

Rollins College Rollins Scholarship Online

Faculty Publications


2001

Between Gay and Straight-1 Before

Lisa M. Tillmann Ph.D.

Rollins College, ltillmann@rollins.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.rollins.edu/as_facpub

 Part of the [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](#), and the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Published In

Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (2001). *Between Gay and Straight: Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by Rollins Scholarship Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Rollins Scholarship Online. For more information, please contact rwalton@rollins.edu.

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

Lisa M. Tillmann
Rollins College Box 2723
Winter Park, FL 32789
Ltillmann@rollins.edu
407-646-1586

Key words: autoethnography, ethnography, qualitative research, narrative, friendship, gay men, heterosexism, homophobia

1: Before

I grew up in the conservative farming community of Lake City, Minnesota, population 4500. Separated from the bluff-lined Wisconsin border by two miles of the Mississippi and nestled in a lush valley carved by glaciers, my hometown is a beautiful place. For its multi-generation businesses, two stoplight downtown, and single-section weekly paper, urbanites consider Lake City a simple place. A haven from the crime and grime of the Twin Cities, it's what residents call "a family place."

This "beautiful," "simple" town does provide a comfortable, nurturing environment for some families—families like mine: white, middle-class, Christian, two-parent biological. At the same time, Lake City is a place where virtually no African-, Latin-, or Asian-Americans live, non-Christians have no place of worship, and premarital sex and divorce still raise eyebrows and lower voices.

¹ Cite the published book as:

Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (2001). *Between Gay and Straight: Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

“Homosexual,” “gay,” “lesbian”—they too tend to be whispered, when uttered at all. Reflecting on my childhood, I remember few instances when these words met my ears. The first I can recall happened in late November 1983.

Lesbian Thanksgiving

On parlor couches and chairs, the men of my extended family recoup from the Thanksgiving meal. They clutch full stomachs while praising the butter-creaminess of my mother’s mashed potatoes, the sausage-spiced perfection of Uncle Rick’s dressing, and the cooling contrast of Great Aunt Doris’ fresh cranberry salad.

“There’s this man at my office,” Aunt Melanie tells my mother as we finish clearing the table. “He has a picture of his *male* lover on his desk.” Melanie’s eyes enlarge as she continues, “And get this: he carries a *purse*. A Big White Purse!” Mom shakes her head.

“Oh, lay off the guy!” Rick admonishes.

“Well it’s odd!” Melanie retorts.

“Keep talking,” he warns, “and one day our daughter will bring home a woman.”

“RICK!” several of us reply.

“You know what I say?” he continues. “Let her be a lesbian! I wouldn’t care.”

“A *lesbian*?” I question. “You’d have no problem with that?”

“I’d just want her to be a happy lesbian,” my uncle insists.

The family chorus crescendos, “No way! Get outta here! Yeah right!” Shouted down, Rick folds his arms defiantly across his chest, closes his eyes, and drifts into a turkey-induced slumber.

A potential source of my family's resistance to Rick is our religious socialization. Catholic doctrine on homosexuality taught us to "hate the sins" (homosexual practices, however mysterious and ill defined) but to "love the sinners" (those sad, cursed creatures who couldn't help "what they were").² Of course, when a sermon or Sunday school lesson asked us to damn "the doing," it wasn't difficult to damn "the being" as well.

My primary and secondary education presented an equally cropped and blurred picture. The philosophy behind *The Rainbow Curriculum* never reached our textbooks, assignments, and discussions. During health class, our (hetero)sex education included not a single conversation about "alternative lifestyles." In fact, when I try to remember myself thinking or talking about homosexuality at school, I only can recall instances that show its invisibility. One such occurrence took place in seventh grade.

The Rules

The bell starts to ring, sending a throng of us stampeding toward our first-period classroom. By the time we settle into our seats, the day's announcements already have begun. The voice over the PA system alerts us to the lunch menu before moving on to the main event—prom. "All students bringing a guest must register him or her in the office. Remember, if your guest gets into trouble, *you* will receive the punishment. All participants must be in at least 10th grade. And all couples must be boy/girl."

At this, the room fills with laughter. "Duh!" the guy behind me exclaims.

I chuckle and respond, "Like, what else would they be?"

² But, as Mohr (1994, pp. 67-68) indicates, "In 1986, the Catholic church, in a major ideological shift, branded as 'an objective moral disorder' the mere status of being a homosexual, even when congenitally fixed and unaccompanied by any homosexual behavior."

As a “boy-crazy” seventh grader, either I couldn’t imagine that anyone would *want* to attend prom with a same-sex date, or I thought such a person had no place there. In the next two years, however, three people significantly impacted my thoughts and feelings about sexual orientation and identity.

The first was Deborah. In 1982, my mother began nursing school at Winona State. There, she met and befriended Deborah, a fellow student. The two enjoyed many of the same activities: racquetball, golf, and camping. It was on a canoe trip that Deborah confessed to being both bisexual and in love with my mom. By the time my parents told me of Deborah’s disclosure, I had come to know and like “the other woman.” Still, the thought of her loving (and lusting after) my mother was more than a little disconcerting. After speaking with our priest, Mom told Deborah that while she never could love her “that way,” she wanted their friendship to persist, and it does to this day.

The second person was Trent, who came into my life in June 1984. I vividly recall our first encounter.

Something Different

With friends Jean and Kristin, I stroll along the pier. The late afternoon sun chaps our lips as we breathe orally, avoiding the wafts of algae and rotting fish. “Hey!” someone shouts from the water below. Thinking the call for someone else, we continue on; but at the second, “Hey!” we look down. From a dinghy, two guys wave.

“The blond’s cute,” Jean whispers.

“Come to our boat,” invites his Latino companion as they motor toward the marina.

“Dock 3, The Neptune.”

An adventure-starved 14 year old, I flash my eyebrows, asking, “How ’bout it, ladies?”

“Why not?” Kristin agrees.

We make our way through the park and across the long, wooden ramp. Several slips down, we find the boat. The blond appears. He *is* cute, I think, noting his tall, lean build, piercing blue eyes, and soft, boyish features. He takes my hand, saying, “All aboard.”

“I’m Lisa,” I tell them, “and this is Jean and Kristin.”

“Trent,” says the blond, pointing to himself, “and my friend Miguel.” He fills plastic cups with sweet Chablis. As we sip and chat, Trent and I exchange glances.

Several minutes later, I look at my watch and gasp. “Ooh! We’re late for my mom’s graduation party.”

Trent jumps onto the dock to help us off the boat. “Will I see you again?” he asks, staring intently into my eyes.

“I’ll leave directions,” I say, “in case you want to come by for sandwiches and cake.”

Back at the house, I watch for Trent but think he probably won’t show. Each time the doorbell rings, I hold my ground. I’ve almost given up when my brother rounds the corner and says, “Some guy named Trent is at the door.”

“Well,” I respond as nonchalantly as possible, “show him in.”

With yacht-club propriety, Trent charms everyone. While mingling, we eye each other playfully.

After most of the guests leave, he and I move outside to sit under the clear night sky. We nervously share biographies before sealing our attraction with a deliciously slow kiss.

"I have to get back," Trent says. "But I'll be in town next weekend."

"You know where I live," I reply.

As he walks away, two figures appear. "Who was *that*?" asks my friend Peter.

"That was Trent," I answer dreamily.

"There's something ... different about him," observes Randy, another schoolmate.

"Yeah, different," Peter agrees, and they break into laughter.

"What's so funny?" I demand.

"C'mon, Lis," Peter says. "He's a fem."

"A what?"

"A *fem*," he repeats, louder this time. "Or didn't you notice the bony legs and fluffy hair? I bet he even had a manicure!"

"You're jealous," I retort.

"Jealous?" Randy huffs. "Of a FAG?"

That word stings. "He is *not*!" I insist, climbing the steps and slamming the door.

I fell hard for Trent that summer. But the words "different," "fem," and "fag" remained etched on my consciousness. At 14, I already knew that these were among the most disparaging labels for young men, yet I became angry not at the stereotypes and misogyny but at Trent's assigned position in a homophobic framework I didn't question. Why was I so defensive? Did I fear that Peter and Randy were right about Trent's gender identity and/or sexual orientation? Was I worried that, if my peers marginalized Trent

(and Trent and I were together), my own status could be in jeopardy? Given these possibilities, perhaps it's no surprise that I ended this relationship just before the new school year began—just before I again would face my classmates on a daily basis.

Later that year, I came to know a guy named Dev. As with Trent, my attraction to him was immediate and visceral. One October night, I again found myself confronting questions about a love interest's sexual orientation.

Something in Common

Dev's lips press lightly against mine. Heart thumping, I fight the urge to reach across his worn front seat and pull him on top of me. We bid goodnight, and I watch his car turn the corner at the end of the block. I inhale deeply, riding a wave of teenage euphoria.

"I saw that," my friend Kara teases, approaching from across the street.

"Oh god," I say breathlessly, "I can't believe he kissed me!"

"Be careful," she warns. "You know what they say."

"*What* do they say?"

"About his ... sexual preference."

I sigh. "Do you think he's ... ?" I can't get the next word out.

"Do I think he's *gay*? I don't know."

"Well, I don't think so," I tell her, as if pleading a case. "He *kissed* me; you saw it!"

"What if he, you know, likes men?" she queries.

"Then I guess we have something in common."

That lighthearted response failed to convey how disturbing I found Kara's inquiry. If Dev were gay, it meant that he wouldn't return my affections, that I could encounter more hassling from my peers, and that I'd established a pattern of attraction to males with "borderline" sexualities. I wondered if that made my sexuality "borderline" as well.

Once my interest in Dev waned, I thought little about homosexuality until I entered Marquette University in 1989. My first year, I took a course called Theory of Ethics. I remember a discussion on sexual violence in which I commented that the punishment for raping a man should be more severe than for violating a woman. Ludicrous as it now sounds, I reasoned that male rape carried the added weight of being "unnatural" (as if raping a woman were somehow "natural"). In another session of that class, I suggested that AIDS might be a punishment for behaving contrary to God's will. Not one classmate challenged my contribution; in fact, it was met with several nods and even a bit of clapping.

By my sophomore year, however, the barriers around my old consciousness were crumbling. In seminars like Gender and Communication and Women's Rhetoric, I became inspired by feminism, and in advanced philosophy courses, I was exposed to various standpoints associated with culture, religion, and socioeconomic class.

Sexual identity was the last wall to crack. Though I increasingly sensed an affinity between women's emancipation and the emancipation of gay men and lesbians, I still found it difficult to support certain causes. In a Theology and Values course my senior year, for example, I argued that children of gay men and lesbians face too many hardships and too much harassment to warrant custody rights for these parents. Looking back, I know that I never would have suggested that a Jewish person or an interracial couple shouldn't have

children. But I now see that my argument—that progeny shouldn't suffer their parents' marginalization—would preclude any non-majority person from parenthood.

By the time I graduated in May 1993, I considered myself a “good liberal” when it came to gay people. I was sensitive, thoughtful, and committed. At least, that's what I told myself. Never mind that I counted no gay male or lesbian among my friends, not even among my acquaintances; indeed, during my four years at Marquette, *I had no sustained interpersonal contact with any openly gay person—ever.*

The summer after graduation, I began dating Doug Healy. Like me, Doug grew up in a rural, insular town and attended a small, private university.

That fall, as Doug began pharmacy rotations at Drake, I entered the University of South Florida as a PhD student in Communication. My first year, I worked hard to establish myself as someone committed to the graduate community. At that time, all my Tampa friends were associated with the university.

In May 1994, I went to Des Moines for Doug's graduation. On that visit, we had our first conversation about “alternative” sexualities.

A Twosome at Threesome

After an onslaught of summer blockbuster previews, we settle in for the feature presentation, *Threesome*. The film opens on a college campus. Two men, one a sex-crazed jock (Stuart), the other a quiet intellectual (Eddy), become roommates. A bureaucratic mistake sends Alex, a beautiful neurotic, to live in the second room of their suite until she can prove she is not male, as the university computer has her listed.

A not-so-classic love triangle forms. Alex falls for Eddy, who falls for Stuart, who falls for Alex. Undaunted, Alex sets out to prove Eddy a closet heterosexual, Eddy endeavors to unleash what he perceives as Stuart's latent homosexuality, and Stuart attempts to reinvent himself as the literatus he thinks Alex desires. Alex sleeps with each man, and Eddy once tries to seduce Stuart, but as dyads, they fall flat. As a threesome, however, they make great friends, and eventually, something else as well.

One afternoon, they lay on Alex's bed, talking and laughing. Alex begins teasing Stuart. "Fuck you," Stuart banters playfully.

"You wish," Alex responds. "Fuck you both," she then says.

"*You wish,*" Eddy tells her.

His statement sparks a relational epiphany. Alex reaches over for Eddy, and they share an open-mouthed kiss. Then Alex turns to Stuart, and their tongues begin probing. The film cuts, and we find the three in the same positions but without their clothes. "Oh my," Doug and I say together as we shift in our seats.

Alex and Eddy face one another while Stuart embraces Alex from behind. Eddy hesitantly reaches across Alex to touch Stuart. He grazes Stuart's buttock, then shyly pulls away. Stuart takes Eddy's hand and returns it to his thigh. The three move together slowly, rhythmically. The film ends a few minutes later.

On the way to the car, Doug and I talk about feeling uncomfortable during the "threesome" scene. I express difficulty breaking the frame of intercourse as a two-person enterprise while Doug says he finds the suggestions of anal sex distasteful. We agree that Stuart and Eddy's mutual affection was "a little too explicit."

In retrospect, that we considered *Threesome* “explicit” speaks volumes about the first 23 years of our lives. Stuart and Eddy don’t even kiss in this film, but for unworldly viewers who had never seen two men share a passionate touch—not in life, not even in cinema—any hint of male sexual intimacy felt strange, uncomfortable, and forbidden. Ironically, upon viewing *Threesome* again in June 1997, I marveled at how conventional it seemed.

In this chapter, glimpses of my family life, my education, and my early relationship with Doug offer a sense of who I was before stumbling into a gay community. Reflecting on the encounters described, I note first how invisible homosexuality once was to me. In my mind, years pass without a single reference to anything gay. When homosexuality does flash upon my mental screen, it calls forth a deeply entrenched code linking it with Otherness, deviance, threat, and sin.

For a time, I cursed my small-town upbringing for teaching me that code and for making it seem so unconsciously right. But I could have learned a similar code in almost any hometown, and if I’d come of age someplace else, I wouldn’t have known Deborah, Trent, or Dev (though I might have known others like them). Even though these associations aroused fears and anxieties, they also may have provided a foundation for the deeper, more sustained connections I later would make with gay men.

Those connections, importantly, might never have been forged without Doug. In June 1994, he moved to Florida and began pharmacy training at Walgreens. There, he met a man who changed both our lives forever.

Work Cited

Mohr, R. D. (1994). *A more perfect union: Why straight America must stand up for gay rights*. Boston: Beacon Press.