and willingly transformed into a patient waiting to be properly treated.

Yet, as Irvin observes (1995), the ostensibly scientific neutrality of a medical diagnosis such as ISD or sexual addiction is far from neutral, for, "as illnesses are social judgments, they are negative judgments" (p. 329). As a result, a degree of stigmatization usually ensues from a medical diagnosis. This is not the end of the story, though, since the desire disorders are usually presented as changeless, fixed categories which can often be perceived as changeless, fixed identities. Additionally, as Irvin points out, questionnaires and checklists inquiring about ISD and sexual addiction symptoms are intentionally vague and ever expansive, rendering pathological almost anything that does not correspond to a "social purity vision of a spiritually based, monogamous sexuality that is always relationally oriented" (p. 329). Consequently, a psychologically perplexed individual, instead of acquiring a more gratifying sexual life with the assistance of

medicine and sexology, may be further trapped in a morality-and-deviance game. Furthermore, given that treatments for ISD and sexual addiction usually ignore cultural, social, and family dynamics and only focus on the individual patient as an isolated biopsychological entity, contributing problems such as “sexual abuse [. . .], the primacy of the nuclear family [. . .], [the improvement of] sex education [. . .], [and] destructive and coercive sexual ideologies” (p. 329) are not addressed. Thus, cure is not enhanced and the individuals asking for help run the risk of further plunging into psychological states of self-blame, fear, and shame.

Should we totally discard the diagnostic categories of ISD and sexual addiction, then? Janice Irvin (1995) reminds us that, even if we wished so, we would not be able to discard them very easily. This is so, as she explains, because, in general, the construction of disease categories reflects cultural anxieties and helps people assign meaning to their experiences. In an era when we are increasingly asked to be more and more productive, uptight, narcissistic, and invulnerable, our sexual desire ceases to be neutral (it’s never been neutral, anyway). Instead, it strives to strike a balance within a dichotomous cultural context in which “[we are constantly encouraged to] tilt away from pleasure and toward prohibition [. . .] [and] sex is simultaneously heralded as the linchpin of individual fulfillment and denigrated as the source of chaos, exploitation, and death” (pp. 329-331). Despite the fact that ISD and sexual desire have sprung up directly from the above-mentioned cultural context, we cannot ignore the fact, however, that they have helped a number of people contextualize and appease their worries to an extent. The price, of course, has been the perpetuation of sexual ideologies which, for the most part, are

reductionist and patriarchal. Perhaps, though, ISD and sexual addiction could also serve a more liberating function.

In *Chapter 1* of this dissertation I referred to Foucault's notion of resistance. Even though this concept will be more fully explored in the next chapter, it is worth following Janice Irvin's (1995) theoretical use of resistance with regard to ISD and sexual addiction. She writes:

[M]edical diagnoses function differently for individuals and may operate fluidly and unpredictably in the culture. While constructed diseases like ISD and sexual addiction may play a central role in the creation and reinforcement of the traditional sociosexual order, the diagnoses also contain the seeds of disruption and opposition (p. 332).

What does Irvin mean? As previously discussed, the diagnostic categories of ISD and sexual addiction have been largely constructed in response to and with the goal of taming cultural anxieties associated with sexual desire. Their conceptual construction has also incorporated dominant cultural ideologies with the aim of reproducing them. One of the ideologies embedded in the ISD and sexual addiction categories has involved the stereotypical view of men as sexually more aggressive and the stereotypical view of women as sexually more inhibited and frigid. As a result, as Irvin (1995) writes, "early on, the demographics revealed more women diagnosed with ISD, while men largely filled the ranks of sex addicts" (p. 332). Yet, despite the assumed fixity of these concepts and diagnostic categories, we should not forget that they are usually imposed within cultures and upon human beings who are volatile, unpredictable, and, often unbeknownst to them, able to undermine these categories. Therefore, when increasingly more women started being diagnosed with sexual addiction and increasingly more men with ISD, a wonderful opportunity to subvert predominant sexual/gender norms and stereotypes had arisen. And,

thus, two diagnostic categories that had been constructed, among other goals, to uphold the sexual/gender status quo intact, were, to some extent, undermined by the untenable character of their constituent ideologies.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to concisely describe the ways through which sexual desire has been theorized, demarcated, and medicalized by the disciplines of medicine and sexology during the last 150 years. Special emphasis has been placed on the medical and cultural ideologies that have generated the previously discussed conceptualizations of sexual desire. Additionally, problematic aspects of these conceptualizations have been highlighted and reasons why alternative theorizations of sexual desire, ones “that insert the elements of history, cultural ideologies, and power relations” (Irvin, 1995, 334), are needed. These alternative theorizations will make up the main body of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

The Multiplicity of (Sexual) Desire

Dangerous

Said Myrtias (a Syrian student in Alexandria; during the reign of the augustus Constans and the augustus Constantius; partly pagan, and partly Christianized):
“Strengthened by contemplation and study,
I will not fear my passions like a coward.
My body I will give to pleasures,
to diversions that I’ve dreamed of,
to the most daring erotic desires,
to the lustful impulses of my blood, without
any fear at all, for whenever I will—
and I will have the will, strengthened
as I’ll be with contemplation and study—
at the crucial moments I’ll recover
my spirit as it was before: ascetic.”
—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, p. 37).

There is no guarantee that the theories to be discussed in this chapter will ever turn me, you (the readers), or anybody else into another Myrtias. After all, we all develop different and complex relationships to desire and pleasure in the course of our lives; the degree to which we are able to surrender to pleasure and strike a balance between hedonism and asceticism constantly fluctuates. Furthermore, such endeavors also demand, apart from a robust theoretical armament, considerable emotional exposure and risk-taking. Placing theoretical shields around ourselves and thinking that fear and pain will miraculously dissipate or that joy and happiness will be our eternal companions will change nothing; or, at least, it has never changed anything in my life. Each time a transformative experience marked my body and mind, theory and emotion always went hand in hand.

This is the perspective I am inviting you, the readers of this dissertation, to engage and wrestle with as you are reading through this chapter. Allow your mind to absorb the concepts and ideas explored here. Go further than that, though. See how your body feels when you process these ideas. Allow it the necessary time and space to generate feelings that will eventually be transformed into emotional reactions. Thoughts, feelings, and emotions will hopefully participate in a dialectical dance which, as Deleuze would probably argue, will reveal the dynamism and instability of all three (Colebrook, 2002). And, in case you are wondering whether I am asking you to become another Myrtias; in other words, whether I request that you perfectly and unmistakably oscillate between hedonism and asceticism, fearlessly offer your body to others and yourself, and welcome pleasure again and again without shame, without fear, and without guilt...the answer is unequivocally NO! I have no right to ask of others emotional achievements I myself haven't accomplished yet. What I am asking you to participate in, instead, is the gradual discovery of the possibility that there may be alternative ways to think about, interpret, and experience sexual desire; the likelihood that there may be different ways of sexually relating to ourselves and others, ones that are equally valid and gratifying as the relationships promoted by dominant sexual ideologies; finally, the opportunity, through this theoretical and emotional discovery, to empower ourselves and suggest to whoever accuses us (men, women, heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals, transsexuals, transgenders, intersexuals, queers...) of not sexually desiring in the "right" way that "there is no fixed way of sexually desiring." And, finally, in case you think that your bodily feelings and emotional reactions will deprive you of your objectivity and the ability to evaluate theories, consider the following quote by Simon Williams (2001):

What is clear [. . .] is that we are never (qua embodied human beings) devoid of an emotional stance on the world [. . .]. The body [. . .] is thoroughly “in” the mind and vice versa. Any adequate account of meaning and imagination, reason and emotion, therefore, accord a central place to human embodiment as the basis from which our knowledge and understanding of the world and the conceptual structures for grasping it emerge (pp. vii-62).

Alfred Kinsey’s Research on Human Sexual Behavior

We begin this theoretical survey on the multiplicity of sexual desire with the American biologist and sexologist Alfred Kinsey’s groundbreaking statistical research on human sexual behavior. Kinsey’s research was especially important because it emanated from the wider scientific establishment that had upheld the—previously discussed—demarcation and medicalization of sexual desire. Despite his rigorous training in natural science research methods, Kinsey was among the very first scientists to show that sexual desire—sexuality, in general—is much more complex than was previously thought.

Jennifer Terry (1995) reports that, before Kinsey’s research, a plethora of research studies had tried to prove that the manifestation of homosexuality was due to biological, hormonal and, generally, physically constitutional reasons. Apart from methodological criticisms, Kinsey’s major disagreement with these studies involved the use of a dividing line between the “homosexual” and the “normal.” He wrote:

More basic than any error brought out in the analysis of [these] data is the assumption that homosexuality and heterosexuality are two mutually exclusive phenomena emanating from fundamentally and, at least in some cases, inherently different types of individuals. Any classification of individuals as “homosexuals” or “normals” (=heterosexuals) carries that implication. It is the popular assumption and the current psychiatric assumption, and the basis for such attempts as have been made to find hormonal explanations for these divergences in human behavior (Kinsey, 1941, p. 425).

Kinsey firmly believed that an individual’s anatomical features could reveal nothing significant about his/her sexuality and that, unless we understood “first, the full

range of human sexual variation, and, second, the frequency with which each kind of sexual variation occurs in the population” (Terry, 1995, p. 154), research studies on the biological and hormonal constitution of homosexuality would be scientifically futile. Based on these two premises, Kinsey set off to investigate human sexual behavior in the mid-1930s and employed a mass survey methodology that involved the participation of thousands of randomly chosen men and women, as well as extensive in depth interviews with hundreds of participants.

For the purposes of his research, Kinsey defined male homosexual behavior as involving “one or both parties in the relation [coming] to ejaculation as a result of stimulation provided by another male” (Kinsey, 1941, p. 425). After the completion of the study, it was found that “between a quarter and a third of all males in any mixed-aged group had some homosexual experience. Over the course of an individual lifetime, an estimated fifty percent of the male population would engage in homosexuality” (p. 425).

Kinsey’s research on women generated analogous results and gave him the opportunity to claim that science should be more interested in what people sexually do instead of how they should be categorized (Terry, 1995). He wrote:

In brief, homosexuality is not the rare phenomenon which it is ordinarily conceived to be, but a type of behavior which ultimately may involve as much as half of the whole male population. Any hormonal or other explanation of the phenomenon must take this into account. Any use of so-called normals as controls...should allow for the possibility that a quarter to a half of these “normals” may in actuality have had homosexual experience at some point in their lives; and...it must similarly be recognized that there are very few “homosexuals” who have not had at least some, and in many cases a great deal, of heterosexual experience (Kinsey, 1941, p. 426).

Convinced that sexuality, instead of being categorized, should be conceptualized in variations and dimensions, Kinsey developed a seven-point scale that attempted to map

individuals' sexual orientation according to the frequency with which they would engage in either homosexual or heterosexual behavior. As Jennifer Terry states, he “[placed] those who had no homosexual experience at the zero degree, those who engaged in homosexual relations exclusively at the sixth degree, and those who had a mixture of homosexual and heterosexual encounters at the degrees in between” (1995, p. 156).

As expected, Kinsey's findings with regard to the prevalence of homosexual behavior among men and women deeply shocked the American society of the 1940s (Terry, 1995). Prior to the publication of his findings, homosexuality would be considered a sexual aberration that only concerned a particular population. Upon the publication of his research results, though, people started viewing homosexuality as a widespread phenomenon that could potentially concern their neighbors, relatives, priests, teachers etc. “Paranoia” and a disturbing and uneasy anxiety was the consequence, probably no less because a phenomenon—homosexuality—that had always been thought of as visible and detectable had suddenly become invisible and pervasive. As we all know, the dissolution of boundaries and an absence of certainties often pressures a desire and search for new certainties, and new boundaries; the scientific community writing and researching in the wake of Kinsey's startling findings similarly sought to reestablish boundaries, and as boundaries and borders are predicated on visibility and the ability to identify people and objects categorically, homosexuality needed to be made visible again, needed to be given to scientific observation and measurement again, and as we shall see, in ways that were often “extra-scientific”, and anything but accidental or incidental to broader societal political and ideological positions.

At first, Kinsey's studies were criticized from psychoanalytic quarters: two main issues were often raised, namely that Kinsey neglected both, the interviewees' personal motives for admitting to homosexual behavior as well as their unconscious processes.

Terry (1995) writes:

Their contention was that a person's conscious admission of sexual desire was anything but the transparent truth of sexuality, and thus should not be taken at face value. Kinsey's psychoanalytic critics insisted that to understand homosexual behavior, one must understand the underlying personality and neuroses that gave rise to this behavior. For the most part, they remained convinced that homosexuality was associated with a fundamentally neurotic type of personality (p. 158).

It should be emphasized that the psychoanalytic psychiatrists' above-mentioned assertions paved the way for developing psychogenic explanations of homosexuality. Seeing that Kinsey's research findings had rendered its biological explanations obsolete, the effort to reconstitute homosexual people as a "distinct species" focused on their—supposedly—unique, pathological, psychological, characteristics. As a matter of fact, as Terry points out (1995), this emphasis on homosexuals' psychological constitution encouraged psychoanalysts "[to reason that], if homosexuality was not a matter of biology, then the chances for curing it were greater" (p. 158). During the following three decades, until the mid-1970s, psychoanalytic psychiatrists, despite Kinsey's protests, were in the academic forefront of understanding homosexuality as aberration, deserving of prevention and cure. In short, Kinsey's major contributions to the field of sexuality had provoked a backlash that ultimately led to new ways of pathologizing and categorizing homosexuality.

Darwin, Evolutionary Psychology, and Sexual Desire

Given that a number of religious and conservative circles have traditionally equated the meaning and purpose of sexuality with those of reproduction and self-preservation, a discussion of sexual desire from an evolutionary perspective seems warranted. In this section of the chapter, I cover the basics of Darwin's theory of sexual selection as explained by Elizabeth Grosz in her recent book, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (2011). Towards the end of the section, Myra Hird's article, *Sex Diversity and Evolutionary Psychology* (2006), serves as a rich source for examples that reveal the reasons why "sexual dimorphism and heterosexuality [cannot be] the evolutionary norm" (Hird, 2006, p. 30).

Grosz, a feminist philosopher largely influenced by the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Luce Irigaray, begins her discussion on Darwin by pointing out that feminists "have had reason to be extremely wary of [. . .] new Darwinian projects [. . .] [due to] the essentialist and reductionist assumptions that proliferated with the eruption of sociobiology⁹ [. . .], the merging of natural with sexual selection, and the reduction of culture to nature that was effected through it" (2011, p. 115). However, as Grosz asserts, a philosophical rereading of Darwin's theory of sexual selection, one that is parted from the reductionist assumptions of sociobiology, could shed new light on Darwin's project and reveal its relevance to "a feminism of sexual difference¹⁰, a feminism beyond the constraints of identity" (p. 117). This could be because of mainly three reasons: a) sexual selection (attraction), as opposed to misguided arguments made by sociobiology, is not reduced to natural selection (survival), b) Darwin, "[in affirming] the fundamental

⁹According to the *Dictionary of Psychology and Allied Sciences* (Bhatia, 2009), sociobiology is "the systematic study of the biological basis of social behavior." (p. 390).

¹⁰Luce Irigaray's theory of sexual difference will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.

continuity of reason, morality, affect, and all the defining qualities of the human with the animal” (p. 119), points to the temporary, volatile, ever-evolving character of humans as well as of their bodies, arts, cultures, etc., and c) sexual selection, instead of encouraging an interpretation of life through the lenses of certain “privileged” concepts or moments (e.g. gene, conception, reproduction, death, etc.), supports “the continuous reframing of every internal perspective with another equally valid perspective” (p. 119).

To better understand the above arguments, though, we should begin by clarifying what natural and sexual selection stand for as well as what differentiates them. The *Cambridge Dictionary of Human Biology and Evolution* (2005) defines natural selection as follows:

[Natural selection is] the nonrandom process by which some individuals in a species who possess adaptive phenotypic traits have a higher net reproductive success than individuals without those traits. This can occur only for those adaptive traits that possess heritability, i.e. genotypes that contribute underlying adaptive genes disproportionately to successive generations as the result of differential fecundity, or, differential mortality or fertility by genotype. In a simpler form, this was the first mechanism proposed (by Charles Darwin, 1859) to account for evolution, in which forces in the environment select which individuals will leave the most offspring; still generally regarded as the principle nonteleological force in evolution. It is supported by the findings of modern genetics (p. 358).

In other words, as Grosz (2011) argues, natural selection is directly related to issues of survival and existence. Unless a member of any species possesses the necessary physical, biochemical and, most importantly, genetically inheritable characteristics to survive, death and extinction can be the only outcomes to ensue. Let us now turn to sexual selection and see how Darwin himself describes it:

This form of [sexual] selection depends, not on a struggle for existence in relation to other organic beings or to external conditions, but on a struggle between individuals of one sex, generally the males, for the possession of the other sex. The result is not death to the unsuccessful competitor, but

few or no offspring. Sexual selection is, therefore, less rigorous than natural selection. Generally, the most vigorous males, those which are best fitted for their place in nature, will leave the most progeny. But in many cases, victory depends not so much on general vigor, as on having special weapons, confined to the male sex. A hornless stag or spurless cock would have a poor chance of leaving numerous offspring. Sexual selection, by always allowing the victor to breed, might surely give indomitable courage, length to the spurred leg, and strength to the wing to strike in the spurred leg, in nearly the same manner as does the brutal cock-fighter by the careful selection of his best cocks (Darwin, quoted in Grosz, 2011, p. 121).

It could be claimed, then, that both natural and sexual selection involve a form of struggle and competition. The struggle entailed in natural selection, though, unequivocally leads to the death of the defeated member of any species, whereas this is never, or very rarely, the case with the struggle provoked by sexual selection. Furthermore, if natural selection is the struggle for reproduction and existence, “sexual selection is primarily directed to the attainment of possible sexual partners, which *may* lead to reproductive success” (Grosz, 2011, p. 120; italics in original). The aforementioned “attainment of possible sexual partners” demands that members of the different sexes within species enhance the attractiveness of their appearance. This goal is accomplished through the gradual acquisition of characteristics that “are only indirectly connected to reproduction” (p. 121) and further intensify the differences between the sexes. Such characteristics can include “colors, forms, sounds, smells, [and] shapes” (p. 122) which, whether present or absent, have *absolutely no effect* on the *reproductive* ability of a member of any species. This is so because these physical features are incorporated by members of a species for reasons of *beauty* and *sexual/erotic attraction* and not to enhance their, already secured, reproductive ability. And, as Grosz further explains (2011), if these features end up being genetically inheritable, they may help

offspring “ in terms of having access to their primary objects of desire or attention, in gaining access to those they deem most attractive [and] not [. . .] in terms of who leaves the most progeny” (p. 124). In fact, sexual selection could adversely interfere with and affect the goals of natural selection since “the most immediate, [. . .], direct [and appealing] objects of attraction and desire [are not necessarily] the fittest [in terms of reproduction]” (p. 125).

At this point, though, a brief digression is warranted in order to address some feminist reservations. Grosz (2011) states that Darwin’s constant references to “the activities of male members of various species” (p. 122) have been taken by feminist theorists to mean that male members of a species compete among each other and actively choose their female objects of sexual attraction, whereas female members passively wait to be chosen by males. Grosz argues that this is not entirely correct and claims that “[Darwin] was somewhat more inclined to feminism than a good many others” (Wolfe, 2014, p. 119). She goes on to explain that, apart from passages describing the competition among males, Darwin’s book, *The Descent of Man*, also includes lengthy passages detailing the competition among females, “which is more common in insects, birds, and some species of fish than it is in mammals” (Grosz, 2011, p. 122). She also maintains that Darwin’s conceptualizations of “activity” and “passivity” do not strictly or singularly correspond to specific sexes. Instead, they represent behavioral qualities that are changeable between the sexes and can take on different forms and expressions.

Continuing with our discussion of sexual selection, Grosz underscores its creative character and asserts that it is responsible for providing “the artistic raw materials for song, dance, painting, sculpture, [music, language], and architecture, or at least for the

animal preconditions of these human arts” (2011, p. 132). Whereas natural selection functions according to laws of survival, rationality, fitness, and reproduction, sexual selection, in its effort to generate more beauty and further enhance sexual/erotic attraction, is always governed by laws of excess, variation, difference, and aesthetics that “expand the world of the living into the nonfunctional, the redundant, the artistic” (p. 132). Most importantly, sexual selection points to the power of life to generate and render genetically inheritable differences that have absolutely nothing to do with our capacity to reproduce and everything to do with our capacity to maximize our experience of sexual pleasure.

Within this framework of excess and creativity, Grosz (2011) tells us that, apart from a vast array of opposite-sexed mating and reproduction possibilities, sexual selection commonly leads to multiple forms of non-heterosexual sexual and emotional attachments. In its effort to create more difference and variance, it gives rise to as many “sexual interests [. . .] [and] bodily types or forms” (p. 130). Homosexuality represents one among the multiple sexual interests generated by the creative function of sexual selection. Grosz points out that homosexuality has been observed in 450 species and, responding to proponents of the view that it is unnatural and abnormal, she reminds us that “it is a continuous and regular product or consequence of heterosexual encounters” (p. 130). She also adds that viewing homosexuality or any other non-heterosexual variation as the outcomes of “maladaptive development” is equally erroneous since homosexual pairings have been observed for hundreds of years, indicating that “nature itself has no problem with the elaboration of all sorts of sexual activity that may have little to do with reproduction, for reproduction is in any case never or rarely the goal of

copulation, only its frequent accompaniment” (p. 130). Similarly, Grosz rejects hormonal explanations of homosexuality, stressing the fact that “sexuality is not about the production of a norm but about the eruption of taste” (p. 130). In other words, sexual selection involves an unruly, almost anarchic, explosion of sexual preferences that principally occupy themselves with the pleasure and satisfaction derived from sexual activity rather than with reproduction, which “is the side-effect or by-product of sexuality” (p. 130).

A discussion of Darwin’s ideas on sexual selection would be incomplete without a reference to the issue of racial diversity. Grosz (2011) states that, despite having been usurped by racist ideologies in the past, Darwin’s ideas have always made it very clear that he unwaveringly disavowed racism, arguing that all human beings belong to the same species and that racial diversity is the outcome of “ideals of beauty and taste” (p. 137). He claimed that specific individual variations in terms of facial features, bodily types, hair types, skin colors, and psychological characteristics have once become likable and attractive among the members of a distinct group. These physical and psychological characteristics have also been genetically inherited from generation to generation and, in combination with factors such as geographical separation and isolation, have created a distinct racial group. In other words, racial diversity is the direct outcome of sexual selection. Grosz writes:

The form that races have today is a consequence primarily of the sexual attractions and forms of reproduction that ensued over many generations. It is primarily sexual and not natural selection that is capable of explaining the nonfunctional, excessive appeal of the preservation of racially particular characteristics (p. 139).

Having reviewed Darwin's theory of sexual selection, Myra Hird's article, *Sex Diversity and Evolutionary Psychology* (2006), serves as a rich supplement of examples pointing to the sex and sexual diversity that characterizes non-human behavior. At the beginning of the article, Hird points out that, in trying to account for homosexual behavior, there have been two sets of competing theories in evolutionary psychology, offering two fundamentally different explanations. The first set focuses on "law-like parameters" (p. 30) and has been accused of working within a paradigmatic framework that favors heterosexuality and glosses over strong indications of diversity. The second set of theories, the one endorsed by Hird herself, focuses on issues of diversity and is based on "fundamental aspects of Darwinian evolutionary theory, such as variation as the baseline upon which natural selection operates, and the contingency of selection due to environmental change over long periods of time" (p. 30). She clarifies that her evidence has been derived from long-term behavioral observations of non-human living organisms "[having existed] on earth far longer than humans and thus [providing] the kind of time-frame required for evolutionary speculation" (p. 30). Finally, although she understands that being compared to non-human living organisms may feel uncomfortable to LGBTQ individuals, she points out that learning from non-human animals constitutes an indispensable source of information, provided scientists recognize the limitations of the paradigm within which they work.

Hird begins her account by stating that etiological explanations of homosexuality have traditionally been triggered by the assumption that there are only two sexes (male and female) that complement each other. Yet, as Hird maintains, possessing a sex and engaging with sexual reproduction constitute changes that, if examined from an

evolutionary perspective, have taken place quite recently. She further explains that sexual reproduction has been the accidental “by-product of the evolution of multicellularity and cellular differentiation” (p. 30). After innumerable years of asexual reproduction, multicellular organisms acquired a sex, and sexual reproduction began as it proved to be advantageous from an evolutionary perspective. Hird notes that sexual reproduction in itself still puzzles scientists; referencing Judith Mackay, Hird asks:

The most intriguing aspect of my research was why we have sex at all. After all, sexual reproduction in animals started only 300 million years ago. Life on earth got on pretty well for 3000 million years before that with asexual reproduction... [Sexual reproduction] takes more time, it uses more energy and mates may be scarce or uncooperative (Mackay, quoted in Hird, 2006, p. 31).

More surprisingly still, Hird continues:

Virtually all plant and many animal species are intersex. That is, living organisms are often both sexes simultaneously, which means that there are not really “two sexes” at all... Many animal species routinely practice transsex, by changing from one sex to another, either once or several times... Other animals practice transvestism by visually, chemically, or behaviorally resembling the “opposite sex.” And over 4000 known species are parthenogenic: all the organisms are female and they reproduce without sex (2006, p. 31).

Apart from sex diversity, though, Hird (2006) affirms that there is an equally impressive gamut of sexual diversity among non-human living organisms. She confirms Grosz’s previously mentioned assertion that there are over 450 species exhibiting homosexual behavior and she adds that such behavior “is found in every geographic region of the world, in every major animal group, in all age groups, and with equal frequency amongst males and females” (p. 31). She goes on to say that more than half of mammal and bird species engage in bisexual activities and she observes that, even though lifetime homosexual pair-bonding is not a very frequent phenomenon among non-human

living organisms, lifetime heterosexual pair-bonding is quite rare as well. As a matter of fact, Hird quotes sociobiologist Edward Wilson who asserts that “monogamy, and especially monogamy outside the breeding season is the rare exception” (Wilson, quoted in Hird, 2006, p. 31). Additionally, Hird reminds us that non-human living organisms, apart from reasons of reproduction, also have sex for reasons of sexual pleasure. Practices such as masturbation and sex during pregnancy are very frequent, whereas, surprisingly, many non-human animals also engage in birth control practices “through vagina plugs, defecation, abortion through the ingestion of certain plants, ejection of sperm and, in the case of chimpanzees, nipple stimulation” (Hird, 2006, p. 31). Finally, sex between different species also takes place and Hird cites the examples of sexual behavior occurring between flowers and insects, as well as “between two different orders of insects—a butterfly and a rove beetle” (p. 31).

Hird (2006) concludes her article by encouraging practicing psychologists and mental health practitioners, in general, to further explore evidence of sex and sexual diversity among non-human animals as well as to be aware of clinical assumptions that favor heterosexuality over other sexual preferences and practices. She fully acknowledges the fact that this evidence “confronts cultural ideas about family, monogamy, fidelity, parental care, heterosexuality, and ‘sexual difference’” (p. 32), adding that, from an evolutionary point of view, homosexuality is not in need of being explained at all.

Queer Theory

Queer theorists would undoubtedly agree with Hird’s latter assertion. In fact, I have always felt that queer theory had a distinct theoretical lineage and response to sex

and sexual diversity as delineated and described by evolutionary theorists and psychologists. Before we embark on a more detailed exploration of queer theory, though, I wish to offer a short outline of how my discussion is going to proceed. Donald Hall writes that “the body of abstract theory and applied readings that came to be known as ‘queer theory’ during the 1990s [. . .] is dauntingly complex and diverse” (2003, p. 1). Following Hall, I wish to tone down my (and the readers’) expectations and state that my discussion of queer theory will be lacking and incomplete in certain senses. This will be so not only because of the limited scope and space of this dissertation but, mainly, because of the unlimited, fluid character of queer theory itself. Keeping in mind the above caveats, this section will begin with an exploration of the general, theoretical tenets underlying queer theory, followed by discussions separately devoted to the works of Michel Foucault, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler. I am fully aware that Michel Foucault died long before queer theory was recognized as a distinct philosophical movement. Nevertheless, a number of queer theorists’ work has been inspired by Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* and, thus, he is explored here. Finally, this section will conclude with a critical appraisal of queer theory.

General Overview of Queer Theory

It is common to associate queer theory with “post-structural philosophical movements.” It may consequently behoove us to briefly explore some characteristic poststructuralist concerns and assumptions. Claire Colebrook (2002) claims that post-structuralism represents a response to positions held by the earlier philosophical movements of phenomenology and structuralism. Both movements had distanced themselves from the idea of knowledge as something that is centered on or acquired by a

rational, human knower. Instead, phenomenology claimed that knowledge should be derived from experience itself, whereas structuralism argued that knowledge “[is] founded [. . .] on the structures that make experience possible: structures of concepts, language, or signs” (Colebrook, 2002, p.2). Post-structuralism disagreed and maintained that knowledge cannot be founded on either experience or its structures. One of the problems with privileging experience hinges on the fact that it renders human experience as the standard, normative one to which every other experience should be compared to; it entirely ignores nonhuman experience. On the other hand, none of us is outside the structures that make experience possible. We all use and communicate through language and concepts and “any attempt to describe such [structures] would have to pretend to be outside or above structures” (Colebrook, 2002, p.2). Therefore, what is it that post-structuralism claims? William Schroeder writes:

Post-structuralism [. . .] claims that concepts, cognitive frameworks, psychic impulses, social movements, and historical forces typically are dispersed in relation to one another. . . . To be dispersed is to become scattered and diffused without pattern. Dispersion is a process as well as a resulting configuration of relationships. . . . As a process, “dispersion” suggests that the dividing, self-repelling operation is ongoing, unceasing. . . . [Post-structuralism abandons] the aspirations of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and structuralism—a search for timeless essences, for authoritative interpretations, or for underlying structures that organize surface events. . . . Though [it reconceives] *everything* on the model of dispersed, fragmented, perpetually self-dividing forces, [its] best example of this model is the *self*. [Post-structuralism] shows that the self consists of multiple voices, rules, drives, and energies, all of which exist in a disharmonious, countervailing relation to one another. . . . [T]he ideals of rational autonomy, individual self-sufficiency, and personal coherence seem untenable (2005, pp. 267-269; italics in the original).

As a consequence of the above theoretical principles, post-structuralism advocates the examination of life as an unstable and mutating system, always in a state of becoming (Colebrook, 2002). Moreover, the various systems (language, culture, society, politics

etc.) comprising life are regarded as constructs and disseminators of dominant, social, and cultural ideologies and “forces that structure identities, social norms, and power relations” (Seidman, 1995, p. 124). The above-mentioned ideologies are usually characterized by binary oppositions such as man/woman, White/Black, health/illness, masculinity/femininity, heterosexuality/homosexuality, etc. These oppositions shape the ways we think and assign meaning to our experiences. They also favor the establishment of fixed categories and identities as well as the effacement of “their arbitrary, social, and political character” (p. 125). Post-structuralism aims at exposing the arbitrariness of these categories and, thus, at dismantling the ideological building blocks that usually render one part of the binary opposition ostensibly superior and/or unrelated to the other (e.g. Whites are superior and/or unrelated to Blacks, heterosexuality is superior and/or unrelated to homosexuality etc.).

The question that arises is the following: in what way is queer theory a post-structural theory? In order to provide an answer to this question, we should start from the beginning and trace the origins of the word “queer.” Joseph Bristow defines “queer” as follows:

In the late nineteenth century, this term, whether used as adjective or noun, referred in a derogatory manner to homosexuals. By the 1980s, activists resignified the word so that it became a defiant statement of sexual insubordination. More recently, the term has been employed more generally to embrace sexual minorities that defy the authority and assumptions of heteronormative culture (2011, pp. 229-230).

In other words, “queer” as a slur to humiliate homosexual people has been reclaimed by homosexuals themselves and turned into a term that denotes an oppositional stance towards the sexual normative; it also acts as a unifying element, linking the majority of non-heterosexual individuals. However, as David Halperin notes (1995), it would be a

serious mistake to consider “queer” as an oppositional stance solely adopted by non-heterosexual individuals. He argues that “[‘queer’] is [. . .] available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices: it could include some married couples without children, for example, or even [. . .] some married couples *with* children—with, perhaps, *very naughty* children” (p. 62; italics in original). Therefore, “queer” as a term could also be available to heterosexual individuals engaging in interracial sexual relationships, or in sexual threesomes, or in polyamorous relationships, or . . . in any consensual, sexual activity among adults not adhering to the model of the Caucasian, middle-class, married, heterosexual couples who exclusively adopt the missionary sex position and have children.

How did “queer” become “queer theory,” though? Steven Seidman (1995) tells us that the post-Stonewall era witnessed the appearance of a lesbian/gay intellectual culture that, among other goals, attempted to obtain more civil rights for the LGBT population and delineate the constituents of the “homosexual identity.” This intellectual movement slowly but gradually succeeded in constituting the objectives of the LGBT community more visible and publishing articles in mainstream magazines and journals such as *Social Text* and *Oxford Review*. As a result, Seidman writes that “the lesbian and gay community staked out a public territorial, institutional, cultural, and political identity [that allowed them to campaign] with a great deal of success for social inclusion. . .” (1995, pp. 123-124). In parallel, though, the rift between the academic and nonacademic sectors of the gay/lesbian intellectual culture was widened and differences with regard to issues of race and social class emerged. A significant part of the LGBT community accused “the dominant ethnic nationalist model of identity and politics [of] exhibiting

white, middle-class, hetero-imitative values and liberal political interests. They [also] challenged the very basis of mainstream gay politics: a politics organized on the premise of a unified subject” (p. 124). The construction of a unitary, homosexual identity was regarded as an effort to discipline, exclude, and marginalize the multiplicity of sexual identities, desires, and practices adopted and experienced by LGBT people belonging to various races, social classes, and religious affiliations. Therefore, towards the end of the 1980s the queer identity was born, which, as David Halperin claims, “need not be grounded in any positive truth or in any stable reality. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence [. . .] [and] describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot be delimited in advance” (1995, p. 62; italics in original). The above-mentioned political and social developments that gave rise to queer identity within the context of the LGBT community in the United States were subsequently articulated theoretically by a number of theorists and university professors (Seidman, 1995). They had been mainly influenced by French post-structuralism and paved the way for developing queer theory.

What are the basic principles of queer theory, then? Sharon Marcus (2005) maintains that one of its most basic tenets is the unstable, volatile, and flexible character of what we call “sexual identity.” Donald Hall (2003) agrees and adds that the ways through which we experience sexuality have changed dramatically over time. As a result, the ways we perceive and define our sexual identities have equally changed. Moreover, although two or more individuals may self-identify as heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals, etc, the boundaries among these sexual orientations/identities are, in reality, blurred and murky. For example, let’s take the hypothetical cases of one self-defined

heterosexual man and one self-defined homosexual man who, both, cannot ejaculate unless their sexual partners wear a specific t-shirt, which is identical in both cases. Where should we draw the dividing line with regard to these two men's sexual identities? Should they be divided based on the different sex of these men's sexual partners? If yes, how do we account for the presence of the fetish (t-shirt), which is indispensable for both men to reach orgasm? Is the heterosexual man's sexual identity closer to that of another heterosexual or to that of another fetishist, regardless of the fetishist's sexual orientation? Additionally, if we, again, take the hypothetical cases of an Indian lesbian woman teaching at a U.S. college and of an Italian lesbian woman working in a factory outside Naples, can we talk about exactly identical lesbian identities? As Hall points out (2003), queer theory does not maintain that there is absolutely no sense of sexual identity. It argues, though, that sexual identity is only one among many identities we are called to fulfill, is always in a state of becoming and related to myriad other roles and (sexual) identities, and is largely determined by society and culture. This brings us to the second principle of queer theory.

Donald Hall (2003) asserts that the ostensible privacy of sexual desire is deceptive. We may (most of the times, at least...) have sex in private but what we think and feel when we are flooded with sexual desire, touch ourselves and others, penetrate and are penetrated by others, or fantasize and look at others...these few, among the innumerable, expressive components of sexual desire are determined and shaped by factors, forces, ideologies, and people outside our bedroom (or bathroom, basement, kitchen, etc.). "Religion, economics, prevailing scientific paradigms, the social sciences, aesthetics, and other flows of cultural expression and social valuation" (Hall, 2003, p. 2)

are directly connected with, disapprove of, legitimize, and, unbeknownst to us, shape how we perceive, feel, experience, and express our sexual desire. We may think that our sexuality is a strictly private matter. Queer theory disagrees and argues that it is predominantly social, cultural, and political. This leads us to the third principle of queer theory.

Seeing that each one of us has been sexually shaped within a specific social, cultural, political, and linguistic context, our knowledge and perspectives on sexual desire are necessarily tendentious and partial (Hall, 2003). No matter how much I may try, I will never be able to grasp the complexity of sexual desire as experienced by a Thai transgender woman in Bangkok. However, as Hall notes, “this inability to claim or access comprehensive or transcendent knowledge does not have to breed cynicism or hopelessness” (p. 6); he adds that, as opposed to their defeatist reputations, post-structural and queer theories have traditionally led to “highly effective political organizing, dynamic cultural critical production, and powerful translations of the ‘theoretical’ into the ‘applied’ and ‘practical’” (p. 6). The aforementioned accomplishments, though, have required—they always require—that we “recognize our own acculturation into notions of [sexual] normality” (p. 16), admit our limited perspectives, and be faithful to the open-endedness of our interpretations. How do these assertions apply to queer theory itself?

The above question pertains to the fourth principle of queer theory; that is, queer theory should never rest on its theoretical and practical laurels. As Hall (2003) maintains, it is and should always remain a theory in becoming, open to change, in need of constant scrutiny. The moment queer theory asserts that it “can accurately claim the status of the ‘natural’, ‘definitive’, or ‘real’” (p. 6), it will be “queer theory” no more. What makes

queer theory “queer” is its insistence on pointing out its “blind spots, lapses, inconsistencies, and nervous avoidances” (p. 8); its refusal to collude and align itself with constraining, oppressive, and sexually normative ideologies and regimes. The above-mentioned principles do not entail the total absence of rules and conventions with regard to the theoretical articulations and practical applications of queer theory; instead, they necessitate constant vigilance so that queer theory retains its radical character.

Before I end this section and start exploring Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, it is worth quoting the following passage from Donald Hall:

[T]he broad social fear is always that the abnormal and degraded will not stay in their assigned place, that “secure” social systems and identities will become unmoored, and that lived complexities will undermine facile designations of who we are and who we should be. Sexuality and desire in particular have a dangerous and infectious quality because they are so unlike the (supposed) “concretes” that underlie other social identities, such as genitalia (for gender identity), skin color (for racial identity), and financial assets (for class identity). . . [S]exuality and desire are so very amorphous, so hard to know or pin down, so potentially changeable in small and sometimes dramatic ways over time. . . (2003, p. 14).

Elizabeth Grosz (1995) agrees and, referring specifically to homophobia, argues that oppression against lesbians and gay men, although it is, in many respects, similar to that experienced by women, non-Caucasians, and poor people, is also distinguished by the fact that lesbians and gay men are discriminated against not so much because of who *they are* but because of what *they do*. Their homosexuality, in most cases, is not as easily detectable as a different skin color or a different sex. Unless the homosexual individual chooses to reveal it either verbally or by engaging in public homosexual activity, it remains hidden and the homosexual person is considered to be heterosexual. There is no indubitably apparent characteristic by which he/she can be classed as a lesbian woman or a gay man. Thus, homosexuality poses two threats: a) it is largely invisible and, thus,

potentially pervasive (this reminds us of the paranoia that was triggered by Kinsey's reports) and, b) it shows that sexual desire is, as Hall earlier noted, amorphous, volatile, contingent, and potentially infectious. It could make a heterosexual person wonder, "Could I also be/become a homosexual?" As Grosz writes, "[sexuality and sexual desire] are ontologically open questions" (1995, p. 227). Therefore, homophobia aims at "[separating] what a body is from what a body can do, [. . .] being from doing, existence from action" (pp. 226-227). It attempts to construct and concretize a distinct "homosexual being" that is easily distinguishable and does not depend on an individual's will to reveal his/her homosexuality or to publicly engage in homosexual activity; a "homosexual being" that, allegedly, does not/cannot threaten to infect others; a "homosexual being" in quarantine.

Such are the issues and the oppressive ideologies queer theory is occupied with and tries to refute. Nevertheless, unless queer theory insists on following a number of strategies, its theoretical analyses and practical applications could be deprived of the thrust that is required for its messages to reach wider audiences. What could these strategies be? First, as Donald Hall (2003) argues, a queer analysis should constantly underscore the role of politics, culture, and society in appropriating sexuality and sexual desire and transforming them into rigid identities. Second, it should also point to the inadequacy of binaries such as heterosexuality/homosexuality to capture the complexity of sexual desire. A third strategy involves the concrete descriptions and analyses of sexual desire as the outcome of a specific era and place. Finally, a queer analysis adopts an open-ended attitude towards its conclusions and encourages continued exploration and dialogue that may end up with alternative interpretations.

Michel Foucault: The History of Sexuality

Admittedly, concisely summarizing Foucault's ideas from his book *The History of Sexuality* (1990) is a daunting task. As with the overview of queer theory, my discussion of Foucault will be incomplete. However, his work is extremely important to the subsequent development of queer theory.

Sara Mills (2003) tells us that Foucault was mainly a historian of social conditions and institutions such as madness and psychiatry, the development of the medical profession, the prison, sexuality, etc. However, she continues, his historical analyses did not consist in or aim at merely describing the circumstances under which social conditions and institutions were formed and shaped. Foucault's goal was also to ascertain and describe the conceptual platforms upon which our thinking of and approach to specific social conditions and institutions were based. In other words, he was not only interested in asking "What is the history of sexuality?"; he was also interested in finding out the answer to the question, "How did we end up thinking about sexuality and its history the way we do?" To this end, he was interested in the concepts of power, knowledge, discourse, and, especially, the ways power and knowledge interact in order to exert social control through social institutions.

Before we proceed to Foucault's ideas about sexuality, the concepts of power and discourse should be elucidated. David Halperin (1995) explains that Foucault's use of power should not be thought of as a type of force or authority that is possessed by one individual who subsequently exerts it over powerless others. Of course, such relationships do exist. However, Foucault's power "is what characterizes the complex relations among the parts of a particular society—and the interactions among individuals

in that society—as relations of ongoing struggle” (pp. 16-17). In other words, what Foucault was mostly interested in were the power relations (actions, reactions, interactions) that take place in our everyday life a) among people, b) between people and institutions such as the Police, educational institutions, the medical community, courts, etc., and c) among the institutions themselves. It should be noted, though, that the above description is very simplistic and cannot capture the unstable, dynamic, pervasive, all-encompassing, and unevenly distributed character of power that characterizes all social relations and can be found everywhere. Furthermore, if we take into consideration the immense complexity of our societies, it is not difficult to understand that all sorts of power relations could be formed and performed. Most importantly, though, Foucault claims that what we know as members of a specific society largely depends on the character of power relations prevailing in this society (Mills, 2003). In other words, different power relations give rise to different types of knowledge available to us. Finally, as Halperin (1995) writes, “power is not intrinsically [. . .] negative... [I]t is also positive and productive. It produces possibilities of action, of choice, [and of resistance]. . . [I]t produces the conditions for the exercise of freedom” (p. 17).

What could this mean? I will offer a simplistic example, based on my personal understanding of this statement. As a gay man, I find myself within a web of power relations with regard to my homosexuality. Society, various institutions, and other people exert their power on me but I also exert my power on them. The power I receive and enact often attempts, with varying degrees of success, to make me think of my homosexuality in various ways. The power I exert also attempts, again with varying degrees of success, to convince others of the correctness of my views. Power constantly

circulates and complex relations are formed. When power is exerted on me in the form of a statement coming from psychiatrists who say, “Your homosexuality means you are psychologically abnormal,” I am motivated to resist, act, and exert power on psychiatrists by saying, “I disagree. Look at the new evidence of sexual diversity in non-human living organisms.” The exertion of power on my part produces resistance, which may be expressed in the form of another statement saying, “There is increasing evidence, though, that homosexuality is genetically determined.” I will, perhaps, resist by offering another statement and the story will go on and on... Of course, the circulation of power is much more complex because it involves numerous parts (individuals, institutions, etc.) of a society, interacting with each other. In addition, power relations are associated with discourse, a term to be discussed in the next paragraph.

Sara Mills (2003) states that “discourse” is one of the most frequently used and, at the same time, contradictory terms in Foucault’s work. In its general sense, discourse encompasses “all utterances and statements which have been made which have meaning and which have some effect” (p. 53). It can also refer, though, to a group of statements which share a common conceptual basis and are organized together. For example, all statements, utterances, ideas, definitions, and vocabulary pertaining to unconscious processes and the resolution of intrapsychic conflicts constitute the discourse of psychoanalysis. Moreover, discourse can also be understood as “the unwritten rules and structures which produce particular utterances and statements” (Mills, 2003, p. 53). I may travel to Tallinn, Estonia, for example, and stay with a host family. I may know nothing about how this family functions but, in a matter of days, I am somewhat able to follow their rhythm. Through observation and active participation I am able to decipher this

Estonian family's discourse (what is allowed or disallowed with regard to meals, noise, topics of discussion, gestures, ways of expressing myself, things to say/avoid, ways of interaction etc.). Needless to say, the discourse of my own Greek family as represented by me should have to be somewhat marginalized or even completely silenced. Its expression would not be encouraged by the structure of the Estonian family (of course, an Estonian person would, perhaps, feel the same if staying with a Greek host family).

The above discussion points to the fact that there are certain discourses which are widely encouraged and circulated in societies and others which are marginalized. For example, the discourse of heterosexuality has traditionally been encouraged by most societies, whereas there have been systematic attempts at marginalizing, or even silencing, any competing discourses (homosexuality, bisexuality, cross-dressing, etc.). Whether a specific discourse is widely circulated or not depends on the power relations prevailing in a particular society. However, discourses should not be conceptualized as a set of ideas that is imposed on individuals (Mills, 2003). Foucault writes:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (Foucault, 1990, pp. 100-101).

In other words, as Mills (2003, p. 55) points out, "discourse is both the means of oppressing and the means of resistance." In addition, we would be mistaken to think of discourses as exact translations of reality into language. On the contrary, discourses are the means through which we approach, structure, and perceive reality. They do not represent "reality" but our versions of reality that have been formed according to the

power relations in our society; in other words, according to what has been allowed to us to know, think, and utter. Concluding our discussion on discourse, we could sum it up “as both an overall term to refer to all statements, the rules whereby those statements are formed and the processes whereby those statements are circulated and other statements are excluded” (p. 62).

In which ways are concepts such as power, discourse, and knowledge weaved into Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1990)? Foucault sets off exploring his subject by claiming that, although the seventeenth century had been characterized, to a large degree, by an open and frank attitude towards sexual matters, the Victorian era, on the contrary, was marked by increasing prudence and secrecy. Ever since, we think of ourselves in the Western world as sexually repressed and “sex [. . .] [as] condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence” (p. 6). Foucault does not dispute that “sex [. . .] has been prohibited or barred or masked or misapprehended since the classical age” (p. 12). Nevertheless, he argues that, if the goal was to completely silence discussion on sex, this goal has resoundingly failed.

Foucault asserts that, although the way we talk about sex has undergone a degree of refinement and censorship during the last three centuries, the amount of talk we do about sex has experienced “a steady proliferation” (p. 18). He does not refer, though, to a proliferation of vulgar or insulting discourses with regard to sex. Even though he acknowledges the existence of the above-mentioned discourses, Foucault is more interested in those which were encouraged by social institutions, which he calls “agencies of power” (p. 18). One of those social institutions was the Catholic Church which would encourage people to examine “all the insinuations of [their] flesh [such as] thoughts,

desires, voluptuous imaginings, delectations, combined movements of the body and the soul” (p. 19) and, subsequently, to confess everything to the last detail in a refined language. In this way, the discourse on sex that was incited by the Catholic Church turned the flesh into the absolute evil, encouraged people to self-examine and talk about everything related to their sexual life in a codified language, and, ultimately, attempted to change people’s relationship to their sexual desires and control it. Foucault writes:

This is the essential thing: that Western man has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex; that since the classical age there has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorization of the discourse on sex; and that this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself (1990, p. 23).

Foucault points out that this analytical discourse on sex would have, perhaps, limited itself to the confines of the Catholic Church if wider social, political, and economic developments had not encouraged other social institutions to adopt the same technique as well. The goal of the Catholic Church was to control people’s sexual desire and turn them to God. States and governments, on the other hand, wanted to control issues such as wealth, labor capacity, productivity, and growth. All the above issues are directly related to and depend on the number of people living in a country or, as Foucault writes, “[on] a ‘population’ with its specific phenomena and its peculiar variables: birth and death rates, life expectancy, fertility, state of health, frequency of illnesses, patterns of diet and habitation” (p. 25). Gaining access into the above information necessitated gaining access primarily into a population’s sex life. As Foucault explains,

It was essential that the state know what was happening with its citizens’ sex, and the use they made of it, but also that each individual be capable of controlling the use he made of it. Between the state and the individual, sex

became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it (p. 26).

Foucault refers to “a whole web of discourses” because, apart from the Catholic Church and governments, discourses on sex were also produced by other institutions such as medicine, psychiatry, and criminal justice. Specific social and political circumstances had required the multiplication of discourses on sex in order to “[intensify] people’s awareness of it as a constant danger and [to create] a further incentive to talk about it” (p. 31). It should be noted, though, that these discourses would not have proliferated if the necessary power relations hadn’t been formed to produce them. In fact, the ability of power to gain access into people’s sexual lives and regulate them depended on the proliferation of discourses.

However, as Foucault maintains, there was another mechanism through which relations of power extended and intensified their control over people’s sexual lives. Specifically, he tells us that two processes took place in parallel: on the one hand, there were significantly less efforts to decipher the secrets of, and strictly control, the sexual desire of monogamous, married, heterosexual, couples whereas, on the other hand, the spotlight fell on “the sexuality of children, mad men and women, and criminals; the sensuality of those who did not like the opposite sex; reveries, obsessions, petty manias, or great transports of rage” (pp. 38-39). In other words, it was time for the peripheral sexualities to come out of the darkness and be thoroughly examined and deciphered. In this way, they acquired an essence; an ostensibly distinct identity that separated them from all other sexual identities and rendered them easier to be controlled and supervised. Thus, although earlier he would just be considered “a temporary aberration, the nineteenth century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a

childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology” (p. 43).

At this point, though, it is important to emphasize that, although the “perverse implantation” (p. 36)—the identification, classification, and demarcation of all sexualities that were unrelated to the heterosexual, marital union—represents an example of how a discourse can be an instrument and an effect of power, it equally stands as an example of how a discourse undermines and resists power. In other words, it is an example of what Foucault calls “the tactical polyvalence of discourses” (p. 100). To facilitate our understanding, he refers to homosexuality and states that its identification as a distinct pathology, apart from its negative consequences, also encouraged “homosexuality [. . .] to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or ‘naturalness’ be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified” (p. 101).

Towards the end of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault asserts that sexuality, despite popular belief, has not been repressed. Although “sex was constituted as a problem of truth” (p. 56), that is, as an experience which carries a particular essence in need of discovery, decoding, and interpretation, in reality it represents a social construct that is constituted by a variety of power relations that operate through a number of discourses. These power relations construct forms of knowledge and these, in their turn, perpetuate the ability of power to produce knowledge and extend its social control.

Foucault detects four strategies through which power and knowledge interacted and supported each other during the nineteenth century in order to exert control over sexuality through social institutions. The first strategy concerned what he calls “a

hysterization of women's bodies" (p. 104) and involved keeping women's bodies under extensive social and medical scrutiny on the grounds that "[they were] thoroughly saturated with sexuality and [intrinsically pathological]" (p. 104). Of course, as Joseph Bristow notes, these assertions, in reality, only aimed at "ensuring [women's] reproductive capacity, fitness as wives, and healthiness as mothers" (2011, p. 157). The second strategy involved the "pedagogization of children's sex" (Foucault, 1990, p. 104). Children's sexuality was deemed to be threatening and in need of containment (Bristow, 2011). As such, parents and a number of professionals (physicians, educators, psychologists, etc.) embarked on surveillance strategies with regard to children's bodies. Their aim was mainly to prevent them from engaging in masturbation. A third strategy pertained to the "socialization of procreative behavior" (Foucault, 1990, p. 104). In other words, attempts were made at linking heterosexual intercourse with "discourses espousing moral responsibility [towards the social and economic common good]" (Bristow, 2011, p. 158). Couples were encouraged to produce children and contraceptive methods were socially and medically castigated. Finally, the "psychiatrization of perverse pleasure" (Foucault, 1990, p. 105) referred to the theorization of the sexual instinct as a distinct biological and psychical one that possessed both healthy and pathological components. The above view led to extensive research with the aim of distinguishing between the supposedly healthy and pathological aspects of the sexual instinct.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: Epistemology of the Closet

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick was a professor of English, and her book *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008), along with Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (2008), is considered to be among the founding texts of queer theory. *Epistemology of the Closet* is an immensely

dense and rich text that combines philosophical theorizing with literary analyses of works by, among others, Herman Melville, Oscar Wilde, and Marcel Proust. In this section, I only intend to touch upon Sedgwick's telling theoretical observations on the incoherence of the binary opposition *homosexual/heterosexual*.

Sedgwick begins her analysis by arguing that the conceptualizations of same-sex desire and gay identity have been traditionally marked by a high degree of incoherence that also renders heterosexual desire/identity incoherent. She also states that this conceptual incoherence principally lies in the ways homosexual individuals have been defined through time with regard to their sexual desire and their gender identity.

Apropos of sexual desire, Sedgwick writes that homosexual individuals have been described in two radically and irreducibly incoherent ways. On the one hand, they have been understood as belonging to a small group of people whose sexual desire is oriented towards members of the same sex. In other words, their homosexual desire in terms of feelings, emotions, expressive means, and sexual acts is entirely theirs and has absolutely no affinity with heterosexual desire. This, according to Sedgwick, is the minoritizing view that renders homosexuals a distinct population. On the other hand, though, there are other views which postulate that "sexual desire is an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities [and that] [. . .] heterosexual persons and object choices are strongly marked by same-sex influences and desires, and vice versa for apparently homosexual ones" (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 85). These are the universalizing views because, instead of arguing that homosexual desire belongs exclusively to gay and lesbian people, they insist on viewing it as potentially affecting anybody. They bring to mind statements like this one: "Don't go out with him, he is a faggot, you may become a faggot too!!" Sedgwick

points out that a number of theorists and authors have attempted “to resolve this conceptual incoherence” (p. 86) but people still oscillate between these two views without realizing their incompatibility.

The second conceptual incoherence is related to definitions that have traditionally been assigned to homosexual people with regard to their gender experience. Again, there are two prevailing views which are irreconcilable with each other. Sedgwick (2008) calls the first view “the inversion trope” (p. 87) which could be summarized as follows: “a woman’s soul trapped in a man’s body—and vice versa” (p.87). It refers to an androgynous concept of gender experience and Sedgwick astutely observes that this model adheres to “an essential heterosexuality within desire itself” (p. 87) since, although homosexual men and women desire members of the same sex, they assumingly possess a soul of the opposite sex. Therefore: a) gay man (hiding a woman’s soul) + man = heterosexual relationship/desire, and b) lesbian woman (hiding a man’s soul) + woman = heterosexual relationship/desire. According to this view, the possibility of a man possessing a man’s soul (whatever this may be...) and desiring another man, or of a woman with a woman’s soul (taking, again, the ambiguity of the word “soul” into consideration)and desiring another woman is precluded.

The counterpart of the above view is the “gender separatist” model that abandons the liminal, transitive character of the “inversion trope” and “[underscores] the specific experiences of what it means to be male or female” (Bristow, 2011, p. 187). In other words, homosexual men and women are not viewed anymore as being located “at the threshold between genders” (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 88).

Under this latter view, far from its being of the essence of desire to cross boundaries of gender, it is instead the most natural thing in the world that

people of the same gender, people grouped together under the single most determinative diacritical mark of social organization, people whose economic, institutional, emotional, physical needs and knowledges may have so much in common should bond together also on the axis of sexual desire. As the substitution of the phrase “woman-identified woman” for “lesbian” suggests, as indeed does the concept of the continuum of male or female homosocial desire, this trope tends to reassimilate to one another identification and desire, where inversion models, by contrast, depend on their distinctness (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 88).

Towards the end of her analysis, Sedgwick expresses her pessimism over an efficacious resolution of the above-mentioned, incoherent conceptualizations. She points out, however, that, despite these views having dominated debates on sexuality during most of the 20th century, they should be subject to intense theoretical scrutiny. In this way, the mechanisms that sustain them could be deciphered and critically evaluated. As Donald Hall (2003) argues, Sedgwick’s insistence on ascertaining these mechanisms has provided the necessary impetus for queer theory to clearly define its object of inquiry and analysis. In other words, she has underscored the importance of asking questions about the legitimacy of sexual categories themselves instead of defending the legitimacy of this or that category. She has also encouraged questions such as these: “Is erotic identity specific to one’s sexed body? Or is it a fluid phenomenon that traverses a complex ensemble of gender meanings—a whole range of femininities and masculinities that are not necessarily grounded in the anatomical distinction between the sexes?” (Bristow, 2011, p. 187)

Judith Butler: Gender Trouble/Bodies That Matter

Along with Sedgwick, Judith Butler, an American philosopher teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, is also considered one of the founders of queer theory. Her work on gender, sex, and performativity is regarded as groundbreaking and

controversial. For the purposes of this dissertation, her books *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* will be discussed.

Gender Trouble

Butler summarizes the questions she addresses in *Gender Trouble* as follows:

[*Gender Trouble*] asks: how do non-normative sexual practices call into question the stability of gender as a category of analysis? How do certain sexual practices compel the question: what is a woman, what is a man? If gender is no longer to be understood as consolidated through normative sexuality, then is there a crisis of gender that is specific to queer contexts (2008, p. xi)?

Influenced by Foucault, she states that her theoretical exploration of sex, gender, and desire utilizes the genealogical method. She explains that genealogy does not aim at searching “for the origins of gender, the inner truth of female desire, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view” (p. xxxi). Instead, genealogy aspires to understand the power relations and the social construction of identity categories that are subsequently deemed to be natural, changeless, and/or inborn.

Butler initiates her discussion by saying that feminist theory has generally presupposed the existence of a particular identity that is best “understood through the category of women” (p. 2). It (feminist theory) has also strived to increase women’s political representation through extending “[their] visibility and legitimacy [. . .] as political subjects” (p. 2). Butler reminds us, though, that, generally speaking, representation is mediated by language, which can both reveal and distort. Furthermore, as Foucault has indicated, language and politics can serve as vehicles for the dissemination of hegemonic discourses which produce subjects (including feminist subjects) according to specific criteria; individuals who do not meet these criteria are simply not represented. Therefore, Butler wonders whether “the feminist subject turns out

to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation” (p. 3). If this is the case, then feminist theory should embark on rigorous analyses of the ways the feminist subject is restrictively constituted by the powers assumingly assisting in its emancipation.

Moreover, apart from the problem of representation, the category “women” is equally problematic. What does “women” mean? By Butler’s account, it is impossible to ascertain what this term means, given that “gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (p. 4). The above-mentioned impediments in universally conceptualizing “women,” however, have not prevented feminist theory from trying to establish universal concepts of “patriarchy” and “women.” The assumed universality of the latter has persisted in feminist theorizations and “women” are usually analyzed in relation to the masculine/feminine binary and represented as detached from their racial, ethnic, class-related, and other cultural contexts. It is Butler’s view that the above culturally decontextualized representations undermine the assumed universality of the category “women,” as evidenced by the fact that many “women” openly oppose feminism as an authoritarian, theoretical and political movement that cannot represent them anymore.

What should be done? Butler argues that, given that we cannot refuse fields of power such as language and politics, a critique of the categories of identities and a rigorous exploration of their discursive formation are warranted. She asserts that feminist theory should give up trying to establish a universally accepted category of “women” that, in her view, only succeeds in further silencing the feminist subject and regulating

gender relations; it should also examine the extent to which “the category of women [achieves] stability and coherence only in the context of the heterosexual matrix” (p. 7); in other words, the extent to which gender identities are culturally induced and regulated and are, therefore, unstable.

This is the point where Butler’s discussion on gender identities truly begins. She states that, although feminist theory has traditionally tried to establish a universal category of “women,” it has, nonetheless, drawn a distinction between sex as an individual’s anatomical morphology and gender as “the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes” (p. 9). If this is so, Butler argues that continuity between sex and gender is far from necessary or inevitable. In other words, a male sexed body will not necessarily lead to a masculine gender identity; similarly, a female sexed body will not necessarily lead to a feminine gender identity. Butler writes:

The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted to it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one (Butler, 2008, p. 9; italics in original).

Butler also points out that a distinction between a prediscursive sex and a culturally constructed gender is impossible to retain. This is so because “the ostensibly natural facts of [the internal stability and binary frame of] sex [are] discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests” (p. 9). In other words, sex cannot be theorized as a natural, neutral surface because it has already undergone discursive formation. (This argument is extremely important. It will be

explained more fully, along with that of performativity, when I discuss Butler's ideas on the materiality of the body in her book *Bodies That Matter*).

By Butler's account, the aforementioned theorizations strongly indicate that this "neatly integrated sex/gender system" (Bristow, 2011, p. 190), organized around the concept of a natural connection that linearly links sex with gender identity and sexual desire, is untenable. In other words, the linear progressions that could be described as male body → masculine gender identity → heterosexual desire, and female body → feminine gender identity → heterosexual desire are not innate and, although they accurately describe some people's experience of gender identity, they are far from universal or natural. Butler writes that "gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time" (2008, p. 22). Gender identity, instead of being dual (masculine/feminine), is plural and encompasses innumerable versions and combinations of femininity and masculinity that are not determined by a person's sexed body and/or sexual desire.

However, the problem remains. What are the mechanisms through which this narrow integrated sex/gender system is sustained? Why do we traditionally adhere to this binary conceptualization of gender identity? Butler goes on to argue that it would be a mistake to think of "identity" as separate from "gender identity." She explains that an individual's personal identity is always understood and interpreted by others according to how this person's gender identity is perceived. If an individual's gender identity is perceived as not abiding by the culturally sanctioned, integrated sex/gender system explained above (as for example with "effeminate males" or "masculine females"), then

this person's identity is generally rendered unintelligible; in other words, this person's humanity is rendered unintelligible and Butler concludes:

The specters of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the "expression" or "effect" of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice (2008, p. 23).

Let us try to unravel Butler's argument. When she speaks of "existing norms of continuity and coherence," apart from the binary gender identities (masculine/feminine) that are sanctioned by culture, she also refers to heterosexuality as the only kind of sexual desire and expression that is supposedly natural, coherent, and "[has] structural integrity" (Bristow, 2011, p. 191). This is the sexual desire that the members of a society are expected to manifest and practice. It represents, as Foucault would say, "the truth of sex" (Butler, 2008, p. 23) and its "truth" renders all other sexual desires/expressions as "developmental failures or logical impossibilities" (p. 24). However, the coherence of heterosexuality, its status as the only true, natural—almost a godsend!—form of sexual desire is constantly threatened and undermined by individuals who persistently refuse to abide by its principles, have sex with members of the same sex, and violate all gender norms. How could these threats against heterosexuality be dealt with in the most effective way? Butler writes:

[The] institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system. This conception of gender presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender, and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire. The metaphysical unity of the three is assumed to be truly known and expressed in a differentiating desire for an oppositional gender—that is, in a form of oppositional heterosexuality . . . The institution of a compulsory and

naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire (p. 31).

Therefore, within the context of the heterosexual matrix, gender has to be constantly policed. The severed ties among sex, gender identity, and sexual desire have to be camouflaged and, as for the sexual dissidents (there will always be sexual dissidents), their existence has to be enveloped by a sense of unintelligibility, almost lacking in humanity. However, this is not the end of the story. At some point, Butler writes that “gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be...[G]ender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (p. 34). What could she mean? Let us now turn our attention to her next book, *Bodies That Matter*.

Bodies That Matter

In her book *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Judith Butler attempts to ascertain how we end up experiencing both our bodies and our gendered identities the way we do. She begins by explicitly stating her inability to consider the materiality of the body per se and poses a question that proves to be critical for the analysis that follows: Is it possible to think objectively about the body as such? In other words, is it possible to think and understand our bodies as solely beginning and ending “at the skin?”

Such an endeavor would be tempting, especially if we take into consideration that we all undergo a series of bodily experiences, such as sleep, pleasure, pain, illness, and death, which are, to a significant extent, common. The irrefutability of these experiences could easily lead to the conclusion that a legitimate theorizing on the body should only involve a perspective that examines it as a natural object. Yet, as Butler points out, such a

view is problematic in more than one way. First, we usually tend to forget that nature is not ahistorical and value-free but, instead, is colored by how we subjectively think of it. Second, even if we accept that we all share some fundamental bodily experiences, a natural science perspective sheds no light on why and how we affirm or disavow our bodies. Thirdly, and most importantly, a conceptualization of the body as an object, a site, or a surface which is, subsequently, socially signified preserves the binary between “sex” and “gender,” a distinction that Butler disagrees with and wishes to contest.

She initiates her analysis by explaining that “sex” has been traditionally regarded as the concept that best describes the natural and, supposedly, value-free material differences between males and females whereas “gender” refers “to the social significance that sex assumes within a given culture” (p. 5). In other words, gender refers to the outcome of the process of taking up our material, sexual differences and integrating them into the understanding of ourselves, an understanding that largely depends on familial, social, and cultural conditions and constitutes our “gendered” identity.

Therefore, if we tried to conceptualize how we acquire our gendered identities in terms of chronological order, we could claim that we are born with natural bodies, *matter, or sex* that pre-exist their social inscription which subsequently gives rise to or constructs *gender*.

Butler asserts that such a theorization results in two modes of thinking. First, we end up thinking of sex and gender as two parallel, distinct entities, as *matter/body* and *social meaning/construction*, which present no dialectical relationship, either in the form of continuity or in the form of opposition, between each other. Second, this distinction between sex and gender does not only present these two concepts as fundamentally

unrelated but results in the conceptualization of gender “as the term which absorbs and displaces ‘sex’” as well (p. 5). In other words, to my understanding, our biological sex is thought of as *matter/body* that is never constructed or gendered, as if we acquire our psychological and social sense of femininity and masculinity in socially constructive ways that are unmediated by our materiality, our sex, which is, thus, rendered an entity that almost never existed.

This is exactly the point that Butler fundamentally disagrees with and wishes to challenge. It is also the beginning of a series of arguments that attempt to think “bodies” beyond the familiar understanding that they begin and end at “the skin.” Butler begins by claiming that the distinction between a biological sex and a culturally/socially constructed gender is artificial and false. Such a distinction presupposes that our sexed bodies are never gendered, in other words that they are not socially pre-inscribed with significations of masculinity and femininity. However, our materiality is never neutral because, even before we are born, “we are subjected to gender, where gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being” (p. 7).

One of the most powerful examples that Butler provides in order to support her argument that the distinction between sex and gender is false and that our sexed bodies are already gendered from the very beginning is the sonogram, the diagnostic medical image which reveals the genitals of an infant and automatically brings it into the sphere of language and gendered relations through ascribing to it the personal pronouns of “she” or “he.” In this way, she attempts to prove that the concept of “sex” is far from absorbed or cancelled by the concept of “gender.” On the contrary, this linguistic and cultural pre-

inscription on our sexed bodies renders the difference between sex and gender entirely indistinguishable. It also proves that sex, far from being a “fiction or a fantasy” (p. 5), constitutes the norm that regulates how we experience, value, affirm, or disavow our bodies. Most importantly, it refers to the norm that constructs our materiality in such a way so as to be perceived and experienced as inherently masculine or feminine within a matrix in which heterosexual hegemony prevails.

At this point, several important questions arise that are in need of exploration and explication. The first question refers to the issue of agency. In other words, if our sexed bodies are gendered from the beginning, does that mean that we are deprived of any form of agency to choose our gender? Does it also mean that we have no means through which to decide how we will construct our gendered materiality? Butler appears to provide positive answers to both aforementioned questions. One of her main arguments is that a sense of who we are with respect to our gendered identity emerges at exactly the same time that we are introduced into a linguistic, social, and cultural context that assigns to us a gendered label based on our sex. In other words, our being born into a world which is dominated by heterosexual hegemony means that we are introduced into a social and cultural frame that is rigid, fixed, and highly regulatory concerning the options of gendered identities that are provided to us to enact. And, almost always, these options are only two, namely a masculine and a feminine identity.

Thus, if, according to Butler, we possess no agency with regard to the choice of our gender identity which is, instead, chosen for us, what are the conditions that give rise to “the emergence and operation of a subject that is itself produced in and as a generated matrix of relations?” (p.7). This is the point where Butler introduces the idea of

performativity, a concept that was first introduced in her book *Gender Trouble*, and has proved to be highly controversial and misunderstood. Consequently, she makes an effort to elucidate it and prove its connection to the materialization of our gendered identities.

Butler reminds us that sex, instead of being a term that denotes the socially unscripted and biologically neutral body, constitutes the dominant regulatory ideal or norm that ascribes meaning to our gendered materiality. However, sex as a regulatory norm could not operate without being supported by a matrix of regulatory forces (or “power” by Foucault’s lexicon) that give rise and sustain the power of sex to enforce itself and regulate how we materialize our bodies; in other words, the meanings we ascribe to the materiality of our bodies which are subsequently enacted by them. Butler claims that the materialization of our gendered identities takes place within this matrix of forces through the reiteration of the sexual norms that are supported by those forces. The reiteration of these sexual norms does not constitute the effect of an already gendered subject who consciously chooses to reiterate them. In other words, we are not first gendered and then choose to reiterate practices that fit our identity. Instead, performativity refers to the constitution of our gendered identities concurrently with the reiterative performance of those practices. Thus, it could be claimed that gender identity is not something that we are but something that we repeatedly act in order for this to be materialized again and again within the context of highly regulative social and cultural conditions that provide and impose only a limited repertoire of gender identities that could be materialized through our bodies. It is important, though, to emphasize that this reiteration is indispensable for two reasons: a) because “materialization is never quite complete [and] bodies never quite comply with the norms by which this materialization is

impelled” (p. 2), thus constant reiteration guarantees the constant materialization of sanctioned gendered identities, and b) because the power of sex as a regulating force is renewed with every reiteration of the norms that sustain it.

As mentioned above, even though Butler believes that the reiterative character of performativity is strong enough to impose the materialization of socially desired gendered identities, the fact that bodies do not always comply with the regulative norms allows some space for these norms to be subverted and for a plurality of gendered identities to emerge (even though these other gendered identities are rendered culturally unintelligible, almost devoid of any sense of humanity). She further explores the possibility of subversion when she points out that performativity is not only reiterative but citational as well. She explains that since the materialization of socially desired gendered identities depends on discursive systems and, more specifically, on the function of language, we materialize these identities through citing linguistic signs that are uttered by others. At this point, she refers to Derrida in order to show that the citation of an uttered sign always entails the possibility of being appropriated or “cited” in completely different ways than that intended by the source of the original utterance. Thus, through a process that involves constant citations and recitations, the omnipotence of the regulative norms that sustain the power of sex can be subverted by generating new meanings and, consequently, materializations of gendered identities that could possibly allow bodies that do not comply to the prevailing norms to regain their visibility and humanity and cease being in a state of abjection.

Concluding Thoughts on Queer Theory

Queer theory has not been without its critics. Referring to the term “queer,” David Halperin writes that “[its] very lack of specificity, which I consider its chief advantage, has also become its most serious drawback, and for several reasons” (1995, p. 64). He states that “queer” often gives the false impression of an all-encompassing umbrella term which harmonically unites all groups of non-heterosexual people and is not affected by issues of race, class, and gender. He also notes that its lack of specificity and the easiness by which it can be appropriated by all groups of people can render it an inadequate term to describe the oppressive regimes experienced by specific sexual minorities. In support of the above argument, Halperin writes that “[‘queer’] has the capacity to despecify the realities of lesbian and gay oppression, obscuring what is irreducibly *sexual* about those practices and persons most exposed to the effects of sexual racism” (p. 65; italics in original). He finally points out that the term “queer” could cause a rift between those self-identifying as “queers” and those adhering to identity terms such as “gay” and “lesbian.” Thus, instead of promoting destigmatization, it could instigate the restigmatization of those people “queer” is supposed to protect and emancipate. Nevertheless, despite its apparent drawbacks, Halperin asserts that the term “queer” is too important to be totally discarded and he explains why:

[“Queer”] has the ability to define homo(sexual) identity oppositionally and relationally but not necessarily substantively, not as a positivity but as a positionality, not as a thing but as a resistance to the norm. . . Resistance to normativity is not purely negative or reactive or destructive, in other words, it is also positive and dynamic and creative. It is by resisting the discursive and institutional practices which, in their scattered and diffuse functioning, contribute to the operation of heteronormativity that queer identities can open a social space for the construction of different identities, for the elaboration of various types of relationships, for the development of new cultural forms (pp. 66-67).

Without a doubt, one of the harshest criticisms raised against queer theory involves its perceived lack of ethics. Steven Seidman (1995) argues that theorists such as Sedgwick and Butler advocate sexual difference, innovation, and proliferation without, simultaneously, acknowledging the fact that “not all self and social expressions would be tolerated; we cannot evade the need for a sexual ethic and regulation, including structures of discipline and moral hierarchy” (p. 136). Therefore, he accuses queer theorists of providing no answers to questions regarding their own ethical standpoint.

Donald Hall (2003) is fully aware of the above-mentioned criticisms and takes up the challenge of a response. He acknowledges the fact that queer theory has often been portrayed as advocating chaos and the collapse of civil society. He is also cognizant of the fact that discussions of ethics frequently bring to mind ideas and concepts related to stringent morality, transcendent ideals of “good,” and restriction of individualized action, self-definition, and desire. Yet, he argues that a discussion of ethics does not necessarily entail the abandonment of everything post-structuralism is skeptical about. After all, no matter which philosophical movement we espouse, we all make use of a number of conventions such as laws, educational institutions, language, etc. Making use of these conventions does not inevitably lead to their uncritical espousal. In fact, this kind of thinking represents a departure from the basic principles of queer theory because it reintroduces the binary of conformity/anarchy. Hall (p. 145) urges us to distance ourselves from such binaries and poses the following question: “[I]s there a possibility for imagining a supple, interpersonal sense of responsibility that at once minimizes ‘normalization’ and at the same time allows for continued exploration and various enactments of desire and selfhood?”

Hall believes that the work of the French ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is able to provide us with useful insights into how queer theorists can articulate “a queer ethics of conjoined concern and resistance” (p. 147). He explains that, according to Levinas, our responsibility to human others, our ethical responsibility to respond to the suffering and vulnerability of human others, precedes our ontological freedom. As such, “we must recognize a placing of concern for others—within or without a queer community—as a prime ethical consideration always potentially restricting and certainly rendering problematic any self-willed desire or selfish action” (p. 146). Levinas argues that our ethical responsibility lies in our willingness to dethrone ourselves and “abdicate [our] position of centrality” (Levinas, 1995, p. 192). This does not signify a naively altruistic position based on the principles of humanistic charity, self-effacement, or self-disparagement. Instead, it points to the fact that, no matter what action we wish to take, we are always and inextricably tied to others. Therefore, our actions and our desires should be “problematized [. . .] in and through an ethical self-conceptualization” (Hall, 2003, p. 146).

Luce Irigaray, Sexual Difference, Desire

French psychoanalyst, philosopher, and feminist theorist Luce Irigaray is internationally known for her concept of *sexual difference*. She has been a prolific writer and her works “are extremely difficult to write about [because] they are exceptionally elusive, fluid, and ambiguous” (Grosz, 1989, p. 101). Therefore, an exhaustive exposition of her (as well as Lacan’s) multifarious oeuvre is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Nevertheless, it is my conviction that her work on sexual difference adds a very significant dimension to my discussion of sexual desire. As a consequence, in this section

I will briefly touch upon her theories and make an attempt to understand whether and how they are connected to queer theory.

At the beginning of her philosophical career, Irigaray is critical towards various philosophical movements (Fuery, 1995). Psychoanalysis, nonetheless, constitutes the main target of her criticism because, even though it has consistently examined feminine desire and could have positively contributed to its analysis and liberation, it has, instead, theorized feminine desire within a masculine theoretical framework and further suppressed it. As Irigaray writes:

What is the position of psychoanalytic discourse with respect to that problem, that crisis? Even if it does allow what is at stake to be more rigorously interpreted, *does it grant a different status to feminine desire?* Does it grant women a language other than that of the hysteric...? (Irigaray, 1985, p. 168; italics in original)

Fuery (1995) states that Irigaray is equally disillusioned with both the Freudian and the Lacanian models of psychoanalysis. Her main objections with the Freudian model involve “a) the privileging of masculine sexuality and the consequent denial of feminine sexuality in terms of penis envy . . . b) [the idea] that the woman’s desire to have a child replaces her sexual desire. . . and c) the idea that women’s sexuality is unknowable” (p. 86). On the other hand, she takes issue with Lacan’s conceptualization of feminine desire and, in general, women as always representing lack and otherness. Despite the fact that she never totally rejects (Lacanian) psychoanalysis, she, nonetheless, argues that psychoanalysis, along with other philosophical movements in the past, have succeeded in suppressing women’s desire because they have deprived them of the right to articulate it, to discover a language to express it. Fuery writes that “Irigaray’s argument against Lacan [is] that women’s desire cannot be known or spoken until it has a language

with which to speak” (p. 90). It could be claimed that Irigaray’s subsequent philosophical work, in its most part, has consisted in discovering and articulating a language for feminine desire to speak “in terms independent of men and masculinity” (Grosz, 1989, p. 110).

Such an endeavor, though, apart from extensive linguistic and symbolic rearticulations, also necessitates a deconstructive theorization of the female body “as a positivity rather than a lack” (Grosz, 1989, p. 110). To achieve this goal, Irigaray rereads major philosophical texts and seeks out the phallogocentric discourses upon which they are based and which render feminine desire silent. She argues that the language and, in general, the means and symbols through which Western culture (politics, art, philosophy, knowledge, laws, rituals, etc.) has traditionally been represented are based on phallogocentric discourses which are equated with male sexuality. She explains her argument as follows:

All Western discourse presents a certain isomorphism with the masculine sex; the privilege of unity, form of the self, of the visible, of the specularisable, of the erection (which is the becoming in a form). Now this morpho-logic does not correspond to the female sex: there is not “a” sex. The “no sex” that has been assigned to the woman can mean that she does not have “a” sex and that her sex is not visible nor identifiable or representable (Irigaray, 1977, p. 64).

What does she mean? Irigaray explains that our female and male bodies are not simply natural structures which are described by neutral languages. Instead, our bodies are “structured, inscribed, constituted, and given meaning *socially* and *historically* [. . .] through [their] sociolinguistic construction” (Grosz, 1989, p. 111; italics in original). However, this sociolinguistic construction does not solely construct the way we think and make sense of our female and male bodies; it also “constitutes the body’s very sensations

[and] pleasures” (p. 111). Therefore, within this context of sociolinguistic construction, male bodies are constituted to be understood and felt as virile and phallic, whereas female bodies are constructed as passive and castrated. By Irigaray’s account, this difference of signification is not the result of biology but, instead, the outcome of how female and male bodies *appear* to be; in other words, their morphology (an argument to be discussed shortly). She also clarifies that the constitution of male bodies as phallic and virile does not stem from men’s “natural propensity” to be dominant. Rather, “the pre-existence of patriarchal social relations relies on the *production* of a specific form of male sexuality through internalization of images, representations, and signifying practices” (p. 112; italics in original). In other words, patriarchal societies produce phallogocentric discourses which, in their turn, are perpetuated through the production of male sexuality; this is what Irigaray refers to as the “isomorphism between male sexuality and patriarchal language” (p. 111); an isomorphism that only conceptualizes feminine desire in masculine terms and renders it silent.

The aforementioned ideas, however, may sound abstract and theoretical. What does it practically mean that female and male bodies are signified according to their morphology? How could these significations silence feminine desire? To provide more concrete answers to these questions, Irigaray goes back to psychoanalytic theory and, instead of trying to formulate a global theory of “woman” or totally dismantle phallogocentrism, she concentrates her energy on denaturalizing it and revealing its conceptual lacunae (Grosz, 1989). To this end, given that there is no special language for feminine desire to be expressed, she attempts to undermine the discourses of patriarchy

by using patriarchal discourses themselves. In so doing, Irigaray hopes to make space for the construction of positive images and representations of feminine desire.

Irigaray begins her analysis by indicating that psychoanalytic theory has traditionally conceived of female sexuality as consisting of two versions or two phases: the pre-oedipal clitoral phase (to the extent that the clitoris is likened to a penis, this phase could also be named “phallic”) and the vaginal phase which begins upon the girl’s induction into the Oedipus complex and “converts her active sexual aims into passive ones” (Grosz, 1989, p. 114). Irigaray distances herself from views which valorize either the first or the second phase “as the true source of female sexual excitement and the site of women’s sexual liberation from patriarchy” (p. 114); instead, she asserts that both models of female sexuality have been constructed according to masculine parameters. She further explains that the clitoris is viewed as a small penis, whereas the vagina is only viewed as an organ destined to host and envelope man’s penis during sexual intercourse. In other words, the female sexual organs have never been conceptualized as separate from the penis. They either represent a copy of or complement the penis. Their uniqueness and specificity, along with the uniqueness and specificity of feminine desire itself, have been totally obliterated within a cultural context of patriarchal discourses.

How could feminine desire make some space for itself through this asphyxiating, patriarchal, discursive environment? How could it breathe and embrace sexual pleasure? Irigaray argues that, as opposed to men’s, women’s induction into the Oedipus complex is more uncertain and they always retain a degree of contact with their pre-oedipal polymorphous sexuality (Grosz, 1989). Men are obliged to definitively repress it, whereas the boundaries between pre-oedipal and oedipal sexualities for women always

remain elusive and murky. By Irigaray's account, women's continued contact with and oscillation between pre-oedipal and oedipal sexualities render female sexuality "[multiple, ambiguous, fluid, and excessive]" (p. 115). As opposed to men's sexuality, whose representation is dominated by and subordinated to a single organ (penis), "feminine sexuality could be positively represented by the metaphor of the 'two [vaginal] lips'" (p. 115). What could this metaphor be?

Irigaray (1999) reminds us that "woman's autoeroticism is very different from man's" (pp. 353-354). Whereas a man needs his hand, another woman, or any other instrument in order to touch and stimulate himself, a woman's genitals are formed in such a way so as to constantly touch and caress themselves. Her two lips are always in contact with each other and their stimulation does not depend on any form of external mediation. Irigaray argues that, "within herself, [a woman] is already two—but not divisible into one(s)—that caress each other" (p. 354). In other words, "The two lips are never one, not strictly two. They are one and two *simultaneously*: where one identity ends and another begins is never clear" (Grosz, 1989, p. 115). Nevertheless, within the context of a culture that is so used to privileging the act of looking at something solid and clearly formed (such as an erect penis), women's amorphous, invisible, tactilely-oriented sexual organ "represents *the horror of nothing to see*" (Irigaray, 1999, p. 355; italics in original). As a result, woman's sexual organ and pleasure are denied. Irigaray writes:

The value granted to the only definable form excludes the one that is in play in female autoeroticism. The *one* of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning . . . supplants, while separating and dividing, that contact of *at least two* (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself, but without any possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched (1999, p. 335; italics in original).

And, referring to woman's sexuality and pleasure, the representation of which woman is deprived of due to the appropriation of her sexual organ and desire by masculine discourses, she states:

So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed she has many more. Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is *plural* . . . Indeed, woman's pleasure does not have to choose between clitoral activity and vaginal passivity . . . They each contribute, irreplaceable, to woman's pleasure. Among other caresses . . . [*W*]oman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere . . . (pp. 356-357; italics in original).

At this point, seeing that Irigaray's ideas on sexual difference and feminine desire have proved to be controversial, it would be useful to clarify certain points and address misgivings that have been expressed by other philosophers. Starting with her metaphor of the two lips, it should be stressed that Irigaray's interest is not in the anatomy of the female sexual organ. Instead, her main interest lies in discovering a discourse through which female sexual organ and, consequently, feminine desire can be reconceptualized and represented in terms independent of men and masculinity (Grosz, 1989). Although the metaphor of the two lips may apply to certain women, Irigaray does not claim that it applies to all women. As Elizabeth Grosz (1989) argues, "[Irigaray's] purpose is to displace male models, rather than to accurately reflect what female sexuality *really* is" (p. 117; italics in original). Therefore, Irigaray is not interested in deciphering what the true, essential, natural femininity may be; she simply wishes to undermine patriarchal representations of femininity.

Philosophers such as Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell have accused Irigaray of "privileging sexual difference over all other types of difference, [and of reducing] sexuality to a version of heterosexuality [. . .], and ethnic and class identity to an

expression of a sexual or gender identity” (Grosz, 2011, p. 107). As Grosz points out, though, Irigaray has never claimed that sexual difference is more important than other types of difference. She acknowledges the fact that, except for common points they all share, each type of difference is faced with specific challenges. Furthermore, Irigaray understands that, depending on cultural ideologies and sociopolitical circumstances, “for many if not most women, race and class may be where they experience and express their oppression most acutely” (p. 108).

Continuing to respond to Irigaray’s critics, Grosz (2011) argues that sexual relations are significantly associated with and affected by sexual difference. She states that, no matter how we sexually define ourselves, our sexual partners’ body morphology and the “particularities of male and female bodies, organs, and activities” (p. 108) are salient components of the sexual relationship. Furthermore, even within the context of nontraditional families and LGBT parenting, “somebody takes on the role of mommy or daddy” (p. 108), indicating that sexual difference, to a certain extent, still functions as a template for LGBT families as well.

Sexual difference, Grosz (2011) claims, is also related to issues of racial, ethnic, class, and religious identities. She notes that the ways these identities are experienced are deeply affected by whether someone is male or female, reminding us, for example, that “all forms of Western (and probably Eastern) religion still affirm the hierarchical relations between man and woman [and] husband and wife” (p. 109). Therefore, our theoretical analyses should not strive to understand whether sexual difference is more important than other differences but how it intersects with them, given that “whatever else one might be—whatever race, class, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, and religion one

might be assigned to—one is assigned only as male, or as a female, or in the mode of some identification with male or female” (p. 109).

As this section comes to an end, the question that arises is the following: is there some “space for rethinking the place of Luce Irigaray in the world of queer theory?” (Huffer, 2011, p. 517) This is the question Lynne Huffer explores in her article, *Are the Lips a Grave?* (2011). (Huffer’s article title directly refers to Leo Bersani’s article, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*—one that will be explored in a later chapter of this dissertation). Huffer maintains that queer theory has traditionally ignored Irigaray’s concept of sexual difference because it has persistently failed to “recognize her antifoundationalism” (p. 529). She argues that both Irigaray and queer theory share a common interest in rethinking “sex” and ascertaining its various social, political, and cultural constructions. However, a number of Irigaray’s theoretical constructs have been misunderstood and, therefore, prevented queer theory from examining her philosophical insights more rigorously.

One of Irigaray’s widely misunderstood theoretical constructs is what she calls “homosexuality,” a term that includes the French word for man, “homme.” Contrary to popular (queer) belief, this term does not refer to homosexuality with one m. Instead, it is used by Irigaray to point to and undermine “monosexuality . . . [that is], the masculine economy of the Same . . . [that forces feminine and queer] desire [to] function only as the complement to a masculine, phallic, macho model” (p. 525). Seen under this perspective, Irigaray’s “homosexuality” denotes a concept that, far from being a derogatory term towards LGBTQ people or solely interested in liberating feminine desire, encourages

LGBTQ individuals to work through and discover discourses that facilitate representations of their desires independent of masculine parameters.

A second point that has stirred controversy in queer theory circles involves Irigaray's invocation to the "heterosexual" (Huffer, 2011). Again, contrary to queer theorists' perceptions, Irigaray's reference to the "heterosexual" does not represent an invocation to heteronormativity or heterosexism. Instead, as Elizabeth Grosz argues, "[the 'heterosexual' refers to] reasserting the necessity of *two positions* (not identities) in any relation" (Grosz, 1994b, p. 344; italics in original). In other words, the "heterosexual" refers to an individual's irreducible otherness and the cultivation of relationships, regardless of whether these relationships are conventionally characterized as heterosexual, homosexual, or other, in such ways so as this otherness cannot be stifled or appropriated by others. Irigaray argues that, to the extent that our sexual relationships are dominated by "homosexuality," "same-sex relationships, [like feminine desire], can appear as what they are not, in a metaphysical language that hides them from view" (Huffer, 2011, p. 527).

Lacanian Psychoanalysis and Desire

During the course of his long and productive life, both in terms of clinical practice and theoretical investigations, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan produced a rich and notoriously complicated theory of subjectivity, language, and culture (Fuery, 1995). Like Freud, he positioned the unconscious at the center of his theory and maintained a persistently oppositional stance toward Descartes' philosophical assertions with regard to certainty, truth, and understanding. His theorizations are characterized by a high degree of self-reflexivity that leads Lacan to state that "understanding is evoked only as an ideal

relation. As soon as one tries to get close to it, it becomes, properly speaking, ungraspable” (1997, p. 7). Apart from its self-reflexive character, though, Lacan’s theory is also marked by the central place it assigns to the articulation and interpretation of desire. His ideas on desire, therefore, will make up the main body of this section as well as their potential connection to queer theory. However, issuing a caveat at this point is necessary. Lacan’s work is multifarious and had been evolving during the course of a career that spanned a period of more than 5 decades. Consequently, my discussion of his ideas will inevitably be dense, selective, and, hence, incomplete.

Notwithstanding the selective character of this discussion, Lacan’s ideas on desire would be incomprehensible without a reference to the mirror stage and the three orders of experience, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real (Bristow, 2011). Lacan asserts that, at some point, young children between the ages of 6 and 18 months see themselves in the mirror. However, the act of seeing themselves in the mirror does not simply result in children’s recognizing their image. Plagued by a sense of overwhelming instability and bodily fragmentation, children are in desperate need of an anchor that will offer them a stable sense of identity. Therefore, their image serves as a projection, a hallucination upon which children build a fictitious sense of coherent identity. A conflict is established between children’s emotional and perceptual experiences and their alienated “ego” is formed; alienated in that the “ego” “comes into being in the field of the other: the statue-like gestalt that young [children] necessarily *misrecognize* as [themselves]” (Bristow, 2011, p. 79; italics in original). According to Lacan, the mirror stage signifies the inauguration of the Imaginary order which is defined as “the realm of [the subject’s] identificatory misrecognitions [. . .] [in its effort] to cohere its self-image” (p. 82).

Nevertheless, apart from the split that the mirror stage induces, Lacan argues that language also splits and subordinates the subject (Bristow, 2011). He claims that the unconscious is structured like a language and has its own syntactical and meaning-making rules, which are quite different from the meaning-making rules of language as is consciously used by the subject. By Lacan's account, the subject's division, although not necessarily orderly and precise, consists of the separation between the aforementioned conscious and unconscious meaning-making mechanisms. Furthermore, he maintains that, in expressing ourselves through language, instead of reinforcing our self-sufficiency, we further understand (unconsciously) the extent to which we depend on others for recognition and for assigning meaning to our beings. These issues, however, could be further elucidated by discussing the Symbolic order.

The Symbolic, according to Lacan, stands for "the social world of language and culture" (Fuery, 1995, p. 16). Our introduction into the realm of language, our wish to communicate with others, and our desire to have our beings recognized by them compels us to "engage in the realm of the signifier, [that is, language, ideas, images, and, in general, all representational systems]" (p. 16). However, when we enter into the Symbolic, we painfully (and, again, unconsciously) realize that the signifier, instead of being produced by us, preexists and produces our subjectivity. In other words, we are introduced into a linguistic and cultural realm of signification which, instead of being produced and controlled by us, controls and produces our subjectivities. Instead of our producing representational systems, we are produced by representational systems that precede our existence. And, most importantly, having moved "from an egocentric position of supposed wholeness [(mirror stage)] into the fragmentary, alienating realm of

the Symbolic [with the promise of mastering the signifier]” (p. 16), we are found deceived and split as ever; subjects who are split from ourselves, from the others, and from the Other as the sociolinguistic field that organizes our intersubjective interactions; subjects of lack who, due to the Symbolic, “[are unable] to find a stable point for [our]identity in the Imaginary” (Bristow, 2011, p. 83).

The Imaginary and the Symbolic orders of experience strive against each other and “compete for meaning” (Bristow, 2011, p. 83). Nevertheless, this tension between the Imaginary and the Symbolic is indispensable to ward off the Real, that is, Lacan’s third order of experience which “marks the domain that exists outside language and resists all symbolization” (p. 230). However, as Bruce Fink states, “the Real is perhaps best understood as *that which has not yet been symbolized*” (1995, p. 25, italics in original), suggesting that words, concepts, and experiences which have remained beyond symbolization could potentially be conceptualized, articulated, and experienced. In any case, the Real as the order which remains beyond symbolization and meaning poses a threat to the Imaginary and Symbolic orders and forces them to engage in an antagonistically collaborative relationship, a paradoxical alliance against non-meaning.

To recapitulate what has already been said, Lacan maintains that our dependence on language to enter the Symbolic order introduces us into a state of radical alienation. This is so because we enter a sociolinguistic system—the Other— which preexists our existence and imposes on us words, ideas, cultural beliefs and meanings. Bruce Fink writes:

We are born into a world of discourse, a discourse or language that precedes our birth and that will live on after our death. . . [M]ost children [. . .] express their wishes [. . .] [in words that] are not their own and do not necessarily correspond to their own particular demands: their very

desires are cast in the mold of the language or languages they learn . . . The Other as language [. . .] can be seen [. . .] as an intruder that [. . .] transforms our wishes; it is, however, at the same time that which enables us to clue each other in to our desires and “communicate”. . . [E]very human being who learns to speak is thereby alienated from her or himself—for it is language that, while allowing desire to come into being, ties knots therein, and makes us such that we can both want and not want one and the same thing, never be satisfied when we get what we thought we wanted, and so on. . . [T]he unconscious is itself Other, foreign, and unassimilated. . . [It] is the Other’s discourse [. . .], *full of other people’s talk, other people’s conversations, and other people’s goals, aspirations, and fantasies*. . . That talk takes on a sort of independent existence within “ourselves” (1995, pp. 5-10; italics in original).

Patrick Fuery (1995) states: “For Lacan, desire and subjectivity are inseparable” (p. 16). Taking into consideration the aforementioned alienation we, as subjects, undergo, what could Fuery’s phrase mean? Let us begin our, inevitably simplified, discussion of desire by referring to what Lacan writes in the *Signification of the Phallus*: “[D]esire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their splitting (*Spaltung*)” (2006, p. 580). Lacan explains that the human infant is born totally dependent on the mother (or any other person taking care of the child); the satisfaction of her/his needs (nutritional, emotional, etc.) depends on the articulation of these needs in the form of a demand. Soon, the mother’s presence acquires a double meaning for the infant: on the one hand, the mother signifies the satisfaction of the infant’s needs; on the other hand, though, she also symbolizes her love for the infant. Therefore, the infant’s demand is soon transformed into a demand for love. However, although the demand for the satisfaction of a need (food, water, etc.) can be easily met by the mother, the infant’s demand for love is insatiable. No matter how much she is able to satisfy the infant’s needs, the mother will never be able to definitively satisfy the infant’s demand for love.

There will always be an unsatisfied remainder which will make the infant (the subject, in general) constantly ask: “Do you love me?” This perpetually unsatisfied remainder is desire; and desire always remains unsatisfied because the infant (subject) seeks to revive that first, unexpected experience of satisfaction that was derived from the mother’s love and care at a time when a representation of love and care did not exist yet. The subject will try to substitute various objects for this very first satisfaction, the satisfaction to be desired, but desire, the subject’s desire to be desired and recognized by the mother, will always remain unsatisfied, leading to the conclusion that desire is related to a lack (Kyvelou, 2009). How could this be interpreted?

Bruce Fink (1995) tells us that the child wishes to be the exclusive recipient of its mother’s nurturance. However, the mother, also being a subject of lack who desires to be desired and recognized by others, does not solely focus her attention on the child. Therefore, her desire almost always goes beyond the child and remains a mystery. Bruce Fink writes:

In the child’s attempt to grasp what essentially remains indecipherable in the [mother’s] desire [. . .], the child’s own desire is founded; the [mother’s] desire begins to function as the cause of the child’s desire . . . There is something about [the mother’s desire] which escapes the child, which is beyond its control. A strict identity between the child’s desire and hers cannot be maintained; her desire’s independence from her child’s creates a rift between them, a gap in which her desire, unfathomable to the child, functions in a unique way. This approximate gloss on separation posits that a rift is induced in the hypothetical mother-child unity due to the very nature of desire and that this rift leads to the advent of object *a*. Object *a* can be understood here as the *remainder* produced when that hypothetical unity breaks down, as a last trace of that unity, a last reminder thereof. By cleaving to that rem(a)inder, the split subject [. . .] can sustain the illusion of wholeness; by clinging to object *a*, the subject is able to ignore his or her division [. . .][and] achieve a phantasmatic sense of wholeness, completeness, fulfillment, and well-being (1995, pp. 59-60; italics in original).

At this point, three issues with regard to desire as conceptualized by Lacan should be clarified. The first issue refers to the idea that desire is not ours. Since we are born into a preexisting, linguistic and cultural world which gives rise to our subjectivity, our desire is shaped according to what *we think* is desirable to this world (our social, cultural, and familial context). Lacan summarizes it nicely when he writes that “Man’s desire is the desire of the Other” (1998, p. 235). However—this is the second issue—since we are never absolutely certain what the Other lacks or desires, our desire always revolves around the question “What does the Other desire?” Finally, although Lacan calls it object *a*, desire does not have an object (Fink, 2006). In fact, an object that would totally satisfy desire would deprive it of the reason of its existence; desire would be annihilated. Therefore, object *a* should not be conceptualized as an object which satisfies desire. On the contrary, it should be thought of as the cause which constantly activates desire and helps it stay faithful to its goal: that is, keep desiring.

Without a doubt, Lacan’s ideas on the unconscious, the formation of the subject, language, and desire are complex and dynamic; a few pages cannot possibly do justice to the entirety of their conceptual richness and potential. Nonetheless, the preceding, somewhat simplified, exposition of his ideas could, perhaps, serve as a vehicle for understanding the extent to which Lacanian psychoanalysis could facilitate the goals of queer theory. Eve Watson’s article *Queering Psychoanalysis/Psychoanalyzing Queer* (2009) will be our guide.

Watson argues that a fruitful encounter between Lacanian psychoanalysis and queer theory is desirable and more than possible. To support her assertion, she cites 3 main arguments. She states that, according to Lacan, sexual identities such as

heterosexuality and homosexuality represent categories which our egos construct in order to produce coherent identities. Nevertheless, the coherence of these sexual identities, being products of the ego, is deceiving. Watson reminds us of the elusive and dynamic character of the unconscious and of the fact that the “I” we enunciate, despite its ostensible coherence, “is characterized by dynamic possibilities that have yet to be said and which are irreducible to a single, synchronic, fixed identity” (2009, p. 129). Our identifications and attempts at producing coherent identities are, of course, important to cope with the traumatic experiences of childhood. Nevertheless, Watson claims that these single identities, in disregarding the complexity of the unconscious, are largely inadequate to “definitively tell us what it is to be man or a woman or gay or straight, etc” (p. 129).

A second argument Watson provides concerns the revolutionary character of the unconscious desire itself. She explains that Lacan, in maintaining that desire has no essential object, “moves beyond Freud’s notion of object-choice” (2009, p. 129) and asserts that love and desire “have nothing to do with sex, [gender identity, or persons]” (p. 130). Finally, Watson reminds us that, even though we are divided into two anatomically distinct sexes, Lacan does not assume the existence of a biologically predetermined symmetry and/or complementarity between femininity and masculinity. He does not deny, of course, the anatomical or biological differences between the sexes. However, his view is that, in considering the sexual relations between the two sexes, more factors should be taken into consideration. Watson writes:

In effect, each person’s most basic partner is not the other of the relationship, but his or her unconscious Other . . . Consequently, all sexual relations are symbolically mediated and determined by the laws and conventions of language and discourse. Neither femininity nor masculinity

is subjectively predetermined either from a biological or social basis. . . Masculinity and femininity constitute two distinct responses to the way language fails to signify sex (p. 133).

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, I have attempted to present theories and conceptualizations of sexual desire which take into serious consideration its historical, cultural, social, political, linguistic, and corporeal dimensions. They do not necessarily neglect its biological, physiological, and anatomical components. Nevertheless, they generally argue that a theorization of sexual desire as a purely natural phenomenon is not only impossible but conducive to oppression, marginalization, and exclusion as well. These theories will inform the autoethnographic stories of the chapters to follow. At the same time, the same stories will also try to follow their narrative truth and move above and beyond these theories. Before we go to the stories, however, an exploration of autoethnography as a research method is necessary. The next chapter will try to accomplish this task.

Chapter 4

Autoethnography

Remember, Body

*Body, remember not just how much you were loved,
not just the beds where you have lain,
but also those longings that so openly
glistened for you in the eyes,
and trembled in the voice—and some
chance obstacle arose and thwarted them.
Now that it's all finally in the past
it almost seems as if you gave yourself to
those longings, too—remember how
they glistened, in the eyes that looked at you;
how they trembled in the voice, for you; remember, body.
—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, p. 83).*

Introduction

My quest for a method that would do justice to the complexity of the research questions of this study has been guided by a number of personal, inevitably subjective, criteria. First, I have sought a method that would allow the multiple voices and bodily performances that have marked my navigation through the nuances of sexual desire to come to the fore and be loudly and clearly heard. A second criterion has involved my desire to distance myself from and contest the notion of master, universal narratives (Lyotard, 1984) by providing ones that illuminate the situationally constructed as well as historically, socially, and culturally contingent character of our sexual desire. Third, for these narratives to be effective and reach an audience beyond the strict confines of the academy, they should be accessible enough and devoid of incomprehensible scientific or philosophical jargon. Most importantly, these narratives should be as vulnerable and intimate as the vulnerable intimacy that an exploration of sexual desire seeks to discover.

Finally, I have looked for a method that would allow me to search for alternative thoughts, ideas, affects, bodily sensations, images, and durations. For all these reasons, autoethnography is the method of choice for this dissertation.

What Is the History of Autoethnography?

As a native Greek speaker, “autoethnography” sounds very familiar to me. It is a compound word that is made up of three Greek words: *auto* (self), *ethnos* (nation, culture), and the suffix *-graphy* (derived from the Greek verb *grapho*=to write) that denotes something written or represented. Carolyn Ellis (2004, p. 37; italics in original) provides the following definition: “*Autoethnography* refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness.” Nevertheless, before we proceed to a deeper exploration of autoethnography, it would be useful to trace its history and understand what has contributed to its emergence as an autonomous method of qualitative inquiry. To this end, a brief reference to ethnography, the qualitative research method autoethnography has stemmed from, is necessary.

Ian Parker (2005, p. 36) writes: “Ethnography can enable us to describe the self-representations a ‘community’ assumes and refuses in its relations with others.” In other words, ethnography is concerned with meticulously studying the cultural context within which a specific community of people, be it a tribe in the Amazon or a religious sect, is constituted and with providing “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) thereof. Exactly because “the history of ethnography is a history of observation, interference, and control” (Parker, 2005, p. 36), Parker tellingly points out the power that an observer can exert on an observed individual and draws a parallel between ethnography and post-colonial

theory. His purpose is to warn us against the utilization of ethnography as a method that reproduces oppression and inequality, instead of one that traces how internal relations perpetuate them.

According to Lincoln and Denzin (2000), ethnography's broad mission of accurately describing and representing others was seriously challenged by critical theory; ethnographers were forced to provide answers to questions that had never been posed before, such as "Who is the Other? Can we ever hope to speak authentically of the experience of the Other, or an Other? And, if not, how do we create a social science that includes the Other?" (p. 1050). This is the point where autoethnography emerges as an attempt to provide convincing answers to the above questions.

Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis (2013) report that the challenge to ethnography and the subsequent formation of autoethnography have resulted from social changes in the Western world during the 1960s and the 1970s as well as from changes within the social scientific community itself. They specifically claim that, after a long period of dominance by the natural science paradigm, it was gradually and increasingly recognized that quantitative research with humans generally presents with serious limitations. For example, quantitative research is not interested in describing the particular elements of our lives and always strives to produce generalizable results. In this way, however, an image of humans as changeless and rigidly formed is promoted; the ways by which we assign meaning to our lives and change through time go unnoticed. Furthermore, "the notion of a 'world out there' to be discovered" (Holman Jones et.al, 2013, p. 26) by "objective" social scientists is encouraged; this notion, nonetheless, has been seriously contested by qualitative researchers who, instead, opt for the mundane, contingent,

situational, details of our lives. Following on Foucault's footsteps, they "embrace a view of knowledge as context-bound, partial, contingent, and constituted in and mediated by discourse" (p. 26).

The challenge to ethnography and the formation of autoethnography, though, have also resulted from 3 more decisive factors (Holman Jones et al., 2013). More specifically, a number of highly controversial studies have shed light on the importance of ethics with regard to research and have led to the implementation of strict ethical principles and guidelines, aiming at the protection of research participants. The above-mentioned concerns with regard to ethical research practice also extend to qualitative research and, in particular, to ethnographic studies. As mentioned earlier, the role of the ethnographer as a neutral, dispassionate observer, fully equipped to describe and understand others, has been seriously contested and ethically problematized.

A second factor leading to the formation of autoethnography has involved the increasing recognition of the importance of "human stories, aesthetic considerations, emotions, and embodied experiences in research projects" (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 29). In the past (as in the present), ethnographers would often investigate emotionally charged topics involving the body; these topics would stir up strong emotional reactions from the researchers themselves. Yet, their ethnographic prose would usually be dry, sterile, and impersonal. Involving their emotional, embodied reactions and openly expressing their personal views would typically be devalued and deemed as "unscientific." As a consequence, the articulation of their ethnographic stories lacked nuance and emotional sophistication, rendering them decontextualized and, thus, monotonous and superficial. Eventually, a number of ethnographers have gradually come

to the understanding that incorporating the aesthetic, embodied, emotional, and narrative dimensions of their projects into their written reports would significantly add to the completeness of their stories.

Finally, one of the most important reasons leading to the advent of autoethnography concerned the acknowledgment of “the importance of social identities and identity politics” (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 30) during the decades of the 1960s and the 1970s. In other words, who we are in terms of race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, religion, sexuality, social class, and nationality is far from irrelevant to social science research. The idea of the Caucasian researcher conducting research with, for example, African or Asian people and, simultaneously, remaining scientifically objective and neutral became ludicrous. Our social identities affect the questions we ask, the people we investigate, and the ways by which we interpret our data. We’d better acknowledge it.

What Are the Key Features of Autoethnography?

One of the most persistent and widespread misconceptions with respect to autoethnography involves its conceptualization as a purely autobiographical method of writing. Nevertheless, autoethnography, rather than simply recount an experience, aims at “[using] personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience” (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 22). In other words, autoethnography seeks to keep and analyze the tension between the researcher and the researched or between the personal and the social/cultural/political. A researcher who engages in an autoethnographic exploration attempts to connect, explain, or track down the ambiguities and contradictions that exist between the personal experience and the wider sociopolitical reality. Thus, autoethnography strives to create personal narratives so that explanatory links between

the personal and the social may be formed and, perhaps, a door toward social change may open. As Ellis writes: “Autoethnography fluently moves back and forth, first looking inward, then outward, then backward and forward, until the distinctions between the individual and social are blurred beyond recognition and the past, present and future become continuous” (1997, p. 132).

We should nonetheless not forget that, apart from its examination and critique of cultural experience, autoethnography is also a *method of qualitative inquiry*. This means that autoethnographers conducting research on a specific topic are expected to be familiar with the relevant literature and generate new knowledge (Holman Jones et al., 2013). This could take the form of asking questions that have never been posed before, highlighting ideas that have been obscured or neglected in previous research, and making suggestions for future research directions. Autoethnographers’ effort to connect their stories to previous research and to shed more light on a topic of scholarly interest further differentiates autoethnography from simple autobiography.

Yet, the scholarly orientation of autoethnography, as opposed to other forms of inquiry, does not presuppose or necessitate a researcher’s impersonal, invisible, and/or “objective” stance. As a matter of fact, “autoethnographic inquiry rejects the distinction between the subjective and the objective, seeking to develop forms of research that fully acknowledge and utilize subjective experience as an intrinsic part of research” (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 72). For that reason, an autoethnographic researcher strives to render his/her self as visible as possible in research and in writing. Visibility of a researcher’s self, though, does not only signify the ways by which an autoethnographer is multi-vocally present as an actor and an agent; it also points to the fact that he/she “is

both framed and opened by the Other. In autoethnographic enquiry, the ‘I’ that is emphasized and celebrated is, therefore, the ‘I’ of connection and position and unfolding” (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, pp. 71-72).

If I tried to phrase the above-mentioned argument differently, I would say that a researcher’s subjective position is blended with the subjectivity of others and the meaning that is generated is the outcome of their co-constitution. In other words, autoethnography, like the majority of qualitative research methods, is an intersubjective endeavor. Hence, the issue of reflexivity becomes one of paramount importance. Keith Berry writes:

Reflexivity calls us to trouble in our research the relationship between researchers’ “selves” and “others,” typically non self-others . . . It means spinning in the correlative space between the two, insofar as constituting experience entails an interaction between the understanding we bring and the phenomena presenting themselves to us through the spinning. [R]eflexivity entails taking seriously the self’s location(s) in culture and scholarship, circumspectly exploring our relationship to/in autoethnography, to make research and cultural life *better* and *more meaningful*. . . Autoethnographic reflexivity is the impassioned process whereby autoethnographers use and play with our implicature to render meaningful accounts (2013, p. 212; italics in original).

Ian Parker (2005) claims that reflexivity is frequently misunderstood as mere confession or as an individual’s subjective belief on a topic; he attempts to dispel that myth. He points out that reflexive qualitative researchers do not only strive to understand how they situate themselves in a specific area of inquiry but, even more importantly, how they came to situate themselves as such as well. By his account, when we aspire to conduct qualitative research there are three crucial contexts that are in need of detailed scrutiny: gender, culture, and class.

By way of example, my anthropological understanding of human sexuality is inevitably colored by how my identity has integrated my experiences in all three

aforementioned contexts. A reflexive examination of how these factors have shaped my understanding of human sexuality will not only reveal what I believe but, most importantly, what I *should not* believe human sexuality necessarily stands for with regard to others. Therefore, my identity as a biologically male, gay, Caucasian, Greek, middle-class individual who has experienced his and others' sexuality in a specific culture would by no means signify automatic access into and knowledge on the ways a biologically female, heterosexual, Mexican, middle-class immigrant in the United States experiences her sexuality. Put in a different way, reflexivity helps us avoid assumptions about other persons which may not only be false but stigmatizing as well. Furthermore, it facilitates a better understanding of the ways by which our cultural backgrounds contribute to our meaning-making processes.

One of the most important and, at the same time, challenging features of autoethnographic writing is its emotionally compelling, evocative, and vulnerable character (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). Autoethnographic stories aim at making their messages accessible to, creating a reciprocal relationship with, and deeply touching wider audiences. Moreover, in view of the fact that most autoethnographic writing focuses on “issues of identity and selfhood, voice and authenticity, cultural displacement and exile, boundary-crossing and [. . .] the multiple nature of selfhood” (p. 72), espousing vulnerability appears to be a *sine qua non*. However, writing vulnerable autoethnographic texts also presents with significant difficulties. An autoethnographer, apart from facing the challenge of writing about traumatic experiences, also needs to handle delicate issues and questions such as: How much do I reveal about myself? How much do I reveal about members of my family? What if I want to be tenured? Could my autoethnographic papers

portray me as a weak person with no sense of boundaries? For all these reasons, it is essential that we “use personal discretion and professional judgment” (p. 76) when deciding what to include and what to omit in an autoethnographic text. Conducting successful autoethnographic research should not entail harming ourselves and/or others.

Finally, autoethnographic stories reject finality and closure and espouse open-endedness (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013). Most often, autoethnographic research describes and investigates experiences, insights, and understandings that are situated in specific social, cultural, and temporal contexts. Given that the majority of autoethnographic researchers are influenced by post-structural philosophical movements, issues like identities, relationships, and culture are viewed as contingent and fluid. As a result, their autoethnographic stories avoid final solutions and definitive conclusions. As Anderson & Glass-Coffin write, “The autoethnographic resistance to finality and closure reflects a conception of the self (and society) as relational and processual, mutably written in a moment that opens onto a panoramic, albeit not unlimited, future of possibilities” (2013, pp. 78-79).

What Are the Goals of Autoethnography?

One of my most vivid memories from my freshman year in college as a psychology major is of feeling overwhelmingly disillusioned at the discipline of psychology itself. I was even contemplating the idea of totally distancing myself from psychology and becoming a philosophy or history of art major. My desire to become a psychotherapist, though, persisted and I silently suffered through reifying research paradigms and tedious research studies, portraying human beings as automata without paralyzing dilemmas or existential fears. In other words, I had to endure a social

scientific paradigm presupposing that researchers are totally rational, neutral, and objective individuals who study equally rational and objective human beings. Referring to traditional social science, Carol Rambo Ronai (1995) argues that it completely disregards “the intuitive leaps, false starts, mistakes, loose ends, and happy accidents that comprise the investigative experience” (p. 421). Consumers of social science research simply read polished journal articles that conceal the researcher(s)’ uncertain and intuitive moments as well as their cultural backgrounds and potential biases. Therefore, autoethnographic research could significantly contribute to highlighting the silenced intuitive and subjective factors involved in the research process. An altered representation of researchers and the research process itself could, hopefully, also lead to subsequent alterations with regard to how human participants are represented by social scientists.

However, altering the representations of researchers and participants in social science does not only rest on the demystification of the research process and the disruption of objectivity; it also necessitates a radical expansion of the perspectives through which we explore our topics and the questions we ask. Traditional social science, stringently confined within the boundaries of objectivity and neutrality, recycles dominant, hegemonic discourses and ideologies. As a result, alternative perspectives are marginalized and important cultural issues are not addressed. Autoethnography, in using personal experiences and “working from insider knowledge” (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 34), aims at posing difficult, challenging questions that are usually neglected by conventional social science. Autoethnographers, contrary to researchers who see their task proceeding from “simple” and “neutral” observation, are deeply immersed in their

topics and, in also being reflexive, can shed light on numerous cultural experiences which have hitherto remained unknown and/or obscured.

Autoethnography, nonetheless, would not be able to demystify the research process and pose culturally poignant questions if autoethnographers did not take the risk to embrace their vulnerability and produce texts recounting hurtful, confusing, and traumatic experiences. As Carolyn Ellis writes, “I tend to write about experiences that knock me for a loop and challenge the construction of meaning I have put together for myself. I write when my world falls apart or the meaning I have constructed for myself is in danger of doing so” (2004, p. 33). Nevertheless, no matter how cathartic this writing experience may be, autoethnographers do not simply aim at working through their emotions and “cleanse” themselves; Adams, Holman Jones & Ellis (2014) write:

I [Tony Adams] did not want to write my story only to work through my anger, pain, and/or confusion about [the relationship with my father]; I also wanted to offer *others* ways of working through their feelings about *their* relationships. If I had not had this goal, I would have no need to publish the essays—I could have written through on a blog or in a personal diary. I published my stories so that others might use them as “equipment for living”; as stories to “live with” during times of relational distress . . . Autoethnographers [tell stories] in order to call attention to the vulnerabilities, questions, injustices, silencing, and shame that others might endure. Autoethnographers embrace vulnerability with a *purpose* . . . It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake (pp. 39-40; italics in original).

Autoethnography, though, does not only confine itself to calling attention to injustices and silencing; it also aims at “[breaking] silences surrounding experiences as they unfold within cultures and cultural practices” (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 35). In other words, autoethnographers aim at empowering and instilling hope in their readers, reminding them that they are not alone and that their experiences, no matter how hard or traumatizing they may have been, can be put into words and communicated to others.

Language, of course—as Lacan would argue—is not ours and no experience can be definitively or adequately recounted. Nevertheless, autoethnography, when faced with the dilemma of total silence or inadequate, fragmented speech and communication, supports the latter; mumbled, incomprehensible speech represents life and has the opportunity to be heard; silence is death, psychic death.

In conclusion, it could be claimed that autoethnography aims at undermining the reifying paradigm of current social science research; at working from insider, personal knowledge in order to pose frequently neglected questions and expand our interpretative perspectives; at espousing vulnerability in order to point to instances of social injustice; and at empowering the readers of autoethnographic stories in order to help them break out of their debilitating silence. All the aforementioned goals, though, would be doomed to failure if autoethnographers did not strive “to create work that appeals to a variety of audiences, not just academics” (Holman Jones et al., 2013, p. 37). Autoethnographers are deeply interested in social change and social justice. On the other hand, though, they are fully aware of the fact that academic articles are only read by a handful of academic people. Most of the times, scientific jargon and complex concepts render academic articles incomprehensible to wider audiences. This is why the use of personal narratives and stories by autoethnographers is so important; it allows people from all walks of life to experience, feel, and think in novel ways about complex cultural, social, and personal issues. Nevertheless, stories are traditionally castigated as totally inappropriate and unscientific in comparison to conventional social science theories. Are these criticisms justified? Are stories unscientific? These are questions to be addressed in the following section.

Why Are Stories Important?

Arthur Bochner (2001) observes that a large number of social scientists strongly object to the use of stories in social science research. Before we discuss why, though, let us first elaborate on the ways by which, according to Bochner, stories function in social science. He writes:

Stories activate subjectivity and compel emotional response; stories long to be used rather than analyzed, to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled, to offer lessons for further conversation rather than truths without any rivals; and stories promise the companionship of intimate detail as a substitute for the loneliness of abstracted facts. Thus evocative stories not only breach ordinary and canonical inscriptions about living, they challenge traditional norms of writing and research, forcing us to reconsider the goals of our research, the forms we use for expressing relationship experience, and the divisions we accept and enforce that separate literature from social science . . . The storyteller is preoccupied with showing how lived experience is endowed with meaning. The result is not so much conclusive as it is believable. Stories invite readers to enter horizons of the human condition where lived life is shown as comic, tragic, and absurd, and where opportunities exist to mold a reality and live in it (2002, pp. 82-89).

Bochner (2001) clarifies that the use of stories is not totally rejected by social scientists. He explains that stories are considered a legitimate means of research provided they are subject to theoretical and methodologically rigorous analysis. In other words, most social scientists draw a clear division between unscientific stories and scientifically meticulous, abstract theories which are able to tell whether a story meets the scientific standards of truthfulness or not. A story that is theoretically unanalyzed cannot be considered to be scientific; a story could never replace a scientific theory.

Bochner (1997) strongly disagrees. He argues that the division between stories and theories is false and he reminds us that a storyteller and an individual who analyzes a story are both brought up within the contexts of specific cultures. In other words, as

Bochner writes, “theorizing is not an activity devoid of context or consequences” (p. 435). A scientific theorist is not necessarily less biased or subjective than a storyteller and Bochner attributes this assumed division between an objective theory and a subjective story to the widely shared illusion among academics and researchers that their research “is divorced from [their lives], that it has no autobiographical dimension, that what [they] do academically is not part of how [they] are working through the story of [their] life” (Bochner, 2001, p. 138). Most importantly, though, this division totally obliterates the fact that the ways by which we explain or describe reality has little or, many times, nothing to do with how we deal with it. In other words, scientists accusing storytellers of being biased and unscientific forget that they themselves, when trying to deal with the reality of their life, inevitably resort to stories; they deal with reality through stories and not through abstract theories which, quite often, are irrelevant to the concrete details of their life.

Of course, Bochner (2001) does not claim that stories should never be the object of theoretical or methodological analysis. Nevertheless, he asserts that stories— theorizing through stories—should be appreciated for their distinctive contributions; for what they have to offer and teach. What may these distinctive contributions be? Bochner states that, unlike theories, stories encourage what he calls “narrative ethics” (p. 141), that is, a position of caring and empathic witnessing. He quotes Frank who describes narrative ethics eloquently:

The first lesson of thinking with stories is not to move on once the story has been heard, but to continue to live in the story, becoming in it, reflecting on who one is becoming, and gradually modifying the story. The problem is truly to listen to one’s own story, just as the problem is truly to listen to others’ stories (Frank, quoted in Bochner, 2001, p. 141).

Put in a different way, stories request that we pause, listen, and observe the intersubjective field; the struggle between personal and cultural meaning; the co-constitution of meaning between us and others; the blending of emotional reactions and the gradual understanding of how we can, perhaps, make peace with each other; how we can contain others' suffering without being intimidated and running away; ultimately, how we can express our suffering without feeling ashamed of it or weak.

Finally, stories have an important lesson to teach us with regard to truth. Let us see what Freeman has to say on this issue:

As for truth, rather than being conceived in terms of the degree of correspondence to fact or reality, we might think of it in terms of that which is disclosed or made manifest to us—or, perhaps better still, re-collected—through the process of self-understanding (Freeman, quoted in Bochner, 2001, p. 152).

In other words, the truth of the stories should not be conceptualized with regard to whether they “convey the way things actually were but rather what [they] do, what consequences they have, to what uses they can be put” (p. 152). Of course, this statement should not be understood as giving stories and storytellers in social science carte blanche to engage in lying and distorting. Instead, it emphasizes the importance of allowing stories to perform what they know best; that is, open up possibilities for the emergence of fresh interpretations, deeper understanding, and strengthening of community ties. In conclusion, as Bochner argues,

Life stories may be based on facts, but they are not determined by them. The facts achieve significance and intelligibility by being articulated within a temporal frame that considers what came before and what comes after. Stories that address the meanings of a life always seek a way of extending them into the future . . . We are not scientists seeking laws that govern our behavior; we are storytellers seeking meanings that help us cope with our circumstances. . . [Stories] reflect our desire to grasp or seize the possibilities of meaning . . . (2001, p. 154).

Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability in Autoethnography

Current social science research is dominated by the concepts of validity, reliability, and generalizability as formulated and understood by the natural sciences. How can autoethnography claim validity since it does not contribute in a linear and cumulative way to a “knowledge base” (Talbert, 2004, p. 95) but, instead, opens up itself to inestimable possibilities and interpretations? In response to the above assertion, Talbert writes that there are writers who call for a fundamentally different interpretation of “validity” in qualitative research; they opt “for dialogic rather than monologic research texts that seek less to persuade than to invite readers to form relations with the text by offering a balance between engagements with others and self-reflexive considerations of [. . .] arguments” (p. 95). In other words, given that qualitative research and, in this case, autoethnography do not aim at formulating eternal truths but, instead, at exploring meaning, memory, and contingency, terms such as validity, reliability, and generalizability should be conceptualized in alternative ways.

Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2010) argue that reliability in relation to autoethnography should refer to the narrator’s credibility. In evaluating the reliability of an autoethnographic text we could ask questions such as: Do I believe that the narrator has really experienced what he/she recounts? Does the narrator believe in his/her interpretations? Does the text give me the impression of being a truthful account?

The meaning of validity also changes when viewed from an autoethnographic perspective. Ellis et al. (2010) assert that the validity of an autoethnographic text depends on whether it seeks verisimilitude. To evaluate its validity, we could ask questions such as: Do I believe that the experiences recounted by the narrator are true, believable, and

life-like? Is the story coherent? Do I feel emotionally connected with what is recounted? Does the narrator help me see things the way he/she does? Does the story open up the possibility for me to communicate with individuals who may be completely different from me? Does the story somewhat help me improve my life? Is it useful?

Finally, the term of generalizability in relation to autoethnography is also conceptualized in a modified way. Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 751) explain:

A story's generalizability is constantly being tested by readers as they determine if it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know. Likewise, does it tell them about unfamiliar people or lives? Does a work have [. . .] "naturalistic generalization," meaning that it brings "felt" news from one world to another and provides opportunities for the reader to have vicarious experience of the things told?

Ethical Considerations in Autoethnography

Carolyn Ellis (2009) claims that "writing about yourself always involves writing about others" (p. 13). This is true. Even though autoethnography usually does not involve research participants and meticulous reviews from IRB committees, an autoethnographic researcher's ethical responsibilities are far from eliminated or resolved (Tullis, 2013).

Ellis, Adams & Bochner (2010) remind us that we do not live in isolation. We are connected to friends, lovers, parents, siblings, co-workers and other significant persons who, very frequently, are deeply and intimately involved in the autoethnographic stories we write. Furthermore, apart from the ethical responsibility we have towards others, an ethics of care should also inform the way we treat ourselves as autoethnographic researchers. As mentioned earlier, our autoethnographic explorations are usually marked by tough decisions about how much to reveal and how vulnerable we should be. They are also characterized by questions that are hard to answer with regard to the authenticity of a story if certain elements are omitted.

Taking the above thoughts into consideration, what are some questions that autoethnographers may ask themselves when writing their stories? Jillian Tullis (2013) mentions 5 questions:

Do you have the right to write about others without their consent? What effects do these stories have on individuals and your relationship with them? How much detail and which difficulties, traumas, or challenges are necessary to include to successfully articulate the story's moral or goal? Are you making a case to write (or not to write) because it is more or less convenient to you? Should you and will you allow participants to read and approve all of the stories about them? Or just those stories that you think are problematic or potentially hurtful? (p. 256)

Of course, there are no easy answers to the aforementioned questions. To a large extent, the answers depend on the topic, the degree to which intimate others are involved in the story, the reason why an autoethnographic text is produced (publication in a peer reviewed journal, dissertation, term paper etc.) and, finally, the autoethnographer's personality, goals, and purposes. Irrespective of the specific circumstances under which an autoethnographic text is produced, though, Ellis et al. (2010) urge us to engage in what they call "relational ethics." In other words, they encourage us to think of the participants in our stories at every step of the writing process. Engaging in relational ethics frequently necessitates that we share our stories with the persons involved in them and ask for their feedback. Furthermore, it also involves strategies which are clearly articulated by Ellis (2007) in her article *Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives: Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others*. She writes: "There are strategies to try. You might omit things, use pseudonyms or composite characters, alter the plot or scene, position your story within the stories of others, occasionally decide to write fiction" (p. 24). Finally, before we move on to the next section, it should be noted that, as concerns this dissertation, ethical

issues will be dealt with as they arise during the writing process of my autoethnographic stories.

Is Autoethnography Self-Indulgent?

Self-indulgence is one of the harshest and most frequent criticisms leveled against autoethnography. Andrew Sparkes (2002) notes that autoethnography “*can* become self-indulgent rather than self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing, or self-luminous” (p. 214; italics in original). Nevertheless, he points out that it is one thing to evaluate one piece of autoethnographic work as self-indulgent and a completely different thing to label autoethnography as a self-indulgent research method altogether. He argues that accusations such as narcissism and self-absorption “function to reinscribe ethnographic orthodoxy and resist change” (p. 215) and he takes up the challenge to refute these accusations and explain why autoethnography is far from self-indulgent.

Sparkes (2002) tells us that accusations of self-indulgence are based on an individual/social dualism that draws a dividing line between the personal and the public/cultural/political. However, this view is mistaken because our subjectivities and life stories are not formed in a social vacuum. We are in constant interaction with others. Moreover, activities which may seem to be completely under our control (such as remembering) are strongly influenced by how we communicate with others; they are, in reality, social activities. Therefore, the binary individual/social, viewed from the above perspective, makes no sense and leads to the conclusion that when we talk or write about ourselves we inevitably talk or write about others as well. Every word we utter or write reveals our deep immersion in past relationships and culture. Bochner and Ellis (quoted in Sparkes, 2002, pp. 217-218) write: “If culture circulates through all of us, how can

autoethnography be free of connection to a world beyond the self?” Therefore, in conclusion, autoethnography, far from being self-indulgent, would/could not be able to exist without the existence of others; the others make autoethnography possible because the others decisively contribute to the emergence of an individual’s subjectivity.

What Is the Connection Between Autoethnography and Queer Theory?

Since queer theory constitutes one of the main theoretical approaches of this dissertation, an exploration of the connection between autoethnography and queer theory is imperative. Holman Jones & Adams (2010) argue that “autoethnography is a queer method” (p. 195) and attempt to delineate their “conceptual and purposeful affinities” (p. 197). They state that both autoethnography and queer theory pay special attention to the particular details of human experience and view it as fluid and formed within the context of an intersubjective field. Additionally, both encourage inventiveness and plurality with relation to concepts, interpretations, and meanings. Autoethnography and queer theory also share a stance of resistance towards normalizing ideologies and techniques. Finally, both “are thoroughly *political*, displaying a clear commitment to refiguring and refashioning; questioning normative discourses, and acts, and undermining and refiguring how lives (and lives worth living) come into being” (p. 197).

Conclusion

Coming to the end of this chapter, the question that arises is the following: how am I going to utilize autoethnography in this dissertation? I will principally follow one strategy. The data for this dissertation will be derived from carefully selected instances of my autobiography which have led to significant cultural self-discovery in relation to my experience of sexual desire. The criteria by which this autobiographical information is to

be selected will, in large part, depend on its ability to evocatively illuminate the various clashes, competing motives, and tensions that have been generated among my multiple selves—son, brother, friend, man, gay, lover, soldier, Caucasian, Greek, fat, hairy, atheist, psychologist—as well as between me and others. Additionally, these instances will be selected based on their ability to elucidate the various performances that my body had to engage into amid competing ideological, social, and cultural forces. A third criterion will involve the potential of this autobiographical information to provide a coherent story of how my subjective experience of sexual desire has evolved through time. The overarching aim of this data will be for my evolving understanding of sexual desire to question, be questioned, and otherwise interrogate the academic understanding of sexual desire.

Chapter 5

Autoethnographic Journeys (1): Greek Army

Theater of Sidon (400 A.D.)

*A respectable citizen's son— above all else, a beauteous
youth who belongs to the theatre, agreeable in so many ways:
I now and then compose, in the language of the Greeks,
exceedingly daring verses, which I circulate
very secretly, of course— gods! they mustn't be seen
by those who prate about morals, those who wear grey clothes—
verses about a pleasure that is select, that moves
toward a barren love of which the world disapproves.
—C. P. Cavafy, Complete Poems (2012, p. 118).*

Days of 1896

*He debased himself completely. An erotic inclination
very much forbidden and held in great contempt
(innate all the same) was the reason why:
the society he lived in was extremely priggish.
He had gradually lost what little money he had;
afterwards his position, then his reputation.
He was nearing thirty and had never held
a job for even a year, at least that anyone knew of.
Sometimes he would meet his expenses by
playing go-between in deals considered shameful.
He ended up the sort who, if you were seen with him
often, you'd likely be extremely compromised.*

*But that's not all of it; that wouldn't be fair.
The memory of his beauty deserves a great deal more.
There's another way of looking and, if seen that way,
he strikes you as attractive; strikes you as the simple, true
child of desire who, above his honor
and his reputation, placed, without a thought,
the unsullied pleasure of his unsullied body.*

*Above his reputation? But society, which was
so extremely priggish had such foolish values.
—C. P. Cavafy, Complete Poems (2012, p. 139).*

Introduction

I feel I am on the verge of a panic attack. I want to cry. I wish to write no more. It's too painful. Why have I chosen this topic? I don't want to fill this page with words. I am looking through the window of my room. I can see the Parthenon. I haven't been on the Acropolis since time immemorial. Should I pay a visit now? I would do anything to distance myself from this dreadful task... Writing about sexual desire, my sexual desire... What do *I* have to say about sexual desire? What does this fat, gay man have to say about sexual desire? Give me a break! Leave me alone! Leave me alone...

There is no way back... I am afraid there is no way back. I have to write about my sexual desire. Dear God... Of all topics... Sexual desire... I am afraid, God! Where are you, God? I don't believe in you, God. Can you protect me, God? Do something, God. Do you hear me, God? Do you ever desire, God? Do you have a body, God? Do you like it, God? Do you ever surrender to your desires, God? Do you ever offer your body to others, God? Will you allow me to touch you, God? Oh God...

Music is heard... It's a guitar melody I am too painfully aware of... I've cried so many times while hearing this melody in the past. It always reminds me of the American Far West and its vastness; of its mountains and the wind blowing through them. There is nothing there. That's not true... There are two men. They herd sheep. They playfully chase each other around. They caress each other, kiss each other. They kiss like lovers do. They think they are alone but they are deceived. A man is looking at them from a distance through a pair of binoculars. He feels disgusted; his mouth is silently spitting contempt. But they don't know; they are totally devoted to each other, to their newly-found love, their sexual desire for each other. They feel protected by the immensity of

their mountainous surroundings, temporarily relieved from the incriminating gaze of the others.

When I first watched “Brokeback Mountain” in 2005, I spent the whole night listening to its soundtrack. I was in a trance-like state. I felt, perhaps, like the Poet did in Alexandria. I wasn’t cruising for young handsome Egyptians, though; I was just looking at my computer screen without really seeing anything; I was only listening to Gustavo Santaolalla’s guitar. Again and again and again...I couldn’t get enough of it. It almost felt like it was my own, private ceremony of allowing each musical note to soak through my body and dwell in my bones and cells. A part of me resisted; I didn’t wish this music to penetrate and enter my brain, my skin, my heart, my mind, my soul. There was a subterranean feeling of a gravitational force towards something ominous and disastrous. My resistance was not forceful enough, though; something in me, a hidden place somewhere in me, had already decided to surrender to Santaolalla’s music. The heavy stone I could feel in my stomach, that threatening sense of something portentous violently emerging and being unearthed, could not be avoided anymore. There was no way back...There is no way back now...There was no way back then...

That gravitational force pulled me down to the floor of my psychotherapist’s office. I was sobbing. But, I hadn’t gone there with the intention of sobbing. I was only interested in talking about “Brokeback Mountain,” Santaolalla’s music, the stone in my stomach...However, the moment I uttered the words “I watched ‘Brokeback Mountain’ the other day,” I collapsed. My body was violently shaking and unevenly articulated screams could be heard. I suddenly found myself lying on the floor, unable to restrain that outpouring of grief. I was ashamed, of course; every now and then I would hurriedly

search for my psychotherapist's eyes. She was there. She was witnessing my grief. She didn't appear to be accusatory, condemnatory, rejecting, or disapproving. She didn't seem to demand that I be a man. She was just there, conveying the message "I can bear with your grief, I will not perish." I kept crying and sobbing and screaming and grieving. I kept searching for my psychotherapist's eyes. I kept going back to the floor, touching the floor, slamming my fists against the floor, scratching the floor. The floor... Thank Goodness, the floor was there...concretely, tangibly reminding me that there was something underneath my fat body to support it; to support my grief.

It was a strange feeling; I was lying on the floor in front of my psychotherapist's feet, curled up in the fetal position. I could hear her breathing. I could hear myself breathing. I was silent, looking at the floor. I was enjoying this bitter-sweet lack of bodily energy. There wasn't anyone to require that I stand up on my feet; or that I stop looking at the floor. Emptiness; sweet emptiness... There was no need to be strong. OK. Stay there. Take your time. Treasure the moment of being in contact with feelings, which, despite your fears, haven't destroyed you. Touch your body. It's beautiful. It's beautifully fat. It feels. It desires. Touch your body. It's not monstrous. Some people like it. It's yours. It breathes. It's the only body you've got. Allow it to be. Allow it to be...Dear God...How...?

I turned around and lay on my back. I could now stare at the ceiling but my peripheral vision could also catch glimpses of my psychotherapist's face. She was looking at me but her eyes on my fat body did not feel intimidating. She was patiently waiting. She was waiting for me to talk. And I did talk when I felt ready. "There is a scene in the movie which has been engraved on my memory. The two characters...those

two cowboys, Ennis and Jack, were herding sheep up on Brokeback Mountain. They were all alone in the midst of such natural beauty...and they could be openly affectionate to each other, sexually playful to each other...I was thinking to myself, ‘Ah, what a paradise...their bodies must have felt so relaxed...their hands...they could touch and caress and embrace without thinking, without having to be apprehensively vigilant all the time.’ But then...I felt angry and wanted to scream. The natural beauty of the mountain was transformed into a smothering hell...a smothering prison. Ennis and Jack were there but there was nobody else to witness their love, their desire for each other... their adoration for each other’s bodies. It’s not that they *should* share it with anybody else, that’s not my problem. My problem was—is—that they were *not allowed to*, they *couldn’t*. And I just remembered of all the times I’ve walked through the streets of Athens in the company of my lovers. I remembered our struggle to strike a balance between what we felt and what we thought was allowed and tolerable by the people around us. I remembered me trying to kiss my lover on the cheek (we never kiss on the mouth in public!) and trying to invent ways by which this bodily movement, the intentional protrusion of my mouth on the cheek of my lover, would appear friendly enough to the people around me and sexually affectionate to my lover. I was reminded of all my journeys on public transport in Athens, sitting next to my lover and exchanging gazes with each other. How could someone, anyone, strike a balance between lust and innocent, playful friendliness? Why is it that these explicit, sexually charged, gestures, behaviors, and expressions should only be exchanged in the privacy of our bedrooms, on Brokeback Mountain, or in Mars? A philosopher once said that ‘the availability of comfort for some bodies may depend on the labor of others and the burden of

concealment' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 149). I don't want to have sex in front of others; I just wish to feel comfortable enough to express my love and desire towards my lover without fearing violent reactions. Of course...I know...Someone could claim that I haven't worked through my fear to an adequate extent; fair enough. But I am wondering...whoever this person may be...does he/she fully understand the cultural conditions within which my fear has been formed? I am not saying that this person is supposed to know. I am not even suggesting that this person should waste his/her time thinking about my or anybody else's fear. Far from that... I am only pointing out that it is impossible for any of us to know exactly why an individual is or is not capable of overcoming his/her fear. Let us refrain, then, from making cynical statements in the most, ostensibly, innocent or naïve manner.”

These were, more or less, the words I uttered to my psychotherapist. I have no recollection of what she replied back to me. I only remember I left her office experiencing a mixture of relief, fear, and hope. Above all else, though, I left poignantly knowing that the issue of fear—my fear to express my sexual desire—would always occupy a central place in my life. There would be no final resolution...As if there could be any!

The fear to express my sexual desire—the cultural, ideological, and political conditions within which this fear was formed and took its shape—will make up the main body of this first autoethnographic chapter. I will not be able, though, to provide an account of all the instances that have culturally contributed to this fear; such an endeavor would simply be impossible. Instead, I will only focus on my experience of being a soldier in the Greek Army and performing a mandatory 18-month military service. My

experience as a soldier represents one of the most difficult and, at the same time, emotionally and culturally illuminating periods of my life. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that the Army is a largely secluded microcosm within which violent cultural beliefs, ideologies, discourses, and power relations emerge clearly and are expressed in bluntly undisguised ways. Seeing that I was a soldier in the Greek Army (I am a Greek citizen), some general information about contemporary Greek culture is imperative. The next section will attempt to accomplish this goal.

Greek Culture in a Nutshell

I am hesitant to begin this section on contemporary Greek culture. Like all other cultures in the world, the culture of modern Greece is not static; it evolves, changes, and becomes. At present, Greece is going through a deep, long-lasting, financial, political and, above all, psychological and ethical crisis. Our current problems, as mentioned in a previous chapter, are directly related to the political oppression and the national catastrophes that the Greek people have experienced in the past. They are also due to our unwillingness to acknowledge our losses, mourn, and come to terms with the fact that we are not as important as we think we are; that the world does not owe anything to modern Greeks because of our presumed affinity with ancient Greeks; and that we need to deal with our national darkness.

Still, although there is a degree of certainty in me with regard to the aforementioned views, my hesitancy to describe the Greek culture, *my* culture, persists. What could this hesitancy signify? I will try to provide some tentative answers. The first thing that comes to mind is the fact that I am only one among 11,000,000 Greeks. The way I interpret the Greek culture will, no doubt, find no resonance in many Greeks'

hearts and minds. Therefore, *my* Greek culture is not necessarily other Greeks' culture and I encourage the readers of this dissertation to bear this in mind. A second reason for my hesitancy involves my 6-year absence from Greece due to my pursuing a PhD in clinical psychology in the United States. This absence has coincided with a number of political, social, and cultural changes in Greece. How could I ever claim to be a valid interpreter of the Greek culture given that I was absent during the last 6 years?

Nevertheless, I feel there is a third reason for my hesitancy that is more important than the previous two: I feel extremely ambivalent towards Greece. On the one hand I adore this land and, on the other, I think it's the ugliest and worst place on Earth. One minute I feel I could never live outside its borders and then I remember all the reasons that have led to its current crisis and I freak out. I am angry with Greece; I've always been very angry because it feels like an irresistibly handsome man who rejects me because of my fatness. I have never felt completely comfortable with its culture, perhaps because modern Greece, despite its glorious ancient past of homoeroticism, has never felt comfortable with alternative sexual expressions. And yet...despite my anger, there is a part in me that wants to protect Greece; to treat it fairly and affectionately. Will my anger allow me to describe it in a spirit of caring and understanding? I don't know...All I know is that you, the readers, should, by no means, consider *my* Greece to represent a universal vision of Greece. *My* Greece will be based on anthropological and ethnographic sources which I have read and deemed to provide in-depth descriptions of contemporary culture in Greece. Inevitably, my subjective views will also constitute a vital part of the account to follow. A large number of my compatriots, though, would fundamentally and unequivocally disagree.

James Pettifer (1993) writes that family ties tend to be stronger in cultures and societies where state governments appear to be weak, hostile, or oppressive. This is the case, I think, with family ties in Greece. They are not simply strong: they are, at times, utterly smothering. Having experienced many years of political oppression, foreign occupations, and civil wars, and currently going through a serious crisis which is mainly attributed to corrupt politicians, modern Greeks generally regard their families as their fortress, the only place where they can truly feel and be secure. Of course, my experience tells me that family ties are not as strong as they used to be 20 or 30 years ago. However, they are still stronger than those in the United States or in Northern Europe.

How do strong family ties in Greece affect relationships among family members? One of the most obvious consequences is young Greeks' significant difficulty in psychologically individuating themselves and moving out of the family home. As a result, it is not uncommon for young Greeks to live with their parents long past the age of 30. It should be emphasized, though, that young Greeks had reluctantly started to challenge this trend before the financial crisis. However, following the beginning and subsequent deepening of the crisis many Greeks who used to be financially independent have returned back to their family homes and childhood rooms.

Young Greeks' difficulty in distancing themselves from their families, though, is, in my opinion, due to another reason as well. Greeks are generally worried about old age. There are, of course, nursing homes but these are generally considered as solutions of last resort. Children are commonly expected to take care of their parents and nursing homes are considered as options only in cases of serious handicap or illness that require specialized care (Pettifer, 1993). In fact, if aged parents are relatively healthy and live in

a nursing home, their children are usually thought of as heartless and unappreciative. Most of the times, of course, children themselves also *feel* heartless and unappreciative because they are well aware of, and thoroughly implicated in the cultural narrative about their “selfish cruelty”, buttressed often by their parents’ skilled, guilt-inducing efforts. Greek parents often present themselves as martyrs who sacrifice everything for their children’s upbringing. Therefore, children, in their turn, should also sacrifice everything for their parents’ care. As a result, that sense of mutual sacrifice produces unhappy people who struggle to understand what it means to follow their desires. This pattern, of course, does not apply to everyone in Greece. However, it is, I strongly believe, the dominant discourse.

What is the Greek people’s relationship to religion and, in specific, the Orthodox Church? Admittedly, as an atheist who has severed his ties to any form of religious denomination for many years, I don’t feel knowledgeable enough to provide a valid answer. What I know, though, is that, irrespective of whether someone believes in God or not, the Greek Orthodox Church, apart from being a symbol of religious identity, is also a symbol of ethnic identity. The Greek Orthodox Church is widely regarded as having been instrumental in liberating the Greeks from the Ottoman Turks. This is the reason, perhaps, why the Greek State is not officially or constitutionally separated from the Orthodox Church. This means that whenever a new government is elected, for example, the new prime minister and the Cabinet ministers are usually sworn in by the Archbishop of Greece. This is not necessary, though, given that whoever desires to take a political oath is perfectly free to do so. But the question remains: do Greeks truly believe in God? I don’t know but, based on my personal experience, tend to agree with Neni Panourgia

who writes that “[Greeks have] a personal, almost casual, relationship with religion and the organized church, in contrast to their intimate, almost organic, relationship with ritual” (1995, p. 98). In my experience, this means that the majority of Greeks, in public, respect what the Orthodox Church symbolizes for Greece but, in private, they don’t really pay much attention to its theological beliefs, preferring instead to tailor belief to personality, circumstance, and particular wishes. All in all, however, the role of the Orthodox Church, despite its present, significantly reduced, influence on younger generations, is still deemed to be important.

In a sense, Greece is a typically Mediterranean, patriarchal society. There are significantly more men in positions of power than women who, despite considerable progress during the last 20 years, are paid less and are more affected by unemployment. However, as Pettifer (1993) claims, women in Greece are more powerful than usually believed and I tend to agree with him. A considerable number of family decisions are usually made by women since men, confined to the role of the breadwinner, are not usually asked or, if asked, are usually unaware of the issue at hand. It must be noted, though, that, as opposed to what was happening during the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s, men tend to be much more involved in family life and children’s upbringing during the last 30 years. Nevertheless, patriarchy in Greece still stands firm.

Considerable changes have also taken place with regard to marital relationships in Greece. Yannakopoulos (2012) writes that marital relationships between the 1950s and the late 1970s were characterized by a lack of affection and romantic intimacy between the two spouses. A large number of marriages were arranged by a relative or close friend and, even though women, supposedly, had the right to say no, most of them would just do

as they were told. As a result, the two spouses would rarely fall in love with each other and, most often, would end up despising each other and living together conventionally.

Sex was simply a means to an end, that is, either reproduction or sexual release.

Nowadays, there are no arranged marriages in Greece—except in remote villages—and, although the divorce rate is high, spouses tend to be more affectionate towards each other. Additionally, contrary to the past, women in urban areas are not necessarily expected to reproduce. Of course, societal pressure upon women and heterosexual couples to reproduce still exists. However, childless couples in the cities, as opposed to rural areas, are not frowned upon anymore.

What is generally expected by a Greek male in terms of his sexuality? As mentioned earlier, Greece is a largely patriarchal society and macho masculinity, especially in rural areas, is still the norm. Therefore, Greek males are normally expected to be heterosexual, virile, and hypersexually active. Liopi Abatzi (2010) argues that sexual desire in Greece is mainly conceptualized as a “naturally” male characteristic, whereas women are expected to act as the objects of men’s desire. This means that Greek males, from an early age, are “called to affirm and publicize [their] virility by way of [their] sexual relationships with women...The intensity of men’s sexual need is considered so great, that they are obliged to satisfy it in every—culturally and socially possible—way” (p. 195). Abatzi claims that the encouragement of this sexual behavior within the Greek cultural framework leads to the formation of the desired, masculine, gender identity.

Konstantia Kosetzi (2010) argues that women in Greece, as opposed to men, are not expected to have sex too soon and/or have multiple sexual partners. In other words,

whereas Greek men's permissive, almost promiscuous, sexual behavior is socially encouraged and sanctioned, Greek women are supposed to control their bodies and exert a considerable degree of restraint on their sexual desire. Kosetzi asserts that Greek women are positioned as powerless victims "without control over their bodies, sexual pleasure, or agency" (p. 105) and who, unless they are sexually restrained, may be socially stigmatized and faced with punishment, "e.g. lack of respect/abandonment by the partner" (p. 105). It should be noted that, nowadays, the above-mentioned norms of masculinity and femininity are multiply contested. Nevertheless, although alternative forms of masculinity and femininity have emerged, they still represent the dominant discourses as to how men and women in Greece are expected to sexually act and be.

The dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity in Greece, though, are also associated with issues of activity and passivity, dominance and submission (Faubion, 1993). In other words, masculinity in Greece is unequivocally related to energy; an energy that—socially, sexually, and corporeally—proves its worth by penetrating and dominating others. Women in Greece are expected to be sexually penetrated by a penis; this is the "normal," the honorable thing. However, a man is always supposed to sexually penetrate others. It doesn't matter whether the penetrated other is a woman, a man, a transsexual, a transvestite, etc. As long as a male penetrates a vagina, a rectum, a mouth... then he is a "true" man; he epitomizes "true" masculinity. As Faubion writes, "If [the Greek male] reigns over nothing else, he should at least reign over the inviolable territory of his own body... The traditional categories of sexual being in Greece are performative categories, not categories of desire or cathexis" (1993, p. 220). The aforementioned statement is also confirmed by Yannakopoulos (2012) who, referring to

contemporary conceptualizations of homosexuality in Greece, argues that homosexuality is generally understood more like a performative act than as a distinct sexual identity.

This is why Greek gay men who exclusively adopt the active sexual role are still widely considered to be “true” men. This is not the case with effeminate men. Faubion (1993) writes:

The man who comports himself like a woman, the man who seems to prefer the woman’s world and the woman’s roles, poses a quite urgent threat to the sexual economy. Born for the more honorable, he gravitates towards the less. Even worse: made to aspire to the more honorable, he instead rejects it for the less. The effeminate man in Greece, traditionally and still today, is among the most scorned of social subversives... [T]he visibly effeminate man who is also a “passive homosexual,” the man who advertises with his effeminacy or through transvestism his willingness to “be jumped,”¹¹ is the greatest subversive of all. Like most other subversives, he is widely believed to be not merely immoral, but mentally deficient as well (p. 222).

The extent to which Greek males are threatened by effeminate men is also revealed by the vast number of Greek pejorative terms relating to the “passive” male homosexual. One of the most widely used derogatory Greek terms is *aderfi* which could be translated as sissy/faggot, and aims at castigating the perceived feminization and emasculation of effeminate men. Anna Apostolidou (2010) argues that the wide use of the term *aderfi* is not accidental. She reminds us that Greeks find it quite difficult to cope with the emotion of shame, more than any other emotion. Greek males, in particular, are usually perceived as the ones managing shameful situations but never as the ones causing them. These (shameful situations) are usually expected to be caused by women who are symbolically (and unconsciously) considered to be “carriers of incontrollable—akin to diabolical—powers, whose sexuality is uncontainable, dangerous and a source of social

¹¹“To jump” (πηδῶ/peetho, in Greek), apart from its usual meaning, is also widely used in Greek as a slang term denoting “to fuck.” Therefore, to jump=to fuck /to be jumped=to be fucked.

anarchy” (Apostolidou, 2010, p. 51). In other words, Greek males dread the possibility of losing control and shaming themselves. Female sexuality and the female body represent an immense source of threat that, in their minds, could potentially make them lose control and be emasculated. However, this threat is tamed through the demarcation of strict, impermeable sex and gender identity boundaries (we are men-they are women, we are masculine-they are feminine). Additionally, their fear is further soothed down by the fact that having sex with women satisfies the demands of, as Butler would say, the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality. However, when another male appears to be effeminate, one of *them*, the threat of emasculation/feminization becomes more difficult to be tamed. The question that arises is the following: “Could I also become like *him*?” Therefore, Greek males repeatedly employ the term *aderfi* in order to manage their anxiety of losing control and being viewed as emasculated, failed males.

Pejorative terms against effeminate men in Greece, however, in addition to soothing gendered anxieties, do the same for national anxieties. Apostolidou (2010) writes that the root of the commonly used insulting word *pustis* “is to be found in *pisht* (the Persian word for ‘ass’), later established as *pust* in Turkish, which denotes the male passive homosexual” (p. 54). Why has the Turkish word *pustis* lived on in the Greek language for so long? Apostolidou reminds us that the period of Ottoman rule is still experienced by contemporary Greeks as one “that directly incurs shame, symbolic loss, and a sense of collective subordination” (pp. 54-55). This sense of collective subordination, though, is not solely felt on a symbolic level. Phrases like “The Turks had been fucking us for 400 years” (p. 55)—still frequently used among modern Greeks — also signify a sense of bodily subordination. The Greek people, deeply committed to

“historical oblivion of the painful past” (p. 55), wish to forget this shameful subordination to the Turks which, in my experience, makes them (us) feel weak, vulnerable, easily penetrable (fucked), morally degraded, lacking in manhood, helpless, and, ultimately, unable to defend the sovereignty of Greece. The aforementioned characteristics, especially in the past, were and, to a significant extent, are still equated to women’s psychological constitution. Women are expected to manifest them. These same characteristics, though, when manifested by effeminate men, are forcefully castigated by Greek males. This castigation is not only due to Greek men’s fear of their potential emasculation/feminization. Apostolidou (2010) writes:

Lacking manhood is here linked not only to the helplessness of females, but to a socially frightful unpredictability ascribed on the homosexual; a constant potential of surrendering to all sorts of (tangible or imaginary) enemies. Indeed, the term’s derogatory power “comes from the assertion that its subject lacks proper manhood; the *pustis* allows his abuse, accepts being penetrated, has no sense of shame, will be duplicitous, and surrenders his humanity without a fight” (Riedel, quoted in Apostolidou, 2010, p. 55). In popular belief, a *pustis* is ultimately someone “who fundamentally lacks full humanity and his moral weakness exposes him to all sorts of evil dispositions” (Loizos & Papataxiarhis, quoted in Apostolidou, 2010, p. 55).

In other words, a *pustis* is not only an emasculated/feminized male who willingly renounces dominant forms of masculinity (this man would be called an *aderfi*): above all else, a *pustis* signifies a morally deficient male who does not hesitate to violate his moral/ethical principles and prefers to be—willingly—anally penetrated, fucked, and subordinated by the enemy. It could be claimed, therefore, that the term *pustis* is employed by Greek males in order to differentiate themselves from those other Greek males who, apart from being utterly emasculated, are also regarded as immoral, unethical, dishonest, and ruthless. Of course, at this point I should point out that, although

effeminate gay men are usually called *pustides* (plural form of *pustis*) in Greece, this term is also directed at any man considered to be ethically compromised and disrespectful.

So far, this section has explored dominant Greek discourses in relation to family structure and dynamics, religion, marital relationships, expected gender roles and identities, and authentic, as opposed to defective, forms of manhood and womanhood. Representations of female and male homosexuality are inextricably related to and affected by the high priority and large importance Greeks assign on their—always (hypothetically) in peril—national identity and security. In other words, the securely continued existence of the Greek *ethnos* depends on the rigid construction of active, masculine, hyper-controlled, heterosexual males and submissive, feminine, under-controlled heterosexual females who get married, have children, and stick together in, often loveless, highly dysfunctional families. Of course, it should be noted again that the above description only refers to the dominant discourses and not the multiple sites of contestation in Greece nowadays. Keeping this caveat in mind, we now turn to investigating dominant representations of female and male homosexuality in contemporary Greek culture. However, prior to this, a brief account of the history of the LGBT liberation movement in Greece is warranted.

Dimitris Papanikolaou (2010) tells us that the LGBT liberation movement in Greece was first organized and became visible upon the restoration of democracy in 1974. Although its roots could be traced back to the 1960s, political instability in Greece and the subsequent imposition of dictatorship in 1967 had temporarily silenced its voice and condemned it to the margins. When the colonels were eventually ousted from office, the Greek LGBT community first came into contact with and translated works written by

hitherto censored authors such as Michel Foucault, Wilhelm Reich, and Herbert Marcuse. The 1970s in Greece were marked by an intense public dialogue on issues pertaining to sexual desire and sexual identity, a dialogue that was conducted and translated into numerous articles, public meetings, and conferences. The Greek LGBT movement, however, did not succeed in capitalizing on this public dialogue since the Greek political class, almost in its entirety, remained indifferent and/or hostile to issues of sexuality. The AIDS crisis in the early 1980s encouraged populist representations of, and phobic attitudes towards, LGBT people. Far from their portrayal as harmlessly and humorously effeminate, naïve, saucy hairdressers and fashion designers in Greek movies of the 1950s and the 1960s, gay men in the 1980s were represented as pathological, utterly tragic individuals in need of medical supervision and social restraint. These representations were widely disseminated by numerous documentaries, biographies, movies, and TV shows which portrayed—especially and, almost, exclusively—gay men and transgender women as totally abandoned, eternally unhappy, pornographically desirable, and suspiciously obscure; semi-human creatures who would, constantly and unjustifiably, accuse society of having marginalized them. Nowadays, although this excessively pathological and tragic representation of gay men has, to a large extent, subsided (transgender women and, in general, transgender/transsexual people in Greece are still heavily stigmatized), it is still not easy to simultaneously be a politician, a physician, a lawyer, or a college professor and openly gay or lesbian. Greece is more accepting of LGB people, provided they embody the social roles the Greek society assigns to them. Therefore, for example, openly gay men can only be gossipy, somewhat effeminate, saucy persons who take part in TV shows and are only able to make comments on fashion

and make-up. The fact that one of the former mayors of Athens is a closeted gay man is never (openly) discussed. His sexuality, although he has never talked about it in public, is common knowledge among the Athenian people; nonetheless, public silence prevails.

It could be claimed, therefore, that, in Greece, a gay man is either represented as an easily identifiable and classifiable effeminate, frivolous, harmless creature or he is not represented at all. During the last 30 years, of course, several Greek gay men have seriously undermined this stereotypical representation by frequently appearing in the mass media and/or participating in activist LGBT organizations. Nevertheless, their conventionally masculine appearance, in my experience, has generated 3 main responses: a) suspicion (Are they really gay? I can't believe this! They are not effeminate!!), b) hyper-vigilant respect (Oh my goodness...they are so different from everything I know about faggots...How am I supposed to react to their masculine appearance? This is uncharted territory...I must be careful...), and c) intensely explicit attempts at ridiculing them and proving that, behind the masculine façade, there is always hiding a frivolous, sissy boy (Come on girl...reveal yourself! Come on you filthy faggot/aderfi/pustis...stop pretending you are one of us!). Thus, although contemporary Greek culture keeps castigating effeminate men, it is my contention that it feels more threatened by and is more afraid of gay men who contest their widely held stereotypical representation.

What about the representation of lesbian women in Greece? It would be no exaggeration to say that lesbians have been all but overlooked by the Greek culture. This does not necessarily mean that the Greek people approve of lesbian relationships. However, in my opinion, sexual liaisons among women are deemed to be much less threatening than those among men. Although they are dealt with a mixture of

embarrassment, disbelief, neutrality, and indifference, the Greek public's interest in or outcry against lesbian relationships cannot be compared to the emphasis that is placed on gay relationships. In addition, as opposed to effeminate men, "the manly woman, the 'man-woman' or the 'male woman' of aggressive temperament and perhaps talented at one or another unfeminine task or skill, has a place in traditional Greek society" (Faubion, 1993, p. 221). I tend to agree with Faubion but my experience tells me that a masculine woman in Greece is accepted to the extent that her skills positively contribute to the well-being of her family of origin, husband, and/or children. A woman exemplifying masculine traits and qualities for the sheer joy of expressing her gender identity or discovering alternative ways of relating to others is frowned upon. No matter how a woman's masculine qualities are interpreted, though, a manly woman in Greece is by no means considered to be a man's equal. She may try hard to be like a man but she will always lack what, according to the Greek dominant discourses, makes a man "truly" manly: a penis, the phallic symbol of power and pride. These are the questions the Greek culture is mostly interested in: Who possesses a penis? How does this person make use of it? Is the penis used to penetrate others? Unless there is a penis in view which is "properly" used, the Greek culture has absolutely no reason to occupy itself and lose time with penis-less sexual relationships. Women do not possess a penis and, therefore, they are in no position to use it in suspicious ways or distort its "proper" meaning. As Faubion writes, "[t]he 'homosexual woman' receives little more traditional attention than the 'active homosexual man.' Her predilections may be suspect. But her acts remain politically 'normal'" (1993, p. 221).

The prominence of phallic masculinity in the Greek culture hasn't left Greek gay men unscathed (Canakis, 2010). In my experience, there is a constant preoccupation with their penis size. "Active" gay men desire to possess the biggest possible penis and "passive" gay men desire to be penetrated by the biggest possible penis. Furthermore, they generally spend a lot of time in the gym aspiring to become as muscled as possible. They also keep the way they talk, walk, and comport themselves under vigilant self-surveillance. Their sexual desire for other men ceaselessly threatens their effort to shape their bodies and subjectivities according to the laws of the hegemonic masculinity in Greece. They incessantly pursue it but every new sexual encounter with another man obliges them to start afresh. And, it is ironic that, no matter how much they try, they join a game already lost. This is so because the homosexual body in Greece, especially the "passive" gay man's body, is exclusively equated with and represented as the epitome of anal eroticism (Apostolidou, 2012). A gay man in Greece *is* his rectum; his muscled body and his penis are overlooked no matter how big or well-shaped they may be. It is his rectum the Greek culture is predominantly interested in because, by this way, his body, a body that is dangerously similar to that of the others, that is the "normal" Greek males, is obliterated. A gay man has a rectum, whereas a straight man possesses a body. A gay man possesses a rectum that belongs to a body which, if and when it is represented, is viewed as a temporally static object (Apostolidou, 2012). This means that the homosexual body is regarded as developmentally arrested; doomed to never reach its full physiological maturation; condemned to experience itself as incomplete, inadequate, and semi-human; ultimately, an abject body destined to solely serve an immature, almost preadolescent, form of anal eroticism.

But...I feel tired explaining theories. I want to write other types of theory; stories. Before I go to my stories, though, I need to make two confessions. First, I have tried to avoid the storytelling part of this dissertation as much as I could. I am scared to death. But I can't postpone it any longer. This dissertation has almost reached its 200th page. I need to get done. Second, I feel extremely guilty for writing stories in my dissertation. My narcissistic inclinations, those tendencies that create in me the illusion that the world revolves around me, make me think that my data should involve other people's stories. In addition—this is so terrifying—they intimidate me by whispering to me that my stories could potentially contaminate my readers. This feeling is really hard to bear with. How can I overcome its paralyzing effect? What if I tried to persuade myself that nobody cares about my stories? Could this strategy work? Perhaps...Nevertheless, if you, the readers of this dissertation, ever feel that my stories sicken you, stop reading. I am not sure my stories are sick but I can't get rid of the idea that they truly are; and I want to protect you. But I also want to give me the opportunity to prove that my stories are not sick. How am I supposed to move beyond this stalemate? I have no clue but I need to get started. Even the worst criminals have the right to explain their actions and defend themselves. It may be an exaggeration to compare myself to criminals but that's how I feel. And, if I don't admit to feeling like shit my stories will be worthless. That's it. I feel like shit. I feel I am the worst person in the world. That's how I feel; like shit. This piece of shit wants to tell a few stories. This piece of shit wants to live. This piece of shit desires to be heard. I am this piece of shit. I am a piece of shit because I sexually desire other men. And I am fed up feeling like a piece of shit because I desire men. And, if my words sound aggressive to

you, it's because I am afraid you have already rejected my stories. But...I am afraid this is a risk I need to take.

***They Shoot Faggots, Don't They?*¹²**

It was just one week after I had read that magazine article. It was September of 1987, school had just started, and Athens, as always, was steaming. My soul was also steaming because the words of the article had widely opened doors which, behind them, hid fiery, scalding waves which had set my whole world ablaze. A sociological analysis of homosexuality in Greece: that was what the article was about. An 11-year-old bookish boy was normally not supposed to read such articles but, alas, I did. And words such as “marginalization,” “homoerotic tendency,” and “desire” acquired a nightmarish quality. Scents, dreams, bodily sensations, thoughts which involved other boys had lost their, hitherto, innocence. They had been permanently marked by these words and these words were proudly carrying the torch of guilt; and fear; and loneliness; and difference. And me, lying in my bed, I was trying to sleep in vain. Sweat was covering my fat body and my throat, dry, was violently vibrated by a silent scream which was struggling to be born and heard. And then...black dots in my mind, thousands, millions, billions of them. One of them started fading until it could not be seen anymore, leaving a white, empty space in its place. Then others...more fading dots...more white emptiness...until a single black dot stood there all by itself, immobilized or, worse, catapulted into Kafka's castle, another Mr. K struggling to stand against a mysterious authority, internal and external. There was no doubt: the lonely dot was me in white background, as if in a psychiatric ward, trying to reconcile with the separation from everything that had constituted my

¹²*They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* is an American film that was directed by Sydney Pollack in 1969. The title of this section is a modified version of the film title.

undisturbed reality thus far: family, mothers and fathers getting married and living happily ever after, femininity, masculinity, identity...

Sleeping with the enemy...In this film, Julia Roberts was sleeping with her abusive husband. My case was different. My night-time companion was the dot. And I couldn't bear it anymore. The idea of being considered a pariah and pushed away by everyone I loved was too much for my 11-year-old body and mind to withstand. One night, in my effort to escape the dot, I went to my parents' bedroom and embraced my mother's feet as if to make sure that my flesh was not falling to pieces. The following morning it was just me and her at home. She was cleaning the house and I knew that if I didn't talk to someone I would start screaming. I found the article and, with trembling hands, I was weighing whether I should talk to her. It was literally a matter of life and death. "Mom, I want to show you something" I uttered. She immediately sensed I had something serious to say to her and she approached me. "What's the matter?" she asked and I could feel her controlled fear but there was no way back anymore. "Well, you see...I've read this...this thing here," I showed her the article, "and I think I...am what it says." She looked at my trembling hands and, after some seconds of reluctance, she took the article and started reading it. I could see her facial expressions changing from fear to terror and, then, to sadness (many years later she would disclose that reading this article confirmed what she had been suspecting about me for many years). While she was sitting in the kitchen, silent, looking at the floor, I was waiting for my eternal condemnation or for a magical solution, something to take this disturbing thought out of my mind and make me return to my previous state of carefree ignorance. She finally looked at me and told me to follow her to the living room. This is where I heard for the first time about

erections and sexual attractions between men and women or among men and women. A surrealistic sex education session which, eventually, led to the critical question: “And you, my love, when you see a girl or a boy, whom are you attracted to? The girl or the boy?” I was fully aware that my future depended on my answer. I was also aware that I was clearly attracted to boys, no doubt about that. But I was also confused. I tried very hard to search my memory and discover moments of attraction to girls. I finally remembered all the innocent sexual plays I had engaged in with my female cousins in the past, during summer holidays in shady woods and sun-lit vineyards. I firmly attached myself to these memories, masterfully and meticulously forgetting my sexual plays with my male cousins, and gave a reluctant response: “Girls.” She didn’t believe me of course; neither did I. But she went on: “So, why are you afraid you might be like the people in this article?” Silence...And then, “Well...I don’t know...probably because the name of one of those people in the magazine article is Niko.” She laughed but now I understand that her laughter only served to our going on with this theatrical performance. Neither of us was ready to face the truth and we silently and secretly agreed to avoid the topic altogether. But the dot was always there, haunting my nights and infusing my days with an anxious apprehension about my nightly ordeal. Covering up things hadn’t worked. “This thought...” I told my mother again one morning when we were home alone, “What thought?” she asked but I knew she knew what I was talking about. “That one...the one we were talking about the other day...” I started crying and she hurriedly came toward me. She hugged me. “Confess to me my love...” I was sobbing and when I found the courage to respond I said, “It doesn’t go out of my mind! I am so afraid! I don’t want to be like these people!” She was there, soothing and rocking me while I was screaming.

And when she sensed I was calm enough to be able to listen, she looked at me in the eyes. “I understand that probably I can’t help you as much as you would like me to” she said and I was ready to say something but she continued. “In this case, there are other people who can help you.” “What do you mean?” I asked suspiciously. “There are other people...who can listen to what you have to say and can help you.” I was desperately trying to understand her words and prevent myself from crying again. “You mean...a psychologist?” I said defensively. “I don’t want to go there! I am not crazy!” I yelled at her, frightened by the prospect of my classmates finding out I was visiting a shrink. “I am not going, period!” I have wondered many times why I was so adamantly resistant to visiting a therapist at the time. Was it because I felt betrayed by my mother, whose recommendation probably implied I was sick? Or, possibly, because I felt that going to a therapist would draw the closed curtain of my desperate desire to forget, revealing everything I wanted to avoid? In me there was a sense of entrapment, as if my words didn’t belong to me anymore. Others had started appropriating them, rendering them theirs, attributing to them their own meanings. My identity was dramatically changing but I had no control over its course. And my body, this tarnished, hitherto innocently desiring, body had just introduced itself into a battlefield full of suppression and guilt.

During the following years my identity was like a bear in a state of hibernation. It was undergoing radical transformations unbeknownst to me. And, even though I was eventually convinced to start seeing a child psychoanalyst, the issue of my sexual orientation—my sexual desire—hid in the land of silence. I didn’t want to know others’ interpretations of who I was and what I represented. I was mute, engaging in all sorts of activities except the ones pertaining to sexuality. That was MY responsibility, one that

became increasingly difficult to handle in silence. “Why don’t you flirt with girls Niko?” “Why don’t you dance with girls at your classmates’ parties Niko?” “Why don’t you go out Niko?” “Why do you always read books Niko?” “Why do you avoid people so much Niko?” So many whys! What an uneven fight between my muteness and others’ overflow of words! I wish I had read Iris Murdoch at the time...She could always find the words I wanted to utter. I wanted to be another Charles Arrowby, the main character in her book *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), and shout out loud his very last phrase: “Upon the demon-ridden pilgrimage of human life, what next I wonder?” (p. 502).

When I was invited to join the Greek Army in January of 1997, I didn’t have to wonder anymore. My fat body, the body I had been trying so arduously to sexually anesthetize for so many years, was violently awakened. A sense of imminent threat occupied its fleshy surface, made its way through thick layers of fat, and took possession of muscles, bones, and cells. That was a warning, spreading all over my body, hissing like a snake, and ominously whispering: *You won’t be able to control your body forever...You have isolated yourself in the hope of deadening your sexual desire...You little fool...I can’t wait, you little fool...I can’t wait to see you navigating yourself through a sea of male flesh and penises...Your sexual desire will spring from deep inside your viscera, overflow out of your mouth, and, instead of kissing, caressing, touching, or embracing, it will violently dash itself against the bodies of the desirable others in the form of poisonous vomit. You little fool...Your sexual desire, instead of being received with erections, sensuous shivers down the spine, or lustful gazes, will be greeted with a shower of abuse, stones, and spit. You won’t be able to control it, though; it will be witnessed by everyone; it will be abhorred by everyone. Your self-imposed isolation*

won't help you anymore. Your fat male body, either you want it or not, will have to coexist with hundreds of other male bodies for 18 months. You will inevitably desire. You will desire other men; no beating about the bush anymore. You will have to take the responsibility of your sexual desire, little fool...Ultimately, you will have to decide what to make of it...Good luck...You little fool...

There was a strong inclination in me to abandon the country; to disappear; to embrace my mother's feet once more. But I wasn't an 11-year-old kid anymore; I had turned 20 just a few months back. I was—supposedly—an adult. I was—purportedly—a man. Adult men are not supposed to be overwhelmed by their fear. Adult men are strong and intrepid, all geared up to penetrate their enemies with their proudly and constantly erect penises. I wanted my penis to be proudly and constantly erect as well. But my penis wanted to penetrate other men as an act of love and desire; my penis desired to offer pleasure to other men. An erection meant manhood; but, an erection caused by the desire for another man was a sign of disgraceful emasculation. Should I have an erection? Should I not have an erection? Should I try to have an erection with women? I tried to have an erection with women; nothing. I would keep looking at the ones I found attractive; nothing. I tried lesbian pornography; nothing. I was in a tantalizing dilemma as to how I should feel about my erections. They would keep visiting me on multiple occasions every single day, instilling in me an excessively pleasurable feeling, a sense of honorable manhood...that would be shattered into a million shameful pieces upon the appearance of a man in my fantasies. I can assure you: I tried not to have erections with men. I would hit my penis, squeeze it, verbally admonish it, and, eventually, masturbate it in order to make the erection fade away...All my efforts would come to nothing. My

erections were invincible. Their connection to men was undisputable. My despair felt palpable.

Would it feel palpable to Oedipus as well? I haven't got a clue. I was standing still outside the gate of the Artillery Training Center in Thebes; Oedipus's homeland. I was surrounded by family and friends, waiting to bid my temporary farewell to my civilian life. There was no sign of Oedipus, though. Where was he? Where were you, Oedipus? I needed you. I was strongly tempted to seize two pins and blind myself with them as you had done in the ancient, mythical past. I wished to see no more. There were far too many male bodies around me. How could I ever resist the temptation of touching them? Where were you, Oedipus? My family and friends were there. They were desperate too. Their son, brother, cousin, and friend was about to leave the family nest for the very first time. They loved me. I loved them too. But, how could they ever grasp the meaning of my despair? How could they ever dwell in the house of my desire not to sexually desire anymore? But you, my sweet Oedipus...my sweet love...you had known everything about forbidden desires and punishable sexual acts. You had suffered dearly for your actions, your sacrilegious transgressions. You could have guided me wisely...Where were you, my tormented King of Thebes? I was secretly sniffing the air of your homeland in the hope of detecting your bodily odor. You were nowhere to be found...

I suddenly heard an announcement; all recruits were supposed to grab their stuff and pass through the gate of the Artillery Training Center. I hurriedly exchanged my last hugs and kisses with the familial representatives of my isolated, child-like sexual desire, suppressed my tears, and sailed towards the unknown darkness of testosterone-filled

oceans. As I was going up the main road leading to the administrative building—a slow-moving river of male flesh—I would occasionally steal furtive glances at the other recruits. They were all walking and, simultaneously, looking at the ground. We had silently formed a moving, terrified, fleshy mass that was anxiously dealing with the after-effects of symbolic parental loss and protection. I remember thinking to myself: why have I always been so afraid of other males? Look at them...They are really scared. I am scared too. OK, most of them are straight. They would never accept me but...they have feelings; they are vulnerable. There may be a chance to connect with them...I will have to pretend I am straight of course but...I won't have to be all alone...

Oddly enough, the acknowledgment of our shared fear and emotional numbness had temporarily liberated me from the ominous prospect of feeling sexually attracted to the other recruits. I was anticipating a military service during which the issue of sex would be altogether avoided and our friendly conversations would be filled with future career plans and tender nostalgia for our families; I was looking for moments filled with intellectual companionship and emotionally safe relationships. In other words, I was hoping for a continuation of my hitherto sexual hibernation. Fear is so much stronger than sexual desire...Life-threatening situations (unless one engages in erotic asphyxiation...) render the issue of sexual desire secondary, almost inexistent...My secret, unconscious wishes could be best summarized as follows: Let us all unite in the name of fear! Let us all keep being fearful! Let us all exclusively deal with the issue of fear! Let us all forget everything but fear! Glory to fear! Down with sex!

Fear prevents dangerous questions from being posed; it often paralyzes people and forces them to stick together irrespective of racial, sexual, religious, or class

differences; it imposes a state of generalized oblivion. People forget. They forget about their and others' bodies, penises, vaginas, nipples, sexual impulses, sexual norms... They want to survive. I wanted to survive. My survival depended on other soldiers' continued sense of fear. Their fear would distract them from my male body and its socially expected coexistence with and penetration of female bodies. Their fear would divert their attention from my clandestinely lustful eyes. Their fear would prevent them from wondering whether I was a "normal" boy or one of those others...the shameful ones. Their fear would safeguard my status as a human being.

It didn't work. After a few weeks of training, masks of glorious, masculine omnipotence had been put on the soldiers' faces. Mine was not among those faces. Mine was apprehensively looking for other unmasked faces. There were still a few ones expressing fear, bewilderment, concern...I could detect them; they could detect me; I would silently invite them to join my fear; they would silently reject my invitations. Their eyes were scolding me. *Get the fuck out of here! Unless we get a mask to put on we are screwed!* I could comprehend their fear; it was my fear too. But I wasn't sure I could play the mask game. I wasn't sure I had a Plan B. I wasn't sure I could survive anymore...My certainty and hope—if I had any certainty and hope left at all—had started abandoning me.

I put a mask on as well. It covered my body too; it became stiff, my movements felt mechanical...Surprisingly, my artificial bodily comportment could convince others. I felt ridiculous; a fat, flabby body pretending to unwaveringly obey the laws of virile discipline. Who was I? I was a flabby, disciplined, pseudo-virile fraud. Others liked this fraud. Burping, farting, cursing, touching my genitals as a sign of masculine, proud

disregard (laugh track!)...this was the repertoire of bodily and gestural communication my colleagues¹³ cherished, felt comfortable with, approved of...A transparent, invisible fishing net had been cast from my colleagues' eyes and mouths, spread out on my defenseless body, and stiflingly wrapped around it. I would occasionally strive to imitate their techniques and cast my own miserable fishing net on their bodies. *Please, let's go back to our earlier fearful days. Please...* But, no... Their fishing nets would always be stronger, tighter, darker, thicker... Their fishing nets would always be made of ingredients unparalleled in terms of pervasiveness, oppressive encouragement, and unarticulated, vague punishments in case of noncompliance. Their fishing nets had proudly come forth to declare my colleagues' firm decision to be staunchly masculine; mercilessly masculine; unyieldingly masculine; fearlessly masculine; masculine.

I was one of them; they thought. Despite my initial reluctance, I had become one of them, like them; they thought. I would, of course, be engaging in activities they disapproved of; reading, for example. They didn't like my reading habits; Stephen King was their worst enemy. "Holy cow, he is reading...he is actually reading . . ." they would tauntingly exclaim in disbelief. But I would still be one of them. As long as I kept burping, farting, cursing, and touching my genitals as a sign of masculine, proud disregard (laugh track, again!), I would always be one of them. Did they ever grasp the narcissistic, resistant undertone of my reading? Could they see the words on the news ticker residing in the lower third of my eyes? *Fuckers...Fucking, crude, ignorant, uneducated rednecks...Yes, motherfuckers...Yes, I am reading everything you will never read over the course of your miserable, fucking lives...Shitheads...I will never be one of you...Retards...Shut the fuck up...Go back to your filthy villages and herd your*

¹³Greek soldiers call and refer to each other as "colleagues."

sheep...Assholes...Morons...Jungle animals...I am still not sure whether they ever sensed my silent anger, my wordless protest. If they did, they never said anything. My body, my fat, pseudo-virile, disciplined, farting, burping body was reassuring enough to make my colleagues feel comfortable near it; near me.

They felt comfortable touching my body. I would mentally push them away but the artificially robust masculinity of my body would keep inviting my colleagues' playful physical games. They wanted to wrestle with me, run around with me, touch my hair and share cigarettes with me. I would be inclined to pleadingly whisper: *No...no...Get away from me...Don't do this to me...I've struggled so hard to numb my body...to stop it from sexually desiring...It's slowly coming to life again and erections may arise...I wouldn't like you to feel them...I'd be so ashamed...You'd get angry with me...You'd hit me...Stay away from me sweet redneck...Stay away from me stud...I want to have sex with you like nothing else in this world but... don't do this to me...Not now...Not here...Don't share your cigarette with me...I don't want to taste your saliva...I'll get a hard on dude...Mercy me...Mercy yourself my love...You don't want to know about me...I am ready to cry dude...Please, stud...Allow me to sink into sweet oblivion...*

When They Are Aroused

*Try to keep watch over them, poet,
for all that few of them can be restrained:
Your eroticism's visions.
Place them, partly hidden, in your phrases.
Try to keep hold of them, poet,
whenever they're aroused within your mind,
at night or in the brightness of midday.
—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, p. 73).*

None of my colleagues would ever allow me to sink into sweet oblivion, though. The pillars of my deceitfully masculine body would have to be repeatedly tested, as if to

prove their resilience, their impeccably tough construction. They were slowly collapsing; I could sense that. An erection here...an inappropriately and unwittingly extended look at someone's bare chest there...I could palpably feel the slow-burning demolition of the fleshy structure I had built out of materials I had never imagined I possessed. That fleshy structure found it more and more difficult to control the increasingly impetuous overflow of stimuli, senses, erections, and impulses to touch, caress, stare at, kiss, hold, penetrate, and be penetrated by bodies of men I strongly desired to punch on the face. I wanted to punch them. I wanted to kiss them. I wanted to hurt them. I wanted to reassure them that everything would be all right; I would never allow anyone to harm them. They were mine. I was theirs. We belonged to each other. And the night, as Patti Smith fervently proclaims, belongs to lovers...

No. The nights, my nights among my colleagues' sleeping bodies, belonged to the dot of my childhood years once more. They belonged to agonizing efforts to re-discipline my body; to rebuild its fraudulent masculinity; to expel all traces of sexual desire; to visualize naked women; to think of the consequences...They belonged to words: *No...It can't be...No...No...Go back...No...I am so weak...No...Leave me alone! Erections...No...I can control you...Yes...I can...Those nipples...So uniquely inviting and juicy...Stop it...You can do it...I am wondering what it would feel like to taste them...Here we go again...Stop it...They'll crucify you...Stop it...Now...Stop it...Stop it!!* That was my personal, obsessive, nocturnal world; a world of indictments and recriminations flying back and forth between parts of me slowly surrendering to the lure of sexual desire and those other parts of me dreading my total, physical and psychological, annihilation.

Annihilation... Liv Ullmann, in Ingmar Bergman's 1978 film *Autumn Sonata*, plays the role of Eva, a deeply traumatized woman who, as a child, had been extensively neglected by her world-renowned pianist mother (Ingrid Bergman). When she finally finds the courage to confront her mother—when she finally decides to confront her long-lasting sense of psychological annihilation—her words chillingly resonate with those I would have wanted to utter during one of those long, tormenting nights of mine.

*"I was fourteen. For want of anything better, you turned all your pent-up energy on me. You felt you had neglected me, and were going to make up for it. I tried to defend myself, but I didn't stand a chance. There you were, with your tender care and concern in your voice. Not a single detail escaped your loving attention. I had a stoop, so you set me exercises. You exercised with me, pleading your back as an excuse. You thought I had too much bother with my long hair, and cut it short. **It was horrible.** You decided my teeth were crooked, so I had to wear braces. **I looked grotesque!** You said I was too old for my trousers and skirts, and had dresses made for me, without asking my opinion! **And I didn't dare say anything,** for fear of hurting you. You gave me books to read that I didn't understand. I read and I read, and then you and I were to discuss what I had read. You talked and talked, but I didn't understand a thing! I only worried about having my ignorance exposed. **I was paralyzed.** One thing I learnt, though. **Not one molecule of the real me could be loved, or even accepted.** You were obsessed, and **I became more and more scared and crushed. I said what you wanted to hear, made your gestures. I wasn't even myself when I was on my own, as I abhorred everything that was my own! It was horrendous, Mother! I still shake all over when I think of those years. It was horrible!** I didn't understand that I hated you—I was convinced we loved each other. I couldn't hate you, so my hatred turned into a terrible anxiety. **I had nightmares, I bit my nails, I pulled out chunks of my hair. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't—I couldn't utter a single sound. I tried to scream, but only stifled grunts came out, which scared me even more, as I thought I was going insane!**" (Ingmar Bergman, 1978, *Autumn Sonata* Movie Script; electronic resource)*

I am currently—NOW—having a sense I shouldn't be talking about these painful experiences. Ever since I embarked on the purely autoethnographic part of this dissertation, I feel guilty and ashamed. I am violently invaded by incriminating voices reminding me that this is not mainstream academic work. I can also hear them sarcastically disregarding my experiences by saying: *You can recount your experiences as much as you wish. We don't give a shit. YOU are at the wrong bank of the river. Utter*

your words. Speak up. Protest! Nobody cares. Your pain is your responsibility; we didn't cause it. YOU are attracted to men...you've caused your pain to you yourself, it's not our fault! It's quite natural for us to reject you, condemn you, ridicule you, try to discipline you, dehumanize you...Your pain is nothing compared to our pain knowing there are faggots in this world; faggots who have the outrageous audacity to defend their sexual attraction to other men! Good heavens! You deserve everything you've gone through, you little bitch...Everything! Protest as much as you want...Describe your pain in the most eloquent way...Nothing will change! We will always be stronger. We will always be better at finding intricate ways to question your humanity. Nothing will change. It is all in vain...Your stupid, childish hopes to be accepted by us will be to no avail. You may implore us, if you wish; you may also suck our dicks...You will always—ALWAYS—arrive at one, single, changeless, timeless conclusion: your existence means nothing to us. We have other problems to deal with; we will always have other, more pressing, problems to resolve. And you, miserable filthy slut...the more you are ignored...the more you are dehumanized...the more you will experience your anger and misery as inherent characteristics of your abominable sexuality. You can always write your little, fucking dissertation thinking that, in adding a professional title to your name, people will respect you more. B U L L S H I T! Wake up and smell the coffee you cunt!! You will always—ALWAYS—be a faggot...No matter what you do...no matter how many PhDs you earn...no matter how much money you earn...no matter how respectful to others you may be...you will always, ALWAYS, always be a fucking, filthy, abominable, loathsome faggot. Stop writing your stories. Nobody cares! Stop wasting your time...Stop wasting our time...Learn how to be a proper faggot...Behave yourself. Faggot...

Am I going insane like Eva in *Autumn Sonata*? Am I going psychotic? No, these are simply the words of my internalized homophobia which, like another Hydra, grows more and more heads, spits venom, and refuses to die. It dwells in me and usually comes out of hiding each time I extend my hand to touch pleasure and joy. There is nothing I can do to uproot this mythical, Greek, serpentine monster. I will have to continue writing my stories despite its presence in me. I will have to remind myself that ***I care about my stories***. I will have to always remember Harold Pinter, my sweet Englishman and favorite playwright, who would always say that his main responsibility was towards himself and not towards his audience. Oh yes...Follow Harold, Niko. Follow his spirit. Keep writing your stories and stop worrying about others' reactions. Your sexual desire...Your pain...Your life...You know there are more important issues than these. But...don't fall prey to homophobic ideas which totally trivialize the significance of your life. Don't allow them to convince you that your little life does not deserve to be heard AT ALL. You are a human being, Niko. Believe it. You are indeed a human being. You won't force anyone to read your stories. You can't and you won't. Others will read them only if they desire to. Enjoy the process, then... Don't censor yourself. You've got the rare privilege of exploring parts of yourself which are immensely important to you. Don't throw away this opportunity, my love. You are a decent human being; yes, you are! Don't lose heart now, my boy. Go on. Go back to your stories. Do your own thing as much as you can. Forget about the others. I'll be here for you...We've been through a lot together and I am fully aware of how incredibly difficult this is for you. But, remember...I'll be here. Your dad will be here. Marvin, the Poet...They will all be here. We love you. Go

on. Tell your stories. Desire... We love you even more when you desire... We love your desires; we can protect them... They are safe with us. Go on.

I am not convinced I am safe; my headache attests to my lack of trust. There is no other option, though, than to pretend I believe I am safe. I close my eyes and the strong Athenian sunlight can be felt behind my eyelids. This temporary disconnection from my surrounding environment offers me a beautiful sense of redemptive escape. I focus on my breathing; it feels uneven, irregular, interchangeably deep and shallow. I open my eyes again and look at the Parthenon through the window of my room. It has been standing atop the Acropolis for more than 24 centuries; it has endured earthquakes, bombings, foreign occupations, wars, vandalism, the passage of time... The Parthenon is there; eternal symbol of a country I love to hate and hate to love. I extend my hands towards the Parthenon. I can't really touch it but my semi-open eyes play extraordinary visual tricks on me. My fingers touch the Parthenon, experience the texture of its marbles, and attempt to form an intimate, osmotic relationship with its durable materials. I silently urge the marbles to reveal their secrets, their survival strategies. Not a single word is uttered by the marbles. They smoothly hold my hands, though, and pull me closer toward their sunburned surface. My fat body is now in a state of total, perfect communion with the marbles. Their silence is deafening; their hold is smothering. I am exposed to the rejuvenating rays of the Athenian sun and the salty air coming from the Aegean Sea. My body is awakened and wants to protest. The marbles tighten their hold. I fight against them, I want to be liberated; I don't want to feel the heat and the air on my skin. They instill in me a dangerous feeling of aliveness. The Parthenon marbles know that and persist in thrusting their nails into my flesh. These are not the Crucifixion nails, however;

my pain is not related to that of Jesus Christ's. The marbles do not wish to redeem me through death, resurrect me, and take me up into heaven. Far from that... Their nails aspire to immerse me into the intoxicating lake of death, mortality, and irreversible finitude. They thrust their nails deeper and deeper; sexual desire clasps my body in its arms tighter and tighter; and an orgasm approaches closer and closer. And when I finally come, when the very last spasm fades away, I am left there speechless, rejoiced, and profoundly depressed. I lie prostrate on the surface of the Parthenon marbles like a baby in his/her crib, looking around me bewildered, utterly disoriented. I have just experienced pleasure; intense, sweet, rapidly dying pleasure. I am terrified of and astonished at the pleasure potential of my fat body... Isn't it only made to consume food and be laughed at? It does possess semen... Imagine that... Is this really *my* body? Is this the fat body everybody chastises, looks at reproachfully, and deems defective? Has it ever occurred to them how much pleasure this ugly body can generate and feel? No... it had never occurred to me either... My body has never belonged to me anyway. It will never belong to me... Desire comes and goes irrespective of my will; it fades away when I want it to be prolonged; it persists when it can't be consummated; it largely depends on others; it dwells within an increasingly aging body that is gradually led to death; it is never satisfied... I wish the Parthenon marbles hadn't awakened my body! I wish they had left it within its previous limited confines of living death. I wish they hadn't reminded it of its potential to desire and feel pleasure. I wish they hadn't instilled life in it, a life that inevitably leads to death... I wish...

I woke up among my colleagues' sleeping bodies. The darkness in my barracks room was too dense to discern anything but the air was filled with male energy. It took

me a few seconds to realize I was in Thebes and that my sexual encounter with the Parthenon marbles belonged to the world of my dreams. I had an erection; of course. I touched my cock and tried to tactilely drain its blood but to no avail. I rolled out of bed and grabbed my cigarettes. “Where are you off to?” That was the voice of my drill instructor. “I am going to the canteen. I want to smoke a cigarette.” “Be quick.” He didn’t spare me a second look. I rushed out of the room and headed toward the canteen. I thought I would be alone but I was deceived. I first noticed his tawny hair and then, when he turned his face to see the intruder, my fat body experienced the blue in his eyes. I hadn’t seen him before. I was certain he was from a different barracks room. He smiled; I smiled back. I mentally checked the posture of my body; it was—artificially—masculine enough. I showed him my cigarettes. “I am dying for a smoke...” I said. He nodded. “OK.” I lit a cigarette and sat on a chair. “Do you smoke? Do you want a cigarette?” I asked. “I don’t smoke, thanks dude” he replied. “OK.” I knew I liked him, my body knew it too. “Which room do you sleep in?” “Room number 1, on the first floor, but they are moving me to number 4 the day after tomorrow.” “That’s my room” I said in a seemingly nonchalant way. “What is it like?” “Not bad.” I said. “How many people sleep in there?” “Almost 20, I guess.” I took a drag on my cigarette. “Why are they moving you to a different room?” “No idea.” I took a last drag and put the cigarette out. “Cool. If you need any help, let me know.” “Cool, thanks. What’s your name?” he asked. “Niko. What about yours?” “Ralph¹⁴.” “Cool. See you around. Goodnight.” “Goodnight.”

A mixture of terror, excitement, and desire had been chained around my legs as I was hurriedly walking back to my barracks room that night. I thought—I felt—I was in love. I wasn’t sure, though. How could I be? I had never fallen in love before. I had never

¹⁴This is a pseudonym. I haven’t seen or heard from Ralph since November, 1997.

been told that men are capable of falling in love with each other. I had never seen any men expressing their love to each other. I only knew that gay men just have sex; dirty, impersonal, brutal sex. They are only able to fuck. They are emotionally crippled, unable to love. Their world revolves around an ass. They are fucking machines. How was I supposed to handle these newly felt emotions? Ralph made me want to hold his face between my hands and look deep into his blue eyes; passionately embrace him from behind and press my hands against his nipples and chest; repeatedly kiss his neck, caress his hair, and thank him. *Thank you, Ralph. Thank you for putting a human face on my sexual desire. Thank you for showing me that it belongs to the world of humans. Thank you for making me feel that, were I to touch you, your body wouldn't die and rot. Thank you...*

Nonetheless...years of silent indoctrination couldn't be easily metabolized and excreted from my body. This initial infatuation with Ralph was soon superseded by fury and fear. Harboring affectionate feelings for another man meant that my sexual desire could potentially inhabit a planet of love and pleasure. My sexual desire could never—should never—be equated with love and pleasure. My sexual desire should always be inextricably tied to fear, shame, pain, and disgust. By then, I had lost all hope of exclusively desiring women. Despite my occasional attraction to them, I was painfully aware of my overwhelming sexual desire for men. I was taking great pains to admit it. At the same time, though, I was trying very hard to accept the fact that, in admitting my sexual desire for men, I should also assent to a life of eternal punishment, suppression, and self-loathing. It was like saying to others, *Look. I know I am gay. A faggot...I can't change it no matter how much I'd love to. I will occasionally have sex with men; I won't*

be able to completely avoid it. Yes, I will try these sexual encounters to occur as seldom as possible. That's a promise. I feel confident enough that, in consistently and persistently reminding myself of how abominable my sexual desire is, I will successfully minimize its intensity. Completely eradicating it, though, is out of the question...I can't. Even when I do engage in sex with men, however, I can assure you that I will never allow myself to enjoy it. I will always try to regard it as a disgusting immersion into a deep, gelatinous swamp of shit. Instead of moans and groans of pleasure, my vocal sounds will consist of beastly screams of regret and utter repugnance. Touching another man will always aim at exerting violence on his body, scratching his skin, and harshly pulling and stroking his penis in order to transform pleasure into excruciating pain. At the same time, I will allow myself to be treated like an object, a miserable proprietor of a penis and an anus, a beast-like, faceless creature. Our orgasms will undeviatingly involve an exchange of unspeakable profanities and physical fighting for having surrendered, once more, to the power of our repulsive sexual desire. Then, after taking a last disgusted look at each other, we will hastily take our hands off each other, as if touched and contaminated by the bacterium of cholera, and rush into the shower to wipe off every and any trace of this ignominious sexual encounter. There will be no affectionate, bittersweet parting words; just silent cursing and wishes never to see each other again. I guarantee, I promise, I swear to God...this process...this ritual will be unwaveringly repeated each time I have sex with a man. If you don't believe me, you are always invited to install a camera in the filthy bedrooms I will be consummating my disgraceful sexual desire; I, already, constantly carry your gaze in my mind and under my skin anyway...A micro camera can't and won't hurt any further...But...I want a small favor in exchange...Could you, from

time to time, tell me a few sweet lies? Nothing too time-wasting...Phrases like “You deserve to be alive,” or “We won’t hurt you,” or “You are a decent human being,” or “We won’t kick you out of your apartment or fire you because you are gay,” or “We love you,” or “You will be happy,” or “You will not be condemned to a life of loneliness,” or...whatever you like; something to keep me going. Would you be kind enough to occasionally satisfy this small favor of mine? And, on my part, I will allow you to voyeuristically devour my fat body as many times as you wish. No limit...I am more than willing to completely forget the pleasurable and loving potentials of my sexual desire provided you furnish me with the illusion that someday I will be accepted and loved by you...

Their Beginning

*The fulfillment of their illicit pleasure
is accomplished. They’ve risen from the bed,
and dress themselves quickly without speaking.
They emerge separately, covertly, from the house. And while
they walk rather uneasily in the street, it seems
as if they suspect that something about them betrays
what kind of bed they’d fallen into just before.*

*Nonetheless, how the artist’s life has gained.
Tomorrow, the day after, or through the years he’ll write
powerful lines, that here was their beginning.*
—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, p. 103).

I desperately desired to stay away from Ralph. I fervently wanted to surrender to my desire for him. He was so handsome...And I was so fat...Furthermore...I wasn’t sure he was gay. How could I risk coming out to a total stranger in a military camp? Damn...He was so fucking handsome...Being rejected by him would be devastating. He was painfully handsome...Nonetheless...would his beauty, were he to suspect my

infatuation with him, prevent him from lashing out against me? Ralph was so irresistibly handsome when he finally moved into my barracks room...

He was cordially welcomed by all my colleagues. He was able to make others be fond of him. My fantasy had imagined him as a man deeply interested in the big, existential questions of life. My fantasy had constructed him as a man intensely pursuing deep, emotional bonds with others. He was my sweet, handsome hero. He was there to save me. He was there to make me feel human, authentic; real...He was there to stop me from desiring anyone and everyone in the camp; no sooner had he appeared in my life, than my sexual desire exclusively concentrated on him...He was there to teach me how to touch my fat body without feeling I touch a corpse. He was there to smash my arduously built masculine armor and expose my helplessly horny core. He was the lover I had always dreamed of; he was the enemy I had so far avoided. My mind would push him away; my body would breathlessly incorporate his eyes, his breathing, his gestures, his skin...

Ralph wouldn't pay much attention to me. He remembered who I was; to him, though, I was only one among many. He would say *Hi* and *See you around* but I wasn't special to him. He had already made a few friends and looked perfectly happy to spend time with them. His blasé attitude hurt me and, at the same time, liberated me. He had confirmed my deep-seated belief that my sexual desire does not deserve to be reciprocated; that my fat body isn't destined to be loved. Yet, despite the pain caused by these self-disparaging ideas, another part of me felt deeply relieved. Ralph's lack of interest in me had freed me from the burden of taking responsibility for my sexual desire and answering difficult questions: how do I relate to my sexual desire? Do I want to be

sexually desired by others? Do I believe others could ever find me sexually desirable? What does it mean to surrender to my sexual desire? Do I want to be naked in front of others? Do I really want to touch and be touched by others? How am I supposed to surrender to my sexual desire and, at the same time, retain control of myself? Am I willing to allow others' sexual desire to affect the way I think, feel, and experience my life? Am I resilient enough to bear with rejection? What if responding to another man's sexual desire entails my coming out as a gay man? Am I ready to accept the risk of being an openly gay man? Should I fuck? Should I be fucked? Should I do both? In case I surrender to my sexual desire, will I be a man or a woman? What does it mean to touch another man's body? Where should I touch this body? Should I desire a man in the same way I desire a woman? Do I have a clue what it feels to desire a woman...?

My hard-earned balance didn't last for long. As I was reading in bed after a long, tough, training day, I heard quickly approaching steps. It was Ralph. "What are you reading dude?" He was looking at me straight in the eyes and his interest felt genuine. I swallowed with difficulty but managed to maintain my composure and provide a clear answer. "Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*...Marquez is a Colombian writer who..." "I know Marquez!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "He was awarded the Nobel Prize back in 1982 if I remember well. I've only read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Awesome dude, it was awesome!" I felt my heart plunging into something indeterminably sweet and mellow. My tightly armored body relaxed, melted, breathed, sighed...It was transformed into a mass of flesh and bones I could no longer recognize; it had, all of a sudden, acquired a life of its own that was ominously and delightedly filling the empty reservoirs of my soul with a warm, intoxicating, sweet liquid. My hunger to

desire and be desired; my yearning to love and be loved; the vastness of my emptiness; my dependence on others to fill this emptiness in me; the realization that this emptiness will always be transiently and imperfectly filled; my eagerness, despite the aforementioned realization, to keep trying to fill this emptiness...all these cognitive and emotional insights, separately and in tandem, forced me to silently cross a threshold where it no longer mattered whether I resisted to my sexual desire for Ralph or not. It no longer mattered because I had already surrendered to him, to everything he symbolized for me. And, strangely enough...I couldn't explain in words what he symbolized for me. The only thing I knew was that his reference to Gabriel Garcia Marquez had made me want to cry. He had suddenly made me feel less of an alien. He had inspired hope in me...I was hoping I could desire another man and simultaneously maintain a sense of humanity.

“What’s up dude? Why are you looking at me like that?” Ralph’s voice interrupted my reveries and violently brought me back to the grim reality of our commonly shared barracks room. I panicked when I realized I had been staring at him for more than 30 seconds. “Sorry dude.” I closed my eyes and rubbed them as if I had just come out of a coma. “You won’t believe it...I almost fell asleep as you were talking to me...I am so fucking tired man...I just want to get the fuck out of this fucking camp...what a waste of time!” I was carefully trying to detect any signs of suspiciousness or disbelief on his face. Nothing...Ralph winked at me and said: “No problem dude. I know what you mean, I feel the same.” Silence...“Cool! I am off to the canteen. See you around. We may talk about Marquez again!” “Yes, we should...” I whispered but he was

already gone. I stayed there, lying motionless in bed and watching Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* resting on my chest and following the rhythm of my breathing.

In the Boring Village

*In the boring village where he works—
an employee in a general
store; extremely young—and where he's waiting
for another two or three months to pass,
for another two or three months till business tapers off,
so he can make for the city and throw himself
straight into its bustle and amusements:
in the boring village where he's waiting—
he fell into his bed this evening sick with desire,
all his youth inflamed with carnal yearning,
with beautiful intensity, all his beautiful youth.
And pleasure came into his sleep; within
his sleep he sees and possesses the shape, the flesh he wanted...
—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, p. 129)*

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to claim that, following this brief encounter with Ralph, my fat body was alternately dwelling in two separate worlds. It was oscillating between a state of rigidly pretentious masculinity and, upon bumping into Ralph, an aura of softness, relaxation, and suppleness. Unwittingly, I would find myself smiling at him, approaching his bed, engaging in small talk, and trying to become a small part of his world. I was very careful not to invade his space; I made a concerted effort to appear casually friendly. At the same time, though, I was on the lookout for fishy stares from others or Ralph himself. There was a vaguely subterranean feeling of venturing into dangerous, uncharted territory. I felt completely unable, however, to resist the Sirens' voices and songs. Ralph's presence would exert a paralyzing and debilitating influence on my body that was too strong and intoxicating to resist. Simply by looking at him walking outside the room or shaving himself, I would feel reassured that life could embrace my desiring fat body and still be beautiful and peaceful. Notwithstanding the

seeming absence of similar feelings on his part, Ralph appeared to possess a magic stick that was able to dissipate all my fears and infuse a somewhat reluctant boldness into my body. I could almost hear him seductively whisper...*Desire...Desire me... Desire my body...Your sexual desire will always be safe with me...Feel your erect penis... Touch your body everywhere...I don't mind your fatness... You love Marquez...How could I ever be deterred from desiring your fat body when you love Marquez? When you are able to endlessly talk to me about Marquez? My fat love...If you only knew how much I long for your kiss...How much I am looking forward to holding you in my arms... I'll build a fortress around your body and heart...My body will be the fortress in which you'll feel free to desire me...to desire me as wildly and lustfully as you wish away from indiscreet gazes and abusive words...Give yourself to me...I'll say it again...I will always protect you and your sexual desire...You will never feel subhuman again...We will learn together how to touch each other...We will teach each other the secrets of pleasure during a process of mutual discovery...We will prove them wrong...The sensual meeting of our bodies will show them that we are humans like everybody else... We love...We desire to be loved...We fuck...We want to be fucked...We are hurt...We hurt each other... We miss each other... We feel lonely... We want to feel intimate to each other...There are times when we can't stand being around anybody else...Our bodies are able to perform acts of love...Our bodies may feel violent and disgusting to us...But you, my fat love...you don't have to worry about anything. You are safe with me...Desire me...Talk to me about Marquez...Worship my body...Possess my flesh...I will possess yours...You are safe with me...You will always be safe with me...Marquez's spell has irreversibly bound us together for the rest of our lives...*

The Window of the Tobacco Shop

*Nearby the illuminated window
of a tobacco shop they stood, in the midst of many others.
Quite by chance, their glances happened to meet,
and timorously, hesitantly expressed
the illicit longing of their flesh.
Later, on the pavement, a few nervous steps—
until they smiled and nodded very faintly.*

*And afterward the closed carriage...
the sensitive nearing of their bodies;
the hands as one, the lips as one.
—C. P. Cavafy, Complete Poems (2012, p. 77)*

Ralph and I were destined to be one. That was my unshaken conviction which was triumphantly confirmed when I found out that, upon the completion of our basic 2-month training in Thebes, we would be both transferred to the same military base in Samos, an island off the coast of Turkey. We packed our military backpacks and took the ferry from the port of Piraeus to this idyllic, densely vegetated island in the Eastern Aegean Sea. It was my first visit to Samos and I loved it from the very first moment I stepped off the ferry. I was in paradise with Ralph; that's all that really mattered. The military context surrounding us...Ralph's lack of sexual interest in me...his persistently polite but distant stance towards me...all these warning signs simply went unnoticed because my urge to integrate my sexual desire with a solid sense of belonging to the human race was unbeatable, almost unbearable. I wanted him so badly...He was holding the key to a world of pleasure and carnal delights; a world of lust and love; a world of safety. I wanted to feel safe; rest my head on Ralph's chest and feel safe; look deep in his eyes and feel safe; undress him and feel safe; undress myself in front of him and feel safe; kiss him and feel safe; rub my hairy chest on his and feel safe; suck his dick and feel safe; fuck his ass and feel safe; caress his hair and feel safe; tell him "I want you" and

feel safe; share our orgasms together and feel safe; feel disgusted by his bodily fluids and feel safe; swallow his bodily fluids and feel safe; feel angry with him and feel safe; surrender to him and feel safe; hear him say to me “You are handsome” and feel safe; feel his dick in me and feel safe; appear vulnerable and feel safe; cry as I look in his eyes and feel safe; tell him “I need you, I don’t want to spend this life alone” and feel safe; believe that I deserve to love and be loved and feel safe; feel what it means to be human and feel safe; desire and feel safe...

Safety was the last thing I felt when we arrived at the military base in Samos. We were the newcomers; we were supposed to obey everyone, including seasoned soldiers who were closer to being discharged. They were the worst; having already endured humiliating hardships during the previous months of their military service, they were more than eager to quickly acquaint us with the ordeals we would have to go through. Cleaning bathrooms, collecting cigarette butts, peeling potatoes and onions, sweeping and mopping floors, carrying heavy bags, being subservient and constantly yelled at were among the few torments we were obliged to suffer in addition to our ongoing military training and tasks. Our Thebes honeymoon was over. So long Oedipus. The time had arrived for us to become real men in Samos, the island of Pythagoras.

I needed Ralph more than ever. I was harboring the elusive hope that my sexual desire for him would motivate him to support me. But Ralph himself was also struggling to survive. He was scared; I could see it on his face. I would sometimes try to talk to him but to no avail. He was desperately trying to carry out his military duties and ignore seasoned soldiers’ constant humiliations. I was the last person he would be willing to take care of and protect...

That was when truth struck me like lightning. Ralph wasn't in love with me. He didn't desire me. He wouldn't be able to protect me and allow my sexual desire to flourish and earn its place in the human pantheon. Marquez hadn't irreversibly bound us together for the rest of our lives. It was all in my head... The cold emptiness of my invisibility as a desiring human being had propelled me into the construction of a nonexistent reality. Ralph's desire for me was inexistent; pure fantasy; a figment of my imagination. My hope to infuse concrete substance into my experience of sexual desire had resoundingly failed. I had, once more, been left with nothing more than invisible air that was pervasively spreading in me, rendering my body unseen, indiscernible, imperceptible; dead. I didn't want to die; the taste of the forbidden fruit I had greedily swallowed had acquainted me with life; real life with emotions, sensations, dilemmas, ambivalent desires, and bodies coming closer to each other; touching each other; rubbing against each other; caressing each other; fucking each other; holding and supporting each other... Dear God, I was so tempted to undress myself, lie naked in the middle of the base, and masturbate; force everybody to actually see my body, see my desiring body, see me desiring... *Dear colleagues. It's a matter of life and death. I've met life but I am on the verge of going back to my psychic death again. Please help me. Touch my body. Nourish my sexual desire. I feel like a premature infant in need of an incubator. Could you, please, function as an incubator? It won't be hard... Place your hands on my body, keep it warm, and repeat "You exist, you exist, you exist, you exist, you exist, you exist..."* Please, colleagues... *I don't like to beg but I am begging you now... My body is dying... Keep it warm until the danger is gone... Please...*

In Despair

*He's lost him utterly. And from now on he seeks
in the lips of every new lover that he takes
the lips of that one: his. Coupling with every new
lover that he takes he longs to be mistaken:
that it's the same young man, that he's giving himself to him.*

*He's lost him utterly, as if he'd never been.
The other wished—he said—he wished to save himself
from that stigmatized pleasure, so unwholesome;
from that stigmatized pleasure, in its shame.
There was still time, he said—time to save himself.*

*He's lost him utterly, as if he'd never been.
In his imagination, in his hallucinations
in the lips of other youths he seeks the lips of that one;
He wishes that he might feel his love again.
—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, p.115)*

The 25th Year of His Life

*He frequently goes into the tavern
where they'd met each other the month before.
He enquired; but there was nothing they could tell him.
From their words, he understood he'd met
a character who was totally unknown;
one of the many unknown and suspect
youthful figures who would pass through there.
He nonetheless goes to the tavern frequently, at night,
and sits and looks toward the entrance;
he grows weary looking toward the entrance.
Perhaps he'll come in. Tonight, perhaps he'll come.*

*For close to three weeks this is what he does.
His mind has grown sick with wantonness.
On his mouth the kisses have remained.
All his flesh is suffering from the ceaseless yearning.
The feel of the other's body is upon him.
He wants to be as one with it again.
Not to betray himself: this is what he strives for, of course.
But sometimes he's almost indifferent.—
Besides, he knows what he's exposing himself to,
he's made up his mind. It's not unlikely that the life he's living
will lead him to some devastating scandal.
—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, p.127)*

To prevent others from noticing my struggle, I would often cry at night in the bathrooms. My cry was silent, anguished, and forced; drill instructors would usually expect me to head back to my room within a time period of 10-15 minutes. I would lock myself in a toilet room and start taking deep breaths. Soon, tears would well up in my eyes and voiceless sobbing would shake my body. I would sometimes bang my fists against the door, while simultaneously checking the time. I would often experience my body as incapable of bearing with its physical and psychological weight. There were times when I would have genuine doubts about the spatial and temporal context within which my suffering was taking place. It was excruciatingly hard to accept the fact that I was trapped in a military base full of men who, were they to find out about my sexuality, could, perhaps, exert violence on me. I could not count on Ralph to defend me anymore and there were no ways to discontinue my military service without considerable repercussions. Discontinuing it could potentially classify me as a mentally incompetent individual; that was a negative stigma I wasn't willing to carry for the rest of my life. On the other hand, though, there were still 15 difficult months of military service ahead of me. How could I ever survive 15 months of hypocrisy and lies without going crazy? How could I ever go back to my previous state of artificially constructed masculinity and psychological numbness after having travelled on the wings of the sweet bird of sexual desire¹⁵? How could I ever persist in fighting against this culturally and socially imposed psychological death and simultaneously reincorporate it into my flesh and bones? How could I ever pretend as if nothing had happened?

¹⁵This is a modified version of the title of Tennessee Williams' play, *The Sweet Bird of Youth*.

Then I met Alex¹⁶. He had been there all along but, deeply immersed into my Ralph-dominated, anxious world, I had totally failed to note his unapologetically feminine presence. I was further taken aback when Alex told me that he had seen me several times in Thebes and that we had travelled to Samos by the same ferry. He finally stated in a very matter-of-fact way that he knew I was gay. “How do you...?” I managed to whisper but Alex prevented me from finishing my sentence with a gesture full of feminine charm. “I’ve noticed how you look at this guy...Ralph.” He took a drag of his cigarette, smiled, and added, “You’ve got good taste. He’s gorgeous. But I like Brad¹⁷ more.” “Who’s Brad?” I asked, experiencing a mixture of astonishment, fear, curiosity, and excitement. “The redhead stud in the transportation management office (TMO)...he’s huge...” Alex took a quick look around and continued, “I’ve been blowing him for several days now...” I felt short of breath. This discussion, I thought, had the potential to carry me beyond the gates of Hell. It was too much; my heart was beating frantically. But, at the same time, I found it almost impossible to refrain from asking questions. “Where do you usually blow him?” I asked him in a low voice, looking at the ground. Alex took another drag. “In the TMO; at night...when nobody is around.” I remained silent for a few seconds. “Is he gay?” I whispered. Alex just shrugged and smiled coquettishly. “I have no idea. He claims I am the first man to give him a blowjob.” “When is he getting discharged?” I asked. “In 6 months if I remember well...why?” “Just asking” I said. I lit a cigarette too. “Have you ever had sex with Ralph?” Alex asked. I took a drag. “No.” He looked at me in disbelief. “Why? Is he straight?” “I don’t know.” I kept looking at the ground not knowing whether I should trust Alex. He was persistent,

¹⁶ This is a pseudonym. I haven’t seen or heard from Alex since November, 1997.

¹⁷ This is a pseudonym. I haven’t seen or heard from Brad since November, 1997.

though. “Have you ever had sex?” I just wanted to get the fuck out of there but my feet wouldn’t obey me. “No.” Alex smirked. “Not even a blowjob?” “No.” He kept smirking. “Are you in the closet?” I could feel my anxiety levels skyrocketing and, at the same time, a pressing urge to cry. “Only a few friends know about me...in Athens.” I put out my cigarette. “Alex...I don’t really feel comfortable talking about this.” Alex playfully touched my cheek and I automatically grabbed his hand. “Don’t do this...” He seemed surprised by the force of my reaction but he quickly found his playful mood once more. “Relax darling,” he said, “your secret is safe with me.” He put out his cigarette, fleetingly touched my cheek again, laughed, and left. I looked around me; not a soul.

In the following days and weeks, I had the rare opportunity to watch a romance unfold between two soldiers in the midst of a military base. Alex and Brad were discreet but it was more than evident that their relationship went way beyond friendship. They would always have lunch and dinner together in the cafeteria, sitting separate from the other soldiers, engaging in hushed conversations, and exchanging smiles. In a way, Alex seemed to be under Brad’s protection. He was symbolically the male; Alex was playing the role of the flamboyant female. Everybody knew but, despite the rumors and the comments behind their backs, nobody ever said or did anything to explicitly reveal the slightest degree of disapproval. Brad seemed to be well respected whereas Alex was enjoying the status of a local celebrity. He was getting along well with most of the soldiers whose facial expressions, when interacting with Alex, seemed to utter the following words: *We know you are a slut but...OK. We’ll tolerate your presence.*

In the meantime, my psychological condition was gradually worsening. I had been wrestling for 5 months with my sexual desire, myself, and others; my high levels of

anxiety, stress, and fear were slowly wearing me out. Almost unbeknownst to me, without totally being able to control my words and reactions, I would sarcastically talk back to seasoned soldiers, provoking their angry reactions and making them my enemies. “You are destined to obey us for the rest of your service, Kiskiras!” they would yell at me; “That depends, I guess” I would calmly respond. “*That depends, I guess!!!!*” they would tauntingly repeat. “Who do you think you are, you fucking bastard?? Do you think you are better than us because you’ve read some fucking books during your miserable fucking life??” “No,” I would retort, “I am better than you because I don’t need to order or yell at others in order to feel important.” “You fucking, filthy, miserable fish¹⁸...Cool! You will be solely responsible for cleaning the bathrooms tonight. We are absolutely certain you are going to have the time of your life...Our shit and urine will definitely keep you good company...Happy, you little, fat shit?” I didn’t mind; I had already been used to spending considerable time in the bathrooms. They felt like home.

One night, as I was cleaning one of the toilet rooms, I heard voices coming through the closed window. It was impossible to say whose voices these were but I could detect suppressed laughter and, occasionally, noisy spitting on the ground (a form of behavior that, at least in 1997, would be equated with robust, aggressive masculinity...). I instantaneously felt a sense of omnipotence. After months of humiliation, paranoia, and emotional hardship, I had the golden opportunity to be sneaky and, supposedly, get back at my torturers. My decision to eavesdrop, therefore, gave me tremendous satisfaction. I cracked open the window and listened attentively. My satisfaction grew even greater

¹⁸The word “fish” (ψάρι/psari, in Greek), apart from its usual meaning, is also widely used in Greek as a military slang term referring to the newly recruited soldier.

when I recognized the voices: Andrew and Robert¹⁹, two of the most boorish and uncouth seasoned soldiers I had ever met. I hated them; at the time, I would have gladly beaten them dead. It was evident that they were at great pains to keep their voices down. No matter how much they tried, though, I was able to hear their conversation clearly. "...in the shower" said Robert. "No way...!" Andrew sounded surprised. "Oh yeah..." Silence... "Is he any good?" Andrew asked. Robert sniggered and took a drag of his cigarette. "Fucking slut...faggot..." he said through his teeth. "What?" Andrew wondered. Robert took another drag. "Can you keep a secret?" he asked. "You bet" Andrew replied. There were a few seconds of silence again. "He's better than my girlfriend..." "Holy cow!" Andrew laughed and coughed at the same time. "Are you serious...?" "I am telling you...he performs wonders with his tongue..." Robert sniffed as if he wasn't able to believe his own words. For a few minutes I could only hear them smoking and walking around aimlessly. Andrew broke the silence first. "Does he also swallow?" I heard Robert laughing boisterously. He grabbed up a small stone and tossed it away. "Every single drop dude..." he replied. "Every single drop..." "Damn..." Andrew whispered and took a deep breath. "Horny?" Robert asked him. "You bet...I feel like going inside and stroking my cock!!" I was alarmed but they just laughed and stayed there. "Smoke another cigarette and go back to the unit?" Robert asked. "Yeah..." I was striving to remain still; I was afraid they could hear my breathing. "He blows others too" Andrew said and Robert concurred with him. "I know...he's a whore...total slut...aderfi with a capital A." He burped. "He gives amazing head, though" he added. "I need to bust a nut man! I am so fucking tired of jerking off!" Andrew complained. "Use his mouth man!" Robert urged him emphatically. "What are you waiting for? He's a faggot! That's

¹⁹ These are pseudonyms. I haven't seen or heard from both men since November, 1997.

what he's looking for!" Andrew remained silent for a few seconds before he finally said, "OK...I am not sure yet...ready to go?" Robert put out his cigarette and spitted on the ground. "Fucking cigarette...Yes, let's go." They walked away. I felt immensely relieved; I kept cleaning the bathrooms.

His name had never been mentioned but I was 100% certain they were talking about Alex. And, all of a sudden, I finally understood other soldiers' tolerant stance towards him. The riddle had been solved. They had never accepted him as a human being. Alex could be part of their community provided he confined himself to being the mouth; a mouth; any mouth. His thoughts, his emotions, his problems, his fears, his likes, his dislikes...everything constituting his distinct humanity didn't matter; it had been erased. Alex's pleasure-producing mouth had obliterated his humanity. And I was more than ashamed to admit I was jealous of him. Being reduced to a mouth was infuriating. It was. Yet...Alex had been acknowledged to be capable of offering pleasure to others. Others had thought—had felt—that he possessed something they desired; something they also wanted to possess. It was only a mouth; a fucking mouth. But it was enough to make me feel incompetent, deficient, incomplete, utterly undesirable...Because, after all, the totality of my fat body—the totality of my fat soul—had already been found to have little or no value at all in the land of sexual desire. This land could be exclusively inhabited by those other bodies, gloriously exemplifying the strictest criteria for beauty, leanness, masculinity and/or, as Alex had tellingly indicated, effeminacy in the service of hegemonic masculinity. I didn't feel handsome; I wasn't lean and athletic; I despised hegemonic masculinity; effeminacy had never been my strong point. Who was I? How was I supposed to desire and be desired by others? What were the chances for my sexual

desire to breathe and flourish in a fat body that neither adhered to nor wished to subordinate itself to hegemonic masculinity? Was my sexual desire destined to simply float around space and silently observe the Garden of Earthly Delights?²⁰

The Little Ladder

My body is a little ladder that I lean against the wall of the world. I climb up it, I stretch myself to look behind the wall, behind the four walls of feeling. The little ladder keeps shaking more and more, I scorn it more and more, and I want to let myself go to the view of the gardens without any sense of direction. For days I think of the deep earth's copulation that sprouts the grass and all the roots of this shameless vegetation. I look but I grow weary. The little ladder keeps shaking and the lights that illuminate the park become milky and then it is night. At the end of a specific but an unknown number of years, I will have forgotten all these chaotic gymnastics. I will be the warped little ladder that someone forgot leaning against the garden wall.

—Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, *The Scattered Papers of Penelope: New & Selected Poems*, (2009, p.33).

Matchsticks

Gulliver

who woke in the field, pinned to the earth like the lilies, fastened like the ears of wheat, screwed down even by the finest hairs in his nose, stuck like an insect in an entomologist's notebook, panicking as he saw how the great bulk of his body was the terrain for millions of brilliant enterprises carried out by tiny people who with matchsticks and threads had reduced him to immobility

it's me

with my Lilliputian frenzied loves that keep me bound to the most cloddish conception of life, the most constrained movement, to a base apprehension of beauty as a body which undresses and lies down and never rises to the skies.

—Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, *The Scattered Papers of Penelope: New & Selected Poems*, (2009, p.34).

The rhythm of life, however, is inestimably faster than our capacity to ask existential questions. Not long after the aforementioned eavesdropping incident, my psychological antennae—intensely and acutely attuned to everything transpiring between

²⁰ This phrase references Hieronymus Bosch's famous painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.

Brad and Alex—captured signals of anger and tension. My instinct told me that the friction between the two lovers was directly related to the content of the conversation between Robert and Andrew. I was right; Brad had found out about Alex’s sexual encounters with other soldiers. “He’s stuck on me like a leech,” Alex complained to me during a smoking break (I would always make sure to talk with him when nobody was around). “I’ve never promised to be faithful to him...For God’s sake...I am not in a relationship with him! We just fuck together...He now claims he is in love with me...Guess what...I am not! As far as I am concerned, good riddance to him is what I say!” Even today, I still don’t know how I managed not to punch him in the face. My anger had nothing to do with feelings of altruism and compassion for Brad. I was just jealous; I wanted to be like Alex—seductive, manipulative, dismissive—and enchant men. Deep down, I knew that, had he been in a different cultural context, Alex would have potentially behaved in a different way. Still, I was terribly jealous of him because he always seemed to be so fucking adaptable, fearless, and alluring. For some mysterious reason, he was remarkably able and comfortable to declare his sexuality without thinking about the consequences. Offering other soldiers sexual favors, of course, had helped him secure a degree of protection and tolerance. But I couldn’t help admitting to myself that his attitude, if anything, was brave. Yes; he had reduced himself to solely being a mouth and an asshole; he was constantly being provocative, foul-mouthed, and calculating. But, ultimately, he was only trying to survive by using the only means available to him: his (homo)-sexuality, eloquently expressed in the most outspoken, frank, and visibly aggressive way, that seemed to say: *Fuck off you bastards! No matter how much you*

want me to shut the fuck up and wipe out my sexuality, I will just do the opposite! I AM GAY! A HOMO! A QUEER! A FAG! Deal with it...

As I was comparing my silent, secretive attitude to Alex's open stance, I couldn't help but feel sorry for myself. It was an unbearable experience to feel cowardice oozing from my body and soul. It was utterly shameful to understand that Alex, a blatantly feminine gay man, had overwhelmingly triumphed over me in the arena of masculinity. And it took me years to realize that, despite my liberal views and feminist inclinations, I was unconsciously associating psychological attributes such as bravery, courage, and power with masculinity. My mind simply couldn't reconcile Alex's feminine mannerisms with the manifestation of guts and bold defiance. I was envious of him being desired by others, having sex, and openly stating who he was; at the same time, though, his patent effeminacy and provocative flamboyance would make my blood boil. I remember thinking that *faggots like Alex are the main reason why society never takes us, LGBT people, seriously*. I wanted my personality and sexuality to be taken seriously and respected; I staunchly believed, however, that, unless I presented myself as a dignified (that is, "properly" masculine) man, I would be condemned to eternal mockery, discrimination, and exclusion. Having unwittingly adopted a heterosexually masculine and homophobic gaze, I deeply immersed myself in self-deception and failed to understand that Alex's aggressive openness and my vigilant secrecy represented the two different sides of the same coin. Being gay and surviving reasonably unscathed in a culture like the Greek army meant that we could either be secretive and silent—in the closet—or aggressively out of the closet. These were our only two options; the common thread that bound Alex and me together, apart from our homosexuality, was that we had

no other options. Yet, instead of affection and a sense of solidarity, I felt contempt for him; I considered him my worst enemy. Years of systematic, societal indoctrination, insecurity, and extreme fear had taught me to regard my (homo)-sexual desire as always bordering on the abnormal; the hilarious; the effeminate; the unthinkable; the ridiculous; the grotesque. Resisting the aforementioned stigmatizing views, in my opinion, meant that I should always try to be as serious, dignified, and “masculine” as possible. I was naïve enough to believe that, were I to fulfill the strictest criteria of human dignity, my homosexuality would pose no serious problem or threat to others. They would be reasonably willing to overlook it and, instead, focus on my potential contributions to society as a (Greek) citizen, a professional, and a human being. It is now obvious to me that I never truly believed these ideas; otherwise, I would have felt comfortable enough to disclose my homosexuality during my military service. Nonetheless, there had always been something—a vague ominous feeling—keeping me from doing it. And yet, despite my reluctance to disclose my homosexuality, I firmly attached myself to my false beliefs; I needed some hope for a brighter tomorrow²¹. And gay men like Alex would shatter this hope to a million pieces; they would constantly remind me that defending my sexuality in the Greek society would inevitably entail a degree of aggressive self-disclosure and the risk of being humiliated, attacked, ostracized, and reduced to a mouth/asshole. Feminine, flamboyant gay men like Alex would eye me sardonically, enjoying my hopeless efforts to become dignified enough and sarcastically whispering: *You can't fool us... You are frantically trying to be dignified but the moment you utter the phrase “I am gay” your hard-won dignity will immediately be pulverized... evaporated... gone. For the vast*

²¹*I need some hope for a bright tomorrow* is a lyric from the song *This Night Won't Last Forever*, written by Bill La Bounty and covered by the composer himself, Michael Johnson, and Sawyer Brown.

majority of the Greek population you will simply be another fag. Deep down you know that...It's time you stopped lying to yourself. The truth is you want to avoid the burden...the responsibility of dealing with your homosexuality. The truth is that your unattainable goal to be dignified enough for the heterosexual others only aims at pushing yourself deeper into your closet. Let's be honest. You will never be dignified enough so as to be unconditionally accepted by 11,000,000 Greeks. Therefore, you will never break your silence. But... you don't need to be accepted by 11,000,000 Greeks...You just need a few friends who will accept you for the person you are...Do you want a piece of advice? Listen up! Do not allow your chronic sense of generalized rejection to harbor utopian fantasies of generalized acceptance. You will be profoundly frustrated. And...you know what? Your frustration will be far greater than your contempt for us; the flamboyant, effeminate, promiscuous, disgraceful others...You son of a bitch...You really think that your plight is different than ours; easier to endure because of your masculine mannerisms...You truly believe that, little moron, don't you? You believe you are the dignified homosexual who makes love and respects others whereas we are the pathetic fags who fuck around and eat cum, right? Come on, you filthy scum, admit it...The idea that we belong to a different species...that you have nothing to do with us...that we are the untouchable OTHERS makes you so damned horny...right? Jesus Christ...(by the way, FYI, his crucified, semi-naked body makes us so damned horny...) you are so fucking deceived, darling...so fucking deceived...But we have patience; life will teach you some interesting lessons in the future. You'll be immensely entertained, that's a promise. We don't want to spoil the surprise (this is a lie, of course; we DO want to spoil the surprise and take sadistic pleasure in dismantling your certainties; at the same time,

though, we are also interested in keeping up appearances ...) but ...how do you like a preview of the questions you will be asked? For example ...why do you feel such contempt for us? Is it, perhaps, because, in your opinion, we represent a degrading, shameful version of a sexuality you strive to purify? If yes, what are the defining characteristics of a purified, cleansed sexuality among consenting adults? What differentiates it from ours? And, by the way, why do you feel like constantly trying to purify your sexuality anyway? Could it be because, no matter how hard you strive, your sexual attraction to men—irrespective of our feminine mannerisms—feels to you inherently emasculating? As a consequence, is it possible that your contempt for us is, in reality, directed towards you yourself? Do you, perhaps, find it easier—less painful—to unleash your contempt upon us instead of immersing yourself in the darkness of your insufferable self-loathing? Do we—the untouchable others—remind you, perchance, of the mysterious otherness of your own sexuality? Could it be that we—the untouchable others—represent a more concrete, a more easily decipherable target than your fluidly ungraspable sexual desire? Would you agree if we claimed that our perceived otherness infuses into your sexual desire a degree of soothing, albeit artificial, concreteness and distinctiveness? Would you ever entertain the idea of a connection between your wish for a concrete sexual desire and your fear of loneliness? Would you ever admit to yourself that your fear of loneliness gives rise to fantasies of eternally harmonious intimate relationships? How would you respond to the claim that your fantasies of eternally harmonious intimate relationships are based on the illusion of rigidly specific sexual desires, exclusively attaching themselves to specific types of people? What if we said to you that you have absolutely no idea what it feels like to be sexually intimate with another person? What if we claimed

that your inability to experience sexual intimacy represents a wound you are most unwilling to admit? And what if we argued that, in reality, you simply desire to remain sexually distant from everything and everyone? What a conundrum... Yes! Your sexual loneliness devours your viscera like a flesh-eating, toxic worm. Yet, you feel incapable of extending your hands and inviting another person into your sexual world. You are equally disinclined to enter into another person's sexual world. You prefer your loneliness. You are afraid that, were you to allow a man to approach your heart, he would find nothing but fear and terror that would scare him away. Worse; he would find nothing; emptiness. That would get the final blow on you. That would constitute the final confirmation of a future life soaked in endless loneliness and isolation. Hence, you dwell in your psychic death for fear of truly dying. Poor thing... You are unluckily forced by the Greek culture to oscillate between two equally unsatisfactory options: silence or the prospect of potential discrimination and constant struggle for justice. But how is it possible for sexual intimacy to flourish in the dark, in silence, exclusively behind closed doors? How could you open your heart, offer yourself to another man, and simultaneously ask questions such as, "Who knows about me? Do they know about me? Does my neighbor suspect I am gay? What if my landlord arrives unexpectedly and finds my boyfriend here? How am I supposed to relax and love anybody under such asphyxiating conditions of fear and suspicion?" Similarly, how can sexual intimacy develop amid circumstances of social discrimination and subtle—or less subtle—aggression? How could you strike a balance between the prospect of being discriminated against by homophobic employers or landlords and the cultivation of an intimate relationship with a sexual partner? To what extent could you bear with such an ordeal

before you finally unleashed your aggression upon your partner? How many incidents of humiliation could you swallow before you were psychologically broken down? How many efforts would it take to bond to another man before you conceded defeat? And how many words, how many languages would you need to know in order to utter the words “I can’t...I can’t love...I may love a friend...a parent...maybe...but I can’t love a lover...I can’t love a man I have sex with... No...I don’t want to love...I feel persecuted...I have to survive...I don’t have the time...I don’t have the power...I can’t...I don’t want to love...No...Never...”? Yes. You feel persecuted. Your masculine mannerisms...your dignity...your education...won’t save you. You will be persecuted...

***Aemilian Son of Monaës, an Alexandrian,
628-655 A.D.***

*From my speech, and looks, and from my mien
I shall make an excellent panoply;
and so I’ll stand before those wicked men
without fear, without debility.*

*They will want to harm me. But none of those
who come close to me will ever see
where my vulnerable places are, my wounds,
beneath the falsehoods that will cover me.—*

*Boastful words of Aemilian son of Monaës.
I wonder if he ever made that suit of armor?
In any event, he didn’t wear it much:
At twenty-seven, in Sicily, he died.
—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, p.72)*

One day, as I was having breakfast, I was suddenly approached by Brad. “Hi there!” he greeted me joyfully and sat next to me. I scanned the dining hall. A wave of excited curiosity had been aroused amongst the rest of the diners. I should be careful. “Hi Brad, what’s up?” I responded nonchalantly and kept eating my breakfast. “Not bad dude, not bad...” Silence prevailed between us for a few minutes. “Listen,” he said, “I was

wondering whether you would be available to have coffee with me one of the next few days.” I almost choked on my saliva. “Have coffee with you?” I whispered. Brad took a quick glance at me. “Yes, that’s what I said.” I was at a loss for words. Except for small talk, Brad and I hadn’t exchanged that many words over the past few months. I was rather frightened at the prospect of finding myself alone with him. What would the others think of our private meeting? “I don’t know Brad...I...” but he was quick to overcome my hesitation. “It won’t take more than half an hour.” I could see Alex staring at us. “Please,” he insisted. I was frightened but curious. “I am off-duty tomorrow,” I said. “Same here,” Brad replied. I wanted to refuse his invitation but the words wouldn’t come out. Instead, I heard myself saying, “We could meet at *Sunset*, a coffee shop in the old town of Samos.” Brad took a sip of water. “I know it. It’s pretty cozy...At what time?” My neck was killing me. “Seven?” He rose from the table, looked around the dining hall, and nodded in agreement. “See you there.” Alex, among others, was still staring at us.

When I arrived at *Sunset* the following day, Brad had already drunk a cup of coffee. He looked pale and his usual air of bohemian, dismissive—a la James Dean—masculine arrogance had been substituted by a dark cloud of existential agony. I almost felt sorry for him. “Thanks for coming,” he said. “No problem,” I replied as I was trying to make myself comfortable. I ordered a cappuccino and waited. Brad’s hands tightened around his cup; he hastily looked outside the coffee shop before he finally spoke. “You must be wondering about the purpose of this meeting.” The waiter served my coffee. “Thank you.” I took a sip. “Yes.” I looked around me; no familiar faces. I relaxed. “It’s difficult,” Brad said and covered his face with his hands. I transiently wondered what I was getting into. He took a few deep breaths. I waited. He looked at me. He was in tears.

“Why doesn’t he talk to me anymore?” I knew he was referring to Alex. “Who...?” I asked. “You know...” I lowered my eyes. “He has sex with others. I am ready to accept that,” Brad continued, “but I am not willing to be ignored like that.” He wiped his tears and took a few more deep breaths. “I am in love with him.” Brad’s confession struck me like a lightning. “Do you...do you like men?” I asked. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. “I don’t know,” he said, “and I don’t care...I only know I am in love with Alex.” *How can you be in love with a feminine fag who fucks with everyone? Can’t you see I am better than him? Why can’t you cry for me, Brad? I am fat, I know, but I am a decent human being. Don’t you think I also deserve to be loved? Dear God...I didn’t know a man could cry for another man, Brad. I swear I didn’t...I am so jealous of your little fag...* “I see.” I tried to suppress my tears. “How could I ever forget the moments I shared with him?” Brad was engaging in a self-absorbed monologue. “How could I ever forget his body...?” I was only able to sit there silent; petrified; envious. “He’s not coming back.” His eyes met mine. My cruelty made me feel ashamed. “I know.” I could hear resignation in his voice. “I just wanted to talk to someone who would be able to understand.” I remained silent. “Alex has told me you are gay.” Of course he had, what did I expect? Deep down I knew it but Brad’s actual confirmation shocked me. I could feel panic enveloping my body. I couldn’t breathe. “Who else knows?” I mumbled. “Just me and Alex...” I put my elbows on the table and rubbed my eyes. I wouldn’t dare look at Brad. My saliva tasted sour. I was ready to cry. “You don’t need to worry,” Brad said, “no one...” but I cut him off. “What do you want from me?” My aggression astounded him. I could tell he was uncertain how to answer. “I just...I mean...Alex has told me you want to study psychology in the future...” He stopped to check my reaction but I said

nothing. “Anyway...I just wanted to talk to someone.” I remained silent. “I feel like shit...” He was in tears again. He was grieving for Alex. And I was grieving for myself. It was a silent, tearless grief; a voiceless grief that possessed no power to break out of my cemented body and translate itself into gestures, actions, tears, words...I was grieving because Brad’s tears were not for me; I was grieving because I deeply desired for a man—any man—to cry for me; I was grieving because I was gay; I was grieving because, unless I extended an inviting hand to a man and pursued an intimate, sexual relationship, the possibility to love and be loved would be slim, almost inexistent; I was grieving because I was afraid my fear would discourage me from stating, *here I am! Give me your hand. I want to love and be loved. I am scared to death but I will do my best to withstand the sweet darkness of intimacy. Fuck society...Fuck the others...Let’s go...Together...It may last for a minute...It may last forever...It’s OK...Give me your hand...* Oh, I had so many reasons to grieve for...None of these reasons, though, were revealed to Brad. I sat quietly drinking my coffee and looking outside the coffee shop, allowing both of us to leave the unsayable unsaid.

This meeting marked the beginning of a peculiar relationship between Brad and me. We would meet at *Sunset* once a week. Brad would lament the loss of his first male lover and I would absorb every word, every tear, and every facial expression of pain, anger, and lustful nostalgia. Unbeknownst to him, he had become my own private tutor. He was teaching me the art of navigating through the labyrinthine crossroads of tracing, following, welcoming, experiencing, and surrendering to my sexual desire; my desire to feel intimate to another man; my desire to love. He was introducing me into a totally new language that nobody had ever taught me before; a writing system that was composed of

neither Greek nor Latin letters. I was like a blind man in a dark room, experiencing the texture of its walls for the very first time; or like a turtle, reluctantly extending its head out from its shell after heavy rainfall. Almost breathless in awe, I was observing Brad, the epitome of conventional, Greek, macho masculinity, being unashamedly flooded with erotic love for another man. Where had I gone wrong? Why hadn't I ever been flooded with similar feelings for another man? Or had I?

I suddenly remembered Ralph...Had I ever loved him? Was it love? Or was it just my imagination? But as I was sitting across the table from Brad week after week, I would grow increasingly uncomfortable with these questions on love. I ended up feeling deeply enraged. Fuck love...Why should I feel love? Why should my sexual desire for Ralph or any other man involve love? What is love? Who could ever conclusively define or explain love? How could I ever feel love for another man when my fat body—my sexually desiring fat body—felt so foreign, so ugly, so frozen, and so appalling to me? How could I ever express love to a man when the mere thought of approaching a male body made me feel the ground beneath my feet tremble? How ironic...As long as the prospect of a sexual encounter with a man seemed impossible, my sexual imagination would go wild. But Alex and Brad had changed everything. They had shown me in the most concrete way that a sexual relationship between two men was indeed possible. It was one thing to vaguely hear about men being sexually involved with each other; it was another thing, however, to actually see it. And the indisputable proof of a man sexually surrendering to another man had confirmed one thing beyond a shred of doubt: my desire to have sex with a man could be realistically accomplished. It wasn't a dream-like vision anymore, a desire living in the realm of the immaterial. It *could* be *actually* fulfilled. This

realization shocked me, terrified me. It turned my sexually desiring body into an enemy to be even further thwarted; it stifled my hitherto vivid, sexual imagination. That's when the issue of love emerged. All of a sudden, I became obsessed with ascertaining the nature of love. I became engrossed with the abstract vastness of love because I was unable to deal with the concrete, relentlessly present, specificity of my sexual desire. Untangling the riddle of love served as the ideal smokescreen to mask feelings of fear, shame, excitement, and disgust over the prospect of having sex with a man. It was one more attempt to "purify" my sexual desire, divest it of all its fleshy, corporeal power, and render it inert, lifeless, and invisible; at bay. But Brad's tears would softly chastise me; they would urge me to follow their watery messages and leave the exploration of love to philosophers. *Go back to the basics...Go back to your body...It's not that love does not contain sexual desire...It's not that sexual desire does not contain love...Who could tell the exact difference anyway...Deciphering the riddle of love, though, should be of no interest to you right now...You will just get entangled in useless theoretical explorations that will only distance you from what should really matter to you at present...The materiality of your desiring body...The materiality of the desiring body...Your body...Others' bodies...are here...You see them...You feel them...You touch them...There is no way around...You could theorize about love again and again and again...But a body...the material presence of a body...demands a response...Its sexually desiring flesh unquestionably invites a response...Your rumination about love could go on and on and on...in secret...or in public...Thoughts, ideas, words, language...These are all so important...But they are pure air without bodies...They can't exist without bodies...They don't exist without bodies...Leave love aside for the moment...Its theoretical or*

psychological exploration could wait...Because...if you were to ever experience love...feel it...share it...or communicate it...whatever love may be...you should first feel at home in your body...tolerate the presence of others' bodies...sense them...savor them...respond to them...and thus...awaken your body...invite your body to venture out of its dark cave...a cave you know all too well...a cave made of shameful and fearful materials...a cave that represents the death of your flesh...your inability to breathe freely...your frozen, mummified, human condition...Frozen...Your body is frozen with fear...It serves as your own, personal armor...a panoply to protect you from abusive words and gazes...There have been so many abusive words and gazes in the past...so much silent suffering...We know...We, Brad's warm tears, know what it feels to suffer...and we are here to comfort you...We are here to look deep in your eyes and call forth our watery lovers...Your tears...We are here to make you sob...That's right...Sob...Because...unless you sob...unless you pay attention to your sobbing spasms...how else could your body remind you that...it's alive...?How else could it melt its armor and welcome others' bodies...? How else could it force a response from you...? How else could your body express its desire to be in communion with other bodies...? How else could it cry out its solitude...its unbearable, calcified despair...? How else...? No...You won't collapse...Have faith in us...Have faith in your body...Absorb our energy...Release your tears...Loosen up your fleshy armor...Approach your cells...your tissues...your muscles...your bones...your viscera...That's where your emotions hide...That's where they are patiently waiting to be found...Philosophical explorations won't suffice...They won't heal you...They will never discover the primordial fever of your body...Its ambivalence between life and death...Its direct connection to destruction and victimhood...Its unfathomable power to enjoy...Ideas

alone won't teach you anything about the inevitable decay of life...Only bodies can...Only bodies will...Listen to them...Listen to your body...Observe it...It travels alone...But it shares a common fate with all other bodies...It's mortal...Yes...Mortal...Alive but mortal...Constantly vulnerable...And we, Brad's warm tears, are here to remind you of your mortality...That's what primarily binds you with other bodies...with other people...Don't be afraid of them...They are radically different...But their bodies are mortal like yours...Approach them...Embrace them...Worship them...Now...Before it's too late...Open up your arms...Welcome your body...others' bodies...Now...You have nothing to be afraid of...Nothing...Nothing?

The Angel Poems – V

*Before they ripen into diffused spirits,
angels are leaf-stalks
and their wings begonia leaves
with dark surfaces
and red glitterings within.
Slowly, very slowly, they emerge out of the flowerpot
of the body,
take on the face of Bill or Bob,
pierce through the cool bower
of the world
and ascend like the promise
of a harmonious end;
on their lips shine
the last bubbles of our breathing,
those droplets
of our unrelieved loneliness.
—Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, *The Scattered Papers
of Penelope: New & Selected Poems*, (2009, p.19).*

“We saw you having coffee with Brad yesterday.” I was heading into the dining hall when I bumped into Robert and Andrew smoking outside the entrance. I suddenly found myself overwhelmed with fear but I tried to hide it. I stopped. “That’s right. What’s the problem?” I was planning to sound dismissive but my voice betrayed my

underlying defensiveness. “No problem at all.” Robert took a drag and looked at me inquisitively. “I guess you know Brad fucks little boys,” he added. “What do you mean?” I asked, making a desperate effort to wear a poker face. Andrew sarcastically clicked his tongue several times against the roof of his mouth and slowly shook his head in apparent disbelief. “Such an innocent boy...” he whispered. I remained silent. “Well,” Robert said, “in case you don’t know...Brad undresses little boys like you...or the other fucking slut...Alex...and sticks his dick in their bubbly asses...” I said nothing. “In fact,” Andrew added, “Brad fucks everything and everyone...boys, girls, bottles, chairs, plastic dolls, socks...” Their faces were carved with triumphant joy, silently yelling *BUSTED!!* I nervously cleared my throat. “You seem to know everything about Brad’s sex life. That’s so strange...” I knew it was risky to return their sarcasm but I couldn’t help it. They seemed undisturbed by my words, though, and just shrugged their shoulders. “You know better...” Andrew replied and spat on the ground. They both put out their cigarettes and leaned over the wall with their hands deep in their pockets. “What is it that I know better?” I asked. Robert tauntingly—pseudo-seductively—passed his tongue over his lips. “Brad’s sex life of course...” I was tempted to run away but I managed to stand still, and whisper “Bullshit...” My body eventually emerged from its deep, temporary paralysis; I entered the dining hall, feeling their looks firmly stuck on my back. I tried to eat but food just wouldn’t go down. There were other people around me but I wasn’t able to see them. At some point, I wondered whether the person trying to have lunch at the dining hall was really me. I was rapidly plunging into a state of depersonalization and fear was running through my body.

It finally hit me that my life in Samos would never be the same again. I wasn't imaginative enough, though, to envisage the consequences of my odd, intricate pas de deux with Brad. I was unwilling, perhaps, to accept that the time of persecution—my own persecution—was coming closer and closer. The dot, that lonely, black, shapeless dot of my childhood years, returned and haunted my daydreams. It filled them with anguished scenes in which I would be repeatedly chased down, stoned, and, ultimately, devoured like Sebastian in Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer*. But that was not the purpose of my weekly meetings with Brad...Damn...Persecution—my own, personal, literal persecution—arrived at the time when I was preparing, reluctantly but trustingly, to surrender to my body, my sexually desiring body, other bodies, intimacy...It arrived at the time when I was getting increasingly ready to welcome joy and pleasure into my body and life...Persecution...I have to describe it for the purposes of this dissertation but, in all honesty, I fervently want to avoid this gruesome task...Oh God...are you there...? OK...I'll keep it short...I am taking a deep breath...Here we go...

How did it start? Yes...It started with gazes; cautious, fearful, silently aggressive gazes. I noticed them for the first time as I was sitting among other soldiers in the cargo area of a REO military truck. We were heading towards a mountain in order to participate in a two-day military exercise along with NATO forces from other countries. We were supposed to sleep in two-person tents but nobody wanted to share a tent with me. I ended up sharing my tent with a guy from France who was more than enthusiastic to socialize with a Greek guy having an intermediate command of French. However, the fact that I could speak French (a language that Greek males generally despise because, in their opinion, it sounds soft and “sissy”) made things worse. As we were heading back to the

military base, I came up against the same fearful, cautious, and aggressive gazes. Apart from the gazes, though, I could also detect sarcastic smiles on my colleagues' faces. "So...you speak French..." one of them observed. I looked at him. His name was John²² and his contempt was more than evident. "Yes," I replied and kept looking outside the truck. I was scared. "Only fags learn to speak French in Greece," John declared and slowly scratched his chin. "Yes...that's right..." others agreed with him. I said nothing but I was fairly aware that remaining silent wouldn't absolve me of my sins. I was right. A few minutes later, John broke the news I had been expecting to hear. "We've heard some rumors about you babe..." For some mysterious reason, John's voice along with the articulation of the word "babe" made me nauseous. I had a vague feeling that I was being viewed as an expendable prostitute by everyone in that truck. Their eyes were revealing a mixture of lust along with murderous rage. I couldn't breathe...I couldn't breathe...But I somehow found the courage to look at John. "What am I supposed to say?" I murmured. John smirked. "The truth babe...just the truth..." he replied and brought his fist only centimeters away from his mouth. He opened it and slowly moved his fist back and forth, imitating the movement of a blowjob. The other soldiers in the truck burst into a wild, mocking laughter. I felt humiliated beyond description but I managed to utter, "Are you happy now?" John vividly shook his head no and kept moving his fist back and forth. "The truth babe..." he repeated. All of a sudden, various voices could be heard, urging me to confess. "Speak up bitch!" "Yes, speak up you fucking slut!!" "The truth fag...just the truth!!" As I was sitting there speechless, terrified, and humiliated, I was wondering whether I would ever stop being the object of mockery and ridicule in my life. I had spent a great deal of my childhood and adolescence coping with bullying and defending my

²²This is a pseudonym. I haven't seen or heard from John since November, 1997.

right to be fat and different. I was again faced with a similar situation. Something in me had changed, though. Something in me was preventing me from engaging into any kind of verbal defense. Something was telling me to remain mute; confirm nothing; let them wonder. And thus, despite my fear for my own physical integrity and my sense of humiliation, I said and confirmed nothing. I was simply looking at those wild faces and defending my right to remain silent. It wasn't bravery or courage because, in reality, I was scared to death. No. It was a strong, wild sense of justice that I felt I had always owed to myself. My sexuality was none of anyone's business. And it was up to me to convey this message to others; my personal responsibility.

Of course, my decision to remain silent did not deter others from engaging in a full-blown war against me. The rumors about my sexuality had quickly spread all over the military base and the great majority of soldiers along with a small number of officers, outraged by my defiant silence, would continuously insult me. The small word "fag" had totally obliterated the complexity of my subjectivity. I would be called a fag everywhere: in the dining hall, in the bathrooms, in the barracks rooms, in the offices, in the hallways, outside the buildings, inside the buildings, on the street... "Good morning, fag!" "Fuck off, fag!" "Get lost, fag!" "Make some photocopies, fag!" "Translate this passage, fag!" "Here is the fag!" "Are your parents proud of you, fag?" "Why don't you drop dead, fag?" "Can you get two cocks in your ass at the same time, fag?" "Do you also rape kids, fag?" "You are fat like a pig, fag!" "Don't you dare touch me, fag!" "You snore like a horse, fag!" "Would you ever suck my dick, fag?" "Your mother should have aborted you, fag!" "You smell like shit, fag!" "You are nothing more than a fucking fag...a whore...a leper...a fag!" I would usually smile and give one-word responses. "Yes."

“Sure.” “OK.” Behind my fraudulent smile, though, panic and shock would feel palpable. The brutality of their verbal attacks had shocked me; it went beyond anything I had ever experienced in the past. But I had decided that I would never allow them to see through my armor...

My body had dropped into survival mode. It was telling me that I wanted to vent my spleen on them; step on them; terminate them like Arnold Schwarzenegger did in the well-known movie. My mind, though, would always advise me to hit the brakes and wait until I was restored to some degree of composure. Mind you, there were several instances when it was almost impossible to maintain it. For example, given that I didn't have a cell phone back in 1997, I could only call my parents from the public phones in the canteen. I would talk to them in public view and, quite often, I would be surrounded by several soldiers who would mockingly whisper *fag, fag, fag...* repeatedly. I would keep talking to my parents but my heart would almost break knowing that, at any moment, I could be ridiculed...I didn't want my parents to become ear-witnesses of my humiliation...I simply didn't...

One evening, after a 2-hour shift as a gate guard, I was ready to enter my room but eventually changed my mind. I sat outside instead, smoking a cigarette and enjoying the beautiful, warm, starry night. Besides, I needed a few minutes to prepare myself for the shower of insults I would receive upon entering the room. All of a sudden, I noticed that one of the windows was semi-open. I approached it quietly and, once more, started eavesdropping. They were all talking about me. “I saw him swallowing Brad's cock in the bathrooms last night...” “Are you surprised?” That was Robert. “The fat cow was telling me the other day that he—or, perhaps she—has sucked to completion more than

half of the male Samos population!” I admired his imaginative power. Loud laughter and mocking, whistling sounds were heard. “We should probably make her blow all of us every night, one after the other!!” Even louder laughter was heard. “I’ve got a better idea!” Andrew said. “How about having both sluts swallow us every night??” They were referring to Alex and me...I leaned over the wall; it was too much humiliation. “At least the other slut knows who she is...” Robert replied sarcastically. “She doesn’t pretend to be something she’s not...She is a fucking fag, period! A woman! She knows it! As opposed to the fat cow...” “Yes,” John added, “we should remind the fat leper her true identity again. That is...how a fag normally talks, walks, moves...and sucks!!” Their laughter was heard maniacal. “You need to be a little girly to deserve our dicks darling!!” Andrew said loudly, as if participating in a theatrical performance. “Come on! You are like shit anyway...ugly and fat...who’s going to use your mouth if you don’t go back to your roots? Come on...We’ve got the milky juice...It will be an utterly transformative experience!!” The laughing commotion gradually subsided. “Where is the fat cow, anyway?” asked Robert. “Who cares...?” John replied in a drowsy voice. Total silence prevailed in the room after a few minutes. But I wouldn’t dare go inside. My body was all fear and I wanted to collapse to the ground and cry. However, I wouldn’t dare do that either. Instead, I kept leaning over and pushing against the wall, as if I wanted to be one with it; white; invisible. When I finally found the courage to enter the room, everyone was asleep. I quietly undressed for bed and hid my fat body under several, black, military blankets.

The following three months went by without any significant disruptions in my usual routine, one that undeviatingly included daily verbal abuse and humiliation. I was

slowly approaching my psychological threshold of pain tolerance but it never occurred to me to ask for help. I was deeply convinced that asking for help would have been a totally futile gesture; or that I didn't deserve any...Therefore, I would suffer silently and secretly, putting as much effort as possible into escaping away from the military base during my days off. I would usually head towards remote villages and beaches where I could swim, read, and dine without constantly feeling threatened and humiliated. Needless to say, of course, these days would be spent in utter solitude. Brad and Alex, despite their silent disapproval of my verbal and psychological abuse, had both discreetly chosen to sever all relations with me. They never explained to me why, but I suspect that my persecution had deeply shocked them too. Were they, perhaps, wondering whether they would likely be the next targets? I can't tell...What I can tell with some degree of certainty, however, is that they never ran any such risk. They both represented two clearly recognizable and socially sanctioned figures of the Greek sex and sexual palette. Brad was a biologically male, behaviorally masculine individual who would penetrate others with his penis. Alex, on the other hand, was a biologically male, behaviorally feminine individual who would be penetrated by others' penises; he was called into the service of hegemonic masculinity and perfectly fit the Greek discourse of the "slutty, promiscuous, feminine fag."As for myself, even before I was seen having coffee with Brad, my colleagues had never regarded me as the ideal representative of the Greek, macho man. I would tend to feel uncomfortable with other men; I would never talk about women; and I had absolutely no interest in soccer. My masculine manners, though, and the easiness by which I, as opposed to Alex, would incorporate my military training into my everyday activities at the base had confused my colleagues. I was somewhat shy and awkward, perhaps, but I

was definitely—they thought—one of them. My weekly meetings with Brad, though, had rendered me socially, psychologically, and corporeally unintelligible, an enigma to be urgently decoded. I was an enigma because, although I was a behaviorally masculine male, I would meet *alone* with Brad, the perfect embodiment of the Greek, macho “stallion.” It was common knowledge among my colleagues at the military base that Brad would never meet with anyone—male or female—alone, unless he wanted to fuck. Therefore, it was perfectly natural for them to conclude that he wanted to fuck me. He, like Alex, had been reduced to a single part of his body; unlike Alex, though, he had been reduced to his penis and perceived as an emotionless fucking machine with no interest in feelings. And a masculine-mannered male like me, despite my occasional deviations from the dominant Greek model of masculinity, was supposed to follow on Brad’s footsteps and sexually penetrate others instead of meeting with him... Meeting alone with him meant that I *actually wanted* to be penetrated by him. And that was something that my colleagues—indefatigable guardians of proper manhood— would never tolerate without raising specific questions and taking necessary action... *Why does he meet with Brad alone? Could it be that he, a masculine male, enjoys to be penetrated by other males? No... This can't be!! But... what if this is actually the case?? This means... this means that these... creatures could be everywhere around us... in disguise! Women disguised as men... Good grief... But... there must be a way to detect them...! Deep down in their fucking souls, behind their masculine façades, there must be a hidden female identity... And we are here to help them—make them, actually force them—discover this identity and incorporate it into their everyday behavioral and corporeal functioning... Oh yes... we are here to force this fat cow to discover the woman she really is... the woman she*

hides...Nobody will ever be deceived by her in the future again...She will be easily detectable...easily classifiable...visible...an effeminate fag...not a masculine fraud...

I remember it was some time towards the end of August when, after a lonely but peaceful day at the beach, I returned back to the military base. I was holding a small bottle of mineral water and the guard who opened the gate smirked. “Are you still thirsty?” he asked and, judging from his facial expression, I knew I would shortly be faced with one more insult. I decided to accept the challenge, though, and gave him a seemingly naïve answer. “I guess so. Besides, it’s still so hot...” It was obvious that he didn’t like my answer. “I didn’t mean that, bitch...” he murmured threateningly. “Then, what did you mean?” I asked and looked him in the eyes. The moment I uttered these words, I realized I had ran out of patience. I could feel my anger ready to explode. Meanwhile, my body was unconsciously preparing to protect itself against the danger of physical violence. “Come on girl...” he protested, adopting a pseudo-complaining tone of voice, “you know...” I kept looking him in the eyes, smiled, and slowly shook my head no. “Explain to me, my sweet love...Come on...Words don’t usually bite...Come on...” He wasn’t able to conceal his surprise. I was pretty surprised myself too. I had no idea I could be so vitriolic. What had happened to my paralyzing fear? “Cum...That’s what I meant, bitch...Haven’t you had enough cum so far? After all, you’ve been out all day...You must have milked more than eighty cocks out there...” As I was trying to process his words, I was simultaneously wondering why I couldn’t feel scared and humiliated anymore. But the time wasn’t right for emotional explorations. I smiled again and slowly approached him a little. It was deeply satisfying to detect fear flitting across his face. My eyes were taking enormous, sadistic pleasure in watching him step back and

agonizingly wait for my next move. “What are you afraid of?” I asked him pseudo-affectionately, as if soothing a baby, “I am not going to harm you...or touch you in any way...” He immediately became defensive. “I am not afraid of you, bitch!” he exclaimed aggressively. “I can see that,” I responded in a mellow tone of voice, “I just wanted to answer your question...Do you still want an answer?” He remained silent. I smiled and approached him a little more. “In case you are still wondering...yes...I am still thirsty.” I waited a few seconds but he wouldn’t respond. “I am at your disposal if you ever have any other questions. Wishes for a pleasant night...” I swung around and started up the pathway leading to my barracks room. But my body wouldn’t allow me to walk fast. I was shaking and my stomach was experiencing severe spasms. I checked the time; I still had half an hour before I should report to the duty officer. I decided to head towards a small nearby grove of trees. When I finally arrived, I approached the first tree I saw and my body, relieved, sank to the ground and leaned against its trunk. It was a beautiful, starry night again but my body was violently shaking and my eyes could only perceive celestial, dizzying patterns. Unexpectedly, I tasted tears on my lips; once more, I remembered Liv Ullmann’s words: ***I wanted to cry, but I couldn't—I couldn't utter a single sound. I tried to scream, but only stifled grunts came out, which scared me even more, as I thought I was going insane*** (Ingmar Bergman, 1978, Autumn Sonata Movie Script; electronic resource). I knew what she meant; as I was trying to control my aching, shaking body, I could only produce grunting sounds myself too. Then, a mysterious power forced my body sideways and, before I was able to react, I found myself vomiting out foods, liquids, words, insults, humiliations, and abuse. My body was uncontrollably shaking; for the first time in months, its forceful, lamenting protest had broken through

my fleshy armor, bringing to surface bile, dirt, darkness, and an unquestionable desire to be and feel alive, one that I had never experienced in the past. Having received so much death in the form of verbal and psychological abuse, I had ultimately encountered my strong desire to live, welcome, and take pleasure in everything life had to offer me. I knew all too well that my struggle to keep following my desire to live and enjoy would last for the rest of my life. After all, my inclination towards pessimism and depression had always been present in my life. But it was so fucking comforting to know that there was a little sparkle in me that desired to live...How strange...It was then and there, in the midst of a grove and surrounded by my disgusting vomit, that, for the very first time, I felt I was a sweet, beautiful human being. Despite my fatness and homosexuality or, perhaps, because of my painful struggle to accept my fatness and homosexuality, I had become a compassionate human being who had never harmed anybody and deserved to enjoy life. And it took me months of daily, systematic abuse to reach this conclusion without feeling guilty or arrogant. My sexual desire had been shaped, put into words, defined, and experienced emotionally and corporeally within the Greek, societal/cultural, oppressive, self-punitive, hostile, puritanical, hypocritical, regulatory matrix. This matrix had to be concretized into actual insults and abuse during my military service in order for me to understand its prior, invisibly destructive effect on my body and soul in all its fullness; its brutalizing effect on my ability to feel minimally intimate with myself and others; its corrosive effect on my willingness to protect myself and choose life instead of death; its constraining effect on my openness to mourning and crying...And, as soon as the above intellectual insights had been experientially understood by and incorporated into my body, a small victory was won for myself: I cried. I bitterly cried for all the harm

and violence that I had unwittingly agreed to exert upon myself in the past; I fearfully cried because I had no idea whether I would ever be able to break away from this self-destructive, lifeless pathway; and, finally, I cried with joy and relief because the demons haunting my mind and body for such a long time had eventually come to surface and acquired distinct shapes and forms.

The Scar

*Instead of a star, a scar shone over my birth.
The pain my uncongealed body suffered
pushed me back into the original darkness.
I crawled on nothingness, my tiny fingers
clutching death like a shiny black toy.
I don't remember how I came to blossom into a wound,
how I learned to find a balance between pus
and my open eyes.
But at the point where my mother had assumed
that like a leaf on the water I'd be carried off
on my first journey by the stream of death,
she unexpectedly saw me emerge from the dark.
Who knows what exchanges were made that night,
what I gave and what I took, what I renounced,
what I promised so life would keep me in its service?
Was it blackmail, agreement, or threat?
Should I be grateful for the butchered gift of existence
or vengeful? Had I been ordered
to look up or to cast my eyes down
to the roots of forgiveness?
Forgiveness? For what? What was this crushing weight
that had exhausted me
even before I had set off?
Or had I taken up another burden
that I'd carry limping to the end?*

*I lived and I began to play.
Trustingly I leaned upon the brace
and climbed the stairs.
In the attic I built the kingdom of my dreams
with paper cut-outs. I called it Florence
my magic city, with its delicate ladies and gentlemen in hats.
Next to the door stood the water-tank
that thundered now and then*

*above the insubstantial actions of my heroes.
The warmth of this world drifted up from below,
the kitchen filled with smells, familiar sounds,
household voices: What time is it?
Have you peeled the potatoes?
The kitchen and my paper imagination—
can the two poles of my existence have been fixed so early?
—Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, *The Scattered Papers
of Penelope: New & Selected Poems*, (2009, pp.53-54).*

I pulled myself together as best as I could and reached the empty bathrooms. I frantically got my mouth washed out with soap for several minutes and tried to expunge the rancid taste of vomit. Satisfied, I made my way to the duty officer's office and knocked on the door. "Come in!" he yelled. I opened the door. "I am here," I said, ready for more insults. "You are late," he barked. I momentarily closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "I apologize." I was weighing whether I should tell him the truth. "I was a little sick today." He looked at me. "That's why I was late." He smiled. "What was the problem?" he asked. "Nothing serious...I threw up on my way to the base." He sharpened a pencil and looked at me again. "I am glad it was nothing serious. For a moment I just assumed you were bleeding out your ass." He smiled as he once more sharpened the same pencil. "Don't be late again or I'll have to report it. Off you go!" I closed the door and headed towards my barracks room. As I was approaching, I could hear the usual, all too familiar laughing and talking sounds. I walked straight into the dimly lit room and sat on my bed. All of a sudden, an ominous silence prevailed in the room but I paid no attention. I grabbed my physical fitness uniform and proceeded towards the bathrooms to change. The room was still silent when I went back. I was getting ready to lie down in bed when Robert's voice was heard. "Kiskiras...come here for a sec dude..." Dude...? I was puzzled; he had never called me dude before. "What do you want?" I asked. I looked around the

room; everyone was expectantly watching me. Their eyes in the dark resembled those of feline predators before leaping to attack their prey. I could feel a palpable sense of urgency and excitement in the air. "I just want to ask you something." Robert's voice was devoid of its usual, sadistically cruel tone but that was not enough to appease my sense of alarm. I finally decided to approach his bed and, as soon as I had taken the first step, mocking snickers were heard. I stopped. "Come on dude..." Robert urged me to go on. An internal voice was advising me to go back to my bed but, as if I had been mesmerized, I suddenly found myself nearing Robert's bed in the left corner of our large barracks room. I could clearly see the black silhouette of his body in the dark but it was impossible to discern his nakedness. This only became fully visible after I had approached Robert close enough to perceive his fully erect penis. He was masturbating, slowly pushing and pulling the foreskin of his penis back and forth. He proudly observed his cock for several seconds and then gazed at me. He was truly handsome and I felt a strong urge to hold him and sexually pleasure him. *Would you stop persecuting me if I showed you how much pleasure I wish to give you? Would you at last make peace with me? Would you ever regard me as your equal? Would you ever accept me? Would you ever stop being afraid of me? Would you ever love me?* No, he wouldn't. He desired to eradicate me. Hence, I forcefully ignored my erection and concentrated on how I could destroy this body before it destroyed mine. I once more looked around me; I could clearly sense the wild, predatory power of numerous pairs of eyes. My colleagues' insatiable gazes were coming from every direction encircling me. They were thirsty for blood. It was either them or me.

Robert was slowly alternating his gaze between his cock and my eyes. There was a constant, proud smile engraved on his face. He was lying in his bed entirely naked but

he seemingly felt totally secure and certain of his manhood. “Come on girl...” he uttered softly, “I know you want it...” I heard snickers behind me; then, silence again. Robert started playing with his left nipple. His smile became more pronounced and he slowly nodded. “You really want my cock...You know it...I know it...What are you waiting for?” He closed his eyes. He sighed. “You can be my little, sweet, fat, whore...” He opened them again. “Come here...” I had remained motionless and silent throughout Robert’s entire effort to entice me with his penis. I was admiring the beauty of his naked body but I finally decided it was time to break out of inertia and strike back. I slowly walked towards the head of his bed in order to be closer to his face. Robert stopped playing with his cock and followed my moving body with his eyes. All of a sudden, his proud, virile nakedness had been transformed into a source of embarrassing vulnerability. I had decided to focus on his eyes instead of his penis. “Thank you Robert,” I responded pseudo-politely, “I definitely appreciate your invitation and your effort to make me feel like a complete, fat whore.” I waited for a few seconds but Robert remained silent and my predatory colleagues around me were silently watching the unfolding scene between him and me. “However, before I give you a definite answer on whether I will accept your generous invitation,” I continued, “I wish to ask you a very important question.” Robert sat up in bed and temporarily looked undecided as to what to do next. He eventually dragged himself out of bed and wore his uniform pants. He then stood a few meters away from me. His eyes were fixed on mine. “If I am not deceived,” I said, “your girlfriend’s name is Angelica²³, right?” Robert kept looking at me and remaining silent. It was evident that he wasn’t expecting my reaction. “So...I am wondering...What would you say to her if I sucked your dick? How would you explain to her the fact that you want a

²³ This is a pseudonym.

blowjob from a man?" I paused in order to take a breath. Curiously, I felt lucid and calm. Robert's face was revealing a silent, underlying anger. "Of course," I added, "you may claim that I am not *any* man. I am a fag, right? Isn't that what you think?" I addressed everyone in the room. "Isn't that what you all think?" I would never grant them the satisfaction of an unequivocal confirmation. "But...my dearest Robert," I sarcastically said, "I...there is one thing I know for sure." The look in his eyes was telling me that I was moving into uncharted, emotional territory. "A real man," I continued, "a real man, I repeat, would never allow *any* other man, fags included, to touch him." Although it was forbidden to smoke in the barracks room, I lit a cigarette, took a drag, and smiled. "Am I right?" Instead of an answer, Robert moved threateningly toward me. "I'll cut you into pieces, bitch..." he hissed, "I promise...I'll kill you..." Despite my fear, I looked him in the eyes and challenged him. "Do it. Do you really want to kill me dude? Do it! Cut me into pieces! I won't resist! It's a golden chance that may never come again, bastard!!" I was seething with rage. "Do it, fucking bastard! Kill me! KILL ME! I WON'T RESIST!! KILL ME!!" I threw the cigarette on the floor, extended my hands sideways, and moved toward Robert. My pent up anger was fast going out of control. "HERE I AM! HERE I AM, MOTHERFUCKER! KILL ME, GODDAMMIT! KILL ME, NOW! KILL ME!!" Robert was standing there petrified, utterly shocked by my overflowing anger. He walked towards his bed and I followed him, gasping for air. "Where do you think you are going, son of a bitch?? Didn't you want to kill me, cut me into pieces?? HERE I AM!! DO IT OR SHUT THE FUCK UP!!" I gave a kick at his bed and, utterly beyond any sense of psychological control, I screamed. I screamed my heart out and sadistically enjoyed my colleagues' palpable fear. It was about time...It was about time...

The news of the above incident travelled fast all over the military base and, quite paradoxically, my verbal and psychological abuse stopped. Come to think of it, however, the end of my abuse was not paradoxical at all. I had overnight been transformed from a fag to a lunatic to be avoided at all costs. One stigmatizing label had been substituted for another. I didn't give a shit, though...I was so fucking exhausted...I could bear with any label, so long as they left me alone. And they did leave me alone. For the first time in months, I was able again to eat, sleep, read, and breathe without being constantly abused, harassed, or insulted. I had been granted some very precious time to heal a little and stop feeling breathlessly persecuted. I was painfully aware that my social status as a fat, gay man would always bring me into conflict with the dominant, cultural, and sexual values of Greece one way or another. Nonetheless, it was equally comforting and heartening to know that, notwithstanding the enormous suffering I had been obliged to endure, I also possessed the necessary strength and stamina to defend myself and survive in harsh environments. The scars of my military trauma will always be engraved in my soul. New scars have been and will be undoubtedly added to the old ones. Nevertheless, the psychological and corporeal memory of my survival as a soldier has been instrumental in rearranging my mental and psychological furniture. It has emphatically pointed to the vicissitudes and the complexity of my sexual desire and my desire to feel sexually intimate with others. Most importantly, though, it has taught me that hardships such as rejection, marginalization, and persecution do not necessarily lead to death and extinction. It has taught me that I am here to desire; I am here to stay.

Chapter 6

Autoethnographic Journeys (2): Violence/Lust/Intimacy or Ode to Greg

The Angel Poems – VIII

*When angels chance to become
lovers, they offer themselves
with a hard shell on the outside
that keeps them untouchable
amid the evils of passion.
I caress the uneven surfaces
of their carapaces
and resemble a blind woman,
run my fingers up and down
to find some opening as at midnight
they silently extend a member,
a dark extension of themselves
that searches me out as I envelop them.
My senseless company seems headless
and so I feel free
to imagine angels
with wide-spread wings
sunning themselves on their backs
in the divine scorching heat
with their fleshy jewels
glittering in the air.*

—Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, *The Scattered Papers of Penelope: New & Selected Poems*, (2009, p. 23).

On the Stairs

*As I was going down the shameful stair,
you came in the door, and for a moment
I saw your unfamiliar face and you saw me.
Then I hid so you wouldn't see me again, and you
passed by quickly as you hid your face,
and stole inside the shameful house
where you likely found no pleasure, just as I found none.*

*And yet the love you wanted, I had to give you;
the love I wanted—your eyes told me so,
tired and suspicious—you had it to give me.
Our bodies sensed and sought each other out;
our blood and skin understood.*

But we hid from each other, we two, terrified.
—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, p.314)

Greg²⁴, do you remember my small apartment in New Jersey? Can you still bring to mind the green curtains in my bedroom? Had you ever noticed that they were usually closed each time you were there? (Pause) If yes, you never mentioned anything. No, I am not claiming that the curtains should have been open. Of course they shouldn't; we did the right thing. After all, we didn't want to be seen having sex by my neighbors in the opposite building, did we? We wanted to protect our privacy and avoid being charged with public lewdness. We wished to be perfectly law-abiding and respectful and, if you ask me, we did a great job. But, at this point, I would like to point out something which, at least in my opinion, is quite important: the green curtains in my bedroom were closed at ALL times, even when we were fully clothed. We would just watch TV or fall asleep in each other's arms but, still, the green curtains would always be hermetically closed. I never suggested that we pull them back and you never complained. I would always pull them back after you had left...

What the hell was happening to us, Greg? Were we so fucking ashamed of the affection we showed to each other because we were both men? Or we just didn't want others to know that an American, black man and a Greek, white man were enjoying each other's bodies so much? Did we, perhaps, think that our interracial, sexual relationship could exclusively breathe behind closed doors and bars? Is it possible that we only felt protected within the confines of my bedroom walls, floating around a lustful, utterly claustrophobic ocean of our own invention? I am wondering...given the circumstances under which we met...were we able to offer each other a minimum sense of warmth, comfort, and acceptance? Were these happy times for us, Greg?

²⁴This is a pseudonym. Greg has had the opportunity to review this chapter and offer suggestions. With few exceptions, all identifying information has been removed or altered to protect Greg's identity.

I don't know...I mean...I definitely know that I have experienced moments of intense joy and pleasure with you, no doubt about it. You've been very generous to me and, hopefully, I've been equally generous to you as well. However, I don't want to lie to you; during the course of our sexual-romantic-emotional-indefinable relationship, I would feel like there was a persistent, unarticulated shadow between us. *Of course there was a shadow between us—I can almost hear you exclaim in surprise—what did you expect? There are always shadows among people who attempt to relate to one another on a more intimate basis. We all carry effects from and residues of our personal, more or less traumatic histories. We are constantly faced with the prospect of fear, shame, guilt, rejection, insecurity, loneliness, alienation, vulnerability...At the same time, we stick around and hope that our desires for connectedness, intimacy, and companionship will be miraculously fulfilled...Of course there was a shadow between us Nicholas. (Do you mind if I call you Nicholas? I've always preferred the English version of your name; it feels closer to home...)* You are Greek and I am American; you are white and I am black; you pursue a PhD in Clinical Psychology, whereas I simply work as a car mechanic...You were raised in a middle-class family, whereas I am still struggling to escape the fucking Newark ghetto...What did you expect, Nicholas? Of course there were shadows between us...Of course...

These are the shadows I want to explore in this chapter, Greg. Of course, you may ask me, *why is it so important to you to recount your personal experience of the shadows pertaining to our mutual sexual desire? We are not especially important to each other anymore. You now live in Athens and I still live in Newark. There's an ocean between us now. And, when all's said and done, we both knew very well from the very beginning that*

our relationship was mainly revolving around sex. That's why we never shared any dreams for a future together. (Pause) Don't get me wrong, Nicholas...I will always treasure the intimate moments we have shared together. The memory of your white skin will always reside among the cells of my black skin. Always...But, let's be honest with each other, Nicholas: we never, not even for a single moment, contemplated the idea of a future together. Speaking strictly for me, I never contemplated this idea because I never even dared to contemplate it. It never crossed my mind because you are white and because you are a man. You will soon be a PhD holder and, most likely, I will always remain a car mechanic because I can't afford college. Now, tell me...How could I ever dream of a shared future with you? How could I ever justify the presence of a white man in my life to my fellow coworkers and ghetto brothers without being ostracized? How could I ever risk my racial kinship with them? And, on the other hand, how could you ever introduce me, a black man from the Newark ghetto, to your family and your predominantly white social circle? Would you ever feel comfortable with me by your side? Are you honest enough to admit that you would, most likely, feel embarrassed with me by your side? If yes, why can't we just accept the fact that our relationship was doomed before it even started, fated to revolve exclusively around sex? Why do you want to explore the shadows that simultaneously united us and kept us apart? Why don't we just leave it there?

I can't just leave it there, Greg...But, before I explain to you why, let me tell you something: no matter how hard you try, you will never persuade me that our relationship had revolved exclusively around sex. Believe me, it's not my intention to sugarcoat the uncomfortable truths about our situation. After all, we were both fully aware of our

significant cultural and social differences. Of course you would never risk your position and reputation in the community that has supported and affected you so profoundly. Of course I would feel uncomfortable with you by my side. Hopefully, I am honest enough to admit that my idea of a committed relationship involves a man with a, more or less, similar educational background. *Is it only the discrepancy between our two educational backgrounds that would make you feel embarrassed, Nicholas? Is this the reason why we never went out for a walk together? Do I have to remind you that the green curtains in your bedroom, as you have already indicated, would remain closed at ALL times when I was there? What were you afraid of? We wouldn't go anywhere else together and the prospect of a committed, romantic relationship was already out of the question. Nobody would ever ask about my educational background because nobody would ever see me by your side...Except for your neighbors, of course...Maybe...What was the problem, then? Did the green curtains remain closed because your neighbors—a bunch of strangers—were likely to read my mind telepathically and detect my lower educational background? Is that what you are trying to tell me Nicholas? (Pause) Are you being honest with me? (Silence) No...I am not being completely honest with you, Greg. Why can't you utter the words you have in mind, Nicholas? (Silence) Because I am afraid, Greg...I am ashamed too... (Silence) What are you afraid of, sugar? (Nicholas smiles) Sugar...I love it when you call me sugar because that's what Marvin Gaye would call his female lovers, Greg. You've been my lover too, Nicholas. Remember? Your female lover...? My white lover, Nicholas... (Silence) Is that what I only was for you, Greg? (Pause) A white lover...? Was I anything more than a black lover for you, Nicholas? (Silence) I don't know...That's what I'll try to figure out in this chapter, Greg. Why is it so important to you? Why*

bother? I am afraid I would not be able to properly answer this question without resorting to a few academic sources. (This chapter is fully devoted to you, Greg. At the same time, though, it is part of an academic dissertation. Therefore, I won't be able to altogether avoid citing a few academic sources here and there in order to support my arguments. Please, understand that I have to do it. I am not doing it to either embarrass or devalue you. As a matter of fact, it has taken me many years to claim that I slightly understand the theories I utilize in this dissertation. Mind you, I am far from theoretically or philosophically sophisticated myself...And, you know what? You don't need to understand these theories in order to matter to me. The people that matter to me the most have little or no knowledge of these theories. Relax, then, and don't worry or panic if you don't understand some or any of the obscure terms that will occasionally pop up in this chapter. I will explain everything afterwards in words that will spring straight from my heart. These are the words you should pay attention to...)

Let me attempt to answer your question, then, by first quoting from a book—*Bodies and Pleasures*—that I have enjoyed and found quite informative:

Within contemporary queer communities, there is a great deal of awareness that our cultural forms, our traditions, and our codes of conduct are fairly recent inventions and are in need of constant revision. Most of us do not rest assured, as our heterosexual siblings might, that we are following the guidelines laid down definitively by our distant forebears and tested by time. *In the absence of long and well-developed traditions for living good queer lives, we have to be concerned about ethics...* The question is only whether each of us will be able to develop an ethics, a way of life or style of existence, that values the conditions that make possible continued self-overcoming through experimentation and questioning, that incorporates practices of reflection upon past decisions and actions, that empowers us to fight discourses and regimes that diminish our own and our community's capacity for self-transformation. Will I be able to develop an ethics that affirms itself as a practice of freedom and that does not hide behind illusions of stasis or transcendentalism? Will the communities and cultures that sustain me be

able to support such an ethical practitioner? Within my community and my culture, will I be able to care for myself? (McWhorter, 1999, pp. 197-198; italics mine)

Let me speak from my heart now, Greg. I hurt you. I know I did. During our indefinable relationship, I could see the pain in your eyes. No, it's not my intention to engage in a barrage of psychological self-flagellation. After all, as you have repeatedly told me on the phone while discussing this chapter, you yourself have also hurt me. We are both guilty and innocent; victimizers and victims at the same time. This is so because, in many respects, I never saw beyond your black skin color and you never saw beyond my white skin color. Your blackness and my whiteness always stood as visibly unarticulated barriers and bridges, drawing us within orbits that were simultaneously determined by centripetal and centrifugal forces. (Pause) I decided to reach out and touch your blackness because I desired to find something in it; similarly, you decided to reach out and touch my whiteness because you desired to find something in it. We sexually desired and predominantly related to the picture of the racial other we had constructed in our minds. (Pause) It could be argued, of course, that this is what we usually do; that is, we relate to others through pictures, images, and fantasies we create in our minds. *What's wrong with that, Nicholas?* Well, there is nothing inherently wrong with that, Greg, except that it can give rise to firmly and uncritically held, racist beliefs that can potentially lead to discrimination, marginalization, and persecution. The beliefs I held and the pictures or fantasies I had for you as a black man had been heavily informed by the predominantly white culture in which I was raised. They were not purely mine. Sure, I never attacked or persecuted you. It was my lust, my loneliness, and my sexual desire that pulled me towards you (the reasons will be further explored in a little, be patient).

Still though, my sexual desire, my kisses on your lips, and my caressing hands on your black body did not deter me from mainly viewing you, at times, as a sex object; a fetish; a consumable item possessing desirable and, perhaps, expendable qualities. I may have not exercised physical violence on you but, in the end, I haven't avoided exercising the violence of ignoring the person you were behind your black skin. You see, Greg, your black skin had unleashed in me imaginative forces that violently and arbitrarily shaped you according to my idiosyncratic blend of cultural beliefs and psychological yearnings. And I am ashamed to admit that in the early stages of our relationship (the first three months at least) my attraction and sexual desire for you had largely depended on the assumed truthfulness of my constructed image of you. As you may remember, of course, I didn't restrict myself to mentally harboring this image. I actively tried to mold you to this image and you, hurt and enraged, actively protested and temporarily distanced yourself from me. (Silence) *Don't you think you are coming down hard on yourself, Nicholas? Besides, I did the exact same thing, sugar...I tried to mold you to my own constructed image of you...I know, Greg. And I feel we have both forgiven each other, haven't we? We have, Greg. Why don't we let it go, then, sugar?* Because I firmly believe that our story of sexual desire and mutual violence is well worth being told, Greg. *Mutual violence...You make it sound so dramatic!* Well...we hurt each other, didn't we? *We did, Nicholas, but let me ask you something...Have you ever visited any black ghettos in the U.S.?* No. I would usually ride the bus through the Trenton ghetto on my way to the hospital but...no, I have never visited any. *Then, you don't really know what violence stands for, sugar.* What does violence mean to you, Greg? (Silence) *You know what it means to me, Nicholas. But...don't get me wrong. I am not saying that you have never*

suffered any form of violence. I know you have. I am just saying that your definition of violence is radically different than mine and that this difference should be adequately underlined. This has always been my intention, Greg. (Silence) Do you insist on writing the story of our little romance? Yes, I insist. Will you help me? Before I commit myself...what do you hope to gain from writing it, sugar? That's sort of a tough question to answer, Greg, but I'll do my best to provide you with an honest response. I am all ears. Well, let me start by saying that ending up alone and lonely has always been one of my biggest fears. I remember you expressing this fear a couple of times....That has been one of my biggest fears too. (Silence) I am really surprised...You've never...I've never shared it with you, I know. But...believe me, Nicholas; I've never shared it with anyone else. It's difficult... Your trust has moved me to tears...Thank you Greg...I feel so relieved and so much closer to you now...So do I but...I've cut you off...Don't worry...Well...I just wanted to clarify that my fear of loneliness has been mainly linked to my romantic life. I've always found it much easier to make friends. As a matter of fact, I feel truly lucky when it comes to friendships...Do they know you are gay? Yes, of course. I could never imagine myself being a friend with someone who is unaware of my sexuality. (Silence) None of my bros know about me...Why? It's tough to be black and gay in America, Nicholas. It feels like fighting two battles at the same time. I definitely can't speak on behalf of all black, gay men in America but I've personally struggled a lot. I am still struggling. On the one hand, I am constantly faced with racism and, on the other hand, my sexuality goes against the image of the tough, heterosexual, black man I am supposed to represent. You know, Greg...I've always wanted to ask you about the issue of homosexuality in the black community but I never did. What stopped you? I am not

sure...I guess I was afraid I'd be indiscreet...*Or, perhaps, you didn't care that much. After all, I was just one among many...* (Long pause) What's wrong? (Silence) Are you angry, Greg? *Bingo...* (Silence) Are you angry because I never asked? *Exactly...I am angry because you never asked. I would have liked you to ask.* (Silence) I apologize...I never thought...*You never thought because you never cared, Nicholas. I was just a piece of black meat to you; nothing more, nothing less!* Wait a minute dude, just wait a minute! Don't you think you are being a little too tough and unfair? After all, to some extent—correct me if I am wrong—I was also a piece of white meat to you, wasn't I? (Silence) Wasn't I, Greg? (Silence) *I am sorry, Nicholas.* (Pause) *I am sorry sugar...*No need to be sorry, Greg... (Silence) I am not surprised we are bashing each other like this. (Pause) I just remembered something, handsome. *What's that?* A black, gay writer once wrote the following:

Black and gay identities have been creatively crafted out of the basest of insults...Even as we express the most positive articulations of black and gay identity, we are nonetheless referencing the ugly historical and ideological realities out of which those identities have been formed (Reid-Pharr, 2001, pp. 101&137).

Does that mean that, no matter how much we try to regard ourselves with a positive attitude, our identities will always be marked by the violence we have suffered through the years? I think so, Greg. That's why our angry outbursts toward each other do not come as a surprise to me. (Pause) We have both suffered years of violence, handsome. *But...Yes...I know. I know...*The type of violence inflicted upon you could never be compared to mine. *Nicholas...*No, let me finish, Greg, I need to say something really important. (Silence) *OK, sugar. I am listening.* (Silence) Let me gain some composure... (Pause) OK...Where was I? Yes...We have both suffered years of violence, Greg. Various

forms of violence...physical, emotional, verbal, psychological, cultural, racial...you name it! Now, I don't know about you...but I keep encountering this violence every step of the way through my life. At times, I can't even recognize it because it takes different forms, articulates itself within a variety of contexts and frameworks, and often lurks behind what appears most well-intentional, generous, innocent, intimate, and gentle. I constantly carry this violence in me, Greg, do you understand me? I carry it under my skin and within my heart. It concerns a toxic blend of anger, fear, resentment, sadness, emotional detachment, and (self)-destructiveness. I am not saying that I feel like this all the time because I don't. My life has also involved a plethora of happy, joyful, and carefree moments. I want to believe that my friends and family, if asked, would describe me as willing and capable of experiencing and sharing a variety of emotions. But...you see, my precious Greg...this dark violence in me—the violence that my sexual desire and my sexually desiring body have suffered through time—is principally activated when the menacing spark of sexual desire emerges and frantically pulls me towards other bodies, other vibrant, corporeal, and psychological worlds. I don't really know how to phrase it but...it almost feels as if I can't forgive myself for sexually desiring others; as if I can't forgive others for sexually desiring me. Although I have succumbed to my sexual desire innumerable times in the past...although I have welcomed innumerable bodies next to/in/near me...and although a big part of me is irreversibly, incurably, unyieldingly, and unashamedly lustful and voluptuous, another big part of me becomes furious each time my sexual desire, my body, and my eyes fervently wish to touch male flesh in order to derive their temporary gratification. My fury, of course, simply masquerades my disintegrating sense of fear. This fear is not as intense as it used to be but, still, it is always an inextricable part of my

sexual life. (Pause) Are you following me, Greg? *I am, sugar.* Am I talking nonsense? *No, sugar...* (Pause) *Go on...* (Silence) You know...there is a writer who once wrote that “there is a big secret about sex: most people don’t like it” (Bersani, 1987, p. 197). (Greg bursts into laughter.) *What did he mean?* I am not really sure what was going through his mind when he wrote this sentence. However, I take it to mean that, no matter how much we talk about or enjoy sex, there is something inherent in it that also makes us feel defenseless, ambivalent, and utterly vulnerable, almost verging on death and annihilation. (Pause) I just remembered that Iain Morland—another writer—has provided the following explanation:

...Bersani’s point is that sex is not as pleasurable as it might seem to us while we’re daydreaming about it. When we actually have sex, Bersani claims, we are no longer self-contained subjects enjoying an easily quantifiable experience of pleasure that we have contemplated beforehand. Quite the reverse: for Bersani, sex is an experience of radical dissolution that he calls “self-shattering.” Sexuality is therefore “socially dysfunctional” [. . .] because it always undoes “the supposed relationality or community of the couple (which depends on selfhood),” as a commentator on Bersani’s essay puts it (Morland, 2013, p. 451).

(Silence) *Is that how you have also felt with me, Nicholas?* (Pause) *Shattered?* (Silence) Can I talk about this a little later, Greg? (Silence) *OK, sugar.* (Silence) Am I burdening you with all this weird psychobabble? (Greg takes a deep breath) *No...But I won’t hide that I feel somewhat...I don’t know...apprehensive? Why?* (Silence) *Because I have no clue where this discussion could be leading us to...and because I still don’t understand why you want to write about us in your dissertation.* (Silence) I can understand your misgivings, Greg. Let me reassure you, though...There will be nothing in this dissertation to identify you, except for the fact that you are black and live in New Jersey. (Pause) Furthermore, I am not going to mention or reveal anything that you wouldn’t like me

to...You know that, handsome, don't you? I would never be *that* dishonest with you...

(Silence) *That's not my concern, Nicholas...* (Silence) What is your concern, Greg?

(Silence) *There is...I have a sort of vague feeling that your exploration of our relationship will prove it to have been trivial...unimportant.* (Pause) *I am afraid you will come to the conclusion that I was nothing to you...* (Pause) *You talked about loneliness before, Nicholas.* (Pause) *I know what you meant.* (Pause) *Our meetings...the times we had sex...the times I held you in my arms...the green curtains in your bedroom...I mean...all this made me feel less lonely.* (Pause) *I belong to my black community, Nicholas, but I also belong to the world we had created together in your bedroom.* (Pause) *I still cling to this shared world of ours, sugar.* (Pause) *Don't spoil it for me, sugar.* (Pause) *Please, don't...* (Nicholas takes a deep breath) You can't see me now, Greg. (Pause) You can only hear my voice but...if you could see me...if you could just see my face...my eyes...you'd see two emotions clashing with each other. (Pause) I feel sadness because I can't touch you anymore. (Pause) Your words have touched me profoundly but you are not near me and I can't touch your body...I can't kiss your eyes. (Pause) That hurts... (Silence) *What else do you feel?* (Silence) I feel...joy and hope. *Why?* (Silence) Greg...do you remember what I said before? *Are you referring to your experience of violence and fear with regard to sexual desire?* Yes. *I remember everything you said.* (Pause) *I have absorbed every single word.* (Pause) *But...how is your experience of violence and fear related to your feelings of joy and hope?* (Nicholas smiles) Be a little patient; let me take up where I left off...*OK, I am listening.* (Silence) When I was finally discharged after 18 months of military service...When I eventually went back to my civilian life...I was...I don't know...I think the best word to describe my

psychological condition would be “semi-savage.” (Pause) I was like a badly wounded wolf, struggling to crawl away and find a place to hide. I almost wanted to entomb myself alive. (Pause) Ugly feeling...but that’s how I felt. (Pause) I wasn’t depressed...yet. I was just excessively scared; horrified. (Pause) My parents, of course, sensed that something significant had happened during my military service and they tried to discreetly inquire about the probable causes of my psychological change. I had never been an especially joyful guy but the extent of my anxiety and self-imposed isolation had truly alarmed them. (Pause) My father had once told me, “We had the eerie feeling that you were slowly, almost silently, slipping away from life...or that life was slipping away from you.” (Pause) Poor Dad... (Pause) I never told them anything, of course. I wouldn’t dare... I simply attributed my isolation to fatigue and reassured them that I would soon recover my strength and pursue my educational goals. (Pause) However, they never believed my false explanations. Although they stopped asking me questions about my life in the military, they would persistently urge me to prepare and send in my college applications. They would constantly prompt me to go out, reconnect with old friends, enjoy the sea, and have fun. (Pause) Deep down, they knew I was walking through a dark and narrow tunnel...They knew... (Pause) Oh Greg...I have just felt a sudden wave of profound love for both of them. (Pause) Despite their own traumas...Despite their less than perfect relationship...Despite my complaints...they did what they could. They did their best to take me out of the tunnel and they did a wonderful job... (Pause) Oh Mom and Dad...Thank you...I am more grateful to you than you could ever imagine... (Nicholas is in tears; it takes him a few moments to regain composure) Greg? Are you there? *I am here, sugar.* (Silence) Thank you, handsome. (Silence) The day I got accepted to college,

I felt that my life was at last reaching a sense of normalcy again. (Pause) I felt that I was leaving behind the violence I had experienced in the past. (Pause) I thought it was my time to put into practice the valuable lesson I had learned the hard way during my military service: I mustn't tolerate any form of violence on the grounds of my sexual desire; I deserve to desire; I am here to desire. (Pause) That was the hopefully optimistic conclusion of the previous chapter, Greg. (Pause) I could vaguely sense the remaining fragments of my injured self-esteem striving to emerge and convey their feeble, wavering messages of encouragement. I knew that the spark of desire had been lit and waiting to be discovered but I was unable to trace it. The eyes of my imagination could only see thick layers of accumulated, undigested violence; the violence of my (self)-imposed silence; the violence of my (self)-forced invisibility; the violence of my constant, paralyzing fear and paranoid vigilance; the violence of bullying for my fatness; the violence of daily debasement and persecution for my homosexuality; the violence of feeling inconsolably anxious; desolately helpless; punitively ostracized; totally undeserving of love and warmth; subhuman; living dead. (Pause) Oh Greg... (Pause) I apologize...I...*Why do you feel like apologizing, Nicholas?* (Silence) I let myself be carried away by my desire to share these thoughts with you and...I don't know...Was it...too much for you? (Greg remains silent for some seconds. Nicholas can clearly hear him breathing) Greg? *I am here, sugar.* Are you OK? (Silence) *I feel...Wait...* (Greg is reluctant to talk about his feelings.) Do you want me to stop? *No, sugar, no...* (Pause) *It's just that...I am not used to people sharing such intimate thoughts and feelings with me...* (Pause) *It may sound strange to you but...I sometimes feel that we, the black residents of the Newark ghetto, don't have the time to explore these feelings.* (Pause) *There is anger, of course...so much*

anger...but we hardly ever talk about it; especially men. (Pause) Let me tell you something, sugar...(Pause) As I was listening to you, I was thinking about all the things my daily struggle against poverty has deprived me of... (Pause) What's bugging me the most is having been deprived of the right to rest and explore my feelings (Pause) Damn...

(Greg remains silent for a few minutes; Nicholas decides against invading his private, emotional space.) *Oh Nicholas...* (Greg breathes deeply and sighs.) *It's painful to realize that poverty does not even allow me to have feelings... (Pause) I know now... (Pause) I think I know now... (Silence) Do you feel comfortable to share your thoughts with me? (Greg sighs again and closes his eyes but Nicholas cannot see him.) I think I know the reason of my previous resistance to this joint exploration of our relationship. (Pause) I wanted to avoid the pain... (Silence) Which pain? (Greg opens his eyes and stares at the floor but Nicholas cannot see him.) I feel less than human. (Pause) The conditions of my life often make me feel less than human. (Pause) My struggle against poverty makes me feel less than human. (Pause) Racism makes me feel less than human. (Pause) Hiding my homosexuality makes me feel less than human...* (Nicholas remains silent. He's had his own share of feeling less than human too. He knows quite well that no words could ever comfort Greg. Any such attempt would be naïve. Hence, he simply approaches his mouth even closer to the microphone on his phone and joins Greg in this silent, lamenting aria, one that is mainly composed of sighs, voiceless sobs, gasps, subdued moans, and labored, irregular breathing. They alternately sing this aria for an hour. Then, Greg speaks again.) *Sugar...? Here I am, handsome. (Greg smiles) I like it when you call me handsome...* (Nicholas smiles too.) *I know... (Silence) I wish you were here now, sugar... (Pause) I've missed you...I've missed your body... (Silence) I know, Greg. (Pause) I've missed you*

too, handsome...more than you could ever imagine... (Pause) I've missed the touch of your hair... (They both remain silent, allowing themselves to savor the moment. Greg is tempted to grumble over Nicholas' decision to leave the United States but he eventually decides to say nothing. He knows perfectly well that neither of the two would ever be brave enough to go against the societal and cultural norms that kept them apart.) *Sugar...?* (Nicholas is still indulging in reveries about Greg's black body when he hears his voice.) Yes, handsome... (Silence) *Tell me more about yourself...* (Pause) *What happened after you got accepted to college? What happened after you realized how much violence you had suffered?* (Nicholas is negotiating with himself whether he truly wants to reveal more.) Are you sure you want to learn more about me, Greg? (Silence) *What's the point of asking me this question?* (All of a sudden, an invisible barrier of anger and suspicion is raised between them.) *Don't you trust me?* (Nicholas understands that his fear has been misread by Greg as lack of trust.) It's more complicated, handsome. (Pause) It's not that I don't trust you... (Nicholas struggles to find the right words.) I am not used to being listened to... (Pause) It's usually me who listens to others... (Pause) At times, there is a voice in me saying that I don't deserve to be listened to or that my words could somehow contaminate others... (Pause) I don't know how else to explain it... (Silence) *You don't need to explain anything else.* (Greg touches his skin.) *But don't worry, sugar.* (Pause) *I'll be alright, I assure you.* (Silence) Promise, Greg? *That's a promise, Nicholas. Yeah.* (They both remain silent for a few minutes). *Nicholas...?* (Pause) *I want to feel, Nicholas.* (Pause) *Your words make me feel.* (Pause) *My black body feels.* (Pause) *You make me feel...* (Pause) *How could you ever contaminate me with your words?* (His voice breaks into a momentary sob and swiftly regains its composure.) *How...?* (Nicholas feels like

Oedipus at the crossroads. He wants to believe Greg but the voices in his mind are mercilessly castigating him, urging him to follow the path of silence and isolation once more.) *I am here, Nicholas. (Pause) I am here for you. (Pause) I am here to listen. (Pause) Sugar...* (Nicholas fights against the voices which, like vampires, suck the blood off of him. He wants to scream.) *The voices belong to another time and place. (Pause) They can't harm you now, Nicholas. (How can he be so sure?) They can't... (Pause) You've invited me to explore our relationship, sugar; our mutual sexual desire... (Pause) I accept your invitation. (Pause) The aliveness I've experienced through your words has convinced me that this exploration is worth the pain. (Pause) It's brought me back to life from the land of emotional death. (Pause) And now, after so much struggle from both of us...what are you doing, Nicholas? (Pause) Are you retreating back to your world of loneliness and isolation? (Pause) Why? (Pause) I am not physically near you but I stand by you. (Pause) I am more than willing to offer you a helping hand, sugar. (Pause) You've helped me too. (Pause) Your trust has helped me realize that I deserve to feel like a human being. (Pause) How could I ever forget that?* (Nicholas is mentally transported back to his parents' bedroom and sees himself embracing his mother's feet, as if to make sure that his flesh would not fall to pieces.) *I won't abandon you, Nicholas. (Pause) I won't allow you to retreat back into your solitary world. (Nicholas is vividly experiencing a somatic memory that is striving to translate itself into words.) I am here and I am not going anywhere. (This somatic memory can be traced back to Nicholas' experience of embracing his mother's feet.) I know which word your mouth and lips are striving to articulate. (Pause) The meaning of this word has diffused itself all over your body. (Pause) It has been patiently waiting for you to trace it and cry it out. (Pause) I am*

willing to hear it, Nicholas. (Pause) I can bear with its meaning. (Pause) I am strong enough to bear with its meaning. (Pause) You won't contaminate me, sugar. (Pause) I won't perish. (Pause) I want to cry out this word too. (Pause) Witnessing your suffering has made me realize how much I've always longed to cry it out myself too. (Greg decides to keep quiet and listens attentively to the sounds coming from the other end of the phone line. Nicholas is silent but his irregular breathing pattern betrays his turmoil.) My body is here but my voice travels fast and can reach you in Athens. (Pause) It embraces you. (Pause) It is much stronger than all the incriminating voices in your head. (Nicholas' somatic memory of embracing his mother's feet as an 11-year-old boy gives way to a mental image that unfolds like a short film. He sees himself as a 26-year-old man, participating in a group psychodrama session that took place in March, 2002. He is watching two female group members immersing themselves into their roles and enacting their conflicts. All of a sudden, one of them whispers a word that Nicholas initially fails to catch. But the group leader urges her to say that word out louder and she, reluctantly at first, repeats the word mechanically, as if reading the grocery list. Nonetheless, the more she repeats the word, the more her voice is colored by a palette of ambivalent emotions which, ultimately, gives way to a crystal clear form of existential fright; a fright that is directly related to our moments of deepest realizations: the inherent loneliness of our lives; the irreversible separateness of our bodies; the unattainable ideal of psychologically merging with and perfectly understanding others; the inevitability of death. She repeats this word and her body is vibrating, radiating its anguished desperation toward the surrounding bodies and inviting them to also dive into their darkness. Her body knows all too well that the articulation, sharing, and open acknowledgment of its darkness could

potentially lead to a community of people who would be less likely to reject and exert violence on others. In allowing themselves to experience their own dark, violent, less civilized, most defenseless, incomprehensible, chaotically desiring sides, this woman's fellow therapy participants would likely feel more at ease with her own sense of trauma, grief, vulnerability, and confusion. They would, perhaps, appreciate the importance of asking for help. This is actually the word she is striving to cry out: help. And Nicholas, scared but fascinated, is watching her repeatedly asking for help. Her voice becomes louder and louder and she sounds increasingly agitated. Nicholas is deeply absorbed in monitoring her body with utmost attention and fails to realize that this woman's vocal plea for help is gradually bringing him closer to the heart of one of his traumas. She keeps shouting "Help me! Help me, please! Help! Help..." He keeps looking at her, almost breathless and mesmerized. How strange...A persistent, screaming lament is filling the air and Nicholas is anxious to know where this voice is coming from. He directs his attention to the woman but she is eerily silent. She is looking at him. Everybody in the session room is looking at him. One after another, the group members slowly approach Nicholas and touch his shoulders and back as a gesture of support. He attempts to ask them why but, instead, he hears himself saying, "They never helped me when I most needed it..." Feeling as if he has just woken up from a dream, Nicholas suddenly recognizes his voice and realizes that the intermittent lament is coming from him. He covers his face with his hands and feels the tears for the first time. The group leader's voice is heard: "They never helped you...Is this why you've decided never to ask for help anymore?" Nicholas is at first unable to fully grasp the meaning of the leader's words but, as they increasingly dash themselves against his body, they violently untie his

muscular knots and bring him down. For the first time in years, he finds the courage to admit to himself that he feels helpless. For the first time in years, he finds the courage to ask for help without feeling ashamed, emasculated, and defective. He cries. All group members gather around him and form a protective circle that allows Nicholas to mourn and practice asking for help. Asking for help feels simultaneously liberating, frightening, and sad. Large stores of pent-up, psychological energy are freed up but the sadness over the lost years of silent suffering and the paranoid suspicion that his quest for help might not be reciprocated still burden Nicholas' heart. The group members are vaguely aware of his inner turmoil but they stay quiet. They intuitively know that Nicholas, more than their comforting words, desires their warm, silent, witnessing presence. And Greg, having been long deprived of a comforting, witnessing presence in his life, also stays quiet and bears witness to Nicholas' lament at the other end of the phone line. It's his turn to take part in Nicholas' lamenting aria.) Greg...? (Nicholas' voice sounds somewhat tremulous but overall calm.) *Sugar...?* (Silence) Thank you. (Silence) *Welcome.* (They stay quiet for a few minutes.) I feel relieved but...I feel embarrassed too. *Why?* (Silence) Do you still respect me? (Pause) I mean...knowing that I often feel so helpless and weak...does that make you feel sorry for me? (Greg smiles; he knows exactly what Nicholas means.) *No.* (Pause) *On the contrary...My affection for you becomes stronger.* (Silence) Do you really think I am deserving of love and affection? (This question breaks Greg's heart. He often wonders whether he himself is deserving of love and affection too.) *Yes, sugar...* (Pause) *You are...* (Silence) OK. (Greg is in tears but Nicholas, no matter how hard he tries to visualize Greg's facial expressions and connect them to his voice, is unaware of this fact.) *Do you...do you feel I deserve some affection too?* (Nicholas is taken aback by Greg's

question. He has always believed himself to be the only person in the world wondering whether he deserves affection.) Greg...of course... (Pause) I wasn't expecting this question, handsome... (Pause) Forgive my surprise... (They both remain silent for a few minutes, not knowing what to say.) *You are so quiet...* (Pause) *What's the matter, sugar?* (Silence) Wondering whether we deserve love and affection... (Pause) These questions scare the shit out of me... (Pause) Is it normal? (Pause) I mean...Does everyone ask such questions? (Silence) *I am not sure.* (Pause) *I believe that, to a certain extent, everyone feels insecure and uncertain...* (Pause) *The issue of affection...The issue of love...I haven't met anyone not wondering whether they are loved by others.* (Pause) *But I am not sure everyone feels undeserving of love.* (Pause) *There is one thing I know for sure, though...* What's that, Greg? (Silence) *We are more likely than others to be wondering whether we deserve to be loved. Who is "we"?* (Silence) *Minorities and socially underprivileged groups...* (Pause) *Gays, lesbians, blacks, Hispanics, poor, women, the elderly...you name it, sugar...* (Greg remains silent for a few seconds.) *There is something I want to share with you, Nicholas.* (Pause) *Just a couple of thoughts...* (Nicholas stays quiet; he feels that Greg needs some time and space to reflect.) *Since we started exploring our relationship, I've been feeling depressed and enraged at the same time.* (Pause) *Don't get me wrong...Our discussion, in its own weird way, has also made me tremendously happy. It's quite rare for me to communicate with anyone the way I do with you. We both experience and reflect on our relationship. We actively try to forge a deeper connection and, most importantly, we do it together. We take the risk to do it together. Mind you, it's utterly frightening but, at the same time, it grants me incredible aliveness and makes me feel worthwhile and loved.* (Pause) *I want to keep feeling alive, worthwhile, and loved,*

Nicholas. I truly do. (Pause) I wish to have people around me, Nicholas; people I love and feel intimate with. (Pause) The more we talk, the more I understand that this is the only way for me to feel that my life has some meaning. But almost everything is against me... (Greg stops to take a deep breath; he remains silent for a few seconds and then goes on.) I am black; I am poor; I am gay. I am obliged to fight for my survival every day and this fight drains my energy, intensifies my insecurities, and makes it difficult for me to trust people. But I don't want to go on like this... (Pause) I don't want to spend the rest of my life secluded and lonely. (Pause) But I don't know what to do, sugar...where to start from...I want to start feeling a little more intimate with you...with others...but, each time I try, I feel totally depressed because I understand how emotionally crippled I am. (Pause) The social circumstances of my life have rendered me emotionally crippled... (Nicholas can hear Greg take a deep breath.) It's unbearably painful to admit this to myself but, if I am to achieve any degree of intimacy with others in the future, I will have to be completely honest. (Pause) Above all, I will have to be true to myself. (Pause) Nicholas...I really don't know how to be intimate with others...My conversations with them are superficial...We never share feelings or anything else...There's been so much violence in my life...Wherever I go...I expect to find violence...I always expect to be seen as less than human...I can't trust anyone... (Pause) That includes you, sugar... (Pause) I trust you more than others but, still...A part of me always expects you to be violent towards me... (Nicholas is in tears.) I am sorry, sugar... (Silence) I appreciate your brutal honesty, handsome. (Nicholas wipes his tears and blows his nose.) It hurts but I appreciate it. (Pause) After all, in a way I've been violent towards you in the past. (They both stay quiet for several minutes, trying to absorb the words they have just exchanged. Nicholas

breaks the silence first.) But there is something I haven't fully grasped yet, Greg. (Pause) You said before that the exploration of our relationship has made you feel depressed *and* enraged. (Pause) What has made you feel enraged? (Greg sighs.) *Oh Nicholas...* (He rubs his eyes and sighs again.) *I am so fucking confused...* (Nicholas laughs.) Join the club, handsome! (Greg laughs too.) *Thanks, sugar!* (He exhales deeply, groans playfully, and sighs again.) *Remind me to never hire you as my therapist the next time I need some comfort!* (They both burst to boisterous laughter; the emotional atmosphere between them becomes lighter, as if to melt away the anxiety caused by the previous confessions and prepare the ground for those to follow.) *OK...So, I now need to explain why I've been feeling enraged...* (Nicholas traces Greg's reluctance and attempts to ease his psychological burden.) You don't have to... (Pause) But I'd be really interested in knowing what has made you so angry. (Greg stays quiet.) It's really OK, handsome... *No, sugar, I want to tell you.* (Pause) *It's just that I am trying to find the right words...* (Pause) *OK, there are no "right" words, I guess...* (Pause) *Oh Lord...* (Pause) *OK. As I was witnessing your effort to ask for help, I couldn't help but touch upon my own difficulty asking for help.* (Pause) *I've never felt comfortable asking for help.* (Pause) *I grew up in a violent, unpredictable environment and I had to depend on myself from a very early age.* (Pause) *My mother left me when I was very young and my father died when I was 8 years old. So, even though my father's sister took responsibility for raising me, I would usually feel like a burden.* (Pause) *It was more than clear to me that, other from the basic life necessities such as shelter, food, and schooling, my aunt's family was pretty much unwilling to offer me anything else. Human qualities like warmth, comfort, or encouragement were out of the question...* (Greg pauses to take some breaths and

regain composure. It takes him several minutes before he is able again to go on with his account.) *It is excruciatingly difficult to live in the ghetto, Nicholas...I am not sure what you know or what you've heard about life—our life—there but...I can assure you, nobody wants to really live there. (Pause) We live there because we can't afford to live anywhere else. We are too poor to live anywhere else and it's fucking difficult to escape the poverty trap. (Pause) I wanted to go to college, Nicholas, I really did! I still want to go to college! But, at the same time, I feel awfully tired...I am tired, sugar...I've been fighting against poverty, racism, and violence all my life...I am tired... (Greg sounds angry but resigned.) I feel so fucking humiliated now... (Silence) Why? (Greg remains silent for a few minutes and Nicholas can only hear his irregular breathing.) Why, Greg? Because I am not supposed to say these things to a white man, that's why! (Pause) Are you happy now? (Nicholas is uncertain how to answer.) I am happy, Greg. (Pause) Yes, I am happy. (Pause) I am happy because you trust me enough to share your sense of humiliation with me. (They both feel deep sadness but keep their feelings to themselves. They are still not ready to admit that their relationship, apart from its interracial lust, is also determined by centuries of interracial violence which cannot be ignored. After almost half an hour of silence between them, Greg decides to break the ice.) Sugar...? I am here, handsome. (Silence) Remind me...What was I trying to tell you before I...? (Greg leaves his sentence unfinished and Nicholas doesn't make any attempt to complete it.) I think...I think you were trying to explain why the exploration of our relationship has made you angry. Right! (Pause) I remember now. (Greg needs some time to collect his thoughts. Nicholas can hear him scratch his face.) OK. (Pause) I should go straight to the point this time. (Pause) Why can't we just admit our helplessness to one another, Nicholas? (Pause) Gosh...*

(Greg draws in a long breath through his nose, exhales vocally, and lets out a sad laugh.)
I am talking nonsense... (Pause) Pure nonsense... (Pause) Of course we can't... (Pause) We are scared to death. (Silence) We are, Greg. (Pause) We definitely are. But this makes me furious, Nicholas! (Greg's voice reveals pained anger.) My God! I could hear you struggling to utter the word "help" and I was in total shock! I was thinking to myself: We, the members of minority groups...our emotional worlds...our worldviews have been shaped by all forms of violence! In a way or another, we are fucked up! We more or less live in constant fear, pain, anxiety, and depression! And yet...Although we are fucked up...Although we desperately long for some emotional support...Although we secretly desire to belong to a community of people we can turn to for comfort and help...we just keep our mouths shut! We stubbornly refuse to articulate the fucking word...even if this is what our hearts desire to cry out! HELP! I AM FUCKED UP! I AM DYING! HELP ME!!
(Greg is breathing deeply and vocally, utterly surprised by the force of his emotional reaction. He takes a few minutes to calm down; when he speaks again, his voice, devoid of anger, gives expression to a complaint that has been crafted from the purest ingredients of unceasing injustice and persecution.) *I don't mean that we live in total isolation, Nicholas. Neither do I mean that our communities—the communities each one of us belongs to—do not provide any support. (Pause) Far from that...After all, who knows what would have become of me without the support of my black community...(Pause) But...we hardly ever disclose the depth of our wounds—the depth of our vulnerability—to one another, Nicholas. (Pause) Yes, I know...Forming and participating in liberation movements represents an explicit recognition of our social vulnerability. I agree. (Pause) I support liberation movements wholeheartedly. (Pause) But...the common denominator*

in all my relationships with my black or gay bros revolves around the issue of empowerment. (Pause) Don't get me wrong, sugar. Fostering a greater sense of empowerment among us is an exceptionally difficult and important task. I don't mean to underestimate its significance. But, Nicholas... (Pause) Oh Nicholas... There are many times when empowerment also means espousing this sense of chronic suffering, pain, and loss of safety that goes with being a member of a minority group. (Pause) This aspect of empowerment—I am sorry to say—is hardly ever addressed by those participating in liberation movements. We rant, analyze the social, political, and cultural contexts within which our oppression takes place, organize protests, and engage in various forms of advocacy activities. (Pause) Yes, some of us—the most active ones—are exceptionally good at defending our rights. But, my personal experience has taught me that we are hardly ever willing to witness one another's most painful, vulnerable moments. We talk about the psychological consequences of constantly being faced with incidents of intolerance, injustice, discrimination, and persecution. However, we have no idea what it means to witness or even contain one another's psychological wounds. Instead, we exclusively focus on empowerment. (Pause) But, sugar...how am I supposed to feel empowered when my deepest fears and nightmares keep residing in the land of the unspeakable? How am I supposed to feel intimate with you when we staunchly refuse to witness each other's most harrowing, emotional scars? How are we supposed to deepen our connectedness if we don't realize that my scars, your scars, our scars are often beyond comprehension or linguistic expression? How are we supposed to feel minimally comfortable with each other's irreducible "nest of differences" (Berlant & Edelman, 2014, p. xi) if we don't make an effort to feel minimally comfortable with this paucity of

meaning and words? How? (Silence prevails for several minutes after Greg's last word. Nicholas struggles to collect his thoughts but Greg's passionate voice is still vividly felt on every inch and curve of his skin, rendering his lover irresistibly desirable. Nicholas wants to have sex with Greg. He desires to possess his body in the hope of possessing his voice and his words. He momentarily feels that Greg's passionate words hold the key to a hitherto unknown, superlative wisdom that could potentially relieve him of the weight of his own life. He swiftly reminds himself, however, that he is solely responsible for carrying the weight of his existence. He suppresses a wave of frustration and clings to his speech as his only hope to avoid a life spent in total silence.) Oh Greg... (Nicholas rubs his eyes and takes a deep breath) You've raised so many important points that I want to touch upon... (Pause) I feel emotionally blocked, though; I have no idea where to begin... (Greg is patient and allows Nicholas to sort out his feelings.) I just remembered something... (Nicholas keeps quiet.) *What's that?* (Silence) When I was little, I thought I was the only unhappy and lonely child in the world. (Pause) I used to imagine everybody else having fun and swimming in oceans of happiness and blissful joy. (Pause) I guess I felt excluded and isolated but you already know that. (Nicholas feels emotionally blocked again. Greg remains silent and waits.) Why am I saying this? (Nicholas exhales violently and groans.) Fuck... (Greg feels the urge to hold him.) OK, I think I know what I am getting at... (Pause) As a gay teenager I thought I belonged to a group of people who were doomed to be miserable and suffer eternal punishment and social marginalization. I would imagine straight people soaking in everlasting happiness, utterly relieved from emotional pain or the practical hardships of life. (Pause) However, my personal experience as a psychotherapist has taught me that this is far from the truth. (Pause) I am

not saying, of course, that white, male, heterosexual, middle-class people are faced with the same challenges and discriminatory practices that we are. Far from that...*What are you saying, then?* (Greg sounds irritated.) I am just saying that our status as members of minority groups often prevents us from looking beyond the obvious and seeing the bigger picture. (Silence) *Seeing the bigger picture...What is the bigger picture, Nicholas?* (Greg sounds angry; Nicholas wonders whether the argument he tries to make is, perhaps, misguided.) What I mean is that it's not necessarily us against them or vice versa... (Pause) My practice as a psychotherapist has shown me that, to a greater or lesser extent, we all find it difficult to ask for help and expose our vulnerable sides. (Pause) We may think that we, the members of minority groups, have suffered the most but we often forget that everyone, irrespective of whether they belong to a minority group or not, has their own share in pain. (Pause) I don't know...I guess I am trying to understand what connects me to others... (Pause) I want to make peace with others, Greg. I get more and more tired of seeing enemies everywhere...I can't go through life like this anymore, handsome. (Pause) I truly need to feel that the world is somewhat hospitable...I am tired, Greg. (Pause) Tired... (Greg also feels emotionally tired but cannot unreservedly share Nicholas' views.) *I also want to make peace with others, sugar.* (Pause) *I also need to feel that the world is hospitable. However, trust me...There isn't a day that goes by that I don't find it to be somewhat hostile.* (Pause) *I strongly desire to find this world hospitable but my hopes are defeated every single day...* (Pause) *Leaving aside for the moment the daily incidents of violence I experience in the Newark ghetto, I am constantly faced with racism, Nicholas. Every day...I encounter at least three subtle or less subtle incidents of racism every single day.* (Pause) *I can't hide my black skin, sugar. You can hide your*

homosexuality but I can't hide my black skin. (Pause) We are coming from two different worlds, Nicholas, and...I am sorry to say but you can't understand where I am coming from. (Pause) You are not black. (Pause) You are white. (Pause) Being a black gay man isn't the same as being a white gay man.(Pause) Nevertheless, I am glad you've had the opportunity to understand through your clinical practice that everyone's got their own share in pain. I wish I had this opportunity too. (Greg's voice reveals barely controlled sarcasm.) But, unlike you, I've always been so busy fighting against racism, poverty, and homophobia. (Pause) I've never had the money or time to study psychology or socialize with white people because, no matter how much in pain they may have been, they've never wanted me near them. (Pause) Thus, I guess I will have a much harder time not seeing enemies everywhere than you did. After all...you've got more in common with them—my enemies—than with me. (Pause) You are white like them...and you are middle-class like them. (Pause) Although, come to think of it, Greece is currently bankrupt...Your country is completely broke, Nicholas, isn't it? Yes, it is...Perhaps, then, you are not part of the middle class anymore. (Pause) Perhaps, you are more like me, like us...Poor and lazy...Poor because we are lazy...Isn't that what the rest of the world thinks of your people, Nicholas? Well, join the club! That's what white Americans think of us too! (Greg's biting sarcasm hurts Nicholas.) Do you really think I am your enemy, Greg? (Pause) I know I've had a more privileged life than you...I know I am white but...do you really think I am your enemy? (Greg remains silent.) I need to know, Greg! (Silence) Each time you forget that I am not a part of your world...Each time you talk about your experiences as if they were everybody else's experiences...Yes, sugar, you become my enemy. (Pause) I am sorry to say but you become my enemy. (Pause) You have absolutely

no fucking idea what it means to be a poor, gay, black man from the Newark ghetto! I would really appreciate it, then, if you stopped lecturing me about being insensitive to my oppressors' pain or not seeing the bigger picture. (Pause) I know we are all human beings! I am more than willing to honor each person's sense of humanity, Nicholas! But my own sense of humanity is brutally trashed every day! (Pause) I am really doing my best not to trash other people's humanity, even though—believe me—I am more than tempted to do it on multiple occasions every day! But, come on...No! I refuse to accept that I am not sensitive enough to my oppressors' emotional hardships! Give me a break! I don't have time to think of their emotional hardships, Nicholas! I am too busy surviving! (Pause) I apologize for the tone of my voice. (Pause) Sometimes you just make me furious, though... (Nicholas experiences a blend of anger, sadness, and despair. His words have offended and hurt Greg but he aches to tell him that he is not supposed to be perfectly knowledgeable about African-American culture. His ignorance doesn't necessarily mean that he is not willing to learn or change his views. Nicholas wishes to tell Greg that he is too damn important to him and that he does not deserve to be yelled at because, despite his mishaps, he is not a representative of the global white population; he is only able to represent himself. He represents a Greek, white man whom Greg has had the opportunity to know beyond his white skin. More than anything else, Nicholas feels sad and desperate because, no matter how careful or considerate he may be, he is far from capable of recognizing and controlling the violent messages his words often convey.) *Was I too harsh on you?* (Nicholas nervously fidgets with the pens on his desk.) Can you please stay quiet for a few minutes, Greg? (Pause) Yes, you were. (Pause) I didn't deserve this. (Greg feels regretful.) I am not like the others. (Pause) I am not a white saint but I am not

like the others. You know that, Greg. (Pause) You fucking know that. (Greg wants to tell Nicholas that the trauma of racism often makes it too difficult for him to understand who wants to harm him and who doesn't. Nevertheless, he respects his wish and remains silent. Greg desires to remain silent too. They both wrestle with feelings that are difficult to be clearly identified and expressed. They both feel threatened by each other's different race but they are ashamed to admit it. They are both fascinated by each other's racial otherness but they are afraid to explore the reasons why. They both wish to defend their races but they fear they may sound racist. They both feel sexually attracted to each other but they dread being absorbed into each other's obscure, racial world. They both struggle to come to terms with their shame for having been violent to each other once more. Ultimately, they both need time to acknowledge and put up with the violence that the long road towards a greater sense of intimacy entails.) You are right, Greg. (Nicholas breaks the silence first.) We are emotionally crippled. (Pause) We dread asking for help. (Pause) We despise weak, needy, vulnerable people because they remind us that, as humans, we are fragile and vulnerable too. (Pause) They remind us that, deep down, we wish to share our vulnerability with others but our fear usually keeps us stuck and lonely, devoid of warmth and intimacy. (Nicholas stays quiet and takes some time to reflect. Greg waits patiently.) We are afraid of discussing the violence we have suffered in the past. (Pause) We wish to clear our minds of all those moments when we were neglected, betrayed, and abused. We wish to forget all those times when our bodies and souls were overwhelmed with sorrow, grief, and shameful weakness. We take a vow to always remain strong and hide the devastating effects of the violence we have experienced even from ourselves. (Pause) I am not saying that the violence we suffer as minority group

members goes completely undiscussed. (Pause) While certainly not the most pleasant conversation topic, we nevertheless know that, unless we recount and make our violent experiences heard and known, there is no other way to make any progress with regard to minority rights. (Pause) Thus, it's not that we don't discuss violence at all; we just avoid this subject whenever we can. (Pause) It's too painful. (Nicholas takes a short break again to reflect.) You know, Greg...Our previous confrontation has reminded me of why I wanted to explore our relationship in the first place. (Pause) My goal was to grasp the dynamics of intimacy in our relationship. (Pause) Motivated by my fear of ending up romantically alone—as you already know—I set about understanding the cultural and ideological factors that have simultaneously allowed and prevented us from feeling closer to each other, more intimate with each other. (Pause) No sooner had I initiated my exploration, however, than I realized that this chapter could not be written without your valuable contribution. *OK, Nicholas, let me ask you something.* (Pause) *Why do you want to specifically explore our relationship? Is it, perhaps, because I am black and you are white?* Yes, Greg. (Pause) That's right. (Silence) *Am I supposed to feel happy now?* (Pause) *I don't know...I mean...I thought you wanted to explore our relationship because I was important to you and not because you wanted to dissect me like a black insect.* (Silence) You are important to me, Greg! (Pause) Dissect you like a black insect...Come on! (Pause) That's not my intention! I want to explore our relationship exactly because you are important to me! (Pause) OUR relationship, Greg! I was also part of this relationship, remember? I am not going to “dissect” you; I am going to “dissect” you *and me together!* That's what I am interested in, Greg; OUR relationship together; OUR interaction together. (Pause) As for the fact that you are black and I am white...Why

shouldn't I explore the sexual relationship between two gay men of different races? (Greg remains silent.) There have been centuries of brutal, interracial violence, Greg, we both know that very well. (Pause) Perhaps, you know that much better than I do! *You bet I do!* I know you do! (Pause) You are a black gay man and I am a white gay man! (Pause) Yes, you are not a slave and I am not a slave owner! But the specter of merciless, anti-black, racist violence is here; it's an integral part of our relationship too, Greg! How could it not be? (Pause) It's been an integral part of our relationship since the first minute we clapped eyes on each other and you know it! (Pause) You fucking know it! *I fucking know it, sugar, I know! Calm down, babe!* (Pause) *You don't have to shout at my ear...Hearing loss is the last thing I want to experience at such an early age.* (Pause) *Chill out, sugar...* (Nicholas bursts into laughter and so does Greg.) *You fucking bastard...I am a fucking bastard, sugar, and I am all yours...* (Silence) *I like that... I know you like it...That's why I said it.* (Pause) *I want to say more but promise me one thing...What's that? Leave the rest out of your fucking dissertation...That's a promise...Go ahead...* (Half an hour later, having somewhat revived a sense of intimacy that used to be stronger when Nicholas still lived in the U.S., they enjoy each other's silent company and prepare for the truths to follow.) *I was playing stupid before, sugar.* (Silence) *I know.* (Silence) *I knew what you meant but I wasn't ready to talk about it.* (Silence) *But...at the beginning of this chapter you seemed more than ready to talk about the decisive impact of race on our relationship, handsome.* (Pause) *I vividly remember you referring to the issues of race, racial kinship, poverty, social class, the discrepancy between our educational backgrounds, my green curtains, my neighbors...I mean...You actually sounded more willing to talk about and acknowledge the importance of these factors than I did...* (Pause) *Am I wrong,*

handsome? (Silence) *No, you are not.* (Pause) *But, when we first started exploring our relationship, I was very angry with you.* (Pause) *I sort of wanted to hurt you for having taken the decision to go back to Greece.* (Pause) *I only wanted to focus on what kept us apart.* (Pause) *But now...my anger at you has evaporated and, instead, I find myself wanting to focus on what has brought us together.* (Pause) *It's my last, desperate effort to maintain a sense of intimacy with you.* (Pause) *And I am afraid that digging into the violent parts of our relationship will just kill this intimacy.* (Nicholas is flooded with an indefinable blend of bittersweet emotions. Greg's tender confession startles and moves him. However, it simultaneously brings about feelings of anger, anxiety, and disbelief. A part of him will always feel fat, defective, and ugly, unworthy of any love and sexual satisfaction. This part will always perceive Greg's words as menacing and insincere, only aiming at deceiving and ridiculing him. Nicholas actively suppresses his urge to attack Greg and tries hard to convince himself that his lover means what he says.) I've always found it so difficult to believe that I am able to inspire love and desire in others, Greg... (Pause) Thank you. (Pause) Your words are the most precious gift. (Pause) I wish I were able to articulate these words myself too. (Pause) Allow me some time to absorb their meaning, will you? (Greg is not in a hurry. Besides, Nicholas' difficulty to believe in his worth as a human being is not unknown to Greg.) *Take as much time as you need, sugar.* (Nicholas concentrates on his breathing. He closely follows the movement of his chest and abdominal wall. His breathing pattern becomes deeper and deeper and, reluctantly, opens an invisible, mysterious gate through which Greg's words invade into Nicholas' body, awaken it, and grant it the courage to speak.) At an earlier point in this chapter—I don't exactly remember when or where—you told me that our relationship has made you

feel less lonely. (Pause) This statement made me so happy, Greg... (Pause) As a matter of fact, I recall myself saying that I felt hope and joy. (Silence) *Exactly... You also said that your feelings of hope and joy were related to your experience of violence and fear.*

(Pause) *But you never explained...* I never elaborated any further; I know. (Nicholas stays quiet for a few seconds.) Greg... I've been quite violent with several of my past boyfriends and lovers. (Pause) I don't mean physically or verbally violent. (Pause) I have definitely been emotionally violent, however, with several of the caring men who desired or even loved me in the past. (Pause) You see, I couldn't believe they really desired or wanted to be with me. (Pause) The psychological violence I had suffered during several periods of my life wouldn't allow me to relax and believe in their sexual desire for me. (Pause) I would usually tend to think that they wanted to humiliate me, or that they felt sorry for me and my fatness. (Nicholas momentarily hesitates to recount his story but eventually finds the courage to continue.) I wanted to have sex of course... (Pause) And I needed some romance in my life... (Pause) And, believe it or not, there have been several men who actually desired me and wanted to pursue a relationship with me in the past. (Pause) But I couldn't believe that they truly desired me. I couldn't believe that they counted me as a member of the human race. (Pause) I would usually wait until they were infatuated enough with me and then, triumphantly, I would simply announce to them that I wasn't in love with them or that we didn't really match. (Pause) There were a few times, of course, when I simply disappeared. (Nicholas keeps quiet and listens attentively to the sound of Greg's breathing. He longs for a response but dares not ask for one.) Yes. (Pause) No matter how ashamed I now feel, there was something unmistakably exultant about the way I abandoned my lovers. I actually felt deep satisfaction at having abandoned them

before they abandoned me. (Pause) I was more than certain, of course, that they would abandon me at some point... (Pause) And I didn't want to experience such humiliation. (Pause) I wasn't sure I could bear with it. (Nicholas takes some time to collect his thoughts. Greg's breathing is clearly heard at the other end of the phone line; a soothing sign of life.) However paradoxical it may sound, I wasn't able to understand how cruel I was to these men. My inner world drama consisted of a victim—myself—and multiple, potential victimizers who were inestimably more powerful than me and threatened to crush my already fragile self-esteem. (Pause) Therefore, I would simply think of my cruelty as an act of self-defense, a strategy protecting me from the inevitable, oncoming cruelty of virile, much more resilient males. (Pause) Greg, I don't mean to say that the sense of triumph I felt did not include elements of aggressive destructiveness towards my lovers. It did. I wanted to destroy them physically and psychologically. However, it was much more related to the inner satisfaction of knowing that, if need be, I could protect myself. (Pause) It was my own survival I was constantly worried about. (Pause) I was more than certain that my lovers/victims/victimizers, no matter how cruel I would be to them, would definitely survive. (Nicholas takes a few minutes to deal with his feelings of shame and sadness.) For that reason, I was taken aback when a guy I was involved with, enraged by my gradual distancing from him without any explanation, accused me of being psychologically sick and monstrous. In fact, his words resonated chillingly with those of Liv Ullmann when addressing her mother in the film *Autumn Sonata*:

...Have you ever cared about anybody else but yourself...? [Y]ou never listen...[Y]ou run away from things...[Y]ou are emotionally crippled...You are helplessly locked up inside yourself, holding yourself back...People like you are lethal—you should be locked up and made harmless... (Ingmar Bergman, 1978, *Autumn Sonata* Movie Script; electronic resource)

Lethal...He had accused me of being lethal... (Pause) But I had always thought that others wanted to put me to death through a lethal injection... (Nicholas remains silent for a few minutes again, his mind deeply absorbed in thought.) It was difficult for me to realize that I could be a ruthless victimizer too. (Pause) Needless to say, my inner world, the way I viewed myself drastically changed. I could be a good, loyal friend but a dangerous, brutal, lethal boyfriend. (Pause) As a result, I started avoiding romantic involvements altogether and only engaged in casual, sexual encounters. I remember myself being overtaken by an insatiable hunger to have more and more sex. I was deeply convinced that having sex with as many men as possible and experiencing as many orgasms as possible would somewhat soothe the pain of being unable to feel intimate with my lovers. My lust would unceasingly travel from one male body to another, trying to avoid concentrating its focus on one, single, male body; one person. Having anonymous sex with multiple men prevented them from taking special interest in me and protected them from the poisonous effects of my violence. Most importantly, my promiscuity protected myself from further realizing how much violence I had suffered and how much violence I wanted to exert on my lovers for making me desire them. My sexual desire for them would remind me of the victimization I had experienced in the Greek culture and the toxic blend of resentment, anger, and unforgiveness I was harboring towards Greece. But this toxic blend towards Greece would bring me on a collision course with its land, its language, its people; my people; a significant part of my identity. (Pause) Who would I be if I pulled up my Greek, anchoring roots? An orphan, perhaps...? (Pause) No. Staying faithful to my Greek roots was a matter of life and death. (Pause) Staying unambivalently faithful to my national roots meant that I should suppress my anger towards Greece.

(Pause) There was no other way to suppress my anger towards Greece, though, than to disregard its violent, cultural role in my failure to feel sexually intimate with my lovers.

(Pause) And my failure to feel sexually intimate with my lovers could only be ignored if I stopped pursuing sexual intimacy altogether. (Pause) I was hoping, I was really hoping that my numerous, sexual encounters with multiple partners could compensate for the lack of sexual intimacy. (Pause) I had reposed my whole trust in the miraculous, divine, beneficial qualities of anonymous, unstoppable sex. As Berlant & Edelman write,

Sex, as a locus for optimism, is a site at which the promise of overcoming division and antagonism is frequently played out. But the consequences of such efforts to resolve our social and psychic contradictions can include the establishment of sexual norms and the circumscription of sex for socially legitimated ends. It can equally, however, give rise to fantasies of sexual liberation and a paradise of polymorphous sexualities (2014, p. xiv).

(Nicholas drinks some water and takes a deep breath.) Greg? *Yes, sugar.* (Silence) Do you think I am disgusting? *Not at all...* (Nicholas drinks some more water.) OK.

(Pause) You know...I've always felt a profound ambivalence about my past sexual promiscuity. (Pause) There is a big part of me that has really enjoyed it. There was a sense of wild gratification...I can't explain it but, in touching so many bodies and then disappearing, there was a primitive feeling of animalistic freedom... (Pause) There were no demands and no promises...Just flesh... (Pause) I miss it...A big part of me truly misses this period of my life. (Pause) And then I remember all those times when I felt lonely and depressed after sex... (Pause) That sense of emptiness and futility was frightening.

(Nicholas stays quiet as his inner world regains its connection with the feelings he has just described. All of a sudden, Leo Bersani, an author he mentioned before, and his article *Is the Rectum a Grave?* (1987) come to his mind. He opens his mouth to say

something but Greg forestalls him.) *If it's any consolation, the vast majority of gay men I have met in my life, myself included, have been sexually promiscuous at some point in their lives.* (Pause) *There is nothing you should be ashamed of.* (Nicholas feels a sudden wave of anger rise in him.) Yet...I do feel ashamed, Greg... (Pause) I do feel ashamed... (They both remain quiet for a few minutes. Then, Nicholas breaks the silence.) Leo Bersani—an author I mentioned before—once wrote that we, gay men, idealize, try to identify with, and feel inferior to the dominant, cultural forms of heterosexual masculinity. (Greg listens carefully and nods.) *I agree.* (Pause) *How could it be any other way, sugar? Most of the times, these are the only forms of masculinity we ever witness.* (Pause) *Almost from birth, we are brainwashed into believing that, unless we shape our bodies and souls according to the rigid principles of heterosexual masculinity, we are doomed.* (Pause) *At this point, however, I want to clarify something. I can't tell what "heterosexual masculinity" means to you as a white gay man.* (Pause) *I can definitely confirm, though, that "heterosexual masculinity" among blacks, apart from having sex exclusively with women, also means being able to protect the black race; it means being self-controlled and powerful enough to defend the black race.* (Pause) *In fact, on numerous occasions I have heard several black people say that "getting black men to practice homosexuality is one way in which whites systematically disrupt black families and neutralize black men" (Conerly, 1996, p. 140) or that "all 'real' black subjects are male and heterosexual. Therefore, [. . .] only these [. . .] subjects are qualified to speak for or to represent the race" (McBride, 1998, p. 371).* (Pause) *As you may understand...being a gay man not only makes me feel like a failed man; it also renders me unsuitable to represent my race...* (The blend of bitterness and pain in Greg's voice is

more than evident. Nicholas wants to comfort him but doesn't know how. He has never felt unsuitable to represent or defend his race because, to the best of his knowledge, the white race has never been in need of being defended. Greg has described an emotional experience that Nicholas is unaware of.) I am sorry, Greg... (Greg is silent at the other end of the phone line, breathes, and, at times, sighs.) *I am sorry too...* (Greg's sadness is palpable.) Is there anything I could do? (Nicholas feels useless; he doesn't like this feeling.) *Just witness my sadness for a few minutes.* (Pause) *That will be more than enough...* (Nicholas stays quiet; he wants to hold Greg in his arms. A few minutes later, Greg talks first.) *So...what else did Bersani say?* (Nicholas respects Greg's unarticulated wish not to talk about the connection between his sexuality and his race any further.) He agrees with you that the dominant forms of heterosexual masculinity glorify self-control and despise powerlessness. (Pause) Patriarchal cultures and societies demand that "properly masculine" men be strong and under control at all times, even when they have sex. This is why, Bersani argues, they find it quite difficult to surrender themselves into the self-shattering power of pleasure and sexual desire. (Pause) Having sex entails getting undressed and giving up a great deal of our psychological and physical control; it involves embracing vulnerability and powerlessness; it ultimately necessitates confronting the incoherence and instability of our, supposedly fixed and changeless, selfhoods. (Pause) Most men, asphyxiated by the rigid criteria of heterosexual masculinity they are expected to satisfy, cannot embrace sex for what it is and offers—self-shattering pleasure, intense sensations, intimacy, vulnerability—and, instead, unbeknownst to them, view sex as a threat to their ideals of fixed selfhood, everlasting power, and self-control. As a result, "[sex degenerates] into a relationship that condemns

sexuality to becoming a struggle for power” (p. 218). Sex, instead of being a terrain within which power is abdicated and the instability of selfhood is celebrated, it becomes a battleground within which men strive to prove the truthfulness of their selfhoods and, thus, impose their power on others. (Pause) Needless to say, individuals who seem to willingly embrace their insatiable desire for unstoppable sex are condemned and considered threats to the self-control that heterosexual masculinity pontificates. Bersani says that, up to a certain extent, gay men identify with the ideals of heterosexual masculinity but the very act of sex—especially the act of anal sex—among men constantly undermines and violates the oppressive principles of the dominant forms of masculinity. (Pause) This is why politically conservative circles during the AIDS crisis attacked anal sex and promiscuity among gay men and represented these sexual practices as diseased. In reality, what they tried to do was control gay men’s sexuality as well as advocating for a “purified” and nonviolent sexuality, experienced by people whose selfhoods are allegedly fixed and coherent. (Pause) Bersani argues, however, that, unless we make an effort to reconcile with the fragmentation of our selfhoods—a fragmentation that becomes most obvious when we have sex—the risk of being violent with others on a personal and social level becomes more likely. This is so because the absolute certainties of a fully coherent self often legitimize the exercise of violence in the name of truth. (Pause) Bersani claims that gay men’s promiscuity, our obsession with sex, is very important exactly because it shatters our certainties and brings to surface the fragmentation of our selfhoods. Contrary to the socially sanctioned image of an all-powerful, self-controlled, heterosexual man, an image that we internalize and feel inferior to, our sexual obsession repeatedly urges us to abdicate power, lose control, and,

therefore, uproot the internalized image of the self-controlled, heterosexual man we always compare ourselves to. (Nicholas completes his sketchy analysis of Bersani's views and immediately feels regret for having explained it in such detail.) I apologize, Greg. (Pause) I didn't mean to be so long-winded... (Greg bursts into laughter.) *Don't worry, sugar.* (Pause) *I didn't catch everything but I think I've grasped Bersani's main point.* (They both remain lost in thought for some time.) *Wow...* (Greg sounds surprised.) *I am wondering...Who would I be if I stopped comparing myself to straight men?* (Pause) *Who would I be if I didn't try to be like them?* (Pause) *Is it possible to desire and have sex with another man without feeling ashamed of betraying the principles of heterosexual masculinity?* (Pause) *Is it possible to desire another man without struggling to imitate a straight man's desire for women?* (Pause) *Would it be possible for me to desire and have sex with you, sugar, simply as...Greg?* (Pause) *But...who would I be if I didn't identify with my heterosexual bros?* (Pause) *Do you have any answers to these questions, sugar?* (Nicholas slowly shakes his head no but Greg can't see him.) No, Greg...I am also trying hard to answer these questions... (Pause) Sometimes I think I am completely clueless about everything... (Greg laughs; he finds this statement funny.) *I think you are somewhat exaggerating, sugar...* (His voice reveals his affection.) *You are not clueless, Nicholas.* (Pause) *I've learned so much from you...* (Nicholas, as opposed to the past, is capable of welcoming Greg's affection. He smiles.) Thank you, handsome. (Pause) I've learned much from you, too. (Pause) I've learned that, although I am always quite scared of sexual intimacy, I am not *that* scared anymore...at least, not like in the past. (Pause) I've learned that, despite my toxic blend of fear and low self-esteem, I am somewhat able to approach another man emotionally and make him—and me—feel less lonely. (Silence)

*That's true, sugar. (Pause) You have made me feel less lonely... (Silence) That's why I felt joy and hope earlier... (Pause) Despite our differences...despite the violence that these differences have engendered, we were able to make each other feel less lonely. (Pause) There is something more, though... (Nicholas remains silent for a few seconds). Most importantly, what I've learned from you, Greg, is that we—the minority group members who wish to come closer to one another and foster a greater degree of belongingness and togetherness—cannot afford to silence the violence we reproduce against one another any longer. (Pause) I feel that our ability to feel emotionally intimate with our lovers/partners, apart from our reluctance to talk about the violence we have suffered and our refusal to ask for help, is also affected by our unwillingness to acknowledge how violent we can be with one another. (Pause) Of course, you could claim that this—that is, violence among us—is something I already knew. After all, I have been a *fat*, active member of the gay community for more than 15 years and I know how violent it can be. Leo Bersani, for example, in his attempt to describe gay baths, writes:*

Anyone who has ever spent one night in a gay bathhouse knows that it is (or was) one of the most ruthlessly ranked, hierarchized, and competitive environments imaginable. Your looks, muscles, hair distribution, size of cock, and shape of ass determined exactly how happy you were going to be during those few hours, and rejection, generally accompanied by two or three words at most, could be swift and brutal, with none of the civilizing hypocrisies with which we get rid of undesirables in the outside world (1987, p. 206).

Therefore, violence among members of minorities and socially underprivileged groups is not something I have not already thought of or experienced. And, in all honesty, knowing how much we have all gone through, I wouldn't expect any different; in the end, we take it out on one another. (Pause) I understand that. (Pause) However, what I hadn't understood before we met, Greg, was the importance of discussing and exploring this

violence—the violence of implicit stereotyping, prejudice, and racism—with the people we desire to be intimate with. (Pause) I mean...Knowing and having sex with you has forced me to realize a number of implicit stereotypical assumptions I have always been harboring about black people, ones that had gone unnoticed before. In addition, my relationship with you, a member of the African-American community, has revealed my ignorance about your culture as well as my violent efforts to classify and totally decode your otherness. (Pause) I now feel that these issues should be openly discussed by people who desire to come emotionally closer. (Pause) In fact, I believe that discussing the ways through which we may be violent to one another is indispensable for increasing our sense of mutual intimacy. (Pause) I am not saying that everybody should do this or that intimacy is only achieved in this way. After all, “[i]ntimacy itself is a contested concept [. . .] [and] its social and ethical-political meaning is indeterminate...” (Frank, Clough, & Seidman, 2013, p. 2). (Pause) Nevertheless, I strongly believe that people like us—people who have suffered a great deal of institutional and cultural violence and desire to come closer and feel less lonely—should openly talk about how they/we reproduce violence to one another. (Pause) We should explore the assumptions lurking behind our violent acts, take full responsibility of them, and, if possible, accept a little bit more one another’s irreducible otherness. (Pause) I feel this openness is preferable to reproducing a violent pattern that could only leave us lonely, marginalized, and powerless. (Nicholas stays quiet; Greg takes deep breaths and sighs.) Greg, I want to ask you a favor. (Greg bursts into laughter.) *One more favor?? Damn! Come on, handsome...the last one! I am not gonna tap dance for the sake of your fucking dissertation, sugar! Forget it!* (They spend several minutes teasing each other like they did when Nicholas was in the U.S.) *I am*

listening, sugar...What will I have to do this time? Trust me, handsome, you won't have to tap dance. *Thank goodness!* Believe me; it's going to be the last favor...*Well, I don't mind doing favors for you. It's just that I don't like doing this kind of favors...*(It takes them some time to resist talking about how much they would love to have sex together again but, in the end, they manage to concentrate on the dissertation.) You know, Greg, this chapter is slowly coming to an end and...*Phew! I thought it'd never end...* I also feel very relieved, believe me... (Pause) So...I would like to devote the last section of this chapter to describing a few snapshots of our relationship. (Pause) It's not my intention to provide a detailed account of everything we have experienced together. Instead, my plan is to refer to a few, selected, very specific incidents of our time together which, in my opinion, practically illustrate a number of the issues we have already discussed. (Silence) *Fuck...* (Silence) I am not going to mention anything that would identify you. (Pause) You know that. I just want to provide a small narrative of how I have experienced and interpreted our sexual relationship in connection with issues such as sexual desire, violence, intimacy, race, etc. (Pause) You don't have to intervene but I would appreciate it if you did. Your feedback would make my narrative less one-dimensional. (Silence) *Are you going to talk about the loss of your father?* Yes, handsome, I am. (Silence) *Then you will have to talk about the loss of my father, too.* (Silence) That's right. (Silence) *It's not so much the issue of confidentiality I am worried about. I trust you.* (Pause) *It's just that I don't know how emotionally difficult such an exploration could be...* (Silence) Well...How much more difficult could it be than everything we've said so far? (They both smile.) What do you think? (Greg stays quiet for a few minutes.) *OK.* (Pause) *I am*

not sure if I will be able to add anything meaningful to your narrative but...I am ready to listen.

The Transcription of a Nightmare

*For a nightmare to become a poem
the silence must be undisturbed by creakings
of the soul, the heart or other organs
of the inorganic chemistry of existence.
The silence may be occupied by colors
but striking clashes are forbidden:
black with rose
or with the much-sung blue of eyes.
Perhaps a bit of earthy brown
the bronze of a withered leaf
or white with brownish spots from a dog's neck.
Once the nightmare has reached its full height
it must undergo a series of operations.
With great dexterity every trace
of reasonable doubt must be removed
and then without anesthesia
something of inborn human kindness
must be transplanted there.
The most difficult surgery
is to cut it away from fear.
This you achieve by immersing
the bad dream unremittingly
in the holiness of nature.
And then the poem springs up;
leaf by tiny leaf
blossom by blossom
quite frail at first, trembling
it rises from the black earth that nourished it
and dares.
It dares to dream
the antidote of agony
the Word.*

*—Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, *The Scattered
Papers of Penelope: New & Selected Poems,*
(2009, p.93)*

Here I go, Greg. (Nicholas remains silent for a few seconds.) The first loss I experienced in my life, when I was thirteen years old, was the loss of my godmother. She

was only 37 years old when she died from breast cancer. (Pause) I remember my parents trying to talk me out of attending her funeral but I was adamant that I should go. I could imagine no other way of saying my final farewell to a woman who was like a second mother to me. (Long pause) When I approached her open casket, my godmother's face shocked me. Although my mother had diligently prepared me for what would happen at the funeral, nothing in the world could have prepared me for the sense of cold finality that I experienced as I was staring at my godmother's lifeless face. (Pause) Her facial features were intact but her smile, her gaze, and her playful, funny grimaces were forever gone. They had been substituted, instead, by a motionless facial expression, conveying a combination of silent redemption, fearful apprehension, and fatalistic resignation. (Pause) My mind would advise me to wean myself from staring at her face but my heart wanted to absorb every single detail, resisting my parents' gentle efforts to carry me away from the casket. (Pause) The unknown, abstract, boundless immensity of death had frightened me and, in a mysterious way, my godmother's face seemed able to concretize it and restrain its disintegrating effect on me. (Pause) Her face lent a weird sense of familiarity to death, one that was doomed to fail because, after all, that was not my godmother's face as I had experienced it when she was alive. (Pause) My eyes would venture towards her face with the intention to discover a previously charted territory, only to realize that they could barely see a no man's land. (Pause) I was asking my godmother's face to help me reconcile with (her) death and its only response consisted of the silent, cold, merciless, and irreversible sense of an ending; a very tangible nothingness. (Pause) In retrospect, I realized that this nothingness was better than nothing; I had been given the opportunity to actually experience the finality of (her) death and move towards a sort of psychological

and symbolic closure. (Pause) I had seen her. (Pause) I had actually seen her lying dead in her casket. (Pause) It was a fact, an indisputable fact. (Pause) She was dead. (Pause) My slightest, most irrational hope to see her somewhere alive again had evaporated. (Pause) And this unequivocal certainty of her death gave me a clear message: mourn, she is never coming back. (Nicholas remains silent for a few moments.) That was not the case with my father's death, though. (Pause) I never saw him lying dead in his casket. I never saw his lifeless face. (Pause) I was thousands of miles away when the funeral was taking place, conducting therapy groups at the hospital and writing progress notes. (Pause) It seemed like any other day but it actually wasn't; I had irrevocably missed my one and only opportunity to experience his loss tangibly and internalize his definitive departure. And my subsequent mourning process, apart from pain, also included a small, irrational, silent, and persistent doubt about the truthfulness of my father's death. "Is it true? Is he really dead? But I never saw him lying dead in his casket!" (Pause) It was so weird to be simultaneously certain and uncertain about his loss... (Silence) *Is this how you felt when we met, Nicholas?* Yes, Greg. (Pause) This is how I felt. I was trying to keep a balance between my emotionally demanding duties at the hospital and my private grief at home. I would have frequent phone and Skype conversations with friends and family in Athens and in Pittsburgh but, in the final analysis, I was all alone in New Jersey. (Pause) I really needed someone to hold and comfort me. (Pause) Correction: I didn't need someone to hold me in his arms, caress my hair, and whisper in my ears comforting words that would alleviate my pain. (Pause) At least, this is not what I *consciously* wanted. (Nicholas stays quiet for a few seconds and thinks.) What I consciously wanted was sex; plain, mind-blowing, intense sex. I wanted to get laid. (Pause) My grief had plunged my body deep

into a state of sensual deadness and I needed a man to touch my body and violently awaken it. (Pause) That was the kind of comfort I urgently needed. (Pause) I wanted someone, anyone, to take hold of my body through sex and prevent it—and me—from further tumbling down into depression. (Silence) *This is partly true, Nicholas.* (Pause) *It's not true that you simply wanted **any man** to have sex with.* (Pause) *When we talked online you were clear on what you really wanted.* (Pause) *You wanted to have sex with a black man.* (Pause) *And I wanted to have sex with a white man.* That's true, Greg. (Silence) *Why?* (Pause) *Why did you specifically want to have sex with a black man, sugar?* (Silence) I am afraid I won't be able to provide you with a definitive answer, Greg. *I never asked for a definitive answer.* (Pause) *I just want to understand what made you, a specific white man, want to have sex with a black man at that time.* (Nicholas stays quiet for a few seconds.) OK. I just remembered a passage from an article which, I think, summarizes beautifully many of the thoughts I wish to share with you. Here it is:

Most travelers are drawn to foreign countries because they hold out the fantasy that possibilities exist in that country that they cannot realize in their own domestic land. Initially the foreignness of the other continent allows the tourist to unleash his sexual and erotic desires held in check in his domestic domicile. He thus begins to believe that it is only in the context of the exotic other that he can experience his own wild instinctual forces. Eventually, however, the point arrives when he realizes that the qualities he was attracted to in this distant land were all of his own making and were an expression of his own idealizations instead of a real recognition of the other land...At some point, he will nonetheless decide to embark on a new mission, in the sustained hope that his fantasies of the other country will be more readily satisfied. He will become the serialized traveler who collects many entrance and exit stamps, always with the renewed hope that somewhere and somehow outside of himself he will finally find the right country. Alternatively, our imagined traveler will finally come to a halt and realize that the otherness he is seeking in the foreign country actually resides in himself, so that what he is seeking is not placed in the exotic other but squarely inside himself. As he realizes the power of his fantasy he can be liberated from this incessant search and can begin to appreciate the true otherness of the other-not, the narcissistic

idealized otherness of his own manufacturing. Once he discovers and can tolerate that difference, that separateness between himself and the other land, he can embark on getting to know the other in all her colors and textures (Wolff Bernstein, 2006, p. 721).

(Greg stays quiet for a while, reflecting on the passage that Nicholas has just read.) *These are very interesting ideas, sugar. However...how do they apply to you?* (Nicholas takes a deep breath and tries to order his muddled thoughts. He drinks some water and clears his throat.) You know, Greg...When I found myself in the same room with another man for the very first time, there was a sense of impending doom in me. Although I had grown up in a largely nonreligious family, I was anxiously waiting for lightning to strike me or something similar. (Pause) But there was an even worse feeling than waiting for lightning to strike: I would actually fear that my touch could cause my lover's death. (Nicholas stays quiet.) Given the circumstances, I still can't believe I was able to function the way I did... (Pause) There were moments when fear would completely take hold of me but my first lover—a 32-year-old sweet, gentle man from Switzerland named René²⁵—would persistently direct my attention to the interaction of our two bodies, silently urging me to leave my fears and thoughts behind. (Pause) How strange...I can still remember him whispering soothing words to me... (Pause) He would gently repeat “I am not going anywhere...I am not going anywhere...” (Pause) Come to think of it, this phrase sounded like a meditative mantra. (Nicholas brings to mind his Swiss lover and tries to hear the sound of his voice again. All of a sudden, he is in tears. He realizes that, despite his overwhelming fear during their time together, René didn't run away. The more he ponders on his lover's emotional generosity, the more he is overcome with a wave of gratitude.) I wish I were able to thank him. (Pause) I've never thanked him. (Nicholas

²⁵ This is a pseudonym.

remains silent for a few minutes, feeling deeply moved. Greg's breathing is heard at the other end of the phone line.) Am I making you feel uncomfortable, Greg? (Pause) I am sorry, I didn't... *I don't feel uncomfortable, sugar.* (Pause) *Far from that...It actually makes me happy to know that your first lover has treated you so well.* (Pause) *Hopefully, our relationship has left you with a good memory, too...* (Pause) *I really hope so...*

(Silence) Greg... (Pause) I could never compare a one-night stand to a nine-month relationship. (Pause) René has left me with a fond memory but you will always be a part of me. (Pause) You will never be *just* one more pleasant memory. (Pause) You will always be Greg, my Greg, the man who generously helped me as I was grieving for my father. (Pause) How could I ever compare you to René? (Pause) How? (Greg says nothing.) Do you believe me, Greg? (Silence) *I do believe you, sugar.* (Pause) *It's just that you are not here anymore and I am constantly afraid you will forget about me in the future.* (Silence) Your fear is mine, too. (Pause) I am also afraid you will forget about me in the future... (They both stay quiet, knowing that they can do nothing else but live with this fear. After a few moments, Greg breaks the silence first.) *You never finished your story, sugar.* (Pause) *What happened after the night you spent with René? How did your experience of sexual desire change?* (Nicholas drinks some water and momentarily looks outside the window of his room at the sunlit Parthenon.) Meeting with René and having sex for the first time proved to be simultaneously a blessing and a curse. It was a blessing because, for the first time in my life and despite my long-lasting ambivalence towards sex, I had felt somewhat capable of welcoming pleasure and feeling sexually close to another man. It felt liberating to know that sex with another man could be utterly enjoyable and that it didn't necessarily carry devastating consequences for either me or

my lover. (Pause) On the other hand, though, having sex specifically with René was a curse as well. (Pause) He looked like a lovely, emotionally generous person and made me think that all the guys I would meet in the future would be equally lovely and generous. (Nicholas laughs and remains silent for a few seconds.) I was a 20-year-old naïve, emotionally insecure guy who, utterly deprived of sexual love and romance, was waiting to be rescued by his Prince Charming. (Nicholas laughs again and takes another sip of water.) Of course, as I would very soon discover, the idealized image I had built up in my mind couldn't be further from the truth. (Pause) Not long after my sexual encounter with René, I made a concerted effort to get involved with the gay community in Athens. Its ghetto-like character had never been to my liking but I was longing to find some friends among like-minded men and, perhaps, a Prince Charming. Yet, no matter how much I tried, I ended up feeling rejected because I was too fat, too unstylish, and too shy to fit in a group of narcissistic, flamboyant, and hypersexual men. To them I was just an anomaly, worthy of rejection by gay and straight people alike. (Nicholas remains silent for a while.) That was a time of utter loneliness and anger, Greg. (Pause) My social life significantly improved over the following years but that specific time was one of anger and loneliness. (Pause) I was actually counting on these people to feel some degree of support and belongingness. Instead, they had discarded me in the most humiliating way. (Nicholas looks outside the window again.) I think that was also the time when the violence lurking in me was activated to the fullest. I was angry with and felt afraid of everyone. The sense of rejection by the gay community along with the violence I had suffered in the past had made a Molotov cocktail that would eventually be thrown against anyone wishing to approach me and pursue a deeper, more intimate relationship with me.

(Nicholas remains silent and tries to sort out his feelings and thoughts.) What a conundrum... (Pause) I wanted to be approached by others but I was afraid they would reject and humiliate me. (Pause) I wanted to approach others but I was afraid that my angry and violent self would harm them. (Pause) I was deeply afraid of feeling intimate with others but, at the same time, I didn't wish to be alone. (Pause) I didn't want to be in a relationship but I was hoping I could find a man to give me the utmost sexual and psychological satisfaction. (Pause) I was engaging in sex with multiple partners in order to avoid the possibility of greater intimacy but, again, I was hoping I could find a man to render me totally unafraid of intimacy. (Pause) Most importantly, I was looking for a man to make me forget about all these unresolved, anxiety-provoking, relational dilemmas but, each time I had sex, I would increasingly realize that these existential dilemmas were residing in me, occupying a foreign, psychic land of mine that I was unwilling to visit. Yet, the more I noticed this foreign, anxiety-ridden land, the more I became determined to deny its existence and discover the man whose body and sexual intensity would miraculously resolve all my emotional and relational conflicts. (Pause) Despite a number of successive frustrations, I was deeply convinced that this man existed. Hence, I threw myself into a marathon of sex with men who had been equally rejected by the Athens gay community as being too fat, ugly, old-fashioned, sluggish, hairy, dull, shy, disgraceful abominations. My sexual desire would be constantly vigilant to discover the next male body, the next man to have sex with and, upon finding him, our two bodies would engage in an utterly desperate, breathless, impersonal, pseudo-passionate, sexual game that would drown out our voices and the words we wanted to utter. (Silence) *What were these words, Nicholas?* (Silence) Save me. Take away my pain and despair. Allow me to use

your body as my personal homeland. I feel like an outsider, as if I don't belong anywhere. Allow me to belong to your body. Allow me to belong somewhere. (Pause)

But this much-desired sense of belongingness was nowhere to be found. I was an outcast turning to other outcasts for sex and comfort. I was unable to withstand the burden of their despair and they were unable to withstand the burden of my existential fright. Thus, the end of our sexual encounter would usually find me and each one of my numerous lovers feeling frustrated, disillusioned, anxious, angry, and lonely. Our mutual expectations to become a safe haven for each other had been, once more, shattered into a million, tiny pieces. (Pause) We would then get dressed and part in silence, secretly castigating each other's incompetence to function as the safe haven we had initially dreamed of. (Nicholas feels unable to continue any longer. For the zillionth time, he wishes he had chosen a different dissertation topic. It's too late now, though; too late.) As time passed by, I felt more and more frustrated but I never, not even for one minute, thought of giving up my sexual marathon and exploring the foreign land of my relational fears and violent urges. (Pause) The possibility of such an emotional exploration should be avoided at all costs because I wasn't sure I would be able to withstand it. Therefore, I kept having sex with a number of men, hoping that a man's smile, hair color, body shape, hands, voice, penis, or hairy chest could somehow alleviate the intensity of my existential pain and grant me the gift of a fully liberated sexual desire and unshakable intimacy...

(Nicholas stays quiet for a while.) There are times when I feel completely amazed at my naïveté back then... (Pause) Anyway...As expected, I grew increasingly frustrated with Greek men; none of my Greek lovers ever seemed capable of offering me the satisfaction I was looking for. Thus, I turned to lovers coming from different countries, speaking

foreign languages, and representing cultures which, in my eyes at least, seemed exotic and sexually promising. A foreign accent, a different skin color, or an Asian facial feature would be psychologically invested with fantasies and expectations of wild sex, immense pleasure, and harmonious, intimate relationships. In other words, I would expect them to succeed where Greek men had failed. (Pause) Needless to say, the meanings I would assign to my lovers' different physical characteristics and cultural backgrounds were usually unrelated to how they viewed themselves. (Pause) Their cultural, sexual, and corporeal self-definitions were of no interest to me. (Pause) Instead, what mattered most was my own interpretation of their cultural and corporeal differences and whether these differences seemed promising enough to maximize my sexual satisfaction and obliterate my psychological pain. (Nicholas remains silent. He feels ashamed of himself.) *Talk to me about our relationship, sugar.* (Pause) *I need to know...* (Nicholas is reluctant to talk.) *Haven't we agreed that the best way to feel more intimate with each other is to openly talk about our mutual violence—the violence of implicit stereotyping, prejudice, and racism?* (Pause) *Why are you backing off?* (Pause) *I am not going anywhere...* (Pause) *I am not René, of course...* (Pause) *I am not your first lover but I feel like telling you what he said to you during that night...the night when you had sex for the first time...* (Pause) *I am not going anywhere because I am also guilty...* (Pause) *I have also been violent towards you.* (Pause) *And I am more than willing to talk to you about this violence.* (Silence) *Are you, Greg?* (Silence) *I am, Nicholas, but on one condition—my account will not be part of your dissertation.* (Pause) *I am willing to talk to you about what your whiteness has meant to me but I am not ready to share my thoughts with the rest of the world.* (Pause) *Your readers may never find out who I am but I am not yet ready to see*

my thoughts on this issue put in written form. (Pause) Could you do me this favor, then? Could you leave my thoughts out? Of course I could, handsome. (Pause) After all, our initial agreement was that I should include only the thoughts and ideas you felt most comfortable with. (Silence) Thank you. (Pause) I am ready to hear the rest of your story now, sugar. (Pause) I am ready to hear about us. (Nicholas drinks some more water and tries to set himself comfortably in his armchair. After some initial reluctance, he starts to talk.) When my father died in the midst of my clinical internship at Trenton Psychiatric Hospital, I found myself all alone in New Jersey. (Pause) The shock of his loss, although he had been sick for a few years before he finally passed away, was detrimental. In the beginning, I felt emotionally numb, as if my body had been covered in hardened cement. Nevertheless, my psychological numbness gradually subsided and I was eventually faced with a kind of pain I had never experienced before. It was a paralyzing, frightening pain that would occasionally interfere with my ability to adequately perform my clinical tasks at the hospital. (Pause) I could feel myself slowly tumbling down into depression and that was the last thing I wanted to happen. I was all alone with nobody to take care of me. (Pause) That's when I decided to find a lover. (Pause) That's when I once more decided to relieve my suffering through sex. (Pause) I wasn't planning to get involved into a long-term relationship. No. I just wanted to have sex with no strings attached and no feelings involved. *Why did you want to have sex with a black man?* (Nicholas takes a deep breath and goes on with his account.) In retrospect, I realized that there were three main reasons that had sparked my desire to have sex with a black man. *By the way, had you ever had sex with any other black man before we met?* I had kissed a black guy when I was still in Pittsburgh but...no; you have been my very first black lover, Greg! (They both burst into

laughter.) *I may have not been your first lover but, at least, I have been your very first black lover!* That's right, handsome. (They keep teasing each other for a few more minutes and then Greg encourages Nicholas to go on.) *So, what was the first reason for wanting to have sex with a black guy?* I guess I've always found black men—African-American people in general—to be more warm-hearted and emotionally demonstrative than white or Asian Americans. In many respects, black people remind me of the Greeks' volcanic emotionality and this has always made me feel much closer to them than all the other Americans. *What about the second reason?* Well, I've always had the impression that black people are more likely to struggle with poverty and, at that time, I was a financially struggling graduate student, hailing from a cash-strapped country that was making headlines all over the world. Having already received a barrage of sarcastic, demeaning, hurtful comments about Greece from a number of white and Asian people, I was hoping to find a lover who would not mind my Greek origin and the financial crisis back home. To my mind, a black man was less likely to call me "lazy, fucking Greek" and go away in disgust. (Pause) But, I think that the most important reason was the third one. (Pause) I mean...I always remember myself being bombarded with images and representations of black men as being super-duper athletic, muscled, and hypersexual (Hall, 1997). Being in a state of depression, I was hoping to find a strong, hypersexual man to take charge of my body and awaken it. I was hoping to find a black man who would prevent me from putting up resistance; a man whose bestial, physical vitality would be poured into my veins and make me forget my suffering for the loss of my father. (Silence) *And what did you think of me when we finally met?* (Silence) I liked you. (Pause) I found you very handsome. I also liked the fact that you knew exactly what you

wanted. (Pause) You wanted uncomplicated sex. (Pause) I wanted uncomplicated sex too. (Pause) We were a perfect match. (Silence) *How did you feel touching my black skin, Nicholas?* (Silence) This is so difficult to explain in words... (Pause) My imagination had started “touching” your black skin before my hands and lips actually touched it. I vividly remember myself sitting across from you in my living room and the very idea of touching your black skin made me really horny. (Pause) It was the idea of crossing a border and transgressing a forbidden boundary that made me so horny. (Pause) Your black skin was a land I was not supposed to visit. I almost felt like Eve, determined to eat the forbidden fruit and go against the commands of God. (Silence) *But, how did you feel when you actually touched my black skin?* (Silence) I approached your black skin with some reluctance, as if I was going to be electrocuted. At first, I would gently rub and squeeze it, trying to understand whether your black skin was different from the other skins I had touched in the past. (Pause) I couldn’t find any difference tactilely but I would keep squeezing and exploring it, determined to find a difference. *What was the reason of this determination?* (Silence) I think that a tactilely different, black skin had been associated in my mind with an increased possibility to find inner peace and achieve a greater level of intimacy. (Pause) After all, that was the reason why I had chosen to have sex with a black lover. I wanted to have a different sexual experience in order to explore different avenues of relieving my psychological pain. (Silence) *Did my black skin disappoint you, sugar?* (They both laugh.) Just a little bit, handsome. (Pause) When I kissed you, when I tasted the salty flavor of your saliva, and when I ultimately lost myself in your black arms, I forgot everything. (Pause) You were everything I had ever imagined for a black man: warm-hearted, passionate, sexy, hot, fearless, tireless... (Pause) Oh yes...The first time we

had sex together I was on cloud nine, happily oblivious of the outer world and my inner suffering. And I was more than thrilled when you unexpectedly called me and asked to meet me for a second time. The second time became third, fourth, fifth...All of a sudden, I found myself looking forward to meeting you and having sex with you. My initial plan to meet you once had been thwarted by your persistence to connect with me. (Pause) You wanted to psychologically connect with me and I was too weak and desperate to resist your persistence. (Pause) I wanted to connect with you too, Greg. I needed you. (Pause) I needed your soothing presence in my life so desperately that even my inner judgmental voices fell silent and allowed me for once to welcome a lover's presence without feeling guilty. (Silence) *That was our honeymoon, Nicholas.* (Pause) *It lasted approximately three months.* (Silence) Yes, handsome. (Pause) It took me three months before the warm feeling of intimacy that had beautifully flourished between us eventually scared me to death. (Pause) My inner voices were revived, accusing me of being fat, ugly, defective, and undeserving of love. (Pause) It became clearer than ever that my desire to find a man who would miraculously resolve all my sexually relational anxieties was just an illusion, a figment of my imagination. (Pause) It became clearer than ever that a big part of me simply despised and was deeply afraid of intimacy. (Pause) I didn't want intimacy. (Pause) I just wanted to be alone so as not to get hurt or hurt others. (Nicholas drinks some water and sits deep in thought for a while.) There were times when I wanted to tell you to go and leave me alone. The charm of your black skin and its sexually uninhibited promises had totally faded away and I was just looking for a pretext to distance myself from you and the knowledge that I was my worst enemy. (Pause) On the other hand, though, I would bring to mind all the beautiful moments we had shared together and the

healthier voices in me would encourage me to surrender to my passion for you and enjoy your body and soul. (Pause) But those other voices were stronger. (Pause) Apart from castigating me for being defective, they would also keep reminding me of our racial, social, and educational differences. (Pause) They would urge me to view you as inferior. (Nicholas is in tears. He sobs.) I am sorry, Greg...I am sorry handsome...I am so sorry... (Greg is in tears too.) I am sorry... (Nicholas feels ashamed.) I should probably stop. *No, sugar, no!* (Pause) *Your honesty is the best gift you could ever give me.* (Pause) *Please, don't stop.* (Pause) *Please, sugar...* (Nicholas feels less fearful of alienating Greg. He decides to continue.) One night, as I was holding you in my arms and caressing your hair, you asked me about my family. (Pause) Paradoxically enough, even though we had been “dating” for more than five months, we had never shared any information on our families before that moment. (Pause) That’s when I first told you about the death of my father and that I hadn’t been able to attend his funeral. (Nicholas takes a deep breath and smiles.) I remember you were very supportive and gentle. In fact, you scolded me for not having shared it with you earlier. (Pause) You told me that suffering has to be shared. (Pause) Do you remember that, Greg? *I do remember that, sugar.* (Pause) *I also remember telling you about the death of my father when I was 8 years old.* (Silence) Yes. (Pause) You talked to me about the death of your father and your subsequent adoption by your aunt. (Silence) *But, unlike me, you never asked any further details about the circumstances of my father’s death.* (Silence) That’s right. (Pause) All I was interested in was the fact that you and I had the loss of our fathers in common. All of a sudden, this knowledge made you sexually desirable again; my ambivalence evaporated and my emotional attachment to you grew stronger. I regarded you as a lover, my own black lover, who could teach me

how to reconcile with my father's death. (Silence) *But that was a role I didn't want to play, Nicholas. (Pause) I didn't want to play it because our peculiar relationship was increasingly getting on my nerves. I was angry with you because you'd never go out with me and because the green curtains in your bedroom would always be closed. (Pause) I was angry with you because I could feel a big part of you feeling uncomfortable having sex with a black man. (Pause) I was also angry with you because you never asked any questions about the circumstances of my father's death. (Pause) I wanted you to ask questions, Nicholas. Yes, I wanted you to appear a little more interested in my father's death because, contrary to what you had thought, I have never felt reconciled to the way he died. (Pause) When you shared the loss of your father with me I thought I had finally found a person to open up to and share details of my life that have always haunted me. (Pause) But very soon I realized that I was wrong. You were emotionally unavailable because you were too engrossed in your grief. (Pause) In a way, I was expecting you to heal my pain but my expectations were deceived because you were expecting the exact same thing from me. (Pause) What an emotional mess... (Pause) And then...I don't remember exactly what...you said something that outraged me. (Pause) And the only other thing I remember is shouting at you, "How could you ever know how it feels to witness your father's murder at the age of 8? How could you ever know how it feels to not know where your father is buried? How could you ever know how it feels to be abandoned by your own mother and feel like a burden to everyone?"* (Nicholas brings to mind this scene from their past.) You shouted these words, slammed the door behind you, and disappeared. And I was left there alone, feeling guilty and heartless. (Pause) But there was also another indefinable feeling, one that simultaneously consisted of anger,

fear, and panic. (Pause) I was angry with you, Greg, because your words had knocked me out of my personal la-la land, obliging me to see the human being behind the black lover I wanted to relate to. Additionally, I could feel panic and fear because the violent death of your father and my sexual relationship to you had brought me closer to a world that I preferred to ignore: the world of the black ghetto and its violent everyday life. (Pause) I knew you were from the Newark ghetto but I didn't want to know anything about your life there. *And I was too ashamed to tell you anything about my life there. I thought you'd reject me.* (Pause) *But, in the end, I couldn't stay silent anymore.* (Greg breathes deeply.) *I couldn't pretend I was just a black lover anymore.* (Pause) *I wanted my humanity, the person behind my black skin, to be acknowledged by you.* (They both stay quiet for a few minutes before Greg finally breaks the silence.) *Nicholas, I want to ask you something.* (Pause) *After that night...I mean the night when I told you the truth about my father's death... it took us two months before we talked again.* (Pause) *You called me first.* (Pause) *Why did you call me?* (Silence) I called you because I couldn't forget the feelings I had shared with you. (Pause) I called you because I was sick and tired of running away from intimacy. (Pause) I called you because I finally understood that, unless I opened up to others, I couldn't expect anything from anyone. (Pause) I called you because you've touched my heart and helped me become a better person. (Greg smiles; he is in tears.) *I usually find it hard to accept compliments but...I accept yours, sugar; with much pleasure and appreciation.* (Nicholas feels relieved. He lights a cigarette; he needs it.) I've got a question for you too, handsome. (Pause) When are you going to tell me your version of our story? (Pause) When are you going to tell me what my whiteness has meant to you? (Silence) *When would you like me to?* Hmm, I don't know...How about now? We both

seem to be in a confessional state of mind. (Greg remains silent and thinks.) *I'll tell you what—my account is not going to be included in your dissertation, right?* Right, we have already clarified this. *Perfect. Then, why don't you just go ahead and write the concluding chapters of your dissertation?* (Pause) *We'll have plenty of time for discussion afterwards.* (Nicholas ponders on Greg's suggestion.) *Come on, sugar. Get done with it.* (Pause) *After all, the best dissertation is a done dissertation.* (Pause) *You've only got one life to live. Get done with the fucking dissertation and start living again.* (Silence) OK, handsome. I am going to call you again in a couple of hours. (Pause) Will you be there? (Greg takes a deep breath and smiles.) *I am not going anywhere.*

Chapter 7

Reflecting on the Autoethnographic Stories

Morning Sea

*Here let me stop. Let me too look at Nature for a while.
The morning sea and cloudless sky
a brilliant blue, the yellow shore; all
beautiful and grand in the light.*

*Here let me stop. Let me fool myself: that these are what I see
(I really saw them for a moment when I first stopped)
instead of seeing, even here, my fantasies,
my recollections, the ikons of pleasure.*

—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2009, p. 43)

The Cicada

*Thousands of summer songs accumulate inside me. I open my
mouth and in my passion, try to put them in order. I sing. Badly. But
thanks to my song I stand out from the branches and from other
voiceless sound-boxes of nature. My simple dress—gray and lime-
white—bars me from every excess of aestheticism and so, cut off
from the rowdy festival of time, I sing. I ignore Spring, Easter, and
violets. The only resurrection I know is when a faint breeze man-
ages to stir and slightly cool the burning heat of my life. Then I stop
howling—or, as the world thinks, singing—because the miracle of
coolness deep inside me says more than all I create so as not to die
of heat.*

—Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, *The Scattered Papers of Penelope:
New & Selected Poems*, (2009, p.30)

Longings

*Like the beautiful bodies of the dead who never aged,
shut away inside a splendid tomb by tearful mourners
with roses at their head and jasmine at their feet—
that's what longings look like when they've passed away
without being fulfilled, before they could be made complete
by just one of pleasure's nights, or one of its shimmering mornings.*

—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2009, p. 181)

Introduction

Dear Dissertation Committee,

Before anything else, I would like to thank you for the time and energy you have devoted to reading my dissertation and coming up with suggestions for its improvement. Notwithstanding the fact that its structure and content deviates significantly from what is normally expected by academic dissertations in general, I feel you have taken a genuine interest in and read it very carefully. Thank you. Your caring approach has considerably soothed my feelings of anxiety and fear, ones that have consistently accompanied me throughout the whole writing process of this dissertation.

Now, I don't mean to say that I fully agree with all your comments, suggestions, and observations. In a way, this dissertation is my child and, like most parents, I find it difficult to admit that my child is not perfect. Such a statement may sound preposterous or utterly pompous, but this is how I feel. You needn't worry though; I fully understand that this is not the right time for me to transform this chapter into a showcase for vanity and narcissism. Instead, my intention is to do my utmost to complete and successfully defend this dissertation. No matter how much I've come to love it, a big part of me just wants to get rid of and leave it behind. In many respects, it feels like a tightrope around my neck that prevents me from breathing. Therefore, in this chapter I will make an effort to address some (but probably not all) of the issues that were raised during our progress report meeting. I cannot guarantee that the discussion to follow will be able to provide fully satisfactory answers to all or any of your comments and observations. I can assure you, however, that I will try.

Let me, then, begin this discussion by providing a brief summary of the main criticism that was voiced by you—the dissertation committee—and that has necessitated the writing of this chapter. More specifically, you have indicated that the theoretical and the autoethnographic parts of this dissertation are still too separate and separated, not quite integrated yet—at least not by the promise of the dissertation, and the expectation of the committee. Therefore, you have encouraged me to examine my autoethnographic stories in light of the theories I have already reviewed (most notably in Chapter 3). In other words, “the theories should touch upon the autoethnographic narratives in ways that will allow [me] to particularize these theories through [my] own instantiation of them” (L. Rodemeyer, personal communication, April 1, 2016). Dr. Barnard has also pointed out (personal communication, April 12, 2016), that this chapter should not necessarily serve the purpose of piecing together a hypothetically coherent theory of sexual desire and intimacy. Instead, it should pose and reflect on questions such as the following: After having worked through a number of theories and autoethnographic stories, what am I left with? What am I offering to the academy?

I must admit these questions have highlighted a certain tension which I always knew would haunt and challenge this work. From its very beginning, beyond everything else this dissertation intended and needed to do, I also wanted to offer it as a gift to all those LGBTQ people who may feel marginalized and struggle with poverty, violence, racism, and loneliness on a daily basis. These are the people I feel I want to talk to, whom I am called to address. In many respects, I still feel myself one of them. Yet, I am also addressing an academic audience: this committee first and foremost, and thereafter who knows how many researchers and scholars who will happen upon this dissertation

through academic dissemination circuits and scholarly research. My predicament is clear: If I only address the academy, I am afraid I will sound pretentious and inauthentic, distant from the audience I so wish to reach, but, if I only address those outside of the academy, I am afraid that this chapter will fail to meet the academic standards required by a credentialing and evaluative dissertation committee. What should I do...?

What I fear is that—again—there is no single, clear-cut path to follow...Perhaps, though, this is an unexpected advantage. Perhaps, this uncertainty could forge a “third way;” that is to say, an explanatory account that goes beyond those expected by either academic or nonacademic audiences and renders the aforementioned dichotomy less pronounced. But again then, the dichotomy I have just mentioned—academics versus nonacademics—may well be false, a figment of my imagination. Perhaps, the relationship between the two would be better understood in terms of continuity and complementarity and not in terms of a binary opposition. After all, it was my immersion into academic theories that has inspired this project and has given me the permission, the courage, and the means to search for an autoethnographic language—an autoethnographic voice—that goes beyond the academy and reaches for the personal and the evocative. Furthermore, it was the academy—its concepts, ideas, and theories—that would always fuel my passion to move forward each time my autoethnographic voice would stumble and fall (into silence). And, conversely, it was my autoethnographic voice—its tears, laments, joys, and sobs—that would often challenge the academy and encourage it to move above and beyond its distancing discourse. In short, far from being in a relationship of absolute opposition, the academic and autoethnographic elements of this dissertation have formed numerous, fluid patterns and pathways of convergence and divergence.

Taking the above thoughts into consideration, what form could my account take? I honestly don't know; what I know is that the task ahead of me is to provide a response to your comments, suggestions, and criticisms in order to successfully complete this dissertation. For the moment, then, I'll set aside my reveries about the potential form of this chapter and, instead, focus on what I am supposed to do: write the chapter itself.

Towards an Integration of Theories and Stories

I have just finished proofreading this dissertation for the eighth time and my (un)satisfying conclusion is that I both love and hate it simultaneously. I love it because it articulates words I had always wanted to voice. On the other hand, though, I hate it because it stands as a constant reminder of my profound difficulty to talk about sexual desire and feel that I have something meaningful to say about it, something others would be minimally interested in knowing. Perhaps, though, my profound ambivalence towards my dissertation is also due to another kind of dilemma, one that I was only able to trace emotionally after I had repeatedly proofread my autoethnographic stories.

When I first thought of writing an autoethnographic dissertation on sexual desire and intimacy, I was mainly influenced and inspired by Sedgwick's following words:

To alienate conclusively, definitionally, from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire is a terribly consequential seizure. In this century, in which sexuality has been made expressive of the essence of both identity and knowledge, it may represent the most intimate violence possible (Sedgwick, 2008, p. 26).

Therefore, almost in a polemical spirit, I began writing this dissertation with the aim of breaking my silence, naming my sexual desire, and resisting, to some extent, the violence I have suffered in the past. Yet, notwithstanding my fervent urge to speak and name my sexual desire, I could also sense an equally strong tendency to remain silent, one that

would grow stronger and stronger as I was delving deeply into my autoethnographic stories. In part, this tendency was due to the personal and painful memories I had to revisit for the purpose of this dissertation. No matter how willing I was to name my sexual desire, I was simultaneously hesitant to explore memories that would undoubtedly bring forth anger, despair, and pain. In many respects, like many patients who terminate their therapies prematurely, I wanted to flee from this challenging task and keep finding myself in the same victimized, psychologically numb situation, one that I knew all too well. Later, however, I realized that my urge to remain silent was due to other factors as well.

As already mentioned in the third chapter, Foucault (1990) asserts that, although the way we talk about sex has undergone a degree of refinement and censorship during the last three centuries, the amount of talk we do about sex has experienced “a steady proliferation” (p. 18). This proliferation of discourses on sex has been encouraged by social institutions (the Catholic Church, states, governments, psychiatry, etc.) which Foucault calls “agencies of power” (p. 18) and which, in their effort to control and regulate sexuality, have traditionally urged people to confess as many intimate details about their sexual lives as possible. Now, if we take into consideration the fact that evocative, autoethnographic writing places special emphasis on self-revelation (confession even?), it becomes evident why the use of autoethnography, apart from its liberating and subversive potentials, can also be experienced as threatening and conducive to further stigmatization and stereotyping. Unbeknownst to me, throughout the entire writing process of this dissertation I would resist autoethnography in fear that my stories could be appropriated by Foucault’s so-called “agencies of power” and used to

further oppress me. Only recently, almost 2 months after the completion of the first draft, have I realized that my urge to name my sexual desire has gone hand in hand with self-doubting questions about my motivating reasons to write an autoethnographic dissertation on sexual desire. More specifically, my deepest fear was that, in writing such a dissertation, I would unwittingly surrender and contribute to the aforementioned proliferating process of discourses on sex and, ultimately, my own oppression. Therefore, instead of producing a description of my sexual desire that would be volatile enough to elude easy categorizations, fixed conceptualizations, and stereotypical interpretations, I could end up arming my “opponents” with intimate details of my sexual life that could be used, once more, against me. It is only now that I can consciously grasp and articulate the underlying questions that have accompanied each stage of the writing process: Should I, perhaps, shut the fuck up? Is it possible that my silence represents a more effective weapon for the protection and defense of my sexual desire than my speech? But, hasn't it been my silence that has led me to an existential crisis, a pervasive sense of psychological asphyxiation and meaninglessness? How am I supposed to strike a middle ground on naming my sexual desire without its being abused?

A second factor that has also intensified my difficulty in describing my sexual desire obtains relief by returning to some of Irigaray's theoretical insights. As already mentioned in the third chapter, one of Irigaray's principal arguments is that psychoanalysis, along with other philosophical movements in the past, have succeeded in suppressing women's desire because they have deprived them of the right to articulate it, to discover a language to express it. Fuery writes that “Irigaray's argument against Lacan [is] that women's desire cannot be known or spoken until it has a language with which to

“speak” (p. 90). It could be claimed that Irigaray’s subsequent philosophical work, in its most part, has consisted in discovering and articulating a language for feminine desire to speak “in terms independent of men and masculinity” (Grosz, 1989, p. 110).

Halfway through the process of writing this dissertation, I realized that, apart from bearing with painful memories and resisting appropriating discourses on sex, my work would also consist in discovering and articulating a language for my sexual desire to speak “in terms independent of men and [heterosexual] masculinity” (Grosz, 1989, p. 110). In fact, I understood that a minimally effective resistance towards the dominant discourses on sex would be unthinkable without making a serious effort to articulate my sexual desire in ways that would go against and beyond the language that had described it so far. To put it another way, naming my sexual desire, instead of inventing a new language, would principally consist in discovering ways of using the existing language and discourses to undermine themselves, showing their lacunae, and opening them up to other meanings, stories, and discourses that have always and already been there. What components would this language consist of, though? Which words, phrases, ideas, syntactic structures, and/or grammar rules could best allow a gay male’s sexual desire to speak? How could I disengage myself from articulating and comparing my sexual desire with that of heterosexual males? How could I stop modeling my desiring self on straight males’ desires? Could there ever be an alternative discourse to describe my sexual desire for another male, a discourse that could go beyond masculine, heterosexual conceptualizations? What’s more, could this discourse describe my sexual desire as detached from its social, cultural, and emotional dimensions? If yes, how could I ever achieve this task in a language other than mine? Finally, would such a discourse solely

describe *my* sexual desire or could it be generalizable to other gay males' experiences of sexual desire as well?

Let me begin by first answering the last question of the previous paragraph. There is a large part of me which generally craves for an effortless, eternal, indestructible sense of connectedness and kinship with others. This part of me, deeply plunged into a world of nirvana fantasies, always takes pleasure in imagining that others think, feel, desire, and act the way I do. Therefore, it would eagerly welcome the possibility of my experiences being generalizable to other gay males' experiences of sexual desire. However, the other parts of me—the ones acknowledging and celebrating the multiplicity of and diversity in the human condition—have promptly understood that the articulation of *my* sexual desire, although potentially and partially recognizable to others, could principally correspond to the unique cultural, emotional, and biological characteristics of my experiences. Hence, instead of trying to discover one, true, essential, trans-cultural, male, homoerotic desire—an impossible and futile endeavor—my autoethnographic accounts simply aspired to undermine patriarchal representations of homoerotic desire. Following in Irigaray's footsteps, my main objective in this dissertation was to try and dismantle patriarchal discourses of male, homoerotic desire and not to describe what male, homoerotic desire *really is*.

Moving on, I now wish to address an issue that has been highlighted by a member of my dissertation committee, who wrote:

[I]t appears to me that your reflections upon desire became much more a reflection upon shame and fear (and anger). Simply put, while you did describe your desires and reflect upon them at points in your narratives, much more of your descriptions presented and worked through these other emotions. This is not a suggestion that you failed in your task; rather, I am suggesting that you step back from your autoethnographic descriptions

and consider how and why they became narratives primarily of shame, fear, and anger, instead of desire (Personal communication, April 1, 2016).

Indeed, as the committee member has rightly indicated, my reflections upon desire have spent considerable time in the neighborhood of shame, fear, and anger. In a way, it could be claimed that my sexual desire, throughout much of the writing process, has symbolized a destination that could never be reached, experienced, and described, unless I trekked through vast, empty deserts, filled with nothing but innumerable grains of shame, anger, and fear. And—I am wondering—how could it be any different? Our sexual desires—like any other human experience—are intertwined with the cultural, social, interpersonal, and emotional contexts by which they are shaped and within which they are experienced; they cannot be treated as phenomena divorced of their experience in time, place, politics, and person. And, admittedly, the person I have, first and foremost, symbolized was (is?) that of the marginalized, voiceless, oppressed, queer, gay, fat, bankrupt, Greek *other*. Hence, the cultural construction of my personhood as well as my forced positioning as the unintelligible *other* have, inevitably, bound the experience of my sexual desire to the affective colors and tones of shame, fear, and anger. Perhaps, had I been a socially sanctioned, traditionally masculine, heterosexual man, I would have discussed my sexual desire as a *sui generis* phenomenon, one that emanates naturally and unproblematically from my biological constitution and is unrelated to cultural, political, and social forces. However, my long-term, painful experience as a marginalized, gay man has taught me otherwise; it has taught me that (my) sexual desire is never detached from the concrete reality of the world and the historical context within which it is experienced. It has also taught me that, unless I trek through and voice the emotional deserts of shame, anger, and fear that are so inextricably tied to my positioning as the *other*, I will never

have the opportunity to transform my painful stories of sexual desire into ones of empowerment, connectedness, and hope. Finally, it has poignantly taught me that, unless I persistently point to the cultural and historical character of (my) sexual desire, accessing my shameful, fearful, angry deserts will always be obstructed by the supposedly neutral, omniscient, reifying, and reductionist scientific paradigms which exclusively view sexual desire as a natural phenomenon in need of demarcation and medicalization.

Despite my aforementioned convictions, however, the challenge of discovering a language, *my* language, to articulate my sexual desire remained pressing. Irigaray, in her effort to discover a language that is not easily appropriated by patriarchal discourses, has produced texts that “are exceptionally elusive, fluid, and ambiguous” (Grosz, 1989, p. 101). When I first started writing this dissertation, I also entertained the idea of following her example but, as opposed to Irigaray, I am not a trained philosopher and I do not believe my writing skills in English, my second language, as very strong. Furthermore, I was not really sure whether I truly wanted my dissertation to be “elusive, fluid, and ambiguous;” or, to be more precise, I didn’t want it to be opaque and inaccessible to wider audiences. My intention was to write a dissertation that, apart from being conducive to alternative views of sexual desire, could also be read by people who are not trained philosophers or psychologists. To this end, I wished to discover a language that would be evocative and eloquent but not obscure and turgid.

Now, I would be a liar if I claimed that I had a well-thought-out, clear strategy for discovering this language at the beginning of the writing process. The constituents of the language I was looking to find and articulate—words, phrases, sentences, syntactical structures, metaphors, poems, inner monologues, real and imaginary dialogues, plots,

characters, events, affective tones, symbolisms, allegories, descriptions—would always remain playfully volatile, often revealing themselves to me after a great deal of emotional hardship and, at times, inertia. Most importantly, however, as I was delving deeper into my autoethnographic research, my emerging language would increasingly and painstakingly reveal to me what it really desired to accomplish through its articulation. Before any further elaboration, though, Hall’s ideas on identity need to be briefly revisited.

As already mentioned in the first chapter, Hall espouses a notion of identity that, despite “its determinate conditions of existence” (Hall, 1996, p. 2), is always in the process of becoming, carries a significant degree of contingency, and espouses difference. Furthermore, he maintains that identities do not represent the culmination of a “naturally-constituted unity” (1996, p. 4) but, on the contrary, correspond to the outcome of a process that excludes and obliterates anything different; that is to say, anything that does not match the desired features of a specific identity construct. Therefore, identities *are something* because they *have already excluded something else*. It could further be claimed that, in excluding and obliterating anything different, the phantasmatic fixity of identities depends on a core that is fragile. And this identity core is fragile because it is always at risk of being disrupted by what has been excluded and left out; that is, those other identity features which we deem undesirable and define ourselves against.

Therefore, inspired by Hall’s aforementioned ideas and after working through and reflecting on my stories, I have gradually realized that my autoethnographic voice has desired to disrupt the phantasmatic fixity and shed light on the fragile nature of sexual identities. In other words, my voice has retrieved autobiographical memories of incidents

that would allow me to speak through and from a marginalized, socially denigrated position and reveal the phantasmatic core of patriarchal, heterosexual, masculine, sexual desire, one that has been traditionally conceptualized and represented as unrelated to anything feminine and/or non-heterosexual. This is why my narratives have revolved around my personal experiences in the military and my sexual relationship with a black man. Military life and black masculinity have often been portrayed—negatively and positively—as being the epitomes of manhood; that is, cultural and racial contexts within which males have accomplished a perfect, changeless, “substantial” identification with the nature and goals of proper, true, heterosexual masculinity. Therefore, I have come to understand that my stories have aspired to question the “epitomes of manhood” as represented in military life and black masculinity and suggest that such “perfect” identifications are figments of our imagination, products of our desire to possess identities that are fixed and stable through time. As Judith Butler writes:

But where or how does identification occur? When can we say with confidence that an identification has happened? Significantly, it never can be said to have taken place; identification does not belong to the world of [accomplished] events. Identification is constantly figured as a desired event or accomplishment, but one which finally is never achieved; identification is the phantasmatic staging of the event...Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability (1993, p. 105).

However, apart from the importance of disrupting traditional representations of masculine, heterosexual desire, my autoethnographic research has also taught me that finding a voice to talk about (my) sexual desire has not only depended on what I could possibly say about it but on how I might be able to say it as well. In other words, it has depended on my ability to write and infuse my narratives with structures and forms that could, hopefully, invite the readers to immerse themselves into the stories and be affected

by them; or, put in a slightly different way, my ability to articulate a language that could create affective intensities and evoke in my readers responses that, often, fall outside the realm of language, “[correspond] to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and [imply] an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act”

(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. xvi). In relation to affect and affective intensities,

Seigworth & Gregg write:

Affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon...Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability. Indeed, affect is persistent proof of a body’s never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world’s obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations...At once intimate and impersonal, affect *accumulates* across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between “bodies” (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect) (2010, pp. 1-2; italics in original).

Hence, after reflecting on my stories, I now realize that I have sought to create a text that, apart from its contents, would also contain a fitting structure to experientially convey the volatile force of my sexual desire to my readers. I have longed for a text that, apart from facilitating intellectual understanding, could also connect with my readers’ bodies and, to some extent, allow them to feel the ir-(regular), ab-(normal), dis-(continuous), in-(distinct), un-(familiar) rhythm of my sexual desire. This is why poetry has been so prominently featured in this dissertation. In my effort to discover a language that not only informs readers but *affects* and *changes* them as well, I have trustfully resorted to the rhythmic, metaphorical, emotional, dense, and refreshingly ambiguous world of poetry. I

have depended on my favorite Greek poets—Constantine Cavafy and Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke—trusting that they would teach me how to be poetic myself; how to utilize words in ways that—simultaneously—say and unsay, condense and expand meanings, reveal and veil new worlds, and inspire and undermine the greatest, liberating certainties. After all, this is, perhaps, the most valuable gift I am able to offer to the academy through this dissertation: a poetic language—a voice—that attempts to undermine the sterility of the supposedly bordered, scientific, psychological phenomena and shed some light on the, hitherto hidden and oppressed, land of the experiential, the unsayable, the supplemental, the unstable, the unintelligible, the interdisciplinary, and the undecidable.

Summing up, I have set out to write this dissertation with the aim of a) openly talking about my sexual desire and, b) understanding whether and/or how I can exist in this world as a Greek, fat, gay male without being overwhelmed by fear, anxiety, shame, and alienation. Halfway through the process of writing it, however, I realized that not only did I not want to talk about my sexual desire, but I didn't know how to talk about it without surrendering to and reproducing the hegemonic, masculine, heterosexual discourses that I wanted to undermine. Therefore, faithful to my belief that speaking out is preferable to remaining silent, I threw myself into the effort to discover a language that could somehow name my sexual desire.

Have I accomplished this task? My impression is that it has been only partially accomplished. More specifically, I feel that there are two reasons why I have been hindered from articulating a much bolder or, perhaps, a more radical language. The first reason refers to the fact that English is not my first language and, consequently,

everything I have expressed in this dissertation has been mediated by and filtered through the Greek language. This fact, I suspect, has infused my text with a certain degree of artificiality, as if it does not really belong to me. I might be wrong, though; after all, the relationship between reader and text is unique and highly dependent on how each text intertwines with each individual's cultural, social, and psychological background.

However, the second and, in my opinion, most important reason why this exploration has been only partially successful revolves around my occasional ambivalence towards queer and, in general, post-structural theories; in other words, my ambivalence towards the critical interrogation of binary oppositions and essential identities. The above statement, when considering the generally post-structural orientation of this dissertation, may come as a surprise to many readers. However, I would probably be lying if I didn't admit that, at times, I simply wish that our world were less complex, volatile, and diverse; that our struggle to understand and embrace the multiplicity of who we are and may become felt less arduous, frightening, and painful. In other words, I simply wish I could take a break from trying to ascertain how I can reconcile my (sexual) desires with an ever-changing world that constantly and interchangeably demands, allures, allows, prohibits, embraces, rejects, frightens, and comforts.

And then I am struck by the thought that giving up this struggle is tantamount to being symbolically—even physically—dead or regressing to an earlier, enmeshed parent-child state. I am reminded that the loss of my childhood la-la land, although painful, has opened up to a whole new world of desiring, relational experimenting, and emotional experiencing. This loss has taught me that, no matter how intimidated I may get by the

multiplicity espoused by post-structural/queer theories, this, often chaotic, undecidable multiplicity is already embedded in my body; I can't avoid it. It manifests itself when I penetrate other bodies and when other bodies penetrate mine. It becomes most evident during those moments when I interchangeably dominate on and surrender to others sexually, physically, and psychologically. It mostly actualizes itself when my male lovers and I travel through a no man's land where, although deeply soaked in the doctrines of the traditional masculine and feminine roles, we surprisingly, almost awkwardly, find ourselves going through and beyond these roles. This multiplicity ultimately reaches its apotheosis when my male lovers and I come to the conclusion that it would be impossible to arrive at definitive conclusions as to whether we are masculine, feminine, or anything at all when we have sex. Accepting the impossibility of definitive conclusions with regard to our sexual desire(s), I believe, represents a task of formidable difficulty which, however, could possibly open a pathway to less violence and social exclusion. And it is with this reluctantly optimistic idea that I eventually proceed to my own, personal, impossible conclusion of this dissertation.

Chapter 8

An Impossible Conclusion

Hidden (1908)

*From all I did and from all I said
they shouldn't try to find out who I was.
An obstacle was there and it distorted
my actions and the way I lived my life.
An obstacle was there and it stopped me
on many occasions when I was going to speak.
The most unnoticed of my actions
and the most covert of all my writings:
from these alone will they come to know me.
But perhaps it's not worth squandering
so much care and trouble on puzzling me out.
Afterwards—in some more perfect society—
someone else who's fashioned like me
will surely appear and be free to do as he pleases.
—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, p.319)*

Addition (1897)

*Whether I am happy or unhappy, I don't calculate.
But one thing always I joyfully keep in sight—
that in the great addition (the addition of those I hate)
that comprises such great numbers, I don't count
as one of the many units there. I wasn't numbered in the great
addition. And for me that delight is sufficient.
—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, p.295)*

To Pleasure

*Joy and balm of my life the memory of the hours
when I found and held on to pleasure as I wanted it.
Joy and balm of my life—for me, who had no use
for any routine enjoyment of desire.
—C. P. Cavafy, *Complete Poems* (2012, p.74)*

Dear Dad, Marvin, and Poet,

This dissertation is finally coming to an end. It's been a long, painful, but very rewarding process. It goes without saying, of course, that I would have never made it all the way to the end without your warm presence and unwavering support. Thank you. I was being tormented by all kinds of irrational, paranoid thoughts and fears throughout the whole writing process but your soothing touch would encourage me to keep going. Thank you so much! Above all else, you've helped me realize that I am not a hopeless case and that my destiny is not necessarily to spend my life alone, isolated, and deserted. What an exceptionally beautiful gift you've all given me!

Now, would it be too much to ask you one last favor? I am supposed to write this last, concluding chapter of my dissertation but I am at a loss as to what I should include and I need your advice. Should I summarize my insights out of writing this dissertation on sexual desire and intimacy? Perhaps I should. This strategy, though, leaves me quite unsatisfied for a number of reasons.

First of all, my insights constitute an inextricable part of the stories out of which they have sprung up. In fact, I would go as far as to claim that my stories, the way I told my stories, the feelings that have been evoked by my stories, the psychological and relational conflicts that have been explored in my stories, *are* my insights. What my sexual desire(s) and my desire for intimacy have meant to me through time *are* my stories. Therefore, summarizing my insights on sexual desire and intimacy would mean telling the stories from the beginning, perhaps in a different way and leading to different insights.

Second, I feel that summarizing insights and drawing conclusions would send the readers of this dissertation a message I do not personally espouse. More specifically, this message could involve the idea that the biological, cultural, social, corporeal, political, and relational complexity of my/our sexual desire(s) and my/our desire for intimacy is possible to be meaningfully and adequately captured by or documented in a few lines. But my goal in this dissertation was—is—exactly the opposite. In other words, my objective was to dismantle restrictive, fixed conceptualizations of sexual desire/intimacy and, instead, encourage an explosion or expansion of ideas, feelings, images, corporeal experiences, and relational possibilities. In writing this dissertation and choosing the autoethnographic method, I have aspired to write detailed, personal stories in order to encourage potential readers to also deepen into their stories of sexual desire/intimacy and avoid facile, sweeping generalizations that classify and stigmatize people. Whether I have succeeded in the aforementioned goal or not remains to be seen. Nonetheless, considering that I am solely responsible for this dissertation, I am also responsible for safeguarding its philosophical orientation towards more expansive and plural worldviews.

Finally and most importantly, I feel reluctant to summarize insights and draw conclusions on sexual desire/intimacy because, unbeknownst to me, the research effort of this dissertation has never exclusively revolved around these topics. I know it sounds strange, but let me explain. A few months ago I saw a Hungarian film titled *Son of Saul*. This film is set in the Auschwitz concentration camp and its main character, Saul, is a Sonderkommando member, namely a Jewish prisoner carrying the responsibility to dispose of gas chamber victims during the Holocaust. At the beginning of the film, Saul finds the body of a boy but, instead of disposing of it, he decides to find a rabbi and give

the boy a proper Jewish burial. Throughout the film we follow Saul's frantic efforts to find a rabbi and protect the boy's body but, in reality, we follow Saul's efforts to maintain a basic sense of human dignity amid totally dehumanizing conditions. Now, as I was watching the film, I had the vague feeling that Saul's story was mysteriously related to the stories of sexual desire and intimacy I had been trying to write. But how could this be possible? How could the horror of the Holocaust compare to my struggle to survive as a gay man? This question plagued me for several days after I had watched the film. Then, one day, as I was reading a chapter I had just finished, I was struck with an idea that had been lurking in my mind all along. More specifically, I realized that my motivation for writing this dissertation was my desire to explore the ways through which I have retained my sense of human dignity as a minority member. I further realized that, in choosing this dissertation topic, I wished to ask myself two very important questions: how can I further strengthen my sense of human dignity so as to foster deeper connections to others? How can I further enhance my sense of human dignity so as not to be psychologically shattered by others' aggression? I think that, in a way or another, these were the questions Saul was also trying to answer in the film. And his efforts to remain human even in the face of absurd inhumanity can only be *felt* and *experienced* through watching the film. Similarly, my efforts to remain human in the face of aggression, prejudice, and discrimination can only be *felt* and *experienced*—hopefully—through reading my autoethnographic stories.

Dear Dad, Marvin, and Poet,

The more I delve into my predicament, the more I realize that properly concluding this dissertation increasingly sounds like an impossible endeavor, an impossible dream. What do you think I should do? Should I, perhaps, come up with a few suggestions for

future research on sexual desire and intimacy? I could definitely do that. However, being primarily an autoethnographer, I am afraid that my research suggestions could be biased and only appealing to those individuals who also wish to engage in autoethnographic explorations themselves. I am afraid that my suggestions would be automatically rejected by people engaging in quantitative research or employing qualitative methodologies that discourage the use of personal stories. After all, I myself also acknowledge the fact that autoethnography, despite its exploratory strength, is characterized by serious limitations as well. For example, my research on sexual desire and intimacy has not been able to include other people's accounts too. For this reason, it cannot be claimed to be, in conventional scientific terminology, generalizable to a wider population. Nevertheless, the purpose of my research has never been to be conventionally generalizable...Oh well. In the final analysis, I cannot pretend I am someone else. I am a clinical psychology trainee from Athens, Greece, engaging in autoethnographic research. No matter what I do, no matter how much I strive to present myself as totally objective, my point of view will always be biased and subjective because it has sprung up from a specific cultural context. I can't please everyone. All I can do is declare my bias up front and go on.

Before I refer to my research suggestions, I wish to briefly answer one significant question. This question involves the importance of desire, sexual or otherwise, as a research topic. Why should anyone explore desire at all? Admittedly, all possible answers to the aforementioned question are inevitably informed by one's philosophical/theoretical convictions. People like me, whose sexual identity has often been used to legitimize acts of aggression and discrimination against us, are principally interested in dismantling fixed, pathologizing conceptualizations of identity and shedding light on its porous

boundaries. Therefore, my personal answer is similar to Leo Bersani's who writes that "since deconstructing an imposed identity will not erase the habit of desire, it might be more profitable to test the resistance of the identity from within the desire" (1995, p. 6).

What has my autoethnographic research on sexual desire and intimacy taught me, then? What do I suggest to future researchers? My first suggestion calls for a significant change in the ways we think about and conduct research on desire. It actually calls for an increasing inclusion of our vulnerability in our writing and for greater resistance to those voices claiming that the personal could never be social, political, or universal. I could explain more but Robert Reid-Pharr does a truly excellent job explaining this argument.

He writes:

The disheartening thing for me is that although so many of us are inspired by the mundane, ever-present ache of desire (the will to be loved, to be seen, to be comforted, to be known), so few of us allow knowledge of that fact to seep into our writing. It is as if there is something so entirely decadent, so altogether provincial in our thirst for justice, for beauty, for fun that we attempt to cover our sinful flesh with an armor of rigor and sophistication... [W]e are lost if we discount the ways in which desire operates in the production of putatively rational decisions about government and politics. We risk the charge of hypocrisy if we offer only more and more sophisticated expressions of the anthropological gaze. We will clearly fail if we give into the fear that our dreams, our obsessions, our grubby secrets can never be vehicles for the articulation of the universal (2000, p. 11).

My second suggestion calls for a more detailed and focused exploration of the materiality of our bodies as they navigate their ways through this world. This suggestion proves especially difficult for many of us, especially considering the emphasis placed nowadays on the importance of the intellect and the disciplining of the body. Yet, my experience of writing this dissertation has clearly shown me that paying close attention to how my body felt, breathed, ached, desired, moved, reacted, talked, laughed, cried, or

sighed could reveal a great deal of valuable information about the intertwined social, psychological, and cultural forces it was—is—faced with. My call does not involve an intellectualized, distant theorization of the body but a minute-by-minute deepening into the ways it exists. The aforementioned argument is nicely laid out by Donald Hall, who writes that “to discuss sexuality in sterile and ‘nice’ terms, and with only passing or nervous reference to sexual acts and sexually active bodies, is not very queer theory” (2003, p. 93).

Finally, my third suggestion calls for a greater attention to and inclusion of our emotions in our research and writings on desire. Like with our bodies, our emotions, far from solely being individual, psychological states, reveal significant information on how culture and society affect and entrap us in fixed, pathologizing identities which ultimately deprive us of vitality and leave us scared and lonely. In support of this argument, Sara Ahmed writes:

...I am joining sociologists and anthropologists who have argued that emotions should not be regarded as psychological states but as social and cultural practices... [E]motions show us how power shapes the very surface of bodies as well worlds...My argument about the cultural politics of emotions is developed not only as a critique of the psychologising and privatization of emotions, but also as a critique of a model of social structure that neglects the emotional intensities, which allow such structures to be reified as forms of being. Attention to emotions allows us to address the question on how subjects become *invested* in particular structures such that their demise is felt as a kind of living death (2004, pp. 9-12; italics in original).

Dear Dad, Marvin, and Poet,

I am about to write the final words of this dissertation but I honestly don't know what these words could be. The end of this dissertation finds me emotionally exhausted and physically tired; very tired. There were times when I actually felt I wouldn't make it

till the end. There were times when I thought of giving up. There were times when writing this dissertation felt utterly meaningless. But your soothing whispers would always urge me to go on. There are no words to thank you enough.

It may sound paradoxical, but the end of this dissertation simultaneously evokes in me feelings of relief and anxiety. I am relieved because I have finally come to the end of the road and I am anxious because this end marks the beginning of a new chapter in my life. Once again, as so many times in the past, I will soon have to respond to a number of new, personal and professional, challenges. Will I be able to come up to my expectations? Most importantly, will I be able to practice what I have preached in this dissertation with regard to sexual desire and intimacy? I don't know...Perhaps, though, I shouldn't know. Perhaps, I should just allow myself to go with the flow. This is a skill, however, that I do not possess. Being a minority member has always motivated me to be hyper-vigilant and carefully plan all my future movements. I always remember myself trying to predict possible threats and potential attacks. How am I, then, supposed to relax and take life as it comes? How am I supposed to feel safe as a gay man and welcome the gifts of sexual desire and intimacy?

However, it strikes me that the answers to the above questions will always remain a mystery unless I decide to write the last word of this dissertation, go out of my room, and venture into the world. I am scared, of course, but the option of staying eternally isolated is far more unattractive. Therefore, my dear Dad, Marvin, and Poet, the time for us to say goodbye has come. I am more than certain that this goodbye is not a real goodbye because I always carry the sounds of your voices in me. You live in me, reminding me that most men are not dangerous and that I can make peace with them. You

breathe through me, constantly directing my attention to the fact that I still possess the invaluable gift of life. You feel through me, conveying the message that my body is the only body I've got. Finally, you stand by me, emphasizing the importance of asking for help. For all these reasons, I thank you again and ask you to wish me "Good Luck."

You've been my guardian-angels all along. What else could I ask for?

With Love and Appreciation,

Niko

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