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***Between Gay and Straight:
Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation***¹

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Art Bochner, my mentor, has given me his passion for stories and for scholarship that aims to make a difference. Both professionally and personally, he and Carolyn Ellis are my second parents. Their presence in my life infuses every page of this book.

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Introduction:

Only Us

October 10th, 1998: a day of reawakening. I arose early, excited to begin composing a 20-minute presentation for my PhD dissertation defense, scheduled for the following Friday. With this talk, I would invite the audience inside my fieldwork experience and relationships with a community of gay men in Tampa. I had vivid memories and over 300 pages of ethnographic stories and analysis—but only 20 minutes. In so little time, how could I communicate the power of the most important and educational journey of my life?

I'd been staring at my computer screen for about an hour when I heard the morning paper strike the front porch. Time for a break, I thought.

As I opened the door, a rush of warm autumn air greeted me, and the *St. Pete Times* lay on the stoop. I tucked it under my arm and headed back to the office. Reaching my desk, I leisurely unfolded the front page. My body froze when I read the headline: "Gay man clings to life after attack." It was my first introduction to Matthew Shepard.

I remember the slight crinkling sound of the paper; it shook with my hands as I encountered the details. Three days before, at around midnight, Matthew Shepard, age 21, was having a beer at The Fireside, a hangout popular among students at the University of Wyoming. Two men, also age 21, approached.

No one overheard the words exchanged, but some speculated that Matthew Shepard "embarrassed" Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney by flirting with them. Whatever their motive, Henderson and McKinney lured Matthew Shepard into a truck and began beating him. They drove to a secluded subdivision a mile away. While Matthew Shepard

begged for his life, Henderson tied him to a fence while McKinney pistol-whipped him with a three-pound .357 magnum and set his body on fire. They stole the wallet and shoes of their 5'2", 108-pound victim and left him tied to that fence, where he remained for 18 hours. When found, Matthew Shepard's cheeks were stained with dried rivers of blood and tears.

Closing my eyes, I tried to imagine his suffering: the raw panic when he first sensed danger, the desperation of his attempts to appease, the brutality of each blow to his skull, the ever-deepening cuts to his bound wrists. What was he thinking and feeling as the truck at last sped away? Hope? Despair? Was he conscious as each cruel hour passed without rescue?

I opened my eyes and studied the printed photograph of him. In his young, thoughtful face, I saw the faces of my informants—and my best friends. My tears hit the paper like raindrops on a tin roof, blurring the newsprint. I sat down and forced myself to finish the article; when I read the last word, my hands released the paper. As the section gently settled to the floor, I was overcome by pain like a fist to my stomach.

I clutched the edge of the desk and wept harder than I ever had for someone I didn't know. I cried because so much had changed for me since beginning my fieldwork on friendship in and with a gay male community, and because I could see how much more cultural change still was needed. In the wake of this horrific attack, my project seemed of little significance. *And of vital significance.* Suddenly, I wasn't just defending a dissertation; I was defending a vulnerable class of *persons* to which my research community—my friends—belonged.

On Monday, October 12th, 1998, Matthew Shepard died from massive head trauma. His funeral was picketed by demonstrators from the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka. Led by Reverend Fred Phelps, the group marched with signs reading, “God Hates Fags” and “Matt in Hell.”²

Fear- and hate-motivated murders of gay men would persist. On February 19th, 1999, Billy Jack Gaither, a 39-year-old gay man from rural Alabama, was beaten to death by Steven Mullins and Charles Monroe Butler. Like Aaron McKinney, Butler offered a “gay panic” account, saying that Billy Jack Gaither started “talking queer stuff” that “set off” a violent reaction. He and Mullins bludgeoned Billy Jack Gaither with an ax handle and cut his throat before throwing his body on a pile of tires and setting it ablaze.³

On July 1st, 1999, Benjamin Matthew Williams and his younger brother, James Tyler Williams, shot to death Gary Matson and Winfield Mowder as they lay sleeping in their bed in Happy Valley, California. Each endured multiple bullet wounds; the walls and ceiling of the bedroom they shared were sprayed with blood. The elder Williams considers himself “a Christian martyr” who is guilty not of murder but of “obeying the laws of the creator.”⁴ Though Benjamin Matthew Williams is believed to be straight, some associates have questioned his sexual orientation. Their suspicions are said to have haunted him.

Columbine killers Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (also thought to be straight) frequently were taunted with homophobic slurs. Though Harris and Klebold didn’t appear to target gay victims, such cases illustrate the symbolic weight of a homosexual label,

² Phelps and his followers also have developed an astoundingly cruel website, which I will not cite here. Clicking on a headshot of Matthew Shepard surrounded by flames produces the sound of a young man screaming, “For God’s sake, listen to Phelps!”

³ See “Billy Jack Gaither: Assault on Gay America” (2000) for a detailed account of his murder.

⁴ See Delsohn and Stanton (1999, November 8).

particularly for young men. Responding to the infamous “talk-show murder” (where Scott Amedure died at the hands of Jonathan Schmitz, a man to whom he had revealed a “secret crush” on a never-aired episode of *The Jenny Jones Show*), Gamson (1998) argues that some men would rather kill a gay man than be perceived as one.

Just four days after the Happy Valley murders, Calvin Glover used a baseball bat to beat a sleeping fellow soldier into unconsciousness. Barry Winchell died the next day. According to Army prosecutors, the victim became a frequent target of anti-gay remarks when his company learned that he had visited a bar known to be popular among gay men.⁵ Two days before the attack, he and Glover were involved in a physical altercation. Barry Winchell defeated Glover, who vowed revenge, telling comrades he would not be beaten by a “faggot.”⁶

On March 21st, 2000, a man walking in Queens, New York found a plastic container. Inside were a foot, loose teeth, and a skull inscribed with the words “gay nigger number one.” The police notified John Fenrich, whose 19-year-old stepson, Steen, had been reported missing. A standoff between police and Fenrich ensued. The stepfather (who is white) allegedly admitted to Steen’s murder. Apparently, Fenrich disapproved of his stepson’s homosexuality and reacted violently when Steen tried to return home after a break-up with his boyfriend. The seven-hour standoff ended when John Fenrich shot himself to death.⁷

⁵ In 1998, there were 400 cases of anti-gay harassment in the U.S. military, a 120% *increase* since the implementation of the infamous “don’t ask/don’t tell” policy (Poynter, 1999, September 25).

⁶ See Poynter (1999, September 25).

⁷ See Elliot (2000, March 24) for an account of Steen Fenrich’s murder.

The family is just one context where homophobia lingers. In 1999, GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) surveyed 496 gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students. Ninety-one percent reported hearing terms like “faggot,” “dyke,” and “queer” regularly at school; 69% said they’d experienced direct verbal harassment; and 24% had been physically assaulted. In addition, 40% of runaways and “throwaways” are non-heterosexual,⁸ and gay and lesbian youth account for one-third of all teen suicides.⁹

Regarding civil rights, as of June 2000, 15 states still legally prohibit sodomy. Twelve ban oral and/or anal sex for both mixed- and same-sex relations (though prosecutions of heterosexuals are exceedingly rare). Four states (Arkansas, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas) ban sodomy only for same-sex relations, as permitted under *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986), in which the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the rights of states to prohibit consensual same-sex intimacy. Penalties range from \$200.00 fines to 20 years imprisonment. In addition, 30 states (and the federal government) have passed “defense of marriage” legislation, barring legal recognition for same-sex couples.¹⁰ Four states (Arkansas, Florida, Utah, and Mississippi) limit adoption rights for non-heterosexuals, while only 11 states prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation.¹¹ At the federal level, hate crimes statutes currently provide enhanced penalties for offenses motivated by the victim’s race, color, national origin, and religion; efforts to add sexual orientation are ongoing. Since Matthew Shepard’s murder, only three states have enacted or strengthened

⁸ See Cullen (1999, October 15).

⁹ See GLSEN (2000) for information on the educational climate for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youth.

¹⁰ Similar legislation is pending in several other states.

¹¹ See NGLTF (2000) for updated information on legislation pertaining to gay men and lesbians.

hate crimes laws inclusive of sexual orientation; similar legislation failed in 22 states, including Wyoming.

The recent U.S. cultural terrain has been equally rocky for non-heterosexuals. In February 1999, Jerry Falwell's *National Liberty Journal* deemed the Teletubbies character Tinky Winky "a gay role model." "He is purple," said the warning to parents, "the gay-pride color; and his antenna is [sic] shaped like a triangle—the gay-pride symbol."¹² On August 13th, 1999, talk show host Dr. Laura claimed that "a huge portion of the homosexual male populace is predatory on young boys."¹³ In 2000, "ex-gay" born-again Christians held the 6th annual Coming Out of Homosexuality Day;¹⁴ and the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a New Jersey State Supreme Court ruling that prohibited the Boy Scouts of America from excluding homosexual members and leaders.

In *Imagine That: Letters from Russell*, gay poet and playwright Russell Harold writes to his straight friend Lydia, "It does seem, at times, that we are on a journey of a hundred miles and are being asked to content ourselves with two steps forward, one step back."¹⁵ In the two years since the murder of Matthew Shepard, I often have experienced the journey toward greater interpersonal and cultural harmony between gay and straight communities in the way Harold describes: a hundred miles, two steps forward, one step back. The steps backward—from hate crimes to heterosexist legislation—have been persistent and frustrating. But there have been notable steps forward as well.

For many, Matthew Shepard's murder was both a wake-up call and a rallying point. It galvanized efforts to add actual or perceived sexual orientation to the classes covered by

¹²See "Tinky Winky Comes Out of the Closet" (1999, February).

¹³ See "Words of Dr. Laura" (2000).

¹⁴ See "National Coming Out of Homosexuality Day" (2000).

¹⁵ See Stux (Ed.) (1999, p. 239).

hate crimes laws.¹⁶ It sparked a town hall on tolerance in Colorado¹⁷ and the creation of the Matthew Shepard Foundation, which sponsors programs for disenfranchised youth. In addition, his death increased support for and participation in organizations like PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), GSA (Gay Straight Alliance), and GLSEN.¹⁸ In fact, the number of local gay-straight coalitions is thought to have doubled in the year following Matthew Shepard's murder,¹⁹ which also inspired the Off-Broadway play *The Laramie Project*²⁰ and the documentaries *Journey to a Hate-Free Millennium*²¹ and MTV's *Fight for Your Rights: Take a Stand Against Violence*.

New and unexpected alliances have formed. Judy Shepard (Matthew's mother) has become an outspoken gay rights activist. She headlined *Journey to a Hate-Free Millennium*, went on a speaking tour, and taped public service announcements for the Human Rights Campaign and GLSEN. In perhaps the most surprising turn of events of 1999, Jerry Falwell co-hosted an anti-violence forum with Mel White (a gay minister who once was Falwell's aide). While not conceding his position that homosexuality is a sin, Falwell told attendees to love all people regardless of sexual orientation and to pray for an end to anti-gay violence.²²

¹⁶ See Elliot (1999, October 11).

¹⁷ See Wallace (1999, October 27).

¹⁸ Both GSA and GLSEN are dedicated to raising awareness about and offering services to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth.

¹⁹ See Cullen (1999, October 15).

²⁰ Thanks to a Critchfield grant from Rollins College, I was able to attend this stunning production at the Union Square Theater in New York City.

²¹ See *Journey to a Hate-Free Millennium* (1999).

²² See Breald (1999, October 25).

Such efforts are aimed at increasing tolerance of differences. Greater tolerance, it is hoped, will reduce the number of hate crimes and promote more hospitable social and cultural environments.

These are laudable goals, to be sure. This book, however, attempts to envision and travel a road *beyond* tolerance,²³ toward a place where differences are seen less as problems to be solved or obstacles to be overcome than as unique opportunities for engagement, understanding, learning, and growth. In that place, we would appreciate the particular standpoints that emerge from our cultural categories (such as gender, race, and sexual orientation). As importantly, we would recognize these categories as human constructions that often blind us to our fundamental interconnectedness. In that place, there would be no “they” or “them,” only *us*.

The Journey

This book chronicles my journey toward such a place. It’s a journey into a world once foreign to me as a straight woman, a journey back through my old worlds (but with a new consciousness), and a search for a home somewhere between. It’s an intellectual, academic, and professional journey. And a deeply personal one.

In many ways, this journey began in the summer of 1994. Doug Healy, whom I would marry the following year, had just graduated from pharmacy school and moved to

²³ In her analysis of Matthew Shepard’s murder, JoAnn Wypijewski (1999, September, p. 67) writes, “Before it came to signify the highest state to which straight society could aspire, tolerance was something one had for a bad job or a bad smell or a nightmare relative who visited once a year. In its new guise, tolerance means straight people know of gay men and women, but there is no recognizable gay life...”

Tampa. His trainer at work was David Holland,²⁴ a man who would alter the course of our lives. Doug and David became friends almost instantly.

For a couple weeks, Doug and I had an ongoing conversation about whether David might be gay, a question David all but answered by inviting us to meet him at Tracks,²⁵ a gay nightclub in nearby Ybor City. At 23, neither Doug nor I had ever had an openly gay friend before. In fact, both of us had grown up in the rural Midwest with conventional, small-town ideas about sexual orientation and sexual identity.²⁶

Despite our limited exposure to gay people and cultures, we agreed to meet David at Tracks. As it turned out, this was only the beginning.

In November 1994, David mentioned to Doug that he played softball. When Doug asked if his team needed players, David told him that the team (sponsored by a bar called The Cove²⁷), and in fact, the whole Suncoast Softball league, were gay-identified. If that didn't bother him, David said, Doug could join under a league provision that allowed each team to field two straight players.²⁸

Doug had been longing for the camaraderie he'd experienced in his college fraternity and during his years of playing competitive sports. While Suncoast Softball offered the possibility of male companionship, Doug had learned to create and sustain this in largely heterosexual environments. Sure, David was helping him unlearn homophobia, but was

²⁴ At their request, most of the primary characters' names are real.

²⁵ Tracks is the real name of an establishment now closed. Names of bars and clubs still in business have been changed (and, in some cases, merged).

²⁶ Throughout this book, I use the term "sexual orientation" to refer to one's sexual fantasies about and desires for men, women, or both. I use "sexual identity" to refer to the (verbal and nonverbal) *claims* a person makes (or elects *not* to make) about her or his sexual orientation.

²⁷ Since 1995, the team has had four different sponsors. For readability, I will refer to them as The Cove throughout the book.

²⁸ In 1999, this rule was relaxed. There no longer is an official limit on the number of straight players a team can have on its roster or can field at one time.

Doug prepared to spend two days each week—most of his free time—on a field where he (a white, middle-class, Protestant, heterosexual) would experience an unfamiliar status: minority; on a field where he might be an *object* of the male gaze; on a field where others would assume *he* was homosexual? Probably not, but he went anyway.

Throughout the spring and summer, Doug attended weekly practices and games. Though he enjoyed softball and liked his teammates, David continued to be the only Suncoast player we saw off the field. That changed in August, however, when Tim Mahn, the coach, and his partner, Brandon Nolan, began inviting us to social events.

For the next year, our journey would be an innocently personal one—a straight couple venturing outside the conventions of their small-town socializations. But in the fall of 1995, it took an unexpected turn.

Merging the Personal and the Academic

That semester, I was enrolled in a graduate seminar on qualitative methods. After a month of class, my intended study fell through. I called Carolyn Ellis, the course professor, to discuss alternative projects. For a half hour, we reviewed and rejected every topic, group, and site that came to mind. Then the line went silent.

At last, one more idea surfaced. Since January, I explained, Doug had been The Cove's "token heterosexual." Carolyn agreed the situation sounded unique, but could I gain entrée? What issues would I investigate; which methods might I use; and where in a gay community would a straight woman find a place from which to speak? Though I had no definitive responses, I told myself not to worry. After all, it was just a class project—or so I thought.

Carolyn's questions in mind, I considered my associations with the team. The Cove, at that time, had over a dozen men on its roster. Unwilling to conduct a covert study, I knew that a single objection to my proposal could end the project before it began. And why wouldn't they object? I'd attended not a single team practice and only a couple of games. Why would men who knew so little about me choose to participate? Moreover, though I felt somewhat close to David and Tim, I wasn't sure *they* would support my research either. Why would *any* gay man allow a straight woman to investigate and write about his life? This was a question I would grapple with for the next three years.

The night before the fall season opened, I proposed the study to Tim. He was surprised but pleased by my academic interest in the group and immediately agreed to help secure the team's permission. Because many of the players concealed their gay identity in non-gay contexts, I expected the Cove men to express reservations. But when Tim presented me to the team the next day and told them my request, I fielded but a single question: "So what do you want to know?"

It seemed straightforward enough. But, indeed, what *did* I want to know?

By this time, I had defined myself scholastically as a student of close relationships. So I told the team, "I want to know about friendship in the lives of gay men." It sounded like a plausible academic response, but the truth is, I had no idea what I was looking for. I had thrown myself into a fieldwork site a month into the semester. Struggling to "find my feet,"²⁹ I found myself "making it up" as I went along. Much later, I would come to understand that the real learning took place not in answering a preconceived set of questions but in figuring out *what the questions were in the first place*.

²⁹ See Geertz (1973).

I began attending Sunday games, weekly practices, team parties, and fundraisers. With The Cove's consent, I often used a micro-cassette player to record dugout interaction. I also carried a camera and a pocket-sized notebook for jottings and verbatim quotes. While driving home from an event, I spoke additional reflections into my recorder. Then, as soon as possible, I typed field notes from the tapes and jottings, detailing my observations of the social actors and scenes I'd encountered.

As much as I tried to practice the tenets of good participant observation, *nothing went according to plan*. When I examined and tried to code each day's field notes, I found it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about "the gay experience" or gay men's friendships. What I did find, however, were descriptions of and passionate reflections on my evolving relationships with the Cove men. My interactions with them moved me to question the dichotomous construction of hetero- and homosexuality. Their pain and anger associated with coming out and homophobia increasingly became *my* pain and anger, and their struggles with HIV deepened and personalized the way I thought and felt about AIDS.

In November 1995, I began composing narrative episodes based on my collected materials. The evolving work took readers into the possibilities for and consequences of being a straight woman who both studies and practices friendship in a gay male community.

The following semester, I entered the classroom with a new sensibility. For the first time, I noticed the absence of openly gay and lesbian authors on many syllabi (including my own). I also recognized, as never before, how gay and lesbian experiences can be marginalized in the classroom, through both heterosexist comments and silence. These realizations moved me to continue writing about the softball league; to examine and alter

my syllabi, class exercises, and teaching stance; and to confront latent and overt homophobia in the courses I was taking.

Every aspect of my identity was becoming increasingly “queer.” My use of this term is not in the traditional disparaging sense. Instead, it stems from queer theory,³⁰ a system of thought that emerged from lesbian and gay studies and from the more radical strands of gay and lesbian activism in the 1980s (i.e., Queer Nation and ACT UP). Queer theorists attempt to uncover, defy, and contest homophobic and heterosexist assumptions, discourse, and practices.³¹

As my professional commitments deepened and expanded, so did my personal attachments to members of my research community. When I wanted a lunch date, movie companion, or just someone to talk to, I found myself, more often than not, consulting the list of phone numbers for members of the softball team. The Cove men began calling me as well. Over coffee or dinner, we shared stories of childhood, school, work, and family. The subject of romance also rendered us confidants, and I valued the unique insights reached by comparing our perspectives on relationships with men.

Doug’s connections with his teammates blossomed as well. Old assumptions about homosexuality withered, leaving him open to new ways of being and relating. Emotionally and physically, these became the closest and most expressive male friendships of his life.

Meanwhile, we noticed our marriage evolving—and not always comfortably. We were raising our consciousness about sexual orientation and identity and discovering uncharted territory in our own sexualities.

³⁰ See Butler (1999) for a foundational text on queer theory and Gamson (2000) for a review of queer approaches to qualitative research.

³¹ See Sedgwick (1990).

The more time we spent with these men, the more invested we became in their lives and concerns. Doug and I tried to serve as ambassadors, both to our straight associates and to our gay associates' straight associates. In dialogue and by example, we hoped to debunk myths and clear new fields for friendship.

To educate others, I first had to educate myself, so I explored lines of academic research more thoroughly. My reading, in turn, prompted more talking. These men were authorities on the lived experience of being gay, and I could offer knowledge from scholarly literatures on gay identity, relationships, and cultures. Our conversations brought together these personal and academic discourses, comparing, contrasting, and critiquing them.

As I read, I became increasingly convinced that the relationships Doug and I were building with the Cove men could be not only personally fulfilling but also socially transformative. For a time, I wanted nothing more than to close the chasm between gay and straight communities.

But then something started to happen in my encounters with heterosexuals.

A slight grimace, an altered intonation, an ambiguous remark—anything that smacked, however slightly, of heterosexism or homophobia—was enough to get under my skin. And stay there. I continued to play the teacher, the mediator, the bridge, but I was growing increasingly impatient with and frustrated by the requirements of these roles. Perhaps I forgot who *I'd* been less than two years before, but sometimes I needed my straight associates to “get it” on their own; sometimes I didn't care what they thought; sometimes I just wanted to run home. But where was home now?

Suddenly, I began to question what *really* brought me into this community, what *kept* me there, what *happened* to me along the way. One thing was certain: I was feeling

more and more like an outsider in my old circles. The familiar had become strange, and I wasn't sure I wanted it to be familiar again. Where did I belong?

There was no turning back. By September 1996, I felt sufficiently prepared, personally and academically, to write my dissertation on this community. But what would be my focus and stance? I'd been asked many times by many people, especially my professors, "What can a straight woman reveal about gay men's lives?" Though initially I had no adequate response, I felt strongly that I was witnessing—and ultimately would *bear witness to*—something important and meaningful. What it was, however, I couldn't yet articulate.

Turning to Narrative Ethnography

In May 1997, I had a meeting with my dissertation adviser, Art Bochner. I expressed my continued difficulty in finding my ethnographic voice. "If I take a traditional stance," I told him, "I'm supposed to be 'objective.' But I'm emotionally attached to these men and politically invested in their welfare. If I take an autoethnographic stance, I can recognize and write from my interests and sympathies, but I'll be focusing on my own experience. I value and want to feature *their* experience as well."

"You're making a false distinction," Art replied. "Even the most traditional ethnography is, in some ways, autoethnography. At the same time, all good autoethnography draws from and teaches about cultural life."

"Besides," he continued, "what you always have seemed most passionate about is what happens *between* you and them. Perhaps you can approach your project as what

Tedlock (1991) calls 'narrative ethnography,' where the *intersubjectivity* you co-construct with your participants becomes the focus of investigation."

Art gave me Tedlock's essay. Reading it, I learned that narrative ethnography is both a way of practicing fieldwork and a way of writing about fieldwork experience and relationships. As a practice, narrative ethnography occupies the middle terrain between traditional, realist ethnography³² and autoethnography.³³

Traditional ethnographers engage in participant observation, usually in cultures to which they don't belong. Autoethnographers, in contrast, are participant observers of their own experience. Both aim to increase cultural understanding, traditional ethnography by studying others' experience, autoethnography by studying one's own. In narrative ethnography, researchers move from participant observation to the *observation of participation*.³⁴ When we make this move, cultural analysis emerges from the character and process of the ethnographic *dialogue*—a move from studying them or oneself to studying *us*. Narrative ethnography requires us to think in unconventional ways about the role of the researcher, the look and feel of ethnographic writing, and the position of readers.

First, because narrative ethnography centers on the mutual and reciprocal relationship between researcher and participants, a high degree of reflexivity is required. Narrative ethnographers must recognize both self and others as historically positioned and

³² See Van Maanen (1988).

³³ See Bochner and Ellis (1996) and Ellis and Bochner (2000).

³⁴ See Tedlock (1991).

locally situated in cultural categories such as gender, race, and sexual identity.³⁵ Fieldwork, in turn, involves communicating about, through, and across these categories.

Because of this, narrative ethnographers try to maximize collaboration.³⁶ Moving toward participatory inquiry,³⁷ we seek as much *co-constructed* meaning as possible. Our projects, therefore, center on communicative *interaction*.³⁸

Narrative ethnographers also are self-consciously political. We view objectivity and neutrality as synonyms for estrangement that are both unachievable and undesirable.³⁹ We take instead a *purposefully ethical stance* toward research and participants.⁴⁰ Ideally, suggests Denzin (1997), our work sparks conversation and action directed toward greater social accord and justice.

As writers, moreover, narrative ethnographers strive to compose texts quite unlike standard academic works. A narrative ethnography may draw from fields as diverse as communication, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, media studies, the visual arts, popular culture, and literature. This radical intertextuality renders narrative ethnography interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and even counterdisciplinary.⁴¹

A narrative ethnography also has a different “feel” than an orthodox social science text. Narrative ethnographers privilege embodied experience as both a subject of research and as a *method of inquiry*.⁴² Our texts move beyond the ethnographic gaze, emphasizing

³⁵ See Bruner (1993) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994).

³⁶ See Fine (1994).

³⁷ See Reason (1994).

³⁸ See Conquergood (1991).

³⁹ See Jackson (1989).

⁴⁰ See Lincoln and Denzin (2000) and Punch (1994).

⁴¹ See Denzin and Lincoln (1994) and Lincoln and Denzin (2000).

⁴² See Conquergood (1991).

what is smelled, heard, and felt as much as what is seen.⁴³ If successful, the text gives readers, in Stoller's (1989, p. 156) words, "a *sense* of what it is like to live in other worlds, a taste of ethnographic things."

To produce an evocative narrative ethnography, we employ techniques more often associated with fiction and new journalism than with social science: thick scenic description, reconstructed dialogue, dramatic tension, foreshadowing, and temporal shifts.⁴⁴ Taking shape in one or more forms, such as ethnographic short stories,⁴⁵ ethnographic fiction,⁴⁶ ethnographic poetry,⁴⁷ ethnographic drama,⁴⁸ and layered accounts,⁴⁹ our texts invite readers inside fieldwork experience and relationships.

The criteria by which we judge narrative ethnographies are different from those used to evaluate traditional social science.⁵⁰ Moving from factual truth to narrative truth,⁵¹ such projects can be assessed by their personal, relational, and cultural *consequences*.⁵² Says Robert Coles (1989, p. 47), "there are many interpretations to a good story, and it isn't a question of which one is right or wrong but of what you do with what you've read." The best stories, according to Bochner (1994), enlarge our capacity to cope with life's challenges, deepen our ability to empathize with others, and expand our sense of community.

⁴³ See Jackson (1989).

⁴⁴ See Denzin (1997).

⁴⁵ See, for example, Ellis (1995).

⁴⁶ See, for example, Angrosino (1998).

⁴⁷ See, for example, Austin (1996) and Richardson (1992).

⁴⁸ See, for example, Ellis and Bochner (1992).

⁴⁹ See, for example, Ronai (1995).

⁵⁰ The June 2000 issue of *Qualitative Inquiry* includes a forum on evaluating alternative approaches to qualitative research. See Denzin and Lincoln (Eds.) (2000).

⁵¹ See Spence (1982) and Bochner (1994).

⁵² See Jackson (1989).

Readers of such works are positioned differently than in traditional research. Narrative ethnographers write for those who want to be engaged on multiple levels—intellectually, emotionally, ethically, and aesthetically; to confront texts from their own experience; and to participate as co-producers of meaning. Narrative ethnographies embrace, in Denzin’s (1997, p. 247) terms, a “dialogical ethics of reading.”

Because narrative ethnographies remain open-ended, encouraging multiple interpretations, readers are invited to offer personal, analytic, and critical responses. Texts thus become sites of political empowerment and resistance.⁵³ Ideally, by interacting with the work, readers find something to take in and use, both for themselves⁵⁴ and for social change.⁵⁵

What you take away from this text largely will depend on what you bring to it. If you are a practitioner of qualitative research, you might be interested in my fieldwork practices. While maintaining a first-person narrative voice, I discuss these practices throughout the book (a thorough review of my writing procedures can be found at the end of Chapter Six, and the most comprehensive examinations of methodological issues are located in Chapter 7 and the epilogue). Among other issues, this book explores the ethics of studying a (marginalized) group to which one doesn’t belong. In addition, I work through the strengths and challenges of conducting research in a community one has befriended. In this project, my researcher and friendship roles fused so completely that I posit friendship as not only a subject of my research but also as a primary *method*.

⁵³ See Bochner (2000).

⁵⁴ See Coles (1989).

⁵⁵ See Denzin (1997).

Briefly, friendship as a method of ethnographic inquiry involves researching with the *practices* of friendship: conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving, and vulnerability; conducting fieldwork at the natural *pace* of friendship—one that often is slow, gradual, and unsteady; and, most importantly, upholding an *ethic* of friendship—a stance of mutuality, caring, and commitment.⁵⁶

Other readers may find the *form* of my study provocative and instructive. I offer not only detailed ethnographic stories but also meta-stories, in which I recount the process of transforming field materials into narrative ethnography.

Still others might be drawn to the identity, relationship, and/or cultural issues raised by this project. Some of the central ones include: the possibilities for and significance of communication and friendship across sexual identity; the sources and consequences of heterosexism and homophobia; and the construction, usefulness, and limitations of cultural binaries (such as gay-straight). In each chapter, I have layered in reflections from literatures on friendship, queer theory, and gender studies. More extensive treatments of the study's issues and implications can be found in Chapter Seven and the epilogue.

If you are a gay or lesbian reader, perhaps you will find encouragement to continue reaching out to your straight associates and giving them a chance to know you *as gay or lesbian*. Your courage will challenge stereotypes and allow heterosexuals to see the depth and breadth of and diversity *within* and *between* gay and lesbian communities.

I hope that both gay and straight readers will take the story I offer not as a program that everyone must live out in the same way but as one possible path toward the more

⁵⁶ See Chapter Seven and the epilogue for expanded discussions of this methodology.

loving and just world that lies on the other side of our cultural assumptions and prejudices. If we commit ourselves to bridging our divides, our journey will be neither easy nor comfortable. But we all must keep in mind the consequences of remaining silent and separate. The cruelties visited upon Matthew Shepard, Billy Jack Gaither, Gary Matson, Winfield Mowder, Barry Winchell, Steen Fenrich, and so many others stem from our *collective* fears and anxieties about difference. The cruelties will not end until there is no “they” or “them,” only *us*.

Chapter Previews

In the chapters and stories that follow, I first will offer glimpses of my life before I stumbled into a community of gay men. Then I’ll show how identities and relationships were transformed as Doug and I moved from outside this community, to its periphery, to its center.

Chapter One spans from my childhood to June 1994. I recount memories of my hometown, where homosexuality was largely invisible to me. Despite this, I meet three people who alter my thoughts and feelings about sexual orientation and identity. My encounters with them, and my academic socialization at Marquette University and the University of South Florida, lay groundwork for the connections I later make with gay men.

Chapter Two extends from June 1994 to September 1995. It opens with Doug meeting David and continues through our initial visits to gay spaces. Also in this chapter, Doug begins his four-year tenure with The Cove.

Chapter Three marks the beginning of my *academic* journey into this community. It’s the fall of 1995, and I’m taking Qualitative Methods. Unexpectedly, the softball field

emerges as a fieldwork site. As I become immersed in the Cove men's lives and stories, I begin exploring how to "work the hyphen"⁵⁷ between gay and straight, to practice research (and friendship) *with* and *for* my participants.

Chapter Four, which extends to the following September, shows how my relationships with these men alter how I position myself in graduate courses, how I practice research, how I write, and how I teach my classes. As a student, I delve into new projects on sexual orientation and identity; as an instructor, I alter course reading lists, assignments, and activities.

This chapter also moves through my increasingly problematic encounters with heterosexuals. My new consciousness makes me impatient for my straight associates to raise *their* consciousness.

Chapter Five spans from the fall of 1996 to January 1997. I'm taking a course on life history, and I ask The Cove's 27-year-old leftfielder, Gordon Bernstein, to participate in my project. During our interviews, Gordon teaches me about the ongoing process of coming out—to oneself, to other gay men, and to coworkers, friends, and family.

Later, I grapple with elements of this gay male culture that can be unsettling, especially for women. I bemoan its obsession with appearance, and I question how gay male communities might become less exclusive and sexist. Taking this stance feels risky because it adds the entanglements of the critic role to those of researcher, friend, and advocate. By now, I'm a fully "vulnerable observer."⁵⁸

In Chapter Six, I present events that took place during the spring 1997 semester and that summer. An issue that comes to the forefront is the binary (gay-straight) construction

⁵⁷ See Fine (1994).

⁵⁸ See Behar (1996).

of sexual orientation and identity. I ask what it means to say, “I’m straight,” or “I’m gay,” and what options and experiences such a claim opens up and closes off. By exploring an attraction between myself and one of my participants, I question the popular wisdom that friendships between straight women and gay men are free of the sexual complications often associated with straight, cross-sex friendships.

Moreover, I begin to lament the lack of female companionship in my life. In contrast to the “gay” sensitivity and intuitiveness described in some literature,⁵⁹ I find my friendships with these *particular* gay men remarkably similar to those I’ve had with straight men: active and stimulating but seldom as emotionally intense as female friendships.

This chapter also shows one way these connections impact my marriage. In a key scene, someone tells me that the group is worried that Doug has “gay tendencies.” Hearing this, I realize that my husband’s level of comfort with gay men sometimes had triggered anxieties in *me*. These return in full force when Doug and I talk through our friends’ concern.

Chapter Seven provides a dialogic analysis of the project. It’s based on a conversation Doug and I had while I was trying to compose a more conventional conclusion on gay-straight friendship and friendship as method. We discuss my project’s academic, personal, interpersonal, and cultural implications.

In the epilogue, the project comes full circle. The setting is the oral defense of my PhD dissertation. About a dozen of the men I befriended and wrote about—most of whom have read the document—are in attendance. My academic and research communities offer

⁵⁹ See, for example, Malone (1980) and Whitney (1990).

personal and scholarly responses to my work. We talk through the disbelief and pain surrounding Matthew Shepard's death just four days before, and we try to direct ourselves toward a future of greater harmony and justice.

As the year 2000 comes to a close, I believe that such a future is possible, because I have seen and felt that harmony in my own life. But we won't look ahead just yet. To help you understand where my journey has taken me, I first must show you who I was before.

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