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PERSONAL NARRATIVE ABOUT CREATING A COMMUNITY AND
FAMILY OF CHOICE**

Gay L. Grymes

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LEARNING AN ETHICS OF COMMITMENT: A SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE
ABOUT CREATING A COMMUNITY AND FAMILY OF CHOICE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

By

Gay Lanell Grymes

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

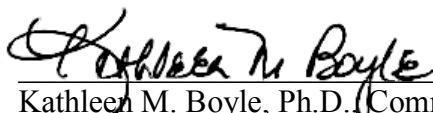
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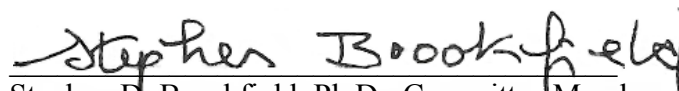
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS, MINNESOTA


Learning an Ethics of Commitment: A Scholarly Personal Narrative about Creating a Community
and Family of Choice

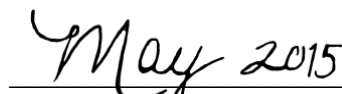
We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to so many people who supported me in one way or the other while I committed to this very inwardly focused dissertation. Many did not know they were the foundation on which I wrote. Without them, the people in my stories and my life, I would not have had the opportunity or the privilege to write my story, and for that I am immeasurably grateful.

Dr. Kathleen Boyle, advisor, professor, chair, guided me throughout this four-year journey, from beginning to end. I was never more grateful than during this last writing spurt. When I needed her most, Kate was there, to help root out the evils that seemed to creep stealthily into my writing and to help hone the story I was trying to share. Dr. Stephen Brookfield, professor, and kind committee member, helped me begin to dare to write my own story and encouraged me to continue after my first rough attempts. I began to understand and believe, through Stephen, that personal stories can be scholarly, meaningful, and universally useful. I am so happy and thankful that this most demanding writing of my life benefited by Dr. Barbara Allen's careful scholarship, close reading, engaged insight, and recommendations for future work. Dr. Karen Klein swooped in at the tail end of this process and did her best to do a close to final edit on these pages. This was a tedious but essential task for which I was extremely grateful and relieved.

To my University of St. Thomas cohort 25, you were the best. I could not have chosen better mates to embark on this educational journey with. I missed you after classes ended and I still miss you. To the faculty who guided us along the way, thank you for your patience and attention. You helped make these four years very well spent.

Without my biological family, I would not be here. I thank and honor my mother and father for my life, for keeping me healthy, for loving me, and for teaching me the importance of trying to be a good person. Despite our difficult times and disagreements, we have had some good times, too. To my two grandmothers, now deceased, I am eternally grateful for your being there for me, for providing generous respite, for thinking I was capable, and for teaching me valuable lessons, like how to drive, grow vegetables, and be kind. To my grandfathers, thank you for doing your best, for remaining committed, in what was often a difficult and hostile world, and for teaching me to value hard work. Thank you to my auntie, for giving me another adult to look up to, and another model to follow.

To past lovers and partners, there were good and bad times, but without your interaction, I would have not had an opportunity to grow and learn to become a better person, an ongoing process. To my chosen family and my dear friends along the way, you saved my life and made it meaningful. You gave me support and helped me learn the importance of friendship, love, and commitment to others. You provided much of the rich content of this project and my life. I am so grateful that I have known you.

To my partner, thank you, thank you, thank you, for hanging in there, listening to me kvetch, and listening to my insecurities, and for hearing more about marriage, lesbian-feminism, and queer theory than you ever wanted to hear. Thank you for your wisdom and advice though I sometimes had a hard time hearing it. I appreciate and love you. I am grateful for your being in my life, your support, your love, and commitment. Growing old is a gift and I am so excited that we will be growing older together.

ABSTRACT

Gay Grymes

LEARNING AN ETHICS OF COMMITMENT: A SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE ABOUT CREATING A COMMUNITY AND FAMILY OF CHOICE

Using a Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) methodology, this study began as an exploration of marriage and its impact on lesbian identity, community, and relationship. What ultimately emerged was a study that considered how living a life excluded from the cultural context of legal marriage prompted learning an ethics of commitment and creating a community and family of choice. Personal story provided perspective and lesbian, feminist, and queer theories provided an initial framework for analysis. In addition, theories of community and relationship informed reflections moving from specific to general. This study is based on the views of one lesbian living and loving, beginning in the closets of the 1970s through the current day of marriage expansion. Marking a moment in civil rights history to legalize same-sex marriage, the study found that lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and queer people, despite current differences about the rationality of pursuing legal marriage, have created love and family throughout their lives. Through personal experiences, many have consequently discovered universal principles about commitment, community, and family even without marriage. Though important and symbolic of broader “acceptance,” a focus on marriage with its social benefits is not enough to achieve full equality and civil rights for sexual minorities. Further lesbian, gay, and queer reflections and interpretations are needed to add to the lessons and ethics of commitment of this lesbian and continue expanding equality within the larger cultures and communities.

Keywords: lesbian marriage, lesbian identity, lesbian community, lesbian relationship, same-sex marriage, commitment, ethics, relationship, community, families of choice

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Learning an Ethics of Commitment: A Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) about Creating a
Community and Family of Choice

CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND FOR THE STUDY

Citing the poem, *Käthe Kollwitz*, by Rukeyser, Greene (1988) explained,

To tell the truth is to tear aside the conventional masks, the masks adopted due to convention or compliance, the masks that hide women's being in the world. It is to articulate a life story in a way that enables a woman to know perhaps for the first time how she has encountered the world and what she desires to do and be.

To do that, for any woman to have done that, is to make questionable the categories that have contained feminine lives and, by so doing, to alter the other labels and categories that compose the taken-for-granted. (pp. 57-58)

I have identified as a lesbian feminist for most of my adult life without any presumption of legal status for my relationships. I never thought much about marriage other than to criticize it as a patriarchal institution that served to make women and children the property of men. Lesbians learned to live their lives separately in many cases, without the privilege of their relationships being sanctioned by the state. As my friends, Xena and Daisy said when I interviewed them following their Iowa marriage after twenty years of love and partnership, "Why worry about something you can't have? We just figured out how to live our lives."

When same-sex marriage rights were first legalized in 2003 in Massachusetts (*Goodridge et al. v. Department of Public Health*, 2003), I noticed but thought of the event as an anomaly. I was in a relatively new relationship already starting to show signs of trouble. The repercussions of the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and similar state constitutional amendments, restricting rather than expanding marriage, made these rights seem even less real. Then, in 2009, an Iowa Supreme Court judge ruled in favor of a constitutional right to same-sex marriage (*Varnum v. Brien*, 2009). A couple of friends who had been together over ten years and reared one of the couple's biological sons together decided to marry in Iowa. Others friends went to

California to marry during the window of legal marriage before Proposition 8 shut it down, temporarily. Another couple I knew had a big non-legal wedding in Minnesota that they later legalized in Massachusetts. Then Xena and Daisy, long-time feminists, who had originally been cautious and critical about the sudden marriage boom among their friends, announced their intentions for an Iowa marriage.

Marriage became difficult to ignore. Lesbians who had initially “pooh poohed” marriage, especially in the state-by-state legalization, were sending out invitations. “I just went to my first gay wedding” started becoming a progressive marker for people. Those excluded from marrying for most of their lives, long and short, rapidly adopted a widely criticized institution many deemed to be in serious decline and trouble. Philosophical debates within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) communities exploded about whether we should be trying to gain admission to one of the most conservative, government-run institutions of heterosexual life. Marriage and the other conservative but symbolic issue of gays in the military began to dominate the mainstream LGBTQ consciousness. Are marriage and the military where LGBTQ energy and money should go?

Many, largely academic voices, argued we should be working against and away from marriage and the military rather than working toward inclusion into what many perceive as symbols of the broad classifications of “patriarchy” and “normality.” I have participated in and disrupted, in small ways, both legal marriage and the military. Despite what some have described as emblematic of “The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism” (Duggan, 2002), military service and marriage cannot be painted with one broad brush. Military service, for example, is a civic duty and marriage is a civil right. Lesbians, bisexuals, and gay men have actually participated in both but as hidden or suppressed participants. Both institutions represent a form

of commitment that bisexuals, lesbians, and gay men have a right to participate in free of discrimination and oppression.

I have been seriously working on this project for several years. In many ways, my life exploration has been to figure out love, identity, relationship, community, and commitment with no hope of legal marriage. When I began my research, Minnesota had not yet succeeded in passing same-sex legislation. Instead, Minnesotans were embroiled in a very close but divided battle about whether marriage should be constitutionally defined as being between a man and a woman, thus barring same-sex couples for any immediate future. The amendment was defeated, narrowly, and using the momentum of that victory, same-sex marriage proponents soldiered on to win same-sex marriage rights a scant year later.

I went to the celebration at the state capitol that atypically hot Minnesota spring day and watched Governor Dayton sign the legislation in front of the capitol's expansive lawn full of cheering supporters. Senator Scott Dibble and Representative Karen Clark, co-sponsors of the bill, were at Governor Dayton's side. Many of us marched with the Minnesota Freedom Band to downtown St. Paul after the signing and attended the after-party. I felt happy and triumphant. On that day, May 14, 2013, I had spent my adult life, from 21 years to 56 years of age as a self-identified lesbian. August 1, 2013, marked the first day same-sex couples could marry legally in Minnesota. Several lesbian couples I know married before the New Year. Minnesota's marriage expansion seemed to signal subsequent marriage expansion victories across the country.

In January 2015, two days before I wrote this sentence, the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) agreed to hear and settle the question of same-sex marriage federally. The trajectory speed toward the landmark decision happening in less than one-half year has seemed breakneck for some but has actually been a carefully navigated if high-speed journey.

Announcing the recent SCOTUS decision to decide this question once and for all, Liptak (2015) said, “The pace of change on same-sex marriage, in both popular opinion and in the courts, has no parallel in the nation’s history” (para.5). However, as Horton, Kohl, and Kohl (1998) recalled in Horton’s recollection of his involvement in civil rights and social movements, “It’s only in a movement that an idea is often made simple enough and direct enough that it can spread rapidly. Then your leadership multiples very rapidly, because there’s something explosive going on... We cannot create movements” (p. 114). The rapid expansion and adoption of marriage rights by LGB people appears to be such a movement. However, at the same time the LGB community experiences the freedom to marry, LGBTQ people also continue to battle notable and legally sanctioned housing and employment discrimination, and income disparity in many of the United States (Walters, 2014).

In 18 months, at this writing, we went from 12 states plus the District of Columbia to 35 or 36 states that legally recognize same-sex marriage. (I read differing numbers and I needed to update the prior sentence continually.) Apparently I am not the only person who cannot keep up. “Over 70% of the U.S. Population lives in a state currently issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples state-wide, and over 64% of the U.S. Population lives in a state with the freedom to marry once and for all” (Freedom to Marry, 2015, para. 4). I will hopefully finish this paper before SCOTUS rules, most likely in favor of same-sex marriage rights. To be polite, this likelihood is miraculous in the context of my life, though it has begun to feel ho-hum. Have we reached a “post-gay” era? Walters (2014) urged caution, “The problem with that [post-gay] story—one told by any number of researchers and popular journalists and one with some kernel of truth—is that it neglects the continued reality of homophobia and heterosexism” (p. 43).

I lived 48 years of my life, more than half my likely lifetime without any hope of marriage. I remember my Granddaddy, who himself lived to be in his nineties, corralling me in his garage, after I had come out at 22, asking me to explain to him what was going on with “all this homo business.” I imagine Granddaddy is rolling over in his grave right about now. Is the afterlife post-gay? I would like to imagine that crossing over has changed him, taught him a few things, and made him more expansive, non-racist and non-homophobic.

My research of marriage rights and what they mean to me led me to unexpected places of inquiry. I identified as a lesbian feminist for 35 years or so, but my understanding of what that means has grown, expanded, and solidified in some ways. I never identified with the term “queer,” but I align with many of the tenets of queer theory. I also disagreed strongly with some of those assertions. I reconnected to my earlier, lazy activism with the advantage and privilege of years of living as both an outsider and an insider. I am astounded to find that with a little luck, I will survive to see what many in the media are calling the “great civil rights questions in a generation” (Liptak, 2015, para.1). Most relevant is that through my marriage research and related stories, a larger question and theme emerged which considered an ethics of commitment/friendship/relationship and what that means for creating a community of choice. Much of my narrative content and analysis will reflect on and conclude with a broader discussion of how I learned commitment to self, relationship, family, and community, within a context of how marriage might transform lesbian identity, community, and relationship.

Regardless of how one may feel or theorize about the pros and cons of marriage, the rapidity and magnitude of the change that same-sex marriage symbolizes is not contestable. My personal query regarding marriage and whether or not I wanted marriage and how it might change the community with which I most closely aligned myself, launched my research. We all

cannot help but be affected by this change, it seems. Despite the preponderance of happy and troubling predictions, how we might change is as yet unknown. The road that led us here is plentiful with lessons about what it means to craft a life and commitment outside of legal benefits and constraints. Attending to these ideas can help us navigate the changes and decide how we want to reshape our own enactments and intersections of relationship, community, and identity, and with what ethics we wish to live together.

Significance of Study and Research Questions

I supported and fought for in my small ways what I called lesbian and gay rights, equal rights; the same rights heterosexual couples possessed throughout my lifetime. Of course, equal rights included marriage rights. I had not thought twice about whether marriage was a good thing or a bad thing. However, I had not grasped what attaining those rights meant in the context of my past life or might mean to my future life. Never really believing that I would be able to marry, I had not put much thought into it. I heard others express that view at the after-party on May 14, 2013 while we listened to the band blast the campaign theme song, *Love is the Law* (Walsh, 2013). What was marriage and how might it change us, I wondered? What did attaining equality mean for me, for us, after a lifetime of living without the symbolic and literal symbol of relational privilege, marriage?

In my original review of literature to uncover what marriage might mean for me, and possibly others who, like me, were incredulous to see marriage start becoming a possibility, I found many themes and sub-themes. Rather than add another voice to the many who have debated the worth of marriage, I wanted to focus on how marriage might transform me and other lesbians. Identity, community, and relationship are three interconnected categories that have been particularly relevant in my life, and I wondered whether these critical categories and

markers would change with marriage. By exploring and revisiting these categories in my life story, I explored the meaning of marriage for my mid-life lesbian community and myself.

As a precursor to marriage, I believed it was important to talk about my experiences with family, identity development, finding and building community, and relationship. These themes and how they played out in my life, critically informed my beliefs, understanding, and feelings about marriage and its sudden availability. Through my stories a larger, and deeper story about commitment, community, family, and love surfaced. This narrative, which investigated how I learned to relate to other people under oppression, is foundational to marriage, and became the larger focus of my study. The detailed explication of my life and experience progressed toward a broader significance for others. My story recounts a particular time in history and is representative of a group of individuals and community who have been excluded from marriage and yet have experienced love and created relationships. Our experiences have something to say, not only to one another, but also to those who have long benefited and suffered from the ancient tradition of marriage. My lesbian group brings a unique understanding gained through experiencing specific obstructions to its expression of relationship and family.

About My Use Of The Rainbow Acronym

Briefly, I would like to explain terminology and acronyms used in my dissertation. I want to facilitate a better understanding of why I sometimes use fewer letters and sometimes use more in the aggregate acronym that has come to include sexual and gender non-normative categories. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and ally (LGBTQIA) is a relatively inclusive acronym though I still fear I have missed a category. New letters denoting new categories seem to be added regularly. While I view this expansion as a positive trend, the additions make the description ever more unwieldy. These categories relate to those who have

pushed the boundaries of what has been considered “normal” in our gendered and sexual world. If one believes, as I do, that these categories are to some degree constructed, then one should understand the category of queer (Q), a “non-identity” that attempts to disrupt all the other categories and to blur them. I have discussed my thoughts about the queer category in later pages.

Largely, I have focused on the LGB of this acronym because my focus has been on same-sex marriage, most specifically on lesbian marriage. L equals lesbian, the primary focus of my study. G equals gay, which I have sometimes identified with and sometimes not. Many gay men claim “gay” as their own, but I know lesbians who also call themselves gay. B equals bisexual, a category that, while still adhering to the binary categories, has been seen as more fluid, sometimes same-sex and sometimes not. Because sometimes bisexuals might be in a same-sex relationship, I often include them with L and G. Because transgender people can marry people of the opposite sex, if they choose, I have not focused on transgendered people, unless they happen to also identify as being in a same-sex relationship. I have not focused on intersex people unless they identify as being in relationship with someone of the same-sex. Regarding intersex and perhaps transgender people, the binary categories start falling away and thus challenge even same-sex relationships. Intersex and transgender concerns are not part of my story though there is great need for research specific to them. Allies are those, usually straight folks, who support or proclaim their alliance with LGBTQI. I have used the acronym, with varying combinations of letters as appropriate in context.

Why Marriage?

Clearly, ongoing and expanded research about same-sex marriage is important to the LGBTQ communities. In addition, several gaps in the current literature exist pertaining to LGBTQ

communities and their diverse intersectionalities. Lesbians comprise one such group that is rarely the subject of research. My research will help answer how legal marriage might affect lesbians' relational and social identity.

There is a social need for research that asks to what extent will lesbians attain certain benefits from marriage? What new relationship meaning might lesbians find in marriage? How might marriage transform lesbian relational identity? Such general questions have primed my more specific questions about same-sex marriage and its meaning to lesbians. My question began with how might marriage transform identity, community, and relationships for mid-life lesbians? The question this study ultimately answers is how I developed an ethics of commitment in the context of learning how to create relationships, community, and a family of choice.

Overview of Study

The following chapters are structured to illuminate my question and process to uncover the meaning of marriage by looking at the three emergent themes - identity, community, and relationship. Using SPN methodology, I have traveled iteratively, as in a three dimensional conical shell, from Pre-search to Me-search to Re-search to We-search. Following the pre-search phase, I began journaling and then began including re-search. The re-search phase thus returned me to the me-search phase where I wrote again, successively including more analysis and re-search as the theme developed. Eventually, this process led me to a slightly different question related to the meaning of marriage, but a question that became more predominant in my story. The question and theme that grew from this process asked how my life and these stories of family, identity, community, and relationship have helped me develop an ethic of commitment and what that ethic means for creating a community or communities of choice. The SPN process

has helped me develop my scholarship related to my expanded questions, to discover “the ‘me’ through [the] theme” (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 97) of marriage. Nash wrote in one of his own SPNs,

And, so, here, today, is where I stand on the subject of ‘scholarship’: It’s all about loving ideas so much that we are willing to play with them, to take chances with them, to express our passions about them, to deliver them in some fresh, new ways; to nurture and care of them; and to continually test and challenge them in the company of others. (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p.101)

This is the type of scholar I have strived to be.

In Chapter Two I have detailed the SPN methodology, and each step of self-reflection and research. In my Pre-search reflection, I derived my question and purpose. In the Me-search phase I wrote and journaled, remembered and reflected, and wrote again. The Re-search phase was not a phase so much as it was a foundation grounding all the rest of the activities and to which I returned frequently, excavating, sometimes reinforcing, and other times revising my discoveries as needed. The We-search phase, a requirement of an SPN writer, according to Nash and Bradley (2011) is to “make meaning of their experiences for the reader, not just for the writer” (p. 104). I strived to make my personal story “universalizable” (p. 104), recognizing that ultimately the measure of success lies with the responses of the reader.

Chapters Three, Four, and Five contain the heart of my Me-search/Re-search. These chapters hold my stories of identity, community, and relationship against an historic backdrop of marriage. In Chapter Three, I delve deeply into how I explored and expressed my identity, especially my sexual identity. In Chapter Four, I ponder my experience of community and what it meant to me during different formative chapters of my life. In Chapter Five, I grapple with several significant relationships and how the experiences of those relationships helped me to become the person I am today. All of these categories, I found, are interrelated. None of them

exists without the others. Marriage, my original theme, affects all of them as they each affect marriage. The ethic of commitment and its importance to creating communities of choice encircles and frames my subthemes, including marriage.

In Chapter Six, I engage other literature and scholarship about LGB marriage, commitment, and communities and families of choice more directly. I answer my fundamental question, “How does my story lead us to understand and apply in real lives an ethic of commitment/friendship/relationship based on my examination through SPN?” I also offer further thoughts and my insight about what might come next, and opportunities for further study and stories.

Through SPN I have been able to explore the meaning of marriage and commitment, not just for me, but also for other LGB people. SPN allowed me the space to approach my topic from an inductive perspective and to include my experiences and perspective, without apology, as the method intends. Through explicating my story within a scholarly narrative and with a focus on marriage, I discovered something more than my original question framed. Through an “emergent” (Creswell, 2013, p. 47) research process using my own stories, a more dominant though strongly related theme than marriage developed. SPN allowed me to consider a more personal study of an ethics of commitment and friendship, and what those ethics mean for creating communities of choice. How have I learned to live an ethical relational life outside of the institution of marriage? How does my SPN lead lesbians to better understand our unique place in a moment in history? How does what we learned apply to a broader community? In the following chapter, I will further explain the methodology and my interpretation and use of SPN to explore and develop my question.

CHAPTER TWO: METHOD MATTERS

What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open. (Rukeyser, 2006, p. 463)

Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN)

As I will show, SPN is an appropriate method for examining identity, community, relationship, marriage, and commitment because these themes are inseparable from and develop from my personal life stories. Nash and Bradley (2007) explained SPN as “a conjoining of personal perspective and scholarly insights” (p. xiv). SPN was developed as a form of personal narrative with the essential features of “Pre-Search, Me-Search, Re-Search, We-Search” (p. 6), which distinguish this approach from autoethnographies, memoirs, personal narrative essays, and autobiographies. SPN, Nash & Bradley (2007) insisted, relies on “vigor...over rigor...both ‘soft’ (heart-driven) and ‘hard’ (scholarly and focused), often at the same time” (pp. 82-83). Although Lincoln and Denzin (2003) edited and enumerated several concerns and conflicts with qualitative postmodern research such as questions of rigor and validity, SPN, I will demonstrate, may offer what non-SPN researchers call valid, reliable data when the truth criteria of honesty, cohesion, credibility, and trustworthiness are attended to by the SPN researcher and observed by the reader or consumer of the research (Nash & Bradley, 2007).

SPN is a genre that falls within the category of narrative research Nash (2004) began to develop around 1996. The most common elements Creswell (2013) found in narrative studies include: story collection, collaboration (between researcher and participant), and individual experiences “gathered through many different forms of qualitative data” (p.71). Creswell also identified additional aspects of narrative research: stories often reflect a “temporal change” (i.e. a narrative arc), analysis of the stories can take various forms (thematic, structural, dialogic), stories contain tensions, and context is important in stories (p. 71). SPN is distinctly within the

narrative research family. Nash and Viray (2013) expounded the multiple meanings of stories as: meaning makers, community glue, tools to help us “know about ourselves and others and to solve problems” (p. 59). Stories help us survive, individually and communally (Noonan & Fish, 2007).

Phelan (1994) expressed her rationale for employing “specificity” or a personal narrative form for lesbian identity politics, not as in identity theory, “which seeks to reduce diverse elements to a single point” (p. xiii), or as in liberal individualism, but as a “practice” that might uncover “potential linkages and possibilities for immediate action in our individual lives” (p. xx). Like Phelan (1994), I believe a personal narrative like SPN reinforces rather than detracts or contradicts my assertion of self or group and community construction. As Phelan (1994) stated, “Specificity is the methodological guide to finding individuality in community” (p. 8). Specificity or self-explication of difference and commonality provides the fuzzy borders or liminality (Phelan, 1989) that allows us to state our location in time and community, to describe the influences that form both individual and community, and to imagine creative institutions with which to “value what we share” (Phelan, 1994, p. 15) and to share what we value.

The idea of what I call fuzzy borders rather than hard boundaries is one that Anzaldúa (2012) explored and Phelan (1989) called liminality. The liminal, Phelan (1989) explained, is what is “between categories; it is a frontier of sorts” (p. 90). The liminal disrupts the idea of a central normalcy as it resides without a center. “Thus, lesbians are marginal only from the perspective of heterosexuals; most lesbians, however, are acutely aware that they negotiate multiple locations with different codes and expectations” (p. 90). Individual expressions like personal narrative broaden these fuzzy borders or “spacious locations” (p. 90) and work to unsettle the tendency of community to reify categories. My story intersects with others in

multiple ways beyond simple categorization. Though categories can be useful, I will show they can also be limiting. SPN, or “getting specific” (Phelan, 1989, p. xvii), is a methodology that helps avoid such limitations.

SPN is personal. SPN purposely has a point of view, a perspective. As Nash and Bradley (2011) described the method, “at times, an SPN, combines elements of all types of personal writing” (p. 14). Nash and Bradley explained the derivation and differences between SPN and several other more familiar forms of methodologies including: autoethnographies, memoirs, personal narrative essays, and autobiographies. These close relations of SPN fall within the types of narratives: biographical study, autoethnography, life history, and oral history, enumerated by Creswell (2013).

Autoethnography, according to Nash and Bradley (2011) is closely aligned with SPN, but the autoethnographer focuses more on the context of culture in the study of self. The cultural aspect of SPN is essential, especially in the “we-search” phase, but the focus of an SPN leans more toward the self, beginning with the personal and going outward to the cultural and the social. Nash asserted, SPN “puts the self of the scholar front and center” (p. 18).

Memoir and autobiography, Nash and Viray (2013) explained, are also similar to SPN methodologies though their differences are easier to discern than autoethnography. An SPN writer, unlike a memoirist, is concerned about theme, universalization, and connecting the personal narrative back to scholarship. Nash and Viray (2013) emphasized that an SPN writer might begin with “personal memoir writing (undertaking a kind of confessional, personal exploration)” (p. 44) but should work toward developing the memoir into a complete SPN. My iterative process was just as Nash and Viray (2013) described, an internal exploration spiraling outward.

I have long been a lover of a good story. When I read the first chapter of Nash and Bradley (2011) for my final cohort class, my heart and mind resonated with SPN. Previously, I had decided to focus on same-sex marriage as a timely and personal topic and had interviewed two friends who had been recently married, thinking that I would interview several more couples. I immensely enjoyed the interview and subsequent preliminary data analysis though I was struck by some of the similarities between their stories and mine. I kept reminding myself during the interview to stay detached, to feign, I felt, objectivity. I began wanting to include my own story but was not sure how I might do so.

I knew I wanted to tell the stories of a culture and community of women rarely heard in the larger society, a culture and community that were also mine. In fact, I knew my own story in ways that I could never know someone else's. Fundamental to SPN, Nash and Viray (2013) held, is that it is liberating both to the narrator, and if successful, to the reader. I also leaned toward a methodology that might give voice to "subjugated knowledge" based on the theory and literature that emerged during my literature review (Foucault, 1980, p. 81). I began feeling compelled to tell my story, "a nagging need ... to tell some kind of truth" (Nash & Viray, 2013, p. 49).

In telling my story truthfully (i.e. if other readers trust my story), readers might find something in my story with which their own stories resonate, thus providing the universalizability required of SPN. Nash and Viray (2014) offered an apt reminder of Palmer's investigation of the etymology of the word *truth* as derived from the Germanic root word *troth*. Betrothal, then, is "an entering into a faithful and lasting relationship with persons. Thus, etymologically, truth, like teaching, is first and always relational: It aims mainly to secure trust and initiate a relationship with others" (Nash & Viray, 2014, p. 83). My circuitous journey

through, around, in, and potentially to, marriage created a truth/truth-seeking passage. SPN, I decided, would be a uniquely appropriate vehicle through which to evoke my own meanings of marriage and to engage with others' scholarship in order to determine how this new understanding might transform my communities and me.

The model of SPN that Nash and Bradley (2011) detailed, in simple form, consists of Pre-Search, Me-Search, Re-Search, and We-Search. These components are iterative parts of a process that begins within, Pre-Search and Me-Search and moves outward to Re-Search and We-Search and back again. Implicit in these four phases is the idea that knowledge and truth are personal and communal. SPN balances the individual with the general and, "universalizability is inevitable" (Nash & Viray, 2014, p. 112). Nash and Viray wrote that SPN should encompass the full range of a life and stories including pain, struggle, happiness, and hope.

Nash and Viray (2013) offered "Ten General Guidelines for Writing SPNs" and cautioned that these guidelines are evolving. I have used these guidelines as just that, tools and guides. I diverged from some of their recommendations and discussed why I made those decisions when I did. To summarize, the ten guidelines emphasize the narrative structure of the method such as theme, clarity, and good storytelling, and the importance of iteratively moving "from the particular to the general" and from "theory to the practice" (p. 54). In addition to creating a dialogue with the reader by moving between the personal and the universal, I explore my story as I employ the theory and literature.

The "perspective," a word Nash and Viray (2014) preferred to the more traditional "data," that comprise my SPN are my personal stories and memories. Analyses of my stories are woven throughout my SPN as I involved scholarly literature with critical self-analysis. Because I do not have much historical record as in personal journals, I have derived much of my story from my

memory, which I admit is not reliable as a record of linear detail. But historical detail is not the point. Rather, feelings and general experiences are more than sufficient for my exploration of what the sudden acquisition of marriage rights means to me currently against the background of a life lived without equal rights. Who am I, how have I constructed my life, and how will I reconstruct it at this momentous occasion?

I am a White mid-life lesbian from a working-class background, first-generation in higher education. My story will contain elements from all of those identities and more. However, I am also interested, when applicable, in engaging with the stories from literature of other lesbians who identify differently, primarily lesbians of color, other working-class lesbians, and mid-life and older lesbians. Their voices are rarely heard and though I would not presume to tell their stories, I will grapple with them in a sort of dialogue, in something like “the third discourse” (p.2) that Garber (2001) described. I believe more strongly now than ever that scholarship can be found in any story. Many overlooked voices throughout history have much to add to the communal discussion though they might not meet the traditional academic criteria of scholarship.

Nash and Viray (2014) wrote that personal narrative is inherently valid and generalizable, explaining: “Personal narrative writers understand that the word *theme* actually includes two words –‘the me’.... They know full well that ‘the me’ is an inseparable part of ‘the we’ and vice versa. Thus universality is inevitable” (p. 112). The question that Nash and academics wrangled with is: what is truth? Validity implies truth. What makes my SPN, my data or perspective valid? As Nash and Bradley (2007) stated, SPN researchers prefer the terms, “plausibility, honesty, and coherence” (p. 84) to validity. The SPN researcher is at first self-engaged and interrogates her own story and what she holds to be true. What is true today may not be what

was true prior. The process of questioning and writing itself should invigorate the research with new meaning and understanding. Whether or not the researcher's views are reliable and whether they cohere to the driving theme ultimately lie with both the researcher and the reader.

The researcher always approaches her quest for truth from the biases, structure, and constraints of her training and influences. Where Angelou, as cited by Nash and Viray (2014) believed researchers find truth in a narrative within the “emotional power of the story we construct” (p. 110). However Nash was not entirely sure and wondered “when is the story I am telling ... a lie” (p. 110)? When does emotion cloud the facts? How does SPN writing avoid telling just one side of the story? Nash and Bradley (2011) and Nash and Viray (2013, 2014) insisted that to do SPN correctly, one must continuously move from the personal to social, internal to external, from the me-search to the we-search. Along the way, the SPN writer must visit the re-search, the scholarly literature. Thus, the SPN becomes, not just personal, but includes scholarship, analysis of self and other voices. The reader ultimately determines whatever truth emerges from an SPN (Nash & Viray, 2014). Does the story ring true? The SPN writer is never simply telling her insular story but iteratively revisiting its generalizability or “universalizability,” and the scholarship that helps expound the story.

SPN is subjective and aims to find universalizability and credibility through investigation and analysis of the “inner life of the writer” (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 83) rather than through testing to discover truth. Nash and Bradley stated, “...the subject *gives meaning to* (rather than simply *receives*) what is observed” (p. 83). They asserted that the reader of the SPN primarily determines the SPN's success and universalizability. Does the authentic, honest SPN make the reader feel? Does the SPN touch the reader in a way that makes the reader understand the “common existential themes that underlie these [human] differences and touch all human lives”

(p. 84)? The theme in an SPN is similar to the hypothesis in more quantitative research. The me-search in an SPN should all connect to the main theme and, most important, “illustrate, enlarge, and enrich” as well as “cohere” (p. 85) to the theme.

SPN, in contrast to a more traditional qualitative research project, engages the literature by embedding references within the narrative to illustrate scholarly relevance to the text. Nash and Bradley (2011) called this a “*lit embed*” as opposed to a typical, chapter two, “*lit review*” (p. 85). Embedding the literature “*ad hoc* throughout the writing,” Nash and Bradley asserted, make the references “illustrative, timely, and coherent” (p. 85) and thus expand the “thematic motifs of the writing” (p. 85).

The ethic of confidentiality is the one area where I will diverge slightly from what Nash and Bradley (2011) advised. Because an SPN is a personal story and thus about my life, I am the primary human subject of the research. However, my life is inextricably connected to other lives and in order to tell my story I must tell part of their story as well, from my point of view (POV). Nash and Bradley (2011) explicitly stated and entreated SPN writers to “tell the truth” and cautioned “sometimes, telling one’s truth in an authentic manner can harm others” (p. 189). My story of intimate relationships and marriage will necessarily include stories of past and present intimate and familial relationships. While I take Nash and Bradley’s (2011) advice that SPN is non-fiction rather than fiction very seriously, I am reticent to name names and would rather hue to a more traditional method of talking about other people using pseudonyms, creating composite characters, and blurring details when details would serve as identifiers. Characters such as my immediate family will be obvious, but I will insist on Nash and Bradley’s (2011) as well as others’ admonition not to cause harm to others and to avoid telling someone else’s story. My goal has been that my story not devolve into a tell-all, get-even story, but rather only serve the

point of bolstering the primary theme, the “through-line” about my inquiry of marriage and the ethics of commitment. On the other hand, I have been scrupulous regarding sharing what I believe my truth to be. I will not presume to know another’s truth.

Nash and Bradley (2011) determined there are no ethical absolutes, but that ultimately the researcher, the SPN writer might need to make a judgment call. The question they posed is, “Is the harm that I could conceivably do to others worth the benefits I might reap from being true to myself” (p. 193)? In almost every case, I would answer no. Finally, as Nash and Bradley (2011) stated, readers will be the “final arbiters regarding what is truth in your writing and what is a lie” (p. 196). However, I, as the SPN writer have discerned the ethical quandaries and their determinations.

Literature that I considered for this study about lesbian identity spans lesbian feminist theories, post structuralist queer theory, and what some refer to as post-queer thinking. Garber (2001) placed lesbian feminist poetics historically prior to queer theory in discussing their similarities and queer theory’s debts to lesbian feminism. Meeks and Stein (2012) suggested a “post-queer politics of gay and lesbian marriage” (p. 140) go beyond the binary debates between queer and feminist theories to get to an understanding that is more complete and less contentious. In addition to these theoretical lenses, I used Symbolic Interactionist (Charon, 2006) and social constructionist frameworks. These intertwining theories and frameworks informed my review of my identities, relationships, and communities against the expansion of marriage rights and helped me understand my development of my ethics of commitment. Hoagland (1988) grounded my move toward an ethics developed under oppression but seeking to move away from oppressive and draining influences. Young’s (1994) reconsideration of Sarte’s concept of “serial

collectivity” informed both my discussion of essentiality vs. constructionism and helped explain how SPN or a specific narrative can be universalized to a broader population.

I have deeply explored my story regarding marriage and relationships using SPN, a methodology that implies and expects personal truth telling and engagement with the body of scholarship from a narrative analytical perspective. My long, sometimes-joyful, sometimes-painful, interaction with my own quest for identity, community, and relationship contains lessons learned, lessons missed, from the not often heard perspective of a mid-life lesbian. Using the vigor of SPN and my intertextual (Garber, 2001) discourse with other less heard voices from the literature, I hope to provide a different view. In addition I want to encourage others to add their unique stories and thoughtful perspectives to mine.

LGBTQI people have lived lifetimes as second-class citizens. I acknowledge that the acronym, the umbrella term, conceals the diversity within. Some LGBTQI have lived better than others despite their second-class citizenry. All, however, have lived as outlaws, outside, in the borders of full citizenry. Regardless of how one feels about marriage, the fact that we are now attaining equality in marriage is historic and symbolic. My study helps to fill one small gap in the literature about how the expansion of freedom might transform our relationships and our communities and note this remarkable moment in our history. How I constructed my ethics of commitment and its importance to my creation of communities and families of choice has implications, not just for other lesbians and same-sex couples, but also for a broader community.

Pre-search

Pre-search is the beginning stage of an SPN and represents the impetus for my research, my question, and my motivation for wanting to know more about my topic (Nash, 2004; Nash & Bradley 2011; Nash & Viray, 2014, 2015). In this stage, I was inspired to go further with the

topic, to dedicate my time and energy to explore, focus, explicate, and revisit my theme and my through-line. The pre-search phase comprised the cogitation and percolation stage needed to frame my question and uncover the themes I wanted to pursue. What follows is a compact description of what led me to question the impact of same-sex marriage on lesbians.

Anti-marriage expansion groups' largely successful attempts to define marriage in a way that excluded same-sex couples countered the expansion of marriage rights in the United States, starting in Massachusetts. The expansion did not yet include me where I lived. Minnesota passed legislation in 2013 granting marriage rights to same-sex couples in response to an attempted constitutional amendment defining marriage as only between one man and one woman. Though I had friends who had started to marry in other states, I was still one of those who could not believe this was happening "in my lifetime."

I have lived as an open, mostly out, lesbian since I was 22 years of age. For 37 years I have lived and loved outside the boundaries and rules of civil society. In considering marriage as a civil, legal, and ubiquitous institution, I pondered what and how my identity, my relationships, my community, large and small, would change with the acquisition of marriage. I had not thought much about marriage until this research. I lived without any hope or fear of ever having to decide whether to marry or whom to marry. When one deals with exclusion to the degree society treats LGB people regarding marriage, I learned to stop thinking about it. Such is the nature of adaptation to the constraints of life.

As I began investigating, I revisited feminist, socialist, and queer theories and their quarrels with marriage as an institution. These quarrels led me to this research and to my own story, my Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) about marriage and marriage's meaning to my relational, cultural, and community identities. This SPN dissertation research seeks to explore

these meanings and their universalizability based on my own relational experience and the analysis of my experience based on existing research and theory.

Why is this important? First, my self-exploration has the potential to enlighten and to help me answer my own questions about relationships, my place in community, and marriage, and my options to participate or not. As Nash and Viray (2014) pointed out,

Scholars need to stop the “depersonalizing trend” in research that results in massive collections of so-called “objective data” regarding the “other” but nothing at all about the “self” who is collecting the data. A scholar who writes as an act of personal witness attempts to “desegregate the boundaries between the self and the other.” (p. 5)

More important than my own enlightenment, through my story I have the opportunity to share with others what I have learned and not learned. I have the opportunity through my self-explication to give back to others and the community with whom I have constructed my life and participated in theirs. I have tried to write “vulnerably” (Nash & Viray, 2014, p. 5) in order to both acknowledge my place, my bias, and my perspective, to analyze and mine my story for meaning using research, and to share my story in hopes that my narrative might have meaning for someone else. In addition, my story will help document a person, a time, marriage rights as a transformative event, and their impact on a community, its individuals, and their relationships.

My story has the potential to stimulate and facilitate others’ story telling. Our stories are what connect us to one another. We make meaning based on our own understandings of experience, along with others’ similar meaning making. “A powerful story, when shared with others, serves as both a catalyst and a vehicle to accomplish the purpose or life lesson embedded within the story” (Noonan & Fish, 2007, p. 6). As Nash and Viray (2014) elaborated, “an academic discipline is really a particular group’s storied view of the world, and the story changes often” (p. 30). My story of identity, community, relationship, and commitment, like others’ stories, cannot help but be universalizable (Nash & Viray, 2013). We are all part of the same

universe. Our stories intersect one another and are constructed together. Story is our connective tissue.

Me-search

In the me-search stage of my SPN, I have utilized themes of my life story helping to drive my story forward and to make sense of its trajectory, its narrative arc. The primary themes involved in my investigation of marriage are identity, community, and relationship. How might these fundamental aspects of my life, change with legal marriage?

The me-search stage of SPN should include all the elements of a good story. I considered several key relationships, turning points in my life and relationships, events that critically changed me, hard-won insights along with ongoing worries and conflicts. Like a good story, the ending, the finale will tie some things up and leave others unfinished. I broke the me-search into three chapters by my major themes of identity, community, and relationship. I wove tales of marriage throughout these stories and applied analysis using theory and relevant literature throughout and in summary sections.

Re-search

I began this search expecting to find few studies but instead found many current, scholarly articles and dissertations about same-sex marriage perhaps due to the timeliness of the topic. In addition, as I investigated, wrote, and engaged with the material, I discovered further relevant literature. I chose my literature and focused my story based on the three primary themes in my question: identity, community, and relationship. As I wrote my SPN, I continually revisited the literature, adding what felt more relevant and challenged me, and dropping what did not.

The re-search, as Nash and Viray (2013) explained is the iterative process of searching for information. The research of an SPN includes the existing scholarship that should be embedded throughout the me-search and the we-search. As Nash and Viray (2013) stated, “The SPN writer’s story is always the primary source of scholarship” (p. 93). I adhered to Nash and Bradley’s (2011) SPN guidelines that called for embedding the literature “*within*, and *throughout*” as “an insertion of previous thinkers’ ideas that emerges organically within the flow of the text itself” (p. 85).

We-search

Nash insisted that an SPN should be universalizable, that is, meaningful for a larger group; thus the we-search of SPN is a requirement. My story, while it has my own unique versions and perspectives of events, also includes universal themes. Many in the LGBTQ community have grappled with the themes of identity, community, and relationship and perhaps no more vigorously than since same-sex marriage started being debated. I was drawn to tell my story after hearing others’ stories and seeing their own enactments of marriage. I believe this story in its universal form, has a long way to go to reach its denouement. My story’s end is likely closer and has the potential to inform others who are investigating like themes. At least, my story might help others in my LGBTQ cohort know that they are not alone.

I was watching a television program recently about the National Mall in Washington D.C. and all the communal groups that have congregated there for different important, historical, moments. One of those events was the 1993 Third March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights. Organizers estimated the march drew from 800,000 to 1,000,000. My partner, Han, and I, with an old friend of Han’s, Sparky, from Texas, all drove together to D.C. from Minnesota. As we got closer to D.C., we began seeing other cars from other distant locations west of the

nation's capitol. Because our cars or our persons all sported rainbow flags and other lesbian and gay symbols, we recognized one another when we passed on the highways. We honked and yelled and waved in a mounting community gaiety. By the time we all converged on the city, the air felt like it was sparkling. It seemed as if we had peacefully taken over the city as we burst into song on the Metro rails. I venture none of us had ever been with that many other people who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. Though I was White and had grown up in an all White neighborhood, I had never felt as much like a majority and the safety that comes with that as I did that weekend with all of the relative diversity of my LGBTQ community.

The television program also reported one of the main events at the 1987 March had been the unveiling of the AIDS quilt, which commemorated victims of HIV/AIDS. I had seen just a portion of the AIDS quilt at the 1993 March. By 1996 the quilt covered the entire National Mall ("The Aids Memorial Quilt", n.d.). I remembered how powerful seeing the quilt had been. Each quilt was made of eight individual panels and each panel commemorated one individual who had died of AIDS. Each panel represented one individual life, composed of numerous stories, related to others' stories. Seeing the quilt as a whole, even a partial of the whole, was one of the most powerful moments of community I have ever experienced. Hearing the roll call of each individual name that accompanied the viewing of the quilt was a striking example of how the personal has meaning for and can change the universal.

Our stories are all interconnected, as are our identities, which relationally constitute our communities, a grand 3-D Venn diagram intersecting other 3-D Venn diagrams. I agree with Nash et al. who assert that all stories are universalizable. For example, as I remember, analyze, and share my experiences growing up in a specific time, place, and culture, I invite readers to

identify their own experiences through mine. I approach this methodology with an a priori belief that we are more alike than we are different but also believe that our differences must be expressed to be useful. As Phelan (1994) noted, “There is nothing wrong with thinking about difference, but without the imperative of specificity it can too easily become a vague pluralism or fastidious deconstruction” (p. 9). Generalizability or universalizability is not helpful if seen as a unitary entity instead of a multifaceted prism. Though we, especially in the Western tradition, tout our individualism and its importance, most important are our borders, where we intersect. These dialectics of blurred borders are what matter and what move us forward, not the binary oppositions that we so easily settle into. My story has intersected many others in my lifetime, and I have learned many lessons that have universal applicability.

Conclusion

My story of a life lived as a lesbian spans decades during which LGBTQI people have been denied access to full citizenship in more ways than just marriage equality. My intersecting stories, their ups and downs, will provide a look at how it has been to live a life constructed as an onlooker, shaped by and rejected by what is considered “normal.” Marriage provided a thematic structure within which to tell my narrative. Through beginning to examine marriage and its meaning in my life, I uncovered the larger, overarching question of how I came to develop an ethics of commitment and what that means for creating communities of choice. By sharing my story, I hope to help open up the space for other LGBTQI to add their voices to mine.

How can an individual story, an SPN, reveal lessons/meanings about a constructed "class" or category? How can my story enlighten anyone beyond myself? How might my specificity be made universal or general? I will assert that individuals, though self-constructed through interaction with others in community, family, and affinity groups, also include a

beginning, an essence, and some uniqueness that provides a starting point. Communities are constructed via group affiliation based on individuals' fluid identity constructions. Communities and groups are composed of individuals with something, more or less, in common. These constructed "classes" usually represent one specific aspect around which the individual members join for safety, camaraderie, and to advance communally chosen causes and desires. An SPN can reveal meaning about the individual members of these classes, and also about the individual points of intersection along which these classes are constructed.

Several aspects of SPN writing appealed to me when I first learned of SPN. I believe as Nash and Viray (2014) have passionately argued that there is a place for SPN, for both "thinking *and* feeling," for " 'heads' and 'hearts'" (p. 13) in scholarship and the academy. I also believe resolutely that we all have access to an individual knowledge, a perspective, that when interrogated, connects us to ourselves and to the "we" in Nash and Bradley's (2011) "we-search." The self-exploration of an SPN can serve to put one closer to original data than other methodologies. These are some of the reasons I chose SPN to reveal through my quest for identity, community, relationship, a human quest for an ethics of commitment through marriage, communities of choice, and love. How we learn to live ethical lives together is central to this quest.

CHAPTER THREE: IDENTITY MATTERS

Where does the need come from, the inner push to walk into change, if we are women who, by skin color, ethnicity, birth culture, are in a position of material advantage where we gain at the expense of others, of other women? A place where we can have a degree of safety, comfort, familiarity, just by staying put. Where is our need to change what we were born into? What do we have to gain? (Pratt, 2013, Chapter 28, para. 13)

I began my SPN study by investigating how expansion of marriage rights to same-sex couples might transform lesbian identity, relationships, and community; specifically, how do my experiences, my stories, my 40-year-or-so-long life as an adult lesbian illuminate this inquiry. A different topic arose within the study that became a consideration of the ethics of commitment and its role in building communities and families of choice. When I began this study, I knew little about identity, relationship, or community studies. I knew little about symbolic interactionism and how it might help me make sense of my understanding of my background and identity development. This exploration has helped me explain some of where I come from and what made me. Through my exploration of the ways in which identity, relationship, and community intersect with self, I hope to add some nugget that illuminates a communal story about commitment, community, and family.

Though I have touted my lesbian identity for decades now, I had not thought much about how I chose to identify myself. I have grappled with elements of what I thought the word “lesbian” meant and how I was to behave as a lesbian. But before I claimed the name and the identity of lesbian, I had been labeled a White tomboy girl, a Texan, a Southern Baptist, among other markers of identity. I had not learned to locate myself in a class position though I can now see that we were working-lower middle class. I had also not learned to identify my essential sexuality and would not until I left home. Marriage was not something we questioned, just something that everyone seemed to do.

Despite my postmodern distaste for labels and essentialist categories and my belief in the fluidity and malleability of these categories, I also believe they matter. It might be more accurate to say instead that they still matter. Young (1994) used Sartre's concept of "serial collectivity" to describe how one could think about a category of gender, specifically woman, as neither an essential nor entirely a group and so avoid the conflict between essentialist arguments and non-essentialist, or constructivist arguments of identity. Young wrote,

Woman is a serial collective defined neither by common identity nor by a common set of attributes that all the individuals in the series share, but, rather, it names a set of structural constraints and relations to practio-inert objects that condition action and its meaning. (p. 737)

Applying this idea to the *lesbian* category helps explain my own conflict between what felt like my essential sexuality and subsequent construction of my lesbianism. This concept might also be used for any other identity category, like race, class, or sexuality suffering from the inherent difficulties of non-recognition of difference within the category. Attending to this apparent conflict also helps to explain how my personal story, my me-search, has relevance to a larger group or community.

This chapter begins my personal investigation of my identity, especially as it relates to my sexuality, my intimate relationships, my community, and my understanding of marriage. Having now lived a lifetime excluded from marriage, how might my identity change with the expansion of marriage? How did my early life influence my relationship with marriage? Most relevant to my emergent query and my findings, is how I came to develop an ethics of commitment and how that informed my creation of a community and family of choice.

Essential Sexuality

I have worn, sometimes paraded, proudly flaunted, and proclaimed my lesbian identity for 37 years or so, since I "came out" in my early twenties. My coming out narrative is eerily

similar to what Ponse (1978) called the “gay trajectory” (p. 124). Ponse’s description was notably about women from a southern United States city, in the mid-1970s, just as I was.

The first element is that the individual has a subjective sense of being different from heterosexual persons and identifies this difference as feelings of sexual-emotional attraction to her own sex. Second, an understanding of the homosexual or lesbian significance of these feelings is acquired. Third, the individual accepts these feelings and their implication for identity—that is, the individual comes out or accepts the identity of lesbian. Fourth, the individual seeks a community of like persons. Fifth, the individual becomes involved in a sexual-emotional lesbian relationship. Given one of these elements, irrespective of their order in time, it is commonly assumed in the lesbian world that the others will logically come to pass. (p. 125)

For me, all of these things came to pass in just about the same order as Ponse reported.

However, my actual sexual experience with another girl in high school came before my understanding or even knowledge of what the word “lesbian” meant. Several years passed during which I experienced my first same-sex experience, my second same-sex experience after high school, and later same-sex experiences in the Army before I finally “came out.” My coming out story was like the coming out story Stein (1997) described where for some women, “coming out meant ‘coming home,’ welcoming the desires they had long affirmed in secret” (p. 63). Like those women I experienced a “subjective sense of being different early in life” (p. 63).

Interspersed between my early same-sex experiences were a few hopeful but unfulfilling different-sex experiments. While I was involved with the last man I was sexual with, I “came out to myself,” as I put it back then. I admitted to myself that I was a “lesbian” not bisexual, as I was identifying up to that point. Bisexuality, for me, had been a sort of safe, middle ground between normalcy and the frightening island of Sappho’s Lesbos.

At that point, I would never have described my identity as anything I had constructed, as I felt my sexuality as something intrinsic. When I later met women in “the community” who had chosen to become lesbians for political reasons, I never really got it. I always harbored a secret

doubt about the “truth” of their lesbianism. I could never have imagined what I felt so intensely to have been a choice.

I have been fascinated and to a point persuaded as I have read and learned about queer theory, social constructivism and symbolic interactionism; that gender and sexuality should be thought of as social constructs rather than biological or essential characteristics. However, it is not insignificant that most people do not live in academia. They, like I, have not thought about their lives and identities in the way that queer theorists and constructivists describe them. But as Young (1994) showed, a feeling of an essential quality does not need to preclude membership in a group, or in Sarte’s concept, a series. The idea of a series is a fluid location rather than the static construction a group describes. Calling myself a lesbian meant that I found rather than constructed an identity, a place, and a community where I could learn to accept and be who I was.

I have certainly grown older and hopefully a little wiser through this study. I have learned that I have been so far behind the times, academically and theoretically, that most of the queer theoretical writing as was the lesbian writing that countered it, was written in the 1990s, ten to twenty years ago now. There are already, progressively in my view, challenges to queer theoretical writing that presage a “post-queer” period of further intersectional analysis. Though I appreciate the postmodern emphasis of queer theory and the attempts to appropriately blur and dislocate gender and sexuality, I believe the complete erasure of those lines in practice goes too far.

Queer, has become a new generic and umbrella identity, which is significant because of queer theory’s anti-identity impetus. Within this new non-identity, presumed by many to be male, gender categories and disparities have been subsumed. Many who still claim an identity,

identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Queer, for many non-academics and many in my age group, has retained its meaning as a slur. The term and the theory, ironically, do not seem to have much traction except with the academic elite and younger people than I.

The important “subjugated knowledges” that Foucault (1980, p. 81) understood as “those blocs of historical knowledge which were present but disguised within the body of functionalist and systematising theory,” now appear subjugated by those queer theorists who have sought to liberate them. However, Butler (2011), in her early and foundational explication of the reclamation of the term “queer” and its politics understood and expressed the contradiction,

It is in this sense that the temporary totalization performed by identity categories is a necessary error. And if identity is a necessary error, then the assertion of “queer” will be necessary as a term of affiliation, but it will not fully describe those it purports to represent. As a result, it will be necessary to affirm the contingency of the term: to let it be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it, to let it take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a very different set of investments. (p. 175)

Those whose lives are actually affected by the expansion of marriage rights are likely some of those who “are excluded by the term [queer] but who justifiably expect representation by it.” As with Young’s (1994) use of seriality to describe “woman,” Butler correctly anticipated the eventual extension and limits of the categorical term while utilizing “queer” then to extend the gay and lesbian liberation politics of the past. The main point is that the category or purposeful group affiliation need not disqualify distinctions of identity and essentiality within the serial collectivity. The specific can be made general or universalizable for the purposes of meaningful action and connection.

The expansion of marriage rights to same-sex couples, which started in 2003 in Massachusetts in the United States, has brought about resurgence in queer and feminist theoretical arguments against marriage in general. On the other side are those lesbians and gay

men and women, who similar to me prior to beginning this study have celebrated the stunning symbolism of the accomplishment of marriage rights. We have, it seems, fought for our entire adult lives to be included and to have the same rights as other full citizens. Most of us who came of age in the baby boom generation, never believed we would see a day when we could marry. The wonder of this legal change happening reminds me of when my family and I sat around our big Magnavox television and watched with awe as Neil Armstrong walked on the Moon, except that the marriage rights expansion is more personal and has far greater societal implications.

Historical and Cultural References

I was born in 1955, in Houston, Texas, in the bulge of the Baby Boom generation. The period between my birth and my graduation from high school in 1973 saw the introduction of:

- a prominent lesbian organization called Daughters of Bilitis (DOB)
- Foster's (1956) publication of her study *Sex Variant Women in Literature*
- DOB's publication of *The Ladder* that would continue until the 1970s, "Lesbian pulp" fiction
- Adrienne Rich's first publication
- First regular picketing of the White House in 1964 by the gay organization
- The Mattachine Society, publication of Jane Rule's (1964) lesbian romance novel with a happy ending, *Desert of the Heart*
- The founding of the Gay Women's Liberation Group in California
- Several other influential lesbian and feminist literary works
- The founding of the first Women's Book Store in the U.S., A Woman's Place, in Oakland, CA
- The founding of Naiad Press "which gradually becomes the largest and most successful lesbian press in the world" (Miller, xxiii).

I do not remember knowing about *any* of this lesbian activity while I was growing up. I would not know any of it until I had "come out" at age 22 and moved to Oakland, California. If I was influenced by the apparent birth of lesbian organizing and literature, the influence was quite subversive and subliminal, very improbable if not impossible. The environment in which I grew up did not allow for any seepage of lesbian sway of which I was ever aware. I would not

even know the L word, “lesbian,” until *after* my first sexual and emotional experience when I tried to start finding words in the library with which to identify my emergent sexuality.

My Traditional Family

I grew up in a typical, United States (US) family organization composed of one woman, one man, a girl child, and a boy child. My family construct, like most of those surrounding us in our working and middle-class neighborhood, as Coontz (2006) historicized, “was the culmination of a package of ideals about personal life and male-female relations that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century and gradually became the norm across Western Europe and North America” (p. 8). Though many believe marriage to be the bedrock of our society, Coontz’s report found, in fact, that marriage has been in continuous crisis since its inception. Just as people finally reached with marriage “the perfect balance between individual desires and social stability” (p. 8), those people who believed in the steadfastness of the 1950s and 1960s marriages were “standing in the eye of a hurricane” (p. 8). Surely, my family of 1955 was one of these.

Parents. My parents married in 1953, and reflected the trend of American women marrying at a younger age than at any time in the previous 50 years; my mother was only 20 years old when she married. My parents’ marriage also reflected the general trend that saw people being married for longer periods of time than ever before (Coontz, 2007). My mother, like most of the other young women of her era, might well have taken to heart that, “an unmarried woman as young as twenty-one might worry that she would end up an 'old maid' ” (Coontz, 2006, p. 226). By the 1960s, 95% of all people in North America and Western Europe were married.

I am not surprised at all, after reading these statistics that my mother spoke of her feelings about marriage as she did. Coupled with her fundamentalist religious beliefs, which likely supported this previously unheard of societal craze for marriage and babies, my mother believed marriage was something that happened only once and lasted for a lifetime. When I was growing up, I remember people talking disparagingly of the few unmarried women as “old maids” or “spinsters.” In contrast to my mother, these negative words and images did not have their intended negative influence on me. Coontz (2006) summarized the golden age of marriage as, “the climax of almost two hundred years of continuous tinkering with the male protector love-based marital model... culminated in the 1950s in the short-lived pattern that people have since come to think of as traditional marriage” (p. 228). Though my parents’ marriage had not been especially happy, from my retrospective view, my mother was devastated when my father divorced her 25 years after they said, “I do.”

My mother likely experienced her marriage very differently than my father did and what I remember from my child’s perspective. From my perspective, for those 25 years and many years after, a large part of my mother’s identity was tied up in her being a wife, even more so than a mother. She told me more than once that, according to her bible and Southern Baptist beliefs, her first duty was to her husband, even over her duty to children. When I was a very, young girl I remember telling my mother that I would never marry. My mother, only 20 years older than I was, laughed and responded, “Oh, you’ll change your mind someday when the right *man* comes along.” Her qualifying clause might have been, “when you fall in love” or “when you grow up” though I remember her statement as being unambiguously gender specific. There seemed to be no question in my mother’s mind about whether my marriage partner would be male or not. From my perspective now, through a feminist-informed filter, my mother’s worldview and

experience did not allow for any variance from her White and heterosexual heteronormative performative as wife. I state my own impressions of my mother, however, with admitted caution and the realization that I did/do not know my mother's desires and motivations, any better than she knew/knows mine.

Coontz (2006) found women of my mother's generation believed in and presumed marriage, and were encouraged to marry at unprecedented rates. Of course there were economic factors at play as well. As Bernstein and Taylor (2013) stated, even today, "the tax structure and the benefits of the welfare state (including social security) continue to privilege economically heteronormative family structures where one partner works and the other stays at home" (p. 10). My mother, perhaps, did not see herself as having many other choices. My auntie, just about a year older than my mother, has said more than once that she wished she could have gone to college, and to art school. Instead she, like my mother, married and had children.

As I told my mother, I do not remember marriage as ever being one of my aspirations. For most of my life I, like my mother, never thought of marriage as anything other than a relationship between a man and a woman. There were no other kinds of marriages. As sure as my mother was that someday I would change my mind, I knew early on I was not interested in married life, at least as I had seen it modeled to date. Since then, I have wondered why I felt not just ambivalent about marriage but against marriage for myself. Was it because, even in my youth, I saw that the institution did not include my own objects of desire? Or was it that I did not see, in my parents' marriage, or anyone else's marriages for that matter, anything I wanted to emulate?

Following a constructionist view and many religious conservative views of the "causes" of homosexuality, one could surmise that the difficulties of my parents' marriage and my

difficulties with my father and mother might have caused me to feel aversion to boys and men and following that, an aversion to marriage. I have long argued against that belief. If unhappy marriages, troubled fathers, and emotionally distant mothers were the cause of my lesbianism, I have asserted, there would be a lot more lesbians and a lot fewer marriages. Social constructionist theories coupled with what have been called "essentialist," deterministic theories have affirmed my own self-constructed belief that what some call the "causes" of my lesbianism are not as simple as just parental flaws and family troubles.

My parents modeled a marriage for me that was probably very similar to many marriages, then and now. They married young, had children young, and did the best they could, given their own family histories and interactions. Mother acknowledged to me just a couple of years ago that one of her considerations in choosing my father was that he would make her a better Christian. My mother had joined or converted to the Southern Baptist church after a religious experience and was full of the "spirit." My father, whose parents had reared him as a Southern Baptist seemed like a good match to her, to help her become who she wanted to be, the identity she herself was constructing and negotiating.

I wonder why my mother felt that she needed "saving" or needed to marry my father to keep her on the "straight and narrow?" Did my mother ever struggle with her own feelings of lust and love? My mother described herself growing up with her own rebellious nature. For her, one of the things that meant was choosing a religion that was different from the one in which she had been raised. To me, the differences between one Protestant, fundamentalist religion and another seem practically non-existent. But, apparently to my mother, via her religious conversion, the differences were significant, and signifying for her own identity construction.

My mother's marriage to my father might have seemed like some sort of governance on her feelings as she signed on fully to the cultural norm of the "male breadwinner" (Coontz, 2006, p. 154) model that became predominant in the golden age of my parents' marriage. Despite the "male breadwinner" model she aspired to, my mother would eventually need to work outside the home both during and after her marriage. However, my mother took being a housewife seriously, a trait that, much to all of my partners' dismay I did not inherit. Instead, I developed a physical anxiety to the sound of the vacuum cleaner and frenetic straightening or "Cleaning up" of my early years.

The vacuum cleaner seemed to be my mother's best friend and cleaning her primary coping mechanism to our increasingly more chaotic family life. One of my friends in high school commented once that every time she came to visit me, which was frequently, my mother was vacuuming. My mother tried very hard to have the perfect marriage she had been promised by society she should have and seemed to want. However, she became one of the victims of the breakdown of "traditional marriage" (Coontz, 2006, p. 228). She, like many others then and now, experienced disequilibrium, when "the inherent instability of the love-based marriage reasserted itself" (p. 228).

If I had become what my parents, my grandparents, and community modeled for me I might certainly have become a heterosexual, racist, Southern Baptist, Republican, Texan, young wife, mother, and potentially angry parent. I have tried hard to shed what I have considered to be the legacy of my upbringing. From an early age, I began trying out different personas, often inspired by books and movies. Despite my disinterest in marriage, I did absorb the ideals about love and romance that were portrayed on television, in movies, and in the books I read and to which I was drawn.

I longed to not be a Southerner because Southerners were portrayed as “dumb hicks” on television. I wanted to be a Jewish girl from the Bronx, like Barbra Streisand, and could sing verbatim every line from *Funny Girl*. “Sadie, Sadie, married lady” I sang, as I imagined my own, less male, romantic version of Nicky Arnstein. Still, it was not the idea of marriage that I was especially drawn to, but the thrill of the romance. In a bit of gender bending prescience, I could and did imagine myself playing either role, Fanny Brice or Nicky Arnstein. My parents at some point started telling me I sounded like a “damn Yankee” presumably due to my success at reconstructing my Texan accent.

My parents modeled a traditional, heterosexual, heteronormative marriage. I am not sure, but odds are that my little boyfriend’s family model, the one who wanted to marry two girls and put us all into one big wedding dress, resembled mine in its construct. Nevertheless, we were imaginative and were making different inventive choices about what our future lives and relationships might be, even as children. We had probably already begun to learn, however, that what a family comprised was a mother who was female, a father who was male, and any number of other boys/brothers and girls/sisters. We knew nothing else. We had no other models in the 1960s and 1970s, not where I lived. Girls grew up and became women who married men and had children. Everyone in our neighborhood and families and churches had always done exactly this. The deviations from the norm were hidden or gone and I would not know about them, until much later when I began to realize I was deviant.

My father, following the model of his own father, could unleash a horrible temper on my brother and me via the discipline of “spanking” if we talked back or were disrespectful in his eyes. My auntie has told me several times how sorry she is for not intervening back then but at that time and place, intervention may not have done any good anyway. I spent many years angry

with my dad. I learned to forgive him only a decade ago but it was not easy. My ex-partner, Cris, who was a staunch Catholic if not a "good" one, suggested that he might deserve a little forgiveness, that perhaps he had his own story. Though it has turned out to be similarly difficult for me to forgive Cris, I believe that she was right about my dad. He was doing what he knew to do, as we all do. As with me, he needed to leave home to grow, to experience his own sort of coming out and healing.

Our family, due to all of this dysfunction, was not close, not as I have come to believe a family could be. We had so many constrictions, culturally and self-imposed, that I do not think we had the freedom, ironically, to be close. We tried and had many happy moments along with the hard. My mother, the queen of denial, could also be very silly and funny. I absorbed both of those characteristics from her. My father, who could also be funny and ironically more progressive, felt trapped, I am guessing, sought refuge in work and elsewhere, and was what I later called abusive, in his attempts to discipline my brother and me; less abusive I have realized than his father was to him and his brother. It took me many years of pain, conflict, resignation, and finally recognition of myself in them, to realize, that both of my parents were doing the best they knew how.

After my father stopped disciplining me physically, we began fighting, at the dinner table, every night, about everything. The more I felt different, unheard, and unseen, the more rebellious and angry I became. My response, while still living with my family, was to become more and more absent. As I matured into adolescence, amidst the political furor of the external world of the 1970s, and attempted to fashion an identity that felt true, I withdrew more and more. I suppose I thought this was somewhat natural at the time, but after I left home and met other people and other families, I saw that our family did not need to be as it was.

My parents, brother, and I seemed to be isolated individuals just trying to survive our own individual little hells. Now I understand that we were constructing these realities through our interactions with one another (Charon, 2007). What came first, my sexuality or my suspicion of family and marriage? How did one interact with the other in their creation? What role did gender, as I saw it enacted in my family, play in my own identity construction?

Little brother. My brother and I fought from a young age and from what I remember modeled what I thought then was a typical sibling rivalry. I wondered since then whether “sibling rivalry” was a designation, a psychological signification of the era, used to explain the symptoms of an unhappy family. After my brother failed first grade, educational administrators evaluated him as having a very slight learning disability. My parents attained some psychiatric analysis and eventually placed my brother in a special school. He came home from school and bemoaned that all the other kids at the school were, in his words, “retarded.” The special school seemed to help my brother learn some adaptive techniques, but he struggled with grades and school performance throughout his growing up. In spite of my brother's school difficulties, he has been successful in his career and raising his two daughters. I have sometimes wondered, jealously or resentfully, why my brother seems to have had it so much easier than I. But I do not know what his life struggles have been, as he does not know mine. We have each had our own set of obstacles to surmount.

I loved and always did well in school, until reaching high school when my performance took a dive. However, I remember feeling very defensive and protective about my brother when he was young, despite our rivalry. I learned to hate the word “retarded” though even for then, the word was not really an accurate description about my brother’s learning disabilities, probably dyslexia. I began to learn the pain that accompanied being different, in being set apart from the

rest of the kids. Early on, I became an advocate for the underdog and felt an affinity with the “other” though I had not yet identified myself as such.

My brother and I never learned to communicate with one another, and I never remember feeling like an authentic being with any of my family. We did not seem to have the skills to pull off honesty and authenticity, though my father’s mantra to us, ironically, was “always be honest with yourself.” Later I would understand my father’s command, not just as a belief in the virtue of honesty, but as something he was unable to successfully achieve, at least while my brother and I were growing up. The inability to communicate with one another, to be authentic carried into adulthood and, eventually, would cause the complete undoing of our relationship.

Grandparents. Coontz (2006) cited Elaine Tyler May who theorized that "Americans adopted a domestic version of ... the 1950s containment policy toward the Soviet Union which involved forgoing any direct attempts to topple the USSR but aggressively combating any efforts to spread communist institutions or ideas" (p. 211). The domestic version of the containment policy, which Coontz believed started in the 1920s, tolerated "sexual expression and the pursuit of individual happiness before and during marriage" but policies were instituted to direct those pursuits into the institution of marriage and to preclude alternatives to marriage. My grandparents' 1930s marriages represented Coontz' domestic version of the containment policy and anticipated my parents' golden age of marriage.

Both sets of my grandparents had married in their twenties. My maternal grandparents had two girls and my paternal grandparents had two boys. In their families, my grandfathers worked outside the home while my grandmothers worked at home, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the kids. Both sets of my grandparents were married to the same people for their entire adult lives.

Both my Granddaddy Grymes and Grandma Grymes claimed to have “Indian” blood and I clung to that claim as some sort of proof of my difference and part of my identity. My maternal grandmother Nan’s tales and pictures of being taken care of by a Black nanny thrilled me. Years later I believed that I surely had some other kind of racial mix to my blood than just the White, European, “Scotch-English-Irish-Welsh” that my family claimed. I recently had my DNA tested and the tests revealed that in reality, I have no Native American ancestry at all. When I learned that I am 80% English, 7% Irish and 8% Scandinavia with trace amounts from other adjacent regions, I was disappointed. My understanding of myself as different somehow might have been a desire as much as a reality. In this way, part of my constructed reality became about being different before I actually identified myself as different.

My paternal grandfather, Granddaddy Grymes, lived to be in his nineties when he decided to stop eating. He seemed just tired of living and was ready to move on. After my grandparents had spent 60 or so years of almost constant togetherness, prototypes for co-dependency, Granddaddy broke my Grandma Grymes’ heart by giving up the ghost, as it were, and leaving her. She died within the year seeming to chase after him to heaven.

My maternal grandfather, Pawpaw, died several years before my maternal grandmother, whom we called Nan. While sad at his death, Nan had been relatively independent during their marriage while Pawpaw worked away from home. She lived for several years after Pawpaw was gone and seemed to retain something of her own life. I grew up assuming that all my relational models, my grandparents and my parents, were deeply in love, though I never really knew what that meant other than from movies and television. They had married for love and stayed married and in love, as far as I could tell, as couples of their generations had been taught and reinforced that they should and could.

Given the longevity of my grandparents' marriages and even my parents' marriage while I was growing up, along with the steady stream of societal symbols of romance and love inculcating my experiences, I incorporated the same values and beliefs. As my stories show, however, my version of romance would be more winding (some might say twisted, bent, or deviant) than my parents' and my grandparents'. Despite my deviations, I inherited a belief in "true" love, romance, and marriage. I searched for, chased at times, that belief my entire life. That belief has been a fundamental part of my emotional and sexual identity.

Extended family. My family life, though challenging and painful, also had some happy times, especially with my extended family, which included my grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins. We kids laughed with my father and uncle at my mother and aunts' silliness. I remember my mother, my auntie, and Nan laughing hysterically at any small thing out of the ordinary. I got my sense of humor from them, not the stern, by contrast, men in the family. We had many family gatherings at holidays where we churned homemade ice cream on the porch, ran non-stop, ate turkey and giblet dressing, strange combinations of green beans and onions out of a can, and cranberry jelly, shaped like a tin can. In many ways, we looked like what I assumed was a normal family.

I remember one happy trip to the Gulf Coast with my father's side of the family where the adults left the kids with some chicken necks, rope, and a basket to go crabbing while they went to end of the long pier fishing. We lowered the ropes with the chicken necks tied on down into the shallower waters off the pier, obsessively checking the ropes every few minutes until finally some poor crab grabbed on. We raised the crab up and threw it into our basket. All of this booty would end up in my Grandma Grymes' crab gumbo that evening.

My family hid our secrets like many families do. We kids did not know then about the cracks in what we believed and possibly were our normal family. I did not know that some relatives drank too much and that some cousins had different biological dads than who we assumed. The discipline they called “spankings” were normal we thought. Depressed mothers and absent fathers were normal. I would not understand the fissures in what represented normalcy in my family until I left home in search for what was missing.

Pursuit of Knowledge

I remember going to the library as a teenager, sick in first-time love with another 15-year-old girl, seeking information and knowledge. The library was, in general, my respite, my refuge, and filled a similar gap for me as I imagine today’s Internet does for many. I had somehow learned the word, “homosexual,” probably from my family’s set of the *World Book Encyclopedia*. Or I may have derived it from the slur, “homo” at the roller rink where it was hurled regularly by the mean bullyboys. I may have then gone home to look it up in the dictionary or *World Book*. What the genesis was of my need to define the word(s), word(s) I feared might have defined me, I do not remember. But at the local library, looking over my shoulder in fear of being discovered, I found two entries for “homosexual” in the card catalog.

I mimicked nonchalance as I made my way to one of the books, a small book in its original German by none other than Sigmund Freud. I did not speak German but I desperately tried to understand it that day, sitting with terror in the cool and the quiet of the library. The other card catalog reference was a religiously oriented book explaining the sins and depravity of “homosexuals.” One of these books might have been where I learned of the word “lesbian,” a word that I could not even find in the card catalog of 1971. I began to understand with each new

bit of data and lack of data that what this word meant was something I must hide from the librarian and the world.

Both of the relatively new words “homosexual” and “heterosexual” denoting two opposite sexualities, are said to have been first used in a German psychological book from the late nineteenth century (“Homosexual” & “Heterosexual”, n.d.). People allegedly used the word “lesbian” as early as the sixteenth century as a word to connote women’s sexual flexibility, referring to Sappho’s love of both men and women on the Isle of Lesbos. In the early 1800s the term became more specific as “erotic love between women” (“Lesbian”, n.d.). The constructions and indeed definitions of both homosexuality and heterosexuality are relatively recent inventions from psychoanalysis, which had begun to categorize what was normal as “heterosexuality,” and thus defined heterosexuality’s inferred opposite, “homosexuality,” as abnormal (Jackson, 2007).

Describing the domain of sexuality, Foucault (1980) said, “in the nineteenth century, an absolutely fundamental phenomenon made its appearance: the inter-weaving, the intrication of two great technologies of power [Christianity and psychoanalysis]: one which fabricated sexuality and the other which segregated madness” (p. 185). Foucault’s point was to re-elaborate the theory of power and to assert that “between every point of a social body...there exist relations of power” and not just in the “privileging of sovereign power” (p. 187). The binary “opposites” heterosexuality and homosexuality derived from the “vast technology of the psyche” (p. 185), as Foucault stated.

Where did I learn to be afraid? Of what was I afraid? How did I learn to be afraid? The truth of what I was beginning to believe about who I was loomed loudly in my body and my brain, made my heart pound and blood race, and not in a good way. I certainly did not want to be different. Thus, I always believed that my early feelings signified who I **was**, not what I chose or

constructed. Why would I choose to be different, deviant, a stigmatized other? Reading Walters' (2014) cogent arguments against "tolerance" and "acceptance" as goals helped me rethink that logic.

Using the pain of homophobia as evidence that gayness is not chosen is as spurious as arguing that no one would ever choose to be black or to be a woman or a Jew since all of these carry with them onerous histories of discrimination. It's insulting and patronizing. Yet because tolerance governs our thinking about gay rights, such phrases trip off the tongue with nary a whisper of concern. Can we imagine the issue of choice and immutability being central to the discussions concerning other civil rights? (p. 124)

In fact, though my early feelings toward other girls had not felt like a choice, I had chosen, as an adult, to remain or claim being a lesbian.

Political groups used the biological argument of the origin of homosexuality strategically as a defense in response to political attacks against gays and lesbians that claim homosexuality is chosen and sinful and should therefore not be a protected class. Esterberg (1997) reported that some differentiate using the terms "sexual orientation" and "sexual identity" to describe both a biological inclination toward feelings of sexual attraction to one's own sex and the subsequent labeling of oneself based on cultural "fashion" (p. 28). I have used both terms throughout my adult years as I have tried to understand my origins and identity. I would eventually give up trying to explain it when I decided that "why?" was the wrong question.

I think I began to construct my little closet back then in that library. I would not finish "closet V.01," until a little later upon experiencing my first closeted breakup. Being with my first love was fraught with fear and quickly complemented by intense feelings of guilt and shame. I seriously contemplated what we called then, a "sex change," as had Christine Jorgenson, whose transformation had been publicized widely enough so that I knew about it at age fifteen. I could not figure out how I would leave home, make money, and pay for the surgery but I could not envision a world then that allowed me to remain a female who loved other

females. I also seriously considered what seemed to be the other alternative to an unimaginable future, suicide.

The Sacred and the Holy

One of the reasons my mother claimed to be attracted to my father was because he was raised Southern Baptist. She was a new convert and thought he would help her stay faithful. Her belief in my father's ability to keep her pious stemmed from what I believed to be my mother's similarly simple beliefs in my ability to grow up and be a perfect heterosexual, equally pious, woman. My mother's religious conversion must have been powerful because she has clung to it since she discovered it in high school, though possibly not without her own questioning along the way. Despite having grown up going to a Southern Baptist church, watching and attending Billy Graham crusades, and being generally indoctrinated into all things Southern Baptist and Christian, I had an opposite sort of conversion when I was growing up. But first I, too, was "saved."

I was nine years old and due to the continual and frightening marketing from "Church" and family, decided that I needed to "accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior." In the Southern Baptist church what "being saved" required was a personal, individual, voluntary admission of sinfulness and consequent need to surrender and "allow Jesus into my heart." The preacher, following a fear inspiring half hour long sermon began his post-sermon proselytizing and boomed something like,

Come forward, WALK down this aisle, of your OWN FREE will but GUIDED by the Lord, and admit that YOU are a SINNER and that GOD's son was sent here to DIE for YOUR SINS, for ALL of our sins, to CLEANSE you of ALL of your sins, so that you might not spend ETERNITY in DAMNATION and HELLFIRE, ETERNALLY dead.

I was scared to death of going to eternal hellfire, a place I imagined to be just as it sounds and as it had been described to me; the devil in his devilish, red superhero type jumpsuit with a red

pointed tail and flames all around. As I remember this image, how gay it sounds, other than the infernal heat. I did not want to take the chance that I might die and end up in that place for the rest of eternity so one Sunday morning, I gathered up all the courage my little nine year old body could muster and, apparently of my own “free will” walked down that aisle towards the scary preacher at the altar. From thereafter, even until after I came out, in the eyes of my mother at least, I was saved.

Shortly after, one Sunday morning, after having been saved publicly, which was one of the requirements, I was baptized publicly. In the vat of water, in front of a church full of people, as is the Southern Baptist tradition, in what seemed like the deep end of a big pool, I swam out to the pastor standing in the middle. I swam, as it was too deep for me to walk. Luckily there was a little stool next to him that raised me high enough for him to then cover my mouth, hold my nose, and dunk me backwards into the water. The preacher intoned something similar to,

In obedience to the COMMAND of our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ, and for your profession of FAITH in him, our SISTER, we BAPTIZE you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.

The congregation intoned back, “AMEN.” The preacher hugged me and I swam away to the safety of dry land and surety of faith, secure for a few years anyway from hellfire.

After I started thinking critically about the world and the ideas in which I had been raised, religion was the first thing I tossed. The obvious hypocrisy that I saw amongst those who projected a holier than thou attitude repelled me. I began to see inconsistencies in word and deed. The whole religious story and accepting the commandments without thought began to just not make sense.

I grappled with religion throughout my life, both attracted by the unspeakable, felt beauty of its musical and artistic expression and its feeling of community, but excluded because of its

arrogant righteousness, bigotry, and because I was a lesbian. I landed on my own religious or spiritual understanding based on all of our commonality, the energy that flows through us all, connecting us and making us more alike than different. I tried to derive from what little Native American blood I thought pumped through my veins, an ancient sense of interdependence on nature and all living things, which is to say, everything.

Fasching, DeChant, and Lantigua (2001) described the differences between the words “sacred” and “holy” as parallel to the uses of “morality” and “ethics.” I spent my whole adult life trying to reconcile these differences. “What is sacred,” Fasching et al. said, “is held to be beyond question” (Ch. 1, Section 3, para. 24). The “holy generates a human response to the sacred which calls it into question by insisting that ultimate truth and reality are radically different than this world and its sacred powers and sacred orders” (Ch. 1, Section 3, para. 24). According to this explanation my religious conversion, in contrast to my mother’s, was one of getting rid of the sacred in favor of the holy. In this way, we of the LGBTQ communities and subcultures, embody the holy. Through our very existence and insistence in being, we are, “A holy community ... typically a subculture which functions as a ‘counter-culture,’ (or alternative community) within a sacred society whose way of life calls that society’s sacred order into question” (Ch. 1, Section 3, para. 30). I am relatively sure that my mother, among many who see themselves as holy and me as sacrilegious, would not agree.

As a lesbian, my expulsion from the religion of my growing up and expansion of my own spiritual beliefs has taken me even farther away from my birthplace and family. I remember when I saw the box of tithing envelopes on my mother’s desk, not that many years ago, addressed to Pat Robertson of the 700 Club, I thought my head and heart would explode. Pat Robertson (“Pat Robertson”, n.d.) has made anti-homosexuality bigotry and rhetoric a

substratum of his zealotry, likening gays and lesbians to terrorists, murderers, rapists, thieves, demons and so on. This type of religion has done more harm to LGBTQ people and their families and has torn the family apart more than same-sex marriage ever could. I have certainly blamed such religions for further damaging my relationships with my biological family. Religion, as I knew it then, caused me to set out to create my own family, built in the holy/ethical/questioning rather than the sacred/moral/non-questioning model.

Childhood Friends and Sweethearts

My best friend from third until tenth grade, Lillian, was also a Southern Baptist. We went to bible camp together where we prayed, played, and both resolved to become missionaries so that we could travel the world together and help other people find Christ. Lillian and I, both born on the same day but a year apart, were inseparable for many years. Years later, in therapy, I realized that Lillian had been my first non-familial love. We were, emotionally, childhood sweethearts.

I spent time with Lillian's family, going to their farm. Her family allowed us to stay on our own in their little cabin at the bottom of the hill. We learned to drive together, in their family's Army Willie Jeep, over and around the Texas hill country. We went fishing for catfish in their pond and whiled away those hot summer days, sucking on blades of grass, exploring, and imagining ourselves to be like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn.

Lillian also joined me at my grandparents' farm where we would drive Pawpaw's tractor into the woods, careful of any water moccasins that might be hanging from the trees in the bayou "slew." Everything we did informed our rich fantasy life as we made up stories about wherever we were and whatever we were doing. Walking down a country path was rich with adventure, the cows becoming scary beasts, and the crows overhead signaling danger.

Occasionally, we had real-life intrusions into our idyllic story creation. Once while visiting my family farm during the cold winter, we went walking to feed the cows, and decided to walk through the standing water in the field rather than around it. We reached the middle of the pond and water started pouring over the tops of our rubber boots. By the time we returned home to Nan and Pawpaw's house, both of us had swollen, frostbitten feet. Somehow we worked that into our communal adventure narrative while we thawed out next to my grandparents' wood-stove.

Lillian and I grew up together, constructing our personal play narratives. If we had been differently sexed, we may or may not have gone from being childhood sweethearts to young lovers, but of course that option was not available to us. I have a picture of Lillian and me at a fancy restaurant, or fancy for us at the time, where my parents took us for our joint birthdays. Lillian had turned sixteen. That September birthday was the last birthday we spent together.

When I was about fourteen or fifteen, in tenth grade, I started thinking critically, as I said, for myself and not according to what my family, culture, religion, and society proscribed. I joined the speech club and began debating, a practice that further fueled my nightly dinner bouts with my father. My debate partner, Miriam, was an earlier bloomer in the critical thinking department and my friendship with her, along with our debating, started me along a path that I continue to circle back to throughout my life, research and pursuit of knowledge. We lugged our heavy metal index card cases, which housed our source data, to and from tournaments where we tried to hone our art of argumentation.

The experience taught me on one hand to argue both sides of an argument based on the evidence found. On the other hand, I learned to logically corner people that I disagreed with somewhat mercilessly. Thankfully, my quest to understand and make sense of the nonsensical is

what continued to lead me back to school where I learned that there are more than just two sides to a discussion. Miriam introduced me to her friend who introduced me to the idea of atheism. After I started thinking critically about religion, especially the Southern Baptist religion, everything became suspect and open to analysis.

Also, that year, I fell in love and lust, for the first time, with a fellow, rather, female member of the speech club. I had dated a boy or two previously, but what others got from the experience perplexed me. Falling in love with Aura was dramatically, noticeably, and inescapably different. She was only a month or so younger than I, though a year behind me in school. Aura and I became obsessed with one another in very short fashion, a change that did not escape my parents' notice. I remember them asking about Aura and wondering about our closeness, implying something that I did not understand at the time. Only over time and trips to the library was I able to decipher their concern.

My first teenage crush/love became something I needed to hide, something that caused me shame and fear. Aura and I wrote love letters to one another, letters that would someday cause me great fear because of their potential as evidence of what my church called sin and abomination, what my culture called unnatural, and what my family could not speak about at all. Nevertheless, I got the message. I welcomed Aura's extreme attention at first, reciprocating with my own, but by the end of the summer between tenth and eleventh grades, I avoided Aura, like the plague, in complete denial of what had transpired between us.

My parents were suspicious of Aura and her family, thinking that there was something "not quite right" with them. They belonged to some religion that was even more fundamentalist than Southern Baptists, or that's how I remember my parents' interpretation. My parents were suspicious of a lot of people so I do not know whether or not their feelings about Aura and her

family were justified. If they found out that we were young lovers, all hell would have broken loose. In August, one Saturday morning after I had spent the night at Aura's house, as we did as frequently as possible, Aura's mother answered the phone while we were having breakfast.

Lillian's mother was on the phone, looking for Lillian. My parents told her I was at Aura's house. "I haven't seen her," I said, thinking no more of it. I had, of course, been with Aura all night. Lillian had not joined her mother and sisters at vacation bible school that morning. Now she was gone and they did not know where. I must have been oblivious to the panic in Lillian's mother's voice. I was probably too wrapped up in my own feelings of love/lust, and/or shame. I walked home later that morning, just a block or two away.

When I got home, my father started questioning me about Lillian. For some reason that I think was due to shame and my need to hide the nature of my relationship with Aura, I did not tell him that Lillian's mother had called me that morning. Even after he told me that he had seen police cars at Lillian's house, I did not mention it. My relationship with my father was at its worst. I had already begun building my bubble to insulate my difference from the world. That bubble later became my closet. At that time only Aura was allowed into my bubble. My family, especially, was not allowed. I remember that my father and I ended up fighting that morning and I finally ended up telling him about Lillian's mother calling. He called them and found out that Lillian was missing. He yelled at me again accusing me of withholding information for some reason neither one of us could explain. His words haunted me for a long time.

Lillian and I had grown apart over that last year. When I became involved with Aura that summer, the split between Lillian and me, due to different interests as I saw it, grew larger. I could not talk to Lillian, or anyone, about what I was doing with Aura. Lillian might have felt I

had chosen Aura over her and in a fundamentally teenaged way I had. I would never see Lillian again.

The morning starting with a nervous call from Lillian's mother turned into a three day long hunt for Lillian. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) questioned me and everyone else who had any knowledge of Lillian. When they questioned me, they asked me about Lillian's relationship with one of our female teachers, seeming to insinuate that there was something suspect in their closeness. I remember feeling very ashamed about my own "suspect" relationship and defensive about their questions. Though I was sick over worry about Lillian, I was also entering my "rebellious stage." I was angry, fiercely defensive against anything that smelled of authority.

The three days of hell and worry ended when they found the guy who had abducted Lillian that morning. A heroin addict, he had broken in to steal money and rare coins. He panicked when Lillian was unexpectedly home and took her with him when he fled. After friends of his tried using the stolen rare coins at the local 7-Eleven, he was caught. He directed the authorities to look for Lillian's body in a creek where he had tied a television on her to weigh her down. He did not realize that televisions float. He got life without parole during the brief time that Texas did not allow the death penalty.

My family, as were most of the families in the two nearby neighborhoods where both Lillian and her abductor grew up, was in shock. He was only a few years older than Lillian. My parents gave me drugs to help me sleep. I retreated further into my bubble. I remember only dreamlike, non-concrete, images from that time. Walking the streets and the bayou behind our house looking for Lillian; riding in the back of the pickup truck with Miriam after Lillian's funeral, crying and dazed; seeing Lillian's mother on television pleading with the yet unknown

abductor to let her go, not knowing she was already gone; Lillian's sister showing up at our house to tell us they had found her body.

I just shut off all contact with Aura. I stopped answering phone calls, or notes, or the door. I did not know what else to do. I was not equipped to handle my pain, guilt, and shame. And there was no person that I could talk to about the mixed up, jumble of feelings that I felt. We did not have support groups of any kind of which I was aware. I certainly could not explain the depth of reality of my feelings for either Lillian or for Aura. I did my best to "stuff my feelings," as we would say later in the high therapy days in Minneapolis.

Decades later when I was partnered with Cris, I came home to a message on the machine, saying Aura, an old friend, had called and wanted to talk. I had shut her away somewhere in my past, almost to the point of complete amnesia. The rare times I had thought of her or talked of her I described her as crazy. The craziest thing I remember her doing now is not leaving me alone. She, like me, was going through her own stigmatized hell, heartbroken with no one to talk to about it.

She told me, when I reluctantly contacted her, how distraught and suicidal she was then. I tried to explain to her that I had also been going through hell, but she seemed unable to hear it. She, like me, had constructed her own story of what had happened, a story she seemed to have retold until it became her truth. Her woman partner, a psychologist I learned, mistakenly sent me an email she later claimed she intended to send to Aura, calling me a narcissist, unable to think of anyone but myself. The whole reliving and retelling of a past long buried, shook me up. I apologized to Aura, for any hurt I may have once caused her, and said I thought it best that we not reconnect. I had enough problems in the present to sort out.

Growing up lesbian in the 1970s was fraught with danger. Normal teenaged angst became self-magnified, hidden away by necessity. Tragic, unspeakable events, like the murder of my childhood friend, exaggerated my family's inability to cope and communicate. I became even more isolated than ever before. My bedroom in our little three-bedroom rambler became my refuge where I constructed an imaginary, virtual world, long before online virtual worlds were possible. I played my guitar for hours on end and when I think about it now, I wonder how close I was to some kind of mental breakdown. While other teenagers imagined and created lives outside of their family homes—lives that included marriage and families of their own—I was just trying to survive, unable to imagine, having never seen it constructed, a life in which I, a girl who loved other girls, could or should be happy.

My early feelings for girls, followed by feelings for women were not just sexual, nor were they just emotional. They were essential in the sense that they consumed my entire being. They also felt essential in an identity sense. At the time I did not consider their origin, whether I was born that way or not. Much later, I would come to understand my feelings as "the medical model" (Stein, 1997, p. 47) of what Stein described as one of the "two different accounts of lesbianism" (p. 47). In the medical model of lesbianism, which proponents for gay and lesbian rights have pointed to as a basis for equal rights, becoming a lesbian was to reveal some hidden and innate character or "essence." The social constructionist model "considered lesbianism to be a product of multiple influences rather than being traceable to a single cause, a lifestyle choice that entailed conscious self-reflection and identification" (p. 47). I have learned to understand my sexuality as a combination of the two.

I focused my predominant feelings of romantic, emotional, and sexual love toward other girls, members of my same identified gender. I ascribed being "in love" to these feelings later

when I started learning language to describe my emotional and accompanying physical feelings. I had boyfriends also while growing up as I was expected to have. My boy crushes, however, were dramatically and notably less intense than the feelings I had for girls, a pattern that would replicate itself into young adulthood. The difference in my feelings between boys and girls along with my search for “true love” became the true north of my search for my sexual and relational identity.

Though many studies have found women to be more “fluid” in their sexuality than men (Averett, Yoon, & Jenkins, 2012, p. 496), I question the assumptions of some of these studies. In a society that required what Rich (1980) famously termed “compulsory heterosexuality,” a term that many queer theorists have invoked, most notably Butler (Garber, 2001), I am not surprised that many lesbians, like myself, have tried to be heterosexual by having sex with men. Having sex with a man when one believes that to be the only viable choice does not, however, make a heterosexual. But as I have noted, heterosexual as a category, like homosexual and lesbian, is a relatively recent invention. These categories provide a way to name what the hegemonic forces have determined to be normal as dominant, and normal’s opposite or abnormal, the minority.

As queer theory has argued, the binary sexualities that are heterosexuality and homosexuality are social constructs, like the gender categories, man and woman (Butler, 2011; Wittig, 1981). De Beauvoir (as cited by Wittig, 1981) said, “One is not born, but becomes a woman”(McCann & Kim, 2013, Chapter 23, para. 1). Because “woman,” like “homosexual” to “heterosexual,” is only a category in response to the category “man.” Wittig thus concludes, “Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically” (McCann & Kim, 2013, Chapter 23, para.11).

Excavating my own sexual and cultural origins through these theoretical lenses has helped me understand my identity formation in the context of culture more deeply. Young (2011) explained the ambiguity of sexual identity due to its connection to gender identity and implicated the extremeness of homophobia and heterosexism to both. “Homosexuality produces a special anxiety, then, because it seems to unsettle this gender order. Because gender identity is a core of everyone’s identity, homophobia seems to go to the core of identity” (Young, 2011, p. 155). Despite my intense explication, I do not believe that identity is easily or even wisely shed. As Kivisto (2004), citing Goffman (1959,1967,1971), noted, “The social structure is accorded a determinative primacy, within which transpire the presentation of self in everyday life” (p. 118). Kivisto also found that “Goffman expanded on [Durkheim’s notion of the cult of the individual] by seeing the sense of sacredness attached not simply to the idea of the individual in general but to particular individuals” (p. 118).

The summer after Lillian’s murder and my subsequent first break-up, I retreated far away from many people. I registered for my junior year classes and was intent on trying to finish high school doing as little as possible. I knew I needed to graduate, but I was not engaged and no one seemed able to engage me. Where I once was an honors student, I began seriously not caring. I purposely did not register for math or science classes but when my father had to sign off on my registration, he marched us down to the school and forced me to take Algebra. In that Algebra class, I met Claudia, my now oldest friend and once short-time lover.

One day in October, the fall after Lillian’s murder, Claudia showed up at my door wearing her signature red t-shirt and bell-bottom jeans from the Navy surplus store. We lived in the same relative neighborhood. She had known of Lillian, of course, and also knew the boy who killed Lillian. Even at that young age, Claudia, an extrovert then and now, recognized that I

was in trouble. I credit Claudia with saving my life at that time. Claudia certainly helped reintroduce me to life and helped burst my bubble so to speak. Though she was a year ahead of me, a senior, I started hanging out with her and her older friends. She became sort of like my older sister. I have always been enormously grateful for the generous attention she gave me when I really needed it.

One of Claudia's friends had a younger sister, Maureen, who started hanging out with us sometimes. She and I became friends and I fell in love, again. Maureen and I hung out with a few boys in our respective grades, two of which each of us started dating, if you call hanging out with a group of kids dating. We would all drink Budweisers, sneak into the country club, swim in their pools, steal golf flags and go plant them in people's yards late at night. Maureen and I wrote notes to one another in school, and called one another "Bud." The boy I was dating from our group asked me to marry him. One day Maureen came over to my house and told me that she and her boyfriend from the group were "going steady." Unable to hide my feelings of rejection, I started crying, heartbroken. Maureen did not understand what was wrong with me nor did I. I had no words to describe what I felt or why.

Time then was so elongated, exaggerated, and life events were huge. I was incapable of imagining much beyond the next night, day, or week. When I think back, I realize all of these events happened quickly. I measured existence from school year to school year. By the time I reached my senior year, I had new friends and graduated from just drinking "Buds" to smoking pot. Claudia went to college and I had new best friends with whom to get high and to have crushes on. The last thing I worried about was graduating from high school or what came next.

Leaving Home for Good

The year I barely graduated from high school, 1973, the Watergate scandal was exposed, Nixon gave his, “I am not a crook” speech, Billie Jean King beat Bobby Riggs in my hometown, Houston, Texas, and the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 1973) removed homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Though I already had my first young love and fallen in love again, I was nowhere near to identifying myself as a lesbian. I moved away from home as soon as I could after graduation, after securing a viable job as a telephone operator at Southwestern Bell. There, I fell in love again with an “older” woman. She was 22 and I was 18.

Maria identified herself as Chicana and lived in a house with her mother, brother, his wife and child, and her little sister. For a White girl from a still-segregated White neighborhood, Maria and her family life were very different from mine. Her mother made homemade tortillas around their big wooden kitchen table with everyone gathered round. I had not had much exposure to people who were different from me racially or culturally. I was a little frightened, in completely new territory, disrupted, but mostly intrigued. I loved it.

Difference has always been much more interesting to me than the status quo. Though I had grown up in a homogenous environment, I always felt different, even more so after “discovering” my sexuality. My experience of difference confirmed what Esterberg (1997) found, “While most people, lesbian or not, probably think of themselves as different or unique in one way or another, lesbians and bisexual women are likely to interpret that feeling of difference as evidence of a lesbian or bisexual identity” (p. 43).

Already I had a strong sense of egalitarianism despite my relatively sheltered upbringing. I credit my grandmother and mother with teaching me that racial difference was not a bad thing.

However, they still believed that the races should not intermarry. That, along with other inconsistencies, drove me to question everything my parents, family, and community had reared me to believe.

I am not sure why my grandmother, Nan, lacked the extreme bigotry of my other grandparents. I think it might have been due to her having had a Black nanny/babysitter as a young girl. I loved looking at that photograph, an image that seemed so novel, her sitting on the lap of a very dark Black woman. Though my Nan and Mother were open-minded relative to my father and his parents, my friendship and romance with Maria crossed racial and ethnic boundaries as well as sexual. I did not realize it or know to describe it as such then, but my affair with Maria was the first time I began to inch towards what Anzaldúa (1987) called a “New Consciousness” and the beginning of my belief in the value and necessity of crossing borders.

Anzaldúa said,

Being the supreme crossers of cultures, homosexuals have strong bonds with the queer white, Black, Asian, Native American, Latino, and with the queer in Italy, Australia, and the rest of the planet. We come from all colors, all classes, all races, all time periods. Our role is to link people with each other — the Blacks with Jews with Indians with Asians with whites with extraterrestrials. It is to transfer ideas and information from one culture to another...

The *mestizo* and the queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum for a purpose. We are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls. (p. 106)

Anzaldúa, I learned much later, grew up on the border of Texas and Mexico, very near to where I had lived for a while as a child. Her experience there had been very different from mine but perhaps much more like Maria’s history.

Maria’s mother had come across the Rio Grande alone with just her children and with no husband, when Maria was small, a feat that I found remarkable and admirable. At that naïve time in my life, I did not know anything about the undocumented people that were then and often

still called “illegal aliens.” I did not understand inequalities implicit in either of those phrases and statuses. My father called them “wetbacks,” as many White Texans did at that time, signifying their supposed swim across the Rio Grande. Anzaldúa called them in Spanish, *mojados*, which personifies and makes the word “wet” an identity.

I think Maria must have been fearful like me but also angry. I wonder, though I cannot ever know, if she might have been experiencing what Anzaldúa (2012) described when she said, “Within us and within *la cultura chicana*, commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture” (p. 100). I wish we could have communicated about these things then but neither of us knew how. Possibly Maria knew, but I could not yet understand.

I lived with Maria and her family in their family home for a short while. Maria and I slept together, secretly in our small room behind closed but not locked doors. Once when we were having dinner, Maria handed me her brother’s baby. Afraid, I probably grimaced. I had no experience holding babies. I was afraid I would drop him or do something wrong. Maria thought I winced because he was a brown baby. Anzaldúa (2012) called the U.S.-Mexican border “es una herida abierta [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds ... Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*” (p. 25).

I was hurt and angry then that she thought I was a racist. Now I understand that her reaction was because of her history, because of our histories as Brown and White. We were both muddling through, trying to understand the other.

A border is dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the

mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'. (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 25)

I did not yet understand my own White privilege though I was determined I would not be a racist. What brought us together was what we could not speak then or explain in any language, a subliminal attraction to one another, perhaps one another's difference and at the same time, similarity.

Maria had a political consciousness regarding her ethnicity and her identity, a Chicana, but I do not think her politics extended to being a lesbian. Though we made love, we did not identify ourselves based on that fact. Still lacking language and identity, I tried to talk to Maria about what we were doing after we had been doing it several months. She said she did not think it meant anything, that we were simply "mutually masturbating" a term entirely too impersonal and clinical to use to define who I thought I was and what I felt.

I abruptly quit the phone company one day because I could not bear the thought of sitting and saying, *ad nauseum*, "Hello, this is the Operator. May I help you?" all night long. I had begun pretending to be other people, going off script, answering as Lily Tomlin did in her "Laugh-In" routine, "And a gracious hello. Whoops, just lost Peoria. Snort, Snort." Maria was still working there and we were still doing the act that had no name in bed, but I was beginning to flounder badly, trying to figure out my next move. After Southwestern Bell, I got a job for only a few hours as a worker at a car wash before I walked out. I was the only person there who did not have a developmental disability, which enabled the owners to pay us all something like \$1.35/hour, below the minimum wage at the time.

I had to move first into my grandparents' house and then back to what was supposed to be my parents' temporary trailer, prior to their marriage completely falling apart, though I think it was well on its way. My fifteen-year-old brother was becoming more and more out of control.

While living in that trailer in the back forty of my grandparents' farm, in the middle of nowhere Texas, I witnessed the final act of physical violence my father ever attempted toward my brother. My brother fought back this time. They were fighting over the length and condition of my brother's wild hair.

My fondest memories of that time are of driving to town to the Post Office to pick up the mail. I would speed along that lonely country road, windows rolled down in my '72 Toyota Corolla, East Texas summer heat and dust billowing in, listening to my eight track stereo, smoking a joint of Mexican grass. By the time I returned home to deliver the mail, I was pleasantly stoned and able to face another evening with my family.

I started visiting military recruiters' offices and taking entrance exams. They promised all sorts of stuff that sounded much more exciting and promising than directing long distance calls or washing cars. I was apolitical for the most part and though the Vietnam War had not yet ended, the military offered me the ability to move far away from Texas and to "see the world." A state university admitted me, despite having barely graduated from high school. But I had no idea how I would pay to go to college. The military would pay for my education. I was the typical first generation college student, basically clueless, with little of what Bourdieu called "cultural capital" (Rawolle & Lingard, Ch. 8, Section 2, para. 2). I decided to join the Army because they could get me out of Texas the quickest.

When I left to join the Army in October 1974, I was surprised to find that Maria was very angry with me in the way a lover might be when left. I think, despite her characterization, she must have thought of us as some kind of a couple, a relationship without designation or status of any kind. After I left for the Army, we did not see one another or talk again.

Identity Analysis

So this is one gain for me as I change: I learn a way of looking at the world that is more accurate, complex, multilayered, multidimensioned, more truthful. To see the world of overlapping circles, like movement on the mill pond after a fish has jumped, instead of the courthouse square with me at the middle, even if I am on the ground. (Pratt, 2013, Chapter 28, para. 20)

Cultural Influences

Unknown to me, second wave feminism and gay and lesbian rights movements gained strength and momentum throughout my growing up years and into my adulthood. Several courageous women and men started two unprecedented homophile organizations in the early 1950s, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) for women and the Mattachine Society for men (Gibson, Alexander, & Meem, 2013). These organizations successfully made headway in the struggle to making lesbians and gay men more visible, a radical idea at the time. I knew nothing about any of these groups while growing up in Texas. Location and lack of media coverage or access isolated those of us who might have benefitted from knowing that we were not alone. Regardless, my ignorance and lack of interaction did not prevent me from having same-sex attraction and love.

Until I was an adolescent, my environment shaped me, including in the domains of love, relationships, and gender roles. I performed, for a large part of my early years, what my family expected of me. I helped my mother wash the dishes while my brother took out the trash. I wore dresses, and even white gloves, like the other women and girls to go to church. My brother wore pants and a little tie like the other men and boys. There seemed no reason to deviate from these detailed scripts and character descriptions. There were, as I have shown, unseen cracks in the underpinnings of these enactments. The story could not accommodate the reality of who I was.

I have lived my life, like many other sexual minorities, especially those my age, trying to create a relational and cultural life without the benefit of strict models and rules other than those we inherited from our heterosexual models, our parents. I grew up during a time without language for what I was feeling and experiencing. There were no support groups; no Internet groups (or even any Internet). I genuinely believed that I must be one of the only persons in Texas who felt the way I felt, whatever that was.

I had no words for my feelings and knew no one else like me other than Aura and Maria; or at least I thought I did not, because in the 1970s in Houston, Texas, they were as closeted as I. Until I left the home of my birth and began to cobble together an identity, family, and home of my own, I was an outsider from my family, my community, and to a large degree even from myself. My identity construction could only really begin after I left home and could encounter and interact with others like me in ways that my birth home could not allow or conceive.

The theories of symbolic interactionism explain how my desire for love, romance, relationship, and family were created. What these theories do not explain is how my different sexuality emerged even though I grew up in a heterosexual milieu. What I was missing then were the symbols, that is, the language, that helped me explain and understand what I felt, the sexual and emotional being I was. I would need to leave family, school, church, friends, Texas, in fact all of the influences of my childhood to find the fundamental aspect of my identity that I was missing; what all of those social contexts did not include. What did it mean to be a woman who fell in love with other women? What was a lesbian and is that what I was? Of course, these were not the only questions fueling the dissonance between what I felt and my upbringing. But they were of great primacy.

Charon (2007) described a study of identity formation in a maximum-security prison to explain symbolic interactionism. The study by Schmid and Jones (1991) asked, "...what happens to identities that are formed on the outside that one brings to the situation" (p. 198)? They found people create new identities to suit their new locale, while retaining their old identities, ready to reinstate when they exited prison. My experience of growing up lesbian was like an inversion of what the prison study found. Rather as if I grew up in a prison of sorts. Leaving home allowed me to expand my identity in interaction with others. Home, like prison, required that I hide and suppress something of my identity. When I go back to Texas, even today, it is as if I am going back into that prison to a degree. I code switch and reorient my "presentation of self" (Goffman, 1959, Title) so that I do not seem odd, queer as it were. But my true constructed adult identity is far more stable now than then.

I constructed my identity in that environment to a point but I would not be able to fill out my identity more completely until I left home. At the same time, aspects of the identity with which I adopted growing up needed to be shed or transformed to accommodate what felt to me like the fundamental, that is, the essential character of my sexuality. I needed to leave the prison of my growing up to grow into a more full person. In leaving home, I ironically found others like me with whom I felt what Stein (1997) and Esterberg (1997) found other lesbians described as a kind of "coming home" experience. The freedom that I found away from Texas, though more expansive than before, was not complete or static.

Understanding Identity

Growing up, I followed one cultural norm in the respect that I became a brazen romantic. I believed and desired the power of love and this belief has informed my self-identity as I have navigated through my relational lives and interacted with community. I was a child of the

sixties, a period of intense cultural shifting denoted by movements that fought for women's, racial minority, and gay rights and liberation as their goals. However, I was not aware of these movements in any depth and not aware of gay rights at all until after I left home.

My early attempts to define and understand my identity were akin to a discovery. Esterberg (1997) referenced several who argued for the "essentialist project [from a] biological basis for homosexuality" (p.25). For much of my adult life, I have held the view that I was born a lesbian, that my sexuality had a "biological basis" (p. 25). As Esterberg, citing Epstein, summarized, "debates about constructionism and essentialism are, in part, debates about choice *and* constraint" (p. 28). More cogent, Esterberg argued, is what identities we assert and why, how, where, we became those identities. I agree. Also important is what these identities and their implications have to do with "building social networks and political alliances" (p. 29).

The terms heterosexual, homosexual, and lesbian identity and the scholarship of identity have a relatively young history. The work on lesbian and gay identity, according to Esterberg (1997), parallels though lags, the general interest in identity study. The bulk of identity work, Esterberg (1997) asserted, falls into two main currents of analysis: a psychological model following Erikson and a sociological model such as in the work of Goffman (pp. 15-16). Erikson's work focuses on the "intrapsychic process" (Esterberg, 1997, p. 15), which stresses development, integration, and adjustment to a larger, in this case, heterosexual environment. Goffman's contribution focuses on the social interactive processes and the "possibilities of change" (Esterberg, 1997, p. 15) and fluidity of identity. My experience points to the applicability of both models.

According to Esterberg (1997), "In the developmental paradigm, then, adherence to radical lesbian feminism, which views lesbianism as a political identity, or continued immersion

in gay and lesbian activism reflects almost a lack of personality integration” (p. 19). According to the development model, my identity with lesbian feminism represented lack of integration with the larger heterosexual community. But, of course, that was the point. We expressly did not want to integrate, and I have to wonder, why would we? Separatists, like Hoagland (1988), believed that the only way to achieve a “moral revolution” was in separation from the heterosexualist paradigm. Esterberg (1997), citing critics of the development model of identity, stated that following this kind of thought might lead one to conclude that “lesbian and gay social movement activity, over the long run, might actually *impede* personal growth and maturity by delaying full integration into a heterosexual setting” (p. 19).

Sociological views, such as that by McIntosh (as cited in Esterberg, 1997) criticizing the developmental model and “labeling” of identities suggest “...as individuals are labeled with a stigmatized identity, it becomes more and more difficult for them to choose alternative nondeviant ‘careers’ ” (p. 20). This view, derived from Goffman, stated that homosexuality is not deviant or psychopathologic, in and of itself, but the dominant, normative society sees it as such and so stigmatizes homosexuals as “spoiled identities” (Goffman, 1963). Certainly I have experienced stigmatization. I recoil a bit when hearing myself described as a spoiled identity though I understand the context in which Goffman used the term. Stigma is accurate only from the perspective of the non-spoiled. I am interested in moving away from all of these binary, oppositional positions.

I agree with those who, according to Esterberg (1997), stopped supporting labeling theory even though their reasons were due to the lack of empirical evidence to support it. My view is that labeling theory along with some of what Goffman (1963) has written pertaining to “deviants” does not seem accurate on its face. While I find some of the observations Goffman

made useful; for example, about deviant groups and community; the fact his insights were made purely by observation of such communities and individuals, rather than through actual self-knowledge, contributed to their deficits. Phelan (1994), in her call for and her expression of “specificity,” asserted,

Of course, this kind of theorizing implicitly denies all of the tenets of modern social science; instead of removing myself from the field of study, I am placing myself at the center. Getting specific means turning social science and theory on its head; it means working out from the centers of our lives to seeing the connections and contradictions in them. The failure of contemporary political theory, especially liberal theory, to speak to our lives, suggest that such a radical course is at least worth trying. I believe that the actual narrative of my life speaks more convincingly about mutthood, about class and race privilege, and about the oppression of lesbians, than any scholarly treatise or argument. (p. 32)

I wholeheartedly agree. Through my narrative and reflection on my youth through young adulthood and its relational context, I have engaged with others’ narratives and analyses. Specificity or personal narrative has meaning, not necessarily because it speaks to a particular “class” of people or a unified group identity, but because it participates with the individual stories that comprise those groups.

The insight that the terms for heterosexual and its binary opposite homosexual were social constructs, proved to be very compelling and antecedent to further constructionist research, including symbolic interactionism. Subsequent to constructionist theories came queer theory, which then attempted, “...to disrupt the fixed categories and binary nature of ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ ” (Esterberg, 1997, p. 23) and to do away with or “move beyond identity itself” (p. 24). I am drawn to queer theory’s desire to “challenge the boundaries themselves” (Esterberg, 1992, p. 24). However drawing on my own experience, while reading much queer theory pertaining to and largely critical of same-sex marriage, I question the dismissal of such ideas as identity that are actually important to individuals’ real lives. Though I

agree with many of the theoretical arguments and historical or “genealogical” (Foucault, 1980) analysis queer theory and social constructionism provided, I am inclined to believe that the “truth,” at least my truth, overlaps both dichotomies and includes other complexities. By exploring my early attempts to understand who I was in the context of my family and culture at the time, I used symbolic interactionism to explain some aspects but not all. As I have read these theories, I have been able to imagine that there may have been other influences working on me than biology, than some deterministic force. However, I have been unable to throw out entirely the idea of some essential determinants that started me along a certain path.

What has become apparent to me is that in order to continue my identity project, I needed to find other fuel for my fires. The answers I sought and the relational interaction I desired were not available to me in Texas, in 1973, in the context of my family, relationships, and community. According to the theories of symbolic interactionism (Charon, 2007), we all change together, an indeterminate conglomeration of identities and cultures that culminate in relationships and community, created and sustained by symbols that communicate those changes and predicate more, a realization that is especially pertinent to marriage.

...the relationship with the environment is central: to the symbolic interactionist we do not simply respond to our environment, but we define, act toward it, and use it. We are not simply shaped, conditioned, controlled by that environment (including other humans), but we act toward it according to our ongoing definitions arising from perspectives that are themselves dynamic. (p. 42)

Marriage is one of those symbols that has been for others to use. It was not, until now, available for me, or my relationships, or my community. That marriage will change us and that we will change marriage no longer seems in question. How marriage will transform us remains left to be seen.

Though at one time I sought to identify the sexual aspect of what felt like my nature, I have never experienced myself as a unified, unchanging, being. Identity might be seen as just one compositional attribute with which one relates to another and through those relations create groups of affinity. As Young (2011) described, “In complex, highly differentiated societies like our own, all persons have multiple group identifications. The culture, perspective, and relations of privilege and oppression of these various groups, moreover, may not cohere” (p. 48). Identity seems most important when one experiences being different from the hegemonic majority as a way to explain that difference to both others but first to self.

I left the home of my birth with all the influences of my biology and my social construction up to that point. These forces helped form who I was then and now. They helped me form my own identity, what and whom I loved. In order to continue my identity project, I needed to leave and find further influences, more fodder to fuel what has been my life-long process. As I ventured out into the world, I found other people and communities that would show me a much broader, and deeper, way of constructing one’s life.

Some people never leave home, out of fear or comfort. I felt like I had no choice if I was to become a person I felt comfortable living with, a goal I attained less frequently than I wished. At that young stage in my life, when many of my peers were going to college and getting married, I was not sure what I was doing. But at least I had gotten out of Texas, on my way to discover other ways to live. Like the encyclopedias I had perused as a child, imagining other places and people, I imagined for myself some kind of adventure and challenge though I was not sure what that would be. I see now, though I did not identify it as such then, that I always brought along my own personal version of faith.

Herstorical Reflection: Leaving Home

My father had tried to talk me out of it, thinking I was not Army material. That probably made me want to do it even more. I had already been admitted to a Texas State University, but for reasons that I do not entirely remember, opted to not go. I remember not knowing how I would pay to go to the university and no one was helping me figure it out. I was a classic, first generation college student. I wanted an education, even then, but I wanted to leave Texas more. The Army promised to pay my tuition after I got out after only three years in. Though three years did seem like a lifetime then, I could stand anything for that long I thought. I had made it through high school right?

After signing papers, taking oaths with the other recruits I went back to my family's trailer in the East Texas woods, in an area also known as the Big Thicket, to await my orders and literally, my bus ticket out of Texas. I was ready to start my first big adventure on my own. I was psyched up, shedding my skin for the first time, leaving my already checkered past behind.

I had signed on the dotted line, pledging to serve my country for three years. Along with that oath was another sentence that had made me pause. After considering the question silently for a moment, trying not to draw attention to my hesitance, I checked the box that said I had never engaged in homosexual acts and had no homosexual tendencies. I lied. My enlistment predated Clinton's Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) policy by 20 years, a compromise Clinton made after he had promised to do away with the prohibition of gays in the military. In 1974, the year of my enlistment, they did ask and the recruit was expected to tell the truth, otherwise committing the unlawful "fraudulent enlistment."

I justified my lie by telling myself that I had almost completely erased any memory of any homosexual acts at that point. I was in deep denial. No one would ever know. I had made myself an internal vow to be resolutely heterosexual and to wipe any contradictory memories from my brain and my history. Staff Sergeant Leonard Matlovich had decided in July 1974 to fight the military policy that specifically excluded homosexuals (Shilts, 1993). I do not remember knowing anything about his challenge. Politics were often not in front of my consciousness.

One morning, like many others since I had moved back in with my family, I made my daily drive to the Post Office (PO). I listened to Joni Mitchell, as usual, on my way into town. Once there, I opened our PO Box. There it was; a very, very, official looking letter addressed to me from the United States (US) Government, the Department of the Army. I got back to my car, opened the letter and read the first of many orders I would receive. These orders told me to show up in a week at the recruiting office ready to leave for boot camp. If I did not show up, I would be considered Away Without Leave (AWOL). Suddenly it all felt very real.

I left whatever pot I had not yet smoked and my precious record albums with my brother to consume and care for. I also left my lovely Martin D-18, the first big ticket item I had ever purchased on my own, via a lay-away plan. My second big ticket item, a 1970 Toyota Corolla, purchased with my first real auto loan, paid for from my wages working at a variety of jobs during and post high school, was also left behind in my family's care. I was ready to get the hell out of Texas and I did not think I would ever be back.

I showed up as ordered on that day and boarded a bus with some other recruits headed to Fort McClellan, Alabama. Most of us seemed to be somberly anticipatory. Maybe it was just me. I did not know what to expect. On my journey away, I likely read the few books I had brought along, Hesse's Siddhartha or Castaneda's series of shamanic adventures with Don

Juan. We bounced along the back roads of the US south in the Army bus, picking up others along the way.

I thought about what was now becoming my past life as we rode away. I thought about Maria and Aura, what we had shared and what I had vowed to forget, to erase. I was glad to be going to a different place where I would not remember Lillian, would not imagine seeing her drive by in her family station wagon. This was my chance to abandon the girl I had been brought up to be and to relinquish the parts of me that I did not want to claim.

I do not remember ever being homesick. I did not think of the boy I had not chosen to marry and only briefly the girls I could not marry. When I left home, I began a fairly rapid process of letting go, a disowning of my family, my culture, and my place of birth. I knew what I was not, the "I" identity I rejected, but not who I was or even wanted to be. I knew that whomever I would discover and/or create, I could not do it in Texas with my family, relationships, and the community of my birth. That much I knew. This tribe into which I had been born, and which had nurtured me as well as they knew how, now felt more like a prison.

I was a single girl from Texas, a formerly "saved" Southern Baptist, a rebel, an actress, a musician, a seeker, a reader, a writer, a lover, a wannabe Native American or Jew or something other than a White, Southern Baptist girl from Texas with questionable sexual tendencies. Much of what normally served as identity were just masks for me now, open to question and revision. I wore my masks in-authentically, as protection when needed. My masks served me well. Though I longed to discard them all, I later learned that I would never, no matter how far away from my birth place I got, entirely separate who I had been from who I was or would be.

The driver woke those of us who had fallen asleep when we finally pulled into Fort McClellan and were ordered off the bus. Late when we arrived, we were escorted to our cots in the communal living space that was the first of many new homes. This transitory home called the US Army, decorated in Olive Drab (OD) green as we would be starting the next day, boarded, trained, and kept me for the next two years, eight months, and thirteen days.

CHAPTER FOUR: COMMUNITY MATTERS

I reckon the rigid boundaries set around my experience, how I have been “protected” by the amount of effort it takes me to walk these few blocks being as conscious as I can of myself in relation to history, to race, to culture, to gender. In this city where I am no longer of the majority by color or culture, I tell myself every day: In this world you aren’t the majority race or culture, and never were, whatever you were raised to think; and are you getting ready to be in this world?

And I answer myself back: I’m trying to learn how to live, to have the speaking-to extend beyond the moment’s word, to act so as to change the unjust circumstances that keep us from being able to speak to each other; I’m trying to get a little closer to the longed-for but unrealized world, where we each are able to live, but not by trying to make someone less than us, not by someone else’s blood or pain. Yes, that’s what I’m trying to do with my living now. (Pratt, 2013, Chapter 28, para. 11-13)

Introduction to Community

Somewhere between naming my sexual identity, and finding relationship, I ran smack-dab into “The Community.” Although I have always loved people and meeting new and different people, I am primarily an introvert though I cross over sometimes to extroversion, mostly in bars. Community is not something I was ever aware of until I encountered it after I came out. White people, at least where I came from, were not all that aware of their community because it was so ubiquitous and the same. Sameness was how we defined community.

I have been reviewing my life since I came out as a lesbian in 1978 in the context of the current state-by-state expansion of marriage to same-sex couples. It is very likely that the Supreme Court will make same-sex marriage legal by June 2015, possibly before I finish this dissertation. This change is one that has become more unsurprising by the day because of my immersion in it. However, when marriage became possible for real, in my beloved adopted state of Minnesota, I felt a little shell-shocked. Many have described the marriage rights expansion as the civil rights battle of a lifetime, and others have described the expansion as a change that signals the end of humankind. My question began with will this change, this expansion of

marriage transform lesbians. Along the way to the answer, I have found and explored a richer question about how, as I constructed identity, community, and relationships, I also created an ethics of commitment and learned how to create a community and a family beyond those I was born into.

There is much more literature about lesbian-feminist community and its politics than I realized when I started this project. I have tried to catch up on my 40 years of ignorance in my desire to understand better the journey I have been on and what impact marriage might have on my lesbian identity, my community, and my relationship. Some of what I have read has been remarkably similar to my actual lived experiences, but much of it has felt like a representation from a distance, too academic, impersonal, and not particularly relevant to the bulk of us who have just been living our lives, frankly without a lot of analysis. Like most “normal” Americans perhaps, LGBT people work, come home, do chores, and craft as happy a life as possible. Sure, I have listened to Minnesota Public Radio (MPR), National Public Radio (NPR), Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), and even the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and Democracy Now. I have formed opinions and tried to think about things based on those outlets. But I have not, until this program and especially this dissertation, tried to think critically about life events, probably because I did not have the time or the tools to do so.

Analytical explications of the lesbian-feminist communities in which I lived and participated sometimes hit the mark and other times miss. I was surprised and enlightened to find to what a large degree lesbian-feminists and queer theories criticize the gay and lesbian push for marriage rights. The push for marriage has played out through debates between those who are designated and predominantly unelected leaders of the LGBT communities. They are the leaders of organizations who have stepped up or just been successful at pushing their own

agendas forward. Thus, same-sex marriage was greatly debated among individuals with differing views as a correct movement goal. But I was just busy trying to live my life, non-reflexive about the rightness of marriage. I did not think about marriage because it was not possible. However, I believe that, also like me, LGBTQIA people have, one by one, pushed against what was normal by living their lives, by coming out, by challenging existing assumptions. At the same time, academics, poets, writers, public figures, and organizers have been debating, writing, and challenging the civil and legal proscriptions.

How marriage will affect community is difficult to say because community comprises dynamic and fluid individuals; community is not a static entity. At one time, in “The Community,” we spoke of community as if it was solid but, of course, it never has been. Community is something that is always being constructed and reconstructed, just like the individuals who are its members. The chauvinism of the lesbian-feminist community, I now see and felt as I lived it, was partially due to its assumption that we were all of one mind and history. As has been widely analyzed, this construction broke down partially because we are not all the same; in particular, we are not all White, middle-class, and educated lesbians.

The self-elected and elected leaders of The Community and community organizations wrote, analyzed, and debated the pros and cons of lesbian separatism, what being a lesbian meant, how lesbianism should be defined, and what lesbianism’s political implications and goals were and should be. Meanwhile other members and I were trying to find love, connection, happiness, and identity in the context of a community under construction. A microcosm of the larger community, many tried to build a lesbian self-sufficient community, within but separate from the communities we came from. From the start those who described themselves as lacking

the privilege or desire to separate themselves from the communities of their birth or to enact a separation strategy viewed this project as objectionable.

The widely cited Combahee River Collective summed up their objections,

...we reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly black men, women, and children ... As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. We must also question whether lesbian separatism is an adequate and progressive political analysis and strategy, even for those who practice it, since it so completely denies any but the sexual sources of women's oppression, negating the facts of class and race. (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 238-239)

Others within the community blamed the lesbian-feminist breakdown on the heterosexist values we still retain and live by. Hoagland (1988) called for a "lesbian ethics" and a "moral revolution." Phelan (1989), in her exploration of the lesbian feminist community and the "limits of community" (Cover Title), pushed beyond what had become the remains of that community and its separatist wing to where we might forge a new, more practical path. Phelan concluded,

If we are to be free, we must learn to embrace paradox and confusion; in short, we must embrace politics. Identity politics must be based, not only on identity, but on an appreciation for politics as the art of living together. Politics that ignores our identities, that makes them 'private,' is useless; but nonnegotiable identities will enslave us whether they are imposed from within or without. (p. 170)

Had I been more reflective and analytically participative in The Community, I might have engaged more in the ways that Hoagland (1988) philosophized and desired. I had not grown up participating in community, or needing to, and the intensity of the lesbian community with which I had aligned by affinity frightened me rather than felt welcoming. This project is my first and late attempt to engage with the leaders and the analysis that arose during my lifetime in my community. I did not feel comfortable engaging until now. As I have asserted, I was busy living my life, outside the relative privilege of academia. Only now have I felt confident enough to assert that despite my history of non-engagement, my life and its experiences still have meaning,

but only if I am willing to wrestle with them, not just alone but in community, in a dialogue or rather a politic as Phelan (1989) suggested.

My experience with The Community, as Phelan (1989) described was both liberating and constraining. I have never been comfortable being an out lesbian in a small town and, over time, the lesbian community elicited the same feelings. After the initial sense that I had of finding “my people,” or “my women,” I started to feel the stricture of the rules that some were trying to create, and others to obey, rules outside of heterosexuality but still informed by it and within its structures. I was not a leader or a mover and shaker in the community but only a peripheral member of it. All of us who participated by making, following, and breaking the rules helped construct the community and inevitably deconstruct it.

In this chapter, I negotiate my experiences with community through story and engagement with scholarship about community. I needed to leave Texas to find a community of affinity. As you will see, I found several, based on different intersections and connections. Identity is implicated in community and relationship as can be seen from the perspective of my experience. Young (2011) exposes the binary oppositions that I experienced in many considerations of community and identity or individualism.

Too often contemporary discussion of these issues sets up an exhaustive dichotomy between individualism and community. Community appears in the oppositions individualism/ community, separated self/ shared self, private/ public. But like most such terms, individualism and community have a common logic underlying their polarity, which makes it possible for them to define each other negatively. Each entails a denial of difference and a desire to bring multiplicity and heterogeneity into unity, though in opposing ways. (pp. 228-229)

Despite, however, what I found to be the shortcomings of community, it is through our interaction in community that we make strides toward fuller inclusion and citizenship.

Communities represent the composite of individuals, but community identities should not be seen as any more reified than those of the individuals of which they are composed.

Do Ask and Do Tell: The Army Years

Halfway Out of the Closet

The Army treated women and men differently when I joined. My boot camp was not as physically strenuous as the men's boot camp. The Women's Army Corp (WAC) did not have to do as rigorous Physical Training (PT) as the men. Instead, after PT we had to run into the barracks, compete for ironing boards and space, and get our skirts nice and pressed, also known as (a.k.a.) looking good or STRAC, for the formation that immediately followed PT. The women's boot camp focused on physical appearance rather than physical stamina though we had a share of both. I started to realize that unequal treatment between genders extended beyond Texas and my family.

We had to liquid starch and iron our own uniforms while the men sent theirs to the cleaners. Once I starched my uniform late at night, hung it up to dry until just damp, and forgot about it. I had been too involved spit shining my boots so that I could smile and see my teeth in them. I went to bed and woke up to my totally wrinkled uniform hanging in my little narrow locker, hard as a rock. We had an inspection that morning and when the drill sergeant saw my uniform, he completely tore apart my bed and failed me on that day's inspection. He may have made me hit the ground and do X number of pushups or do X number of laps around the track. And of course he yelled at me, right in my face, nose to nose. The point, of course, was to break us down, to erase our former identities, and create a community of soldiers. The Army had an easy job reconstructing my identity, at that young age, because I really did not have much of an

identity. But I did retain some part of an identity, a rebellious “nature” that would eventually determine my early discharge.

My father might have been on to something when he suggested that I would not make it in the Army. After that first night in the barracks I cried all night long causing my bunkmate to consider turning me in to the psychiatric unit. My Army experience predated but was quite similar in some ways to the movie *Private Benjamin* about a similarly misplaced woman in the military. However, I did not have a rich father or any cultural capital to bail me out or get me an upscale military job. The only way out for me was to go Away Without Leave (AWOL), which would lead to the felony crime of desertion, or to get kicked out for reasons of incompatibility or criminality.

Basic training, other than the drill sergeants’ attempts to force compliance and assimilation, strangely suited me as other young women from all parts of the country surrounded me. I imagined that this was my version of going away to college except instead of sharing a room with one other woman I was sharing a room with about 20 other women. I really did not mind the cotton fatigues, though I, like Private Benjamin, tired of the color. Like most of my boot camp platoon, I was working class or poor and lacked any higher education. Most of those with a college degree would have been in the commissioned officers’ ranks, not enlisted. There were more African American women and other types of women from across the United States than I had ever been around in my life. My very small world expanded rapidly. It is quite likely that some of those women were also lesbians, but we were all very careful to steer clear of that, as far as I knew.

I started out as an OK, intermittently, exemplary soldier, a pattern I would continue throughout my Army career. I remember the experience a bit like prison as portrayed in the new

Netflix series, *Orange is the New Black*, but without the sex and less brutal. We also seemed a lot less tribal than the TV series. I interacted with everyone and we all seemed to get along. We were following the Army plan to create a unit out of a bunch of disparate individuals. Perhaps I was just very malleable, or clueless, or just happy to be away from home. We all seemed to bond if only for a few weeks.

I could not discern any noticeable discrimination between how my diverse group of Army mates and I were treated but what did I know then. I was a White girl from Texas. There was no discrimination against gays or lesbians because we did not exist. If lesbians do not come out, do they exist? If we do not claim an identity, who are we? Without relationship, community, and interaction we were invisible. We had a Black, male, and a White, female drill sergeants who both yelled in our faces, sparing no one. We were all equally insignificant which I think was one of the points of our training. As anti-military as I became later, the camaraderie and leveling that I experienced in the military contributed to my subsequent belief that difference was just as compelling if not more so, than similarity.

Homosexuality was strictly forbidden but also, I learned later, quite rampant in the military. I had a lesbian friend at Fort Bragg, a Captain, whom I met through my lover, the Lieutenant. Fraternizing between enlisted soldiers like I was, and commissioned officers was also verboten in the military. But that was no worse than being a lesbian; so, I suppose we all just took our chances. This Captain friend told me a story about Fort McClellan, Alabama, where she had worked and where I was in boot camp. She said the commanding officer of the entire post at Fort McClellan, either a Colonel or a Brigadier General, was a lesbian. When this commander received orders to report to another post, so did her second-in-command, who also happened to be her “room-mate.”

Shilts (1993) cited Private First Class (PFC) Tanya Domi's story of Fort McClellan, "It was during her basic training at Fort McClellan, Alabama, where all the WACs trained, that Tanya realized the Women's Army Corp was lesbian heaven" (p. 200). The Army later charged Domi with being a lesbian during an investigation, a "witchhunt" at Fort Devens, Massachusetts. There, several women decided to turn themselves in when they ended up on a "list of lesbians" (p. 201). Women started turning in their friends and lovers and PFCs Randolph and Watson decided they would rather just turn themselves in. PFC Domi ended up following suit. I did not know about any of this until years later when I read *Conduct Unbecoming* (Shilts, 1993). Something was obviously changing and I would accidentally become a small part of the change.

Shilts (1993) reported that similar actions were taking place across the military services during the time I was part of them, including the most famous case, that of Leonard Matlovich. Matlovich ended up on the cover of *Time* magazine, September 8, 1975, with the headline "I Am a Homosexual." That magazine article and Matlovich's ultimate discharge might very well have influenced me. But I had not yet determined I was a lesbian, a homosexual. At the very least, Matlovich's coming out told me that I was not the only gay or lesbian in the military.

I survived boot camp with my sexuality safely quashed. I moved on to my next Army station at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, for Advanced Individual Training (AIT) where I learned to make maps. There I met the first man with whom I had "man-woman" sex as Ellen Degeneres jokingly referred to it in her famous coming out episode. I was attracted to him because he played the guitar and sang and so did I. Rod and I spent weekends in Washington DC, hauling our guitars along with us for music on the National Mall. By then, I had retrieved my Martin from my family's home and was able to take it with me everywhere I went. We stayed in an old hotel with lots of stories to tell, overlooking a park. I thought the whole scenario wonderfully

romantic, bohemian, and normal, exactly how I had imagined myself. Inevitably, the night would come and I would try to perform as I thought a woman should with “her man.”

Rod never complained and we never spoke of what we were doing which makes me wonder if he was just as clueless as I was. Our lack of openness about sex made my experience with Rod just like my experiences with my two girlfriends, except that I enjoyed the sex with my girlfriends. We did not discuss it. He even asked me to marry him, after a very short courtship. I cannot imagine that the sex made him think he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me.

After months of attempting to feign interest and knowing that I was failing miserably, I ended the relationship. Luckily, the Army suddenly stationed him overseas, which always made it so much easier to breakup. My relationship with Rod was one of a very few relationships that I had with men. In studies of lesbian sexuality and identity, lesbians are often cited as being more “fluid” than men (Stein, 1997), because they have had sexual relationships with men. I would characterize my relationships with men of young adulthood, not as heterosexual or fluid, but as my doing what was expected, what was available and acceptable.

I survived my stint at AIT with no hints of lesbianism that I remember. I was a heterosexual, adult, woman, I told myself. I had even had sex with a man. Sex was not supposed to be enjoyable I told myself. Except that deep down, in the Sapphic past I had buried, I knew better.

After about four months of training, a lifetime in those days, I received my orders for Fort Bragg, North Carolina, near Fayetteville, a military town that some called the “armpit” of North Carolina, though I thought armpits were much nicer than this town. Fayetteville’s main drag was one strip club after another. Many of these places, I later learned, were on the Army’s list of blacklisted establishments. A soldier caught in one of these bars was subject to being charged in

the Army courts. Regardless of the prohibition against the bars, the bulk of the clientele for these places was in fact from the Army base, which was the largest industry around. Another bar was on the blacklist but off the main drag and subject to raids. It was the first gay bar I ever visited.

I spent a year at Fort Bragg, arriving there as a 20 year old wannabe heterosexual woman. While there I had almost anonymous sex with one man that I remember as feeling degrading, and feigned interest in other men. These memories are just vignettes now, very short stories strung together that create a mostly foggy impression. Other stories I remember very well. Either way, foggy or not, I am now amazed by how much activity I crammed into a year at that time of my life.

The majority of my time as a young adult seems to have been spent figuring out who I was and who I wanted to be sexually and relationally. I wonder if it is any different for twenty something year old heterosexuals with their privilege of normalcy? Certainly marriage was not an option then, nor even a fantasy, for young lesbians, at least not marriage with the subjects of their desire. Would marriage and relational acceptance have provided me the communal support to help me at least think through my relationships and desire a little more?

I spent much of my youthful energy figuring out love, sex, and relationships as if that was all I needed to be happy. I have looked back at those times with some regret. Why could I not have gone to college instead of the Army? Why did I seem to be so obsessed with finding “love?” Growing up gay seemed to be about understanding my sexuality, finding relationships, community, and family. I have spent many years of my life in that pursuit and wondered how my life might have been different, how much more I might have contributed if I had not needed to figure out, really to accept, who I was, and how to be me? Growing up alone, outside of all

known support and structures forces one to find or create other structures, a process that is both time-consuming and energy draining.

My attempts to be heterosexual at Fort Bragg were short-lived. I was sitting on the steps of my barracks one afternoon when a woman I had seen around stopped by and said something like, "A bunch of us are going out tonight to a place where the men won't bother you. We were wondering if you wanted to come along?" I sat and pondered her question, really not sure what the subtext was. I have always been sort of dense when propositioned, not really understanding what was being asked, eventually assigning either more or less gravitas than was real. But, happy to be included, I said, "Sure." They would pick me up later. That left me time to wonder what she meant by, "... and the men won't bother you there." And why did that sound like a good thing to me?

They picked me up and we went to downtown Fayetteville to that little bar off the main drag that would soon become the only place I went out after hours, every night I could for a while. The bar was hidden away, a little windowless, dark, box on the darker side street. There were fewer lights inside than out. Though my recollection is also dim, I think that we had to say a secret password through a little slit in the door and literally join the club to get in. I quickly found a secure place at the bar within clear view of the exit and planted myself.

Sitting there sipping my beer, I was slowly able to make out some shapes through the 1970s bar era fog of cigarette smoke. I downed one beer and quickly ordered another when I began to realize that many of the dancing shapes were couples composed of either two women or two men. They danced to, "I never wanted, I never wanted to love a man, the way that I want to love you." The song took on a richer meaning than I think the Captain and Tenille intended. Or, maybe not? I slowly began to understand where I was. I said I was slow.

Then, I saw others that I had seen at my Army base there. And they saw me. We exchanged some sort of mutual wink and a nod, which I would come to understand as, “Oh, you too? I thought so.” For the first time in my life I was with more than one other lesbian. And we were sort of in public. My heart pounded. Afraid but exhilarated, as others described (Stein, 1997; Esterberg, 1997), I felt at home in a stranger-like way. My fear was a different kind of fear because I realized that I was not alone. I had found other humans for whom I had been searching, with whom I felt affinity.

Young (2011) described,

Membership in a social group is a function not of satisfying some objective criteria, but of a subjective affirmation of affinity with that group, the affirmation of that affinity by other members of the group, and the attribution of membership in that group by persons identifying with other groups. (p. 172)

I had found my group. At the end of the night, I left with my new friends to the sound of the Esther Phillips disco version of “What a Difference a Day Makes.” No shit. If I had known about it at the time I might have said, let the symbolic interactionism begin (Charon, 2006).

Stein (1997) described my version of coming out as “the medical model” (p. 47), one of two predominant “accounts of lesbianism” that prevailed during the 1960s and 1970s. I can identify with certain aspects of her description of this model but not all. For example, I experienced coming out as “to reveal something that had before been hidden, to disclose something that occupied the very core of one’s ‘being,’ and to build an identity on the basis of one’s stigma” (p. 47). However, I did not associate my desire for women with “gender nonconformity, exemplified by the mannish woman” (p. 47). The contrasting and emergent accounts of lesbianism was “influenced by social constructionist thought, [that] considered lesbianism to be a product of multiple influences rather than being traceable to a single cause, a lifestyle choice that entailed conscious self-reflection and identification” (Stein, 1997, p. 47).

I do not believe either of these two descriptions to be entirely accurate portrayals of my coming out or understanding of my being lesbian. They both have truth and may be true as Stein described for some but not for me. As I explained, social constructionism describes why I needed to leave Texas to continue my development of identity but does not clarify my initial lesbian impulses and desires. The “medical model,” or essentialist view combined with social constructionism and symbolic interactionism, is how I have come to understand how I became a lesbian. Like most dichotomous constructions and taxonomies, the one between essentialism versus construction misses the mark. Important as they may be to explain certain characteristics of individuals, these two sides of the argument do not cover the gamut. Sexuality, like gender, is much more complex than a linear continuum.

The social constructionist argument was used by the early lesbian-feminists and separatists who argued that any woman could be a lesbian, that all women could fall somewhere on the “lesbian continuum,” from “sexual lesbians” to “political lesbians” (Phelan, 1989). While I subscribed to this idea at one time, because it was the community understanding of lesbian, I was never very comfortable with it personally. While it may be true at some level, for example, we all may be bisexual but have aligned ourselves based on social construction, such placement also diminished the struggles of those lesbians who had always identified as real, sexual, primary lesbians (Esterberg; 1997; Phelan, 1989; Stein, 1997).

Although I grasped the idea of “women-identified-women,” whom one slept with was not the same thing, not to me anyway. Rich (1986) intended the continuum “to include a range—through each woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another

woman” (p.51). Rich’s ideas did not directly influence me until much later when I gained access to “the women’s community.”

During that one year at Fort Bragg I went to my first gay bar, had four affairs with women—including an officer’s daughter, was the target of witch hunts, had sex with a couple of men, partied a lot, had a couple of attempts at something resembling serious but very short relationships, and experienced the break-ups and drama that inevitably went along with all of this. I probably came very close to expulsion from the Army at Fort Bragg. Despite all of this I somehow also received an Army Commendation Medal for Meritorious Service for conducting classified research of certain unnamed countries in the Middle East. One day I was a STRAC soldier and the next I was showing up to formation “smelling like a brewery” as my Puerto Rican Staff Sergeant put it one morning. I packed in a lot.

During the affair with the officer’s daughter, a rumor started going around that the Army base was conducting a witch-hunt and that my name had been mentioned as one of those witches. The officer’s daughter had picked me up in the bar and I did not know nor did I think to ask if she was underage or if she was an officer’s daughter. She seemed far more mature and knowledgeable than I was. Turned out she was 17. I was 21. I had suddenly become the older woman. When I learned of the witch-hunt and realized that what I was involved in was at a minimum illegal, I abruptly broke up with the officer’s daughter.

I was like an un-socialized one year old puppy, running around, over, under, structures and blockades, manically trying to exhaust myself, but very sensitive to overt criticism. But I was trainable and eager to learn. Along with all of this revelry, I accrued or perhaps added to the shame and fear connected to my sexuality that dated back to my high school days.

After a year of this exciting but nerve-wracking debauchery, I received my orders for Hawaii. I was getting the hell out of Fayetteville and had a chance for a fresh start in paradise, leaving my affairs behind. Reflecting on these times, I am more than a little appalled at how easily I seemed to make these relational transitions. I can blame some of my apparent lack of relational ethics then on my youth, but I also had no rules or ethics to follow. I was trying to be honest, as my father demanded of me growing up, and not purposely hurt anyone, but there is a lot of room for error in that ethic. Loving women came naturally it seemed, but the rules of behavior, the cultural rules, were missing.

Married for Money

Hawaii and 1977 marked the place and time of my last heterosexual affair to date. In North Carolina I had begun calling myself bisexual, which seemed more acceptable than being a full-fledged lesbian. I heard and felt turned off by the stereotypes of lesbians being “man-haters” and at the same time “women wanting to be men.” I did not understand that inconsistency in attributes, but I knew I did not want to be either. In Hawaii, as I encountered other lesbians I began to come to an understanding of myself as a woman who simply was not attracted to men sexually. I identified such a person, myself, as a lesbian. Similar to others who described their experiences of coming out (Stein, 1997), I stopped denying what I believed then to be my true essence and I finally came out.

I made two very good straight friends in Hawaii. One of them was a woman, Angie, who I had known in North Carolina. Angie and I used to run into one another when coming home to the barracks at night after our respective carousing, except she had been at straight bars. The Army reassigned Angie to Hawaii at about the same time as I also received my orders to go to Hawaii. Soon after Angie came to Hawaii, she started dating Ryan. Ryan and I worked together,

side by side. Both from Texas, Ryan and I had hit it off almost immediately. He took me under his wing right away and became sort of like an older brother.

One day, Ryan and I were talking at work about how married people were able to live off-post and were provided extra money in the form of a stipend to do so. Ryan and Angie did not want to marry because they were afraid it would ruin their relationship. I do not remember who proposed first but before you knew it, Ryan and I were at the Justice of the Peace getting married with Angie as our witness. Soon after that, Ryan and I moved off post together. Though Angie retained her on-post bed, she usually stayed overnight with Ryan. All three of us would drive into work together in the mornings causing all sorts of rumors. I started to see that there were all sorts of ways to construct a family.

People throughout history married for money, convenience, title, and family. Often women did not have much of a choice about who their spouse would be. And often, marriage did not preclude the marriage partners from having their own separate lives. Ryan and I did not plan to consummate our marriage by having sex. But Ryan did not officially know I was a lesbian when we married.

Soon after Ryan and I married, I started coming out, for real, to myself and to others. I had ended things with my last boyfriend, avoiding him until he forced me to tell him what was going on. I told him I was a lesbian. He said, that was “cool,” that he would not mind if I had girlfriends, too. So, as many do, I had to come out again. I did not realize then that coming out would be an iterative, lifetime project. I started going to National Organization of Women meetings (NOW) and meeting other lesbians. It was a step up or out from the bars. Angie, who had gone with me to some of these meetings, told me that I needed to come out to Ryan. He was already or was becoming my best friend in addition to being my legal husband.

I do not remember Ryan registering any dismay or surprise at his wife, on paper only, being a lesbian. We continued along our merry way, all cohabiting and happily remaining friends. But my new lesbian community was pulling me more and more away from my newly constructed “family.”

Imagine my surprise! I love that I have found you
 But I ache all over wanting to know your every dream
 Imagine my surprise! To find that I love you
 Feeling warm all over knowing that you've been alive

Pirates off an Eastern Coast
 Women you lived in danger
 But I hear your laughter free of petticoats
 No need for foolish chivalry
 Though you're living in the eighteenth century
 You make love to each other on your boats out on the sea

Lady poet of great acclaim
 I have been misreading you
 I never knew your poems were meant for me
 You lived alone in a quiet den
 Pouring passion through your pen
 And weeping for your lady lovers
 As they safely married men

Rugged women gone before me
 Paving paths like pioneers so often all alone
 I dreamed of queens and cinderellas
 Facing disappointment when I was grown
 Facing disappointment when I was grown
 (Near, 1978)

The Women's/Lesbian Community

Much like going to that first gay bar in North Carolina, meeting the women at NOW was exhilarating but frightening. The bar had felt safer. These NOW women were serious, political, feminists and all seemed to be lesbians, to my surprise. I learned that frequently in these groups, “woman” was an unstated code word for “lesbian.” Women's music really meant lesbian music. Women's community really meant lesbian community. This may not have been the case across

the board but it sure seemed to be. I did not know of the battles waged between feminists and lesbians nor those between lesbians and lesbian-feminists.

There was more at stake now. I wanted to be a "good" lesbian and feminist. Though I did not know what the rules were, I intuited or just picked up on a more narrow, strict, way of being. Carousing at the bars—out. Sleeping with someone else's lover—maybe. Trashing heterosexism—definitely. Dressing femme—NO. Dressing butch—NO. Androgynous (which by today's standards was butch) —YES. Wearing Birkenstocks and being vegetarian—YES. These women seemed different from me in many ways most notably in class, education, and place of origin.

At the NOW meetings I met two women from Minnesota, a psychic named Waterdancer—Water for short—and her lover, Johanna who was a songwriter and singer. I met one woman, who was in at least her sixties, perhaps even her seventies, and her much, much younger, twenty to thirty year old "lover." The older lesbian had not come out that long ago and had children and grandchildren. I have to admit that then I was a little shocked, but also sad she had not felt free to be a lesbian her whole life.

I met others who were beautiful, serious, and angry, in a "fuck the MAN" sort of way, but still nice to me. Actually, they probably would never have uttered any sentence that contained "fuck" and "man" together. They were the most radical people I had ever met to date but very matter of fact about it. I remember them as all being White though I would not have noticed that at the time. They were gorgeous, smart, and they intimidated the hell out of me.

I had been "dating," that is "sleeping with," "having an affair with," a Black woman I worked with, who, following military protocol, everyone called by her last name, Woodcock; Wood for short. Her crowd was almost the polar opposite of the NOW women. Her primary

relationship was with a White woman, Gigi, who worked as a high-end prostitute, or that was the story, and I believed it. When Gigi would go away to conferences for work, Wood would play. Her friends were all Black and somehow affiliated with Gigi. I was also afraid but intrigued by them in a different way than the rich, educated, political, White NOW women. However, being afraid and out of my element, did not seem to stop me from responding to whatever stimuli presented itself.

Wood may have been a kept woman. She drove a big new Cadillac that I know she could not afford on her Army wages. I ended the affair with Wood or she ended it with me after Gigi came to our barracks one night and caused a commotion, yelling up for me to come down because she wanted to fight me, like literally, mano a mano, fisticuffs. Another Black lesbian from the barracks had "outed" us to Gigi. I was not a fighter and had no idea how to be a fighter, nor did I have the guts to be a fighter, so I declined.

Again rumors of a witch-hunt along with drug raids arose. I withdrew from Wood and my other bar associates, as I started to go to NOW. I became closer to Water and started hanging out with her lesbian friends. I later learned that Johanna left Minnesota as an attempt to break up with Water but after Water followed her to Hawaii, they renewed their relationship. The details were fuzzy, at least to me, and possibly them as well. I liked them both and became drawn into their world. I started going to parties they hosted, met friends of theirs from Hawaii, California, and Minnesota.

Though Water and Johanna were still in the process of breaking up according to Water, they both seemed very interested, even flirtatious, with me, the new "baby dyke" on the island. One evening while I was visiting Water, she invited me into her bedroom to see the "etchings on

her sheets.” I thought she seriously had etchings on her sheets so I followed her into the bedroom. I soon learned that Water was seducing me. We became lovers that night.

Water introduced me to an entirely different lesbian community than I had previously even known existed. My world expanded again, a phenomenon that seemed to be a constant at that time of my life. Water, Johanna, and their friends listened to “women’s/womyn’s/wimmin’s/womon’s music,” which included songs like “Leaping Lesbians,” “Ode to a Gym Teacher,” “Sweet Woman,” and “Imagine My Surprise,” to name but a few. The soundtrack that began to accompany my life celebrated lesbians and women-loving-women. Most of the women's music then came from the East and West Coasts and included Black, Jewish, Latina, and Asian women along with White women. They were making their kind of music, for themselves and it appealed to enough women across the country, maybe world, to support them.

These new lesbians made their own bread, cooked vegetarian food, wore cotton drawstring pants and Birkenstock sandals, did not wear bras, or shave, and some did not wear deodorant. I was busy processing all of this difference and starting to adopt the behavior myself, self-consciously at first and then full on. They represented a type of clonish lesbian, later stereotypically known as “granola dykes.” They were my introduction, my coming out, to lesbian community, lesbian-feminism, lesbian politics, and separatism. I was terrified and enthralled.

As I incorporated new acquaintances and lovers, my world expanded at the same time as it was contracting and excluding other friends, men in particular. The separatist wing of the lesbian-feminist cohort, at least according to Hoagland (1988), believed that we could not free ourselves from the influence of “heterosexualism” unless we chose not to live within its

ubiquitous systems. Hoagland, in *Lesbian Ethics*, calls repetitively for lesbians to “spin a [moral] revolution” impassioned by our “moral outrage” (p. 1). Separatism was a strategy but also, according to Hoagland and other separatists, a necessity if we, as lesbians, were to live an ethical life. Separatism meant engaging by not engaging, by separating from the heterosexualist paradigm, and by “dis-covering” ourselves. I was slowly beginning to learn the cultural rules.

Hoagland (1988) published her book ten years after I came out and was introduced to the “lesbian community.” Nonetheless the philosophy, politics, and community thinking of the era that Hoagland analyzed influenced me greatly. During that decade, I vicariously experienced much of the community building that Hoagland and others revisited, analyzed, and many dismissed as second-wave, lesbian-feminist, separatist, and therefore without value.

Hoagland also briefly considered monogamy and non-monogamy in lesbian relationships, two hot-button topics of the day. Same-sex marriage expansion in the United States would not begin to occur for another fifteen years beyond the publication of Hoagland’s book. Marriage, according to Hoagland, was the “heterosexualist” tool of “the fathers” intended only to control women and children. Like other feminist authors I read prior to the late 1990s, lesbian marriage was not even a consideration for analysis other than the historical reporting of non-legal “marriages” and commitments between women, like “Boston Marriages” or Harlem marriages between Black women, fully known to the Harlem heterosexuals (Faderman, 1992). Certainly there have been long term committed, romantic, sexual, and asexual relationships between women (Faderman, 1992, 2001; Rothblum & Brehony, 1993). But there has not been much other analysis of those relationships. Inroads toward same-sex marriage have led to further feminist analysis of marriage, but feminist and queer critics have been particularly unenthusiastic in their critiques.

I did not choose to be a separatist as Hoagland (1988) chose, though in many ways I lived as one. Hoagland described separation as “a central option both as a political strategy and as a consideration in individual relationships” (p. 54). This is not unlike the rule of non-engagement I learned in couples’ therapy. If someone lobbs you a bomb in the form of incendiary language for example, one may choose not to lob it back. Choosing not to engage, the ball falls away. Hoagland explained, “...the choice to separate is not *acknowledged* as a legitimate ethical choice” (p. 55).

Many have seen heterosexualism as the root and source of other ills, as Hoagland said, “...I am not trying to argue that heterosexualism is the 'cause' of oppression. I do mean to suggest, however, that any revolution which does not challenge it will be incomplete and will eventually revert to the values of oppression” (p. 67). Hoagland invoked a “moral revolution” and believed it only possible through separation from the dominant and oppressive system of “heterosexualism.”

Hoagland (1988) chronicled the rise and fall of lesbian community that I had participated in and proffered some reasons for its demise and possibilities for its resurgence. On one hand, marriage, an institution of heterosexualism, was not one of the possibilities for lesbians Hoagland envisioned; on the other hand, she considered monogamy and non-monogamy as legitimate choices for lesbians. Her view of the community seemed to be somewhat wistful and nostalgic, at least in 1988, owing much of the blame on its demise to lesbians' apparent inability to divorce themselves from the rules of heterosexualism. I am not convinced of that being the only reason.

I became “radicalized” by my new lesbian feminist friends and lovers. I had never considered the term, radicalized a negative term, as it is now used to describe people who have

become terrorists. I had found a home and a possible place to start answering questions whirling around in my head since I was fifteen. My new community and I were not plotting to do damage but there was talk of revolution of a different kind, not unlike Hoagland's (1988) moral revolution, premised on the demise of patriarchy.

Coming out

Lesbians did not all live as separatists and lesbian-feminists, without any interaction with men. Short of living in the woods, on a commune, and growing one's own food, living as a separatist seems like it would be very difficult to actually do. Hoagland's (1988) exploration of separation, however, entailed much more than just the physical and logistical difficulties of living separate. Hoagland's (1988) separatism could better be described as a sort of mindfulness of living mentally and ethically apart. Hoagland's premise was to desire and to create a "moral revolution," a way of living an ethical life as a lesbian under oppression. Hoagland's lesbian ethics were developed as an ethic imagined differently than the ethics we have usually adopted under heterosexualism. "And so I also want an ethics that embraces plurality, not uniformity, one which locates us in relationship to each other where we gain perspectives and develop interactively" (Hoagland, 1988, p. 284). All of my meaningful, visible, relationships seemed to be with other lesbians. Of course, most of us had men in our lives somewhere; fathers, brothers, friends, even sons and grandsons. What did we do with them? My coming home to the lesbian community was not without its own set of questions. I began to absorb the community ethos into my own worldview as I continued to try to figure it and myself out.

I saw lesbians I was connecting with as powerful goddesses. Like them, I began to invert the gender of deities and I feminized all other positive forces. God became The Goddess, though I did not really believe in either. Most of what I saw as negative in the world, I blamed on men

and patriarchy. I began to worship all things lesbian and feminist. I aspired to be like them. I felt powerful by association but not necessarily through interaction. Ironically, much deep insecurity began to surface as I began my self-reconstruction. Parties became stimulating sites of lesbian energy, but also locations where my lack of self-assuredness and paranoia became painfully inescapable. The marijuana probably did not help.

One day, while Ryan, Angie, and I were driving in to work, Ryan told us he was going to leave and go AWOL to take care of his children, whom his former wife was horribly neglecting. He had learned that his ex-wife had left the two small girls in an apartment for several days alone, with no food or care. Ryan officially requested a hardship transfer or discharge from the Army for this purpose; when they denied his request, he took matters into his own hands. While AWOL Ryan went to Texas, got his kids, and turned himself into the Army on the thirtieth day of AWOL, thus avoiding the much worse charge of desertion. The Army then, did not allow service members to have custody of their children and they were balking at giving Ryan a discharge for that purpose. Finally, by using a personal connection and persuasion, Ryan was able to get a discharge for reasons of hardship. Angie was also in the process of being discharged, but for reasons of unsuitability.

I had begun researching the ramifications of coming out to the Army the more radicalized I became. When Ryan decided to leave, I decided that I would also come out as a lesbian to the Army, my family, and pretty much anyone who I could force to listen. I did not come out to my grandparents, however, believing the news might kill them. I left the other relatives to my parents to tell as they wanted and as they were able to come out themselves as the parents of a lesbian.

Though I had done some homework about what the Army's options were for someone who admitted to being homosexual, I was still naïve about the process and how it might go. The year was 1977, 17 years before the Clinton administration would institute the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy prohibiting the military from asking about someone's sexuality but also prohibiting anyone from disclosing their sexuality, that is, from coming out. The policy in 1977 was if they caught you in the act they could discharge you with a dishonorable status. If you volunteered the information, they could give you either a general or an honorable discharge. The Army retained the discretion to do whatever they wanted based on unknown other factors. I now wonder, if I had been Black, what kind of discharge would I have received?

The morning after Angie and I took Ryan to the airport bound for Texas, I walked into my Commanding Officer's (CO) office. He was a very young and "green" Lieutenant and CO. I proclaimed, "I am a lesbian and I want out of the Army because of it." Seeming to skip a few beats he finally said, "I have to assume you are telling me this just to get out of the Army." I replied, "Sir, you can assume whatever you like, but if you don't believe me now you soon will." I am not sure what the hell I intended by that statement of bravado or stupidity. In my fantasy, I could envision throngs of lesbians and feminists marching outside the gates of the Army base. Thankfully, I did not have to try to make that happen.

The first thing they did to me after I came out was to revoke my security clearance, which meant I could not continue to do my job. I had not really thought through what the consequences might be between my declaration and the actual desired discharge. Because I had to do something and I could not do my job, they put me in a small, windowless room and had me sort technical manuals into a sort of library. I then created a little library, checkout system, so that

people could check the books out. That left me with 29 and 1/2 days where I sat in my private office that quickly began to feel like a torture chamber.

I went from being someone who was on the list for a Top Secret clearance to a pariah with no clearance. I became invisible to most of the officers, commissioned and non-commissioned (NCO). My enlisted co-workers knew I was a lesbian but were surprised that I had come out to the Army. Wood did not speak to me, afraid of guilt by association, like they did not know about her. Some days, as if for punishment, the officers made me go do a work detail like moving rocks from one ditch to the other. One day, during the rock detail, I went to the NCO club for lunch and several beers later, compliments of my Master Sergeant, came back to that ditch barely able to walk much less toss rocks.

Needing proof of my homosexuality, the Army required me to go to the Army psychiatrist who I had to convince that I had not known about my homosexuality before joining the Army. I obviously lied again—what else was I going to do? I did not want to spend time in Leavenworth Prison for finally being honest.

I wrote my parents and my brother long coming out letters. I could not do it in person. I did not grow up in that kind of a family, sadly, and I was not that brave. I did eventually go back to Texas to visit after leaving Hawaii. That first visit, when my Mother opened the front door, you would have thought the Army's Grim Reaper staff had come to tell her the bad news that I had died in action. She started bawling uncontrollably. Due to the virtual umbilical cord that I still feel when we are near one another, I also started crying. That is about all I remember from that encounter, sitting on the couch, with my mother and I sobbing and my father sitting in silence. Our relationships never returned to normal, whatever that was. I do not think we ever

really recovered. But recovered to what? We had all been living in our own versions of reality. My coming out was like chipping a hole in the dike; pun intended. A flood was sure to ensue.

My brother stopped speaking to me after I came out to him in a letter. He was, admittedly, ill equipped to deal with his sister being a deviant. My brother and I had been reared to be Southern Baptists, in a part of the country that, though progress has been made, is still quite behind in acceptance and even tolerance towards homosexuality. My biggest regret is that I was not able to understand or mitigate somehow the effect that the news of my lesbianism would have on the family.

My father was working a lot, which was not really different, but my mother was distraught about her marriage, and my brother was acting out. My brother's biggest influence at the time was my grandfather, Pawpaw, who every night before falling asleep, listened to religious radio preachers who preached their unique version of "The Bible." His other biggest influence was my mother's relatively younger cousin who had long hair, and rode Harley motorcycles real fast down those Texas back roads. Who was the better influence is a toss-up but probably for staying alive, I would have to give it to Pawpaw.

When my parents' marriage finally officially ended, my brother and I both blamed my father. I was sympathetic in some ways with how trapped my father must have felt. I believed he stayed with my mother as long as he did because of my brother and me. I had a hard time forgiving him, however, for not understanding that my mother had essentially given up her life for a man who lied to her. I blamed him for everything, as I thought a good lesbian-feminist should. He had been abusive. He had betrayed my mother. He was a man, after all. My father became the symbolic representative for all the evils of the "patriarchy."

I did not forgive my father for his adult reenactment on my brother and me of his own childhood abuse for many years. The way my mother described it, my grandfather was much “harder” on my father and his brother than they were on their kids. My father had his own demons to work through and unfortunately he took some of those out on my brother and me.

My brother found his wife along with religion, a denomination that according to my mother was “really conservative,” which was an ironic and frightening characterization coming from my mother. Years after I came out, I traveled from Minnesota to Texas to see my mother, grandmother, brother, his wife, and my nieces. I sat on my grandmother’s porch waiting for my brother and his family to pull up the long dusty driveway when he called to tell my mother they were not coming. He said he did not want me to be around his daughters.

I remember sitting on that front porch of my grandparents’ farmhouse where I had spent so many happy times as a child and just crying. Of all of the hurts and rejections suffered because of my sexuality that was one of the worst. After I cried, I shut off the part of my heart where I had kept my brother and resolved not to let him or anyone in my biological family hurt me again. My brother and I did not speak until about 20 years later when I came to visit my dying grandmother.

I grappled with how to reconcile not only the men in my life but my whole family. Their rejection of me made my rejection of them relatively easier. Couple that rejection with my growing non-academic but no less strident lesbian-feminism, and I would effectively become a separatist for many years. I never identified as separatist and only read shallowly about what the “community” believed separatism to mean. I did however practice without naming it; a separatism that Phelan (1989) said, “...is grounded on the metaphysical difference between male and female essence” (p. 57). Women were good and men, at best, not to be trusted.

Phelan (1989) argued, “The problem is not the act of separation, the moment of separatism, for some such space is clearly necessary for many women as a welcome antidote to ubiquitous male power and presence” (p. 57). The type of separatism that Phelan charged radical lesbian feminists as practicing “...leaves little or no room for the development of diverse, individual patterns of relationship with the larger society” (p. 57). I made semi-conscious decisions to separate, from my family, from community, and from the Army. I cannot assert that I was making these choices for ethical reasons but for self-interested reasons that felt like survival. I lived much of my twenties in survival mode, trying to live a moral, ethical life, separated from but still loosely guided by the ethics on which I had been raised.

Kicked Out

After about thirty days of living as an Army castaway, I reported one Monday morning, for what I assumed would be an easy discharge. The person at the front desk, who reminded me of Radar O’Reilly from MASH, glanced up at me with piercing eyes, eyebrows raised, and said something like, “You’re in deep shit. Wait here. They aren’t sure what they’re going to do with you yet.” Yet? I had been waiting 30 days! For the first time during those 30 days, I got nervous. I called Water and asked her to find my other little book of rules titled something like Lesbian Rights and Laws in the United States. It was a very small book. I got little more than symbolic solace from it but that was better than nothing.

I reflected that perhaps I should have been more cautious at the International Women’s Year Conference that past weekend. My picture and quotation had wound up on the front page of the Sunday’s Honolulu Times newspaper. I had attended the event, of course, full of myself and my newfound lesbian radicalism. A friend had called me over, “Hey a reporter is interviewing people ...”. I did not think twice as I spilled my guts about being discharged and

what I thought about the hypocrisy of the military. I had forgotten if I ever knew, the rule in the military that barred military people from making public statements, especially statements that criticized the military. I became afraid that I might not actually get out or worse. Visions of Leavenworth filled my suddenly panicked thoughts.

Finally, that afternoon, “Radar O’Reilly” came back with some discharge papers for me to sign, which I did as quickly as possible, not wanting to give them one more second to change their minds. I was out of the closet and out of the Army, with an honorable discharge to boot. They would provide a plane ticket back to my place of origin but back to Texas and my family was the last place I wanted to go. Instead I envisioned a gay mecca to escape to, where else but San Francisco.

Pretty much alone, I stayed in Hawaii another couple of months, collecting unemployment and soaking up more lesbian vibe along with the sun, surf, and Maui Wowie. Waterdancer decided to return to Minnesota. I imagined a fantasy world of lesbian activism in San Francisco, which perhaps I might be a part of? Olivia Records was then an Oakland based, women-only music collective responsible for much of the women’s music in which I had become immersed. I entertained thoughts of auditioning but I did not have a clue or the confidence to do so. But, I, a young, newly out lesbian, was ready to explore my new world.

Lesbian Community, West Coast

THE NEXT SESSION

LYN

Then, Doctor, I went to this Holly Near concert.

I saw Edie waving me over... She looked so *different*.

She was wearing Indian cotton drawstring pants,
Birkenstock sandals and a "Sisters of Silkwood" T-shirt.

She introduced me to her friend Pam. She's clearly into a new phase.

And then someone very attractive came over, passing out candles. An artist from the Woman's Building, Janet.

She was wearing Indian cotton drawstring pants, Birkenstock sandals and a "Lesbians Ignite" T-shirt. She'd made the candles herself.

Not the usual phallic-shaped.

They were formed like a...a beautiful labia majora.

(Wagner, 1986, p. 149)

Making up the rules

I arrived in San Francisco with \$200, my 1971 Martin D-18, and my red Jansport backpack, which held the rest of my worldly possessions. I decided to leave Hawaii on Labor Day weekend with loosely made plans. A woman from California whom I met in Hawaii told me that she knew people in Oakland, where I could stay. I arrived to the San Francisco airport with a couple of phone numbers. I tried the local number and got no answer. This was before mobile phones or answering machines, but I had some dimes for the pay phones.

People go out of town on Labor Day weekend, something that finally occurred to me after calling the number a few more times throughout the day. I began making my way, via bus and foot, to downtown San Francisco lugging my belongings. I felt very Simon and Garfunkle, except that I was alone, sans Kathy, sans lover, having “walked off to look for America” (Simon & Garfunkle, 1968) except that I was afraid to hitchhike. But still, I felt very Simon and Garfunkle. I was alone but excited in a way that I have only experienced when visiting new places, left to my own devices.

As I walked down Market Street in The City, I started to realize that I needed to find a place to stay the night. I literally had no idea where I was in physical space. I had a map, I am

sure. I knew how to read them, having spent my Army years making maps. Maps, however, could not tell you anything beyond one's geographic location.

I knew nothing about the people I was with on the streets of San Francisco or the nature of those streets. I was not in the suburbs, that much I knew. Several of the people seemed friendly, but I suspect that they might have seen me as an easy mark. A couple of them asked for money and I may have even given them some, though I did not have much myself. I have always been a soft sell.

One youngish but street worn man was one of the friendly ones and started walking along with me. He seemed like he might have been gay. I was very sensitive to stereotyping people then and worked against leaping to conclusions, all the while making internal observations. After he had followed me a couple of blocks I purposely decided I needed to somehow—gracefully of course—ditch him. Did I tell him I was looking for a place to stay? Was I that naïve then? Did I mention that my “friends” weren't answering the phone? I really was starting to want to connect with these women. Two hundred dollars, even then, does not last long. Here I was, relying on some version of faith, again, though I professed to be a non-believer. Feeling a little more vulnerable with each block, I saw a place with a classic “Rooms to Rent” sign hanging outside and I walked into the lobby.

I asked the man behind the small window at the hotel counter how much the rooms were. “Eight dollars a night for a private bath, six dollars without,” he replied. I do not recall him raising his eyebrows at the sight of me, as I would have. I had walked into a Holiday Inn earlier, but the prices would have made too big a dent in my cash supply so I walked on. Eight dollars a night sounded like a good deal and nighttime was coming. I needed a room.

Walking up the narrow stairs and down the dark hallways to my room I felt relieved to turn the key and plunk myself down in the privacy of my own room. The room was dingy, the shade of the window overlooking Market Street was broken, and my built-in \$2 bathroom could have used a refresh. Obviously this was not a fine hotel but I was used to army cots and futons on the floor. At least I could put my stuff down and my door locked.

I rested for a bit but I was antsy to see San Francisco, the city of my dreams and revolutionary fantasies. I went out, found some cheap food and probably a beer, and walked a bit, unencumbered by my possessions. I was careful to make my way back to my room before dark. There was an ice machine, a pop or soda machine, and a cigarette machine in the first floor lobby. I walked up the stairs, past a few people hanging out in the lobby, and returned to my room where I attempted to fix the broken shade for some evening privacy. I continued trying unsuccessfully to reach my Oakland connections using the lobby phone booth. I was beginning to get a little on edge. I had a place to stay the night. I would check back in the morning.

I probably read or played my guitar into the night. Perhaps I wrote about my adventure in San Francisco. I did that occasionally through the years, tried to keep a journal but I have never been able to maintain the habit. It always ended up sounding the same. Same thoughts, same problems, same struggles, love poems when I was in love; love, work, living, repeat, without much analysis. I did not have any idea what I wanted or needed in life, work, or love. Go with the flow was my modus operandi at that time. If she was attracted to me, then I was attracted to her. I was usually the pursued, lacking the confidence to be the pursuer. A positive spin says I was figuring it all out. I regret that I caused some hurt and pain along my blundering way.

At some time that evening in San Francisco, I heard voices in the room next door, separated from mine by a locked door. Through the thin walls, I heard drinks being prepared, ice in glasses, and most disturbing to me at the time, two male voices that, only in retrospect, I decided were involved in some sort of sexual play. However, the voices sounded like something out of a scary porn movie. I caught snippets of low-voiced, muffled conversation referring to Nazis and other unsavory characters and situations. My imagination may have been getting the better of me, but I began to feel more and more panicked.

I went downstairs and tried calling my Oakland contacts, stepping over the person in the hallway who had decided to sleep or pass out there. No answer. I walked back through the dim hallway, to my room again, trying not to wake the person in the hall as I stepped back over them. The voices continued next door, only louder, more provocative and slurry. I waited. Surely they would pass out at some point I hoped.

Hours later, exhausted from trying to block the activity next door, I left my room. I bought a pack of cigarettes, breaking my resolve to quit, and sat smoking, watching really interesting people come and go. I was starting to feel a little desperate. I realized slowly that most of the clients were not people planning to stay long in their rooms at any one time. I was not as naïve as I had been when I first joined the Army by any means, but being a part of this street life widened my 22 year old eyes further about different ways that people choose to or have to live. I waited and watched.

Finally, I started making connections after dawn that next morning. One of the Oakland lesbians, who I now remember as looking just like Tina on *The L Word* came and picked me up later that morning and took me back to their house in Oakland, a cute little bungalow. Later that evening I would meet her roommate and later her roommate's lover, X.

Through them, I would meet other lesbians in what was a comparatively very diverse community. X was Japanese American but part of a larger Japanese American and Asian lesbian community. There were African American lesbians, though at the time we said Black. There were Chinese, Chicana, Latina, or Mexican American women. The women I had met in Hawaii had been mostly Whites, immigrants to the islands.

This Oakland/San Francisco community was an open community, much more open than I was at that time. I barely knew myself. I found it difficult to be real with other people because I did not know what real was. I struggled to get beyond the intense shyness I had started feeling in the Hawaiian lesbian community. I do not think this was due to being a lesbian but rather due to being my mother's child. I was attracted and afraid. But I was good at going with the flow.

My love life, or sex life, did not seem to suffer despite my shyness. I had an affair with X who had told me that she and her primary lover, my roommate, were "non-monogamous." I thought it was as simple as that but of course there were still rules, rules I did not know, and perhaps did not even matter. Even though X and her lover were "open," she also cautioned me not to tell her other lover, my roommate, of our affair.

I still remember when my roommate confronted me after learning that I had slept with her lover. I became the subject of their drama and my roommate's intense anger. Lesbians were really getting into expressing their anger at that time and she unleashed hers at me. Horribly ashamed, apologetic, I wanted to crawl away home except I did not have a home other than the basement apartment I was renting from the lesbian who was railing at me. I moved out and moved in with my friend and occasional lover in Cupertino where somewhere in my neighborhood, two young Steves; Jobs and Wozniak, were working on the first Apple computers.

From there I continued my sexual experimentation having one night stands with women I met in the bars and one clumsy and far too complicated, foursome. I am not referring to golf or bridge.

I learned that these types of personal relationships were tricky and could be deeply hurtful, despite what we told ourselves about how open and non-heterosexist they were. These interactions, hurts, and insults were what Hoagland (1988) described as resulting from our internalized heterosexism. Hoagland imagined a different ethics for her “moral revolution” that would accommodate open relationships and do away, presumably, with jealousy. I think her goals are good ones, for anyone, but I began then to question non-monogamy, especially for me. Non-monogamy seemed like a lot of work and had the potential to create a lot of bad feelings. But as I would eventually learn, serial monogamy also wore one out. Basically rules were unclear and we were living and enacting little distorted versions of our own upbringing. Hoagland was right about that. I did not know much about relationships but what I knew was that one at a time was hard enough.

The Bay Area in 1977-78 was a great and confusing place to be a young lesbian. As I hoped when I went there, I immersed myself, even if on the sidelines, into the gay and lesbian culture of the time, a very happening time for LGB people. The community elected Harvey Milk to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977. John Briggs, initiated a fight for Proposition Six, a.k.a the Briggs Initiative, which sought to require mandatory firing of gay and lesbian teachers or any public school employee who supported lesbian and gay rights. AIDS and HIV had not yet surfaced. Gay men wore crummy jeans and had long hair and frequented bath houses. Lesbians wore batik and tie-dyed undershirts, short hair and hooked up with abandonment of heterosexist rules. Of course I am generalizing but my experience was as described.

The LGB community seemed a lot freer then but our enclosing communities restrained us more. Any “out” action was “in your face,” because until then I/we had lived in the closet. We were a community in flux, beginning to feel our power, our pride, but also beginning to create the same sorts of oppression we raged against on the outside, within our own internally constructed community (s). Olivia Records, then in Oakland, comprised a cadre of women musicians, mostly if not all lesbian, who were cranking out albums like those I had first listened to in Hawaii. A controversy ensued at Olivia when a transgender woman became part of the collective. The debate about how the community defined a “woman” also raged on in other parts of the country. Unable or unwilling to sustain the collective record label begun in the 1970s, Olivia became a successful lesbian cruise line in the 1980s, still in operation today.

My Oakland roommates and lover had connections to Olivia. I went to house parties that included members of the collective and others of what seemed to be the “in” lesbian community. When, decades later, in ironically the first feminist class I had ever taken, I later heard people describe “second-wave feminists” as mostly White and racist, I was not sure who they were talking about. I had been a peripheral part of that era and my experience had been exactly the opposite. But I was White, so what did I know? For the non-White lesbians, the experience was likely very different. Years would pass before I understood the unintentional racism I carry with me because my experience has been a White experience.

For a White girl from Texas, this was the most expansive and ethnically inclusive time of my life. I felt part of a community probably for the first time in my life, though on the fringes. Criticizing a movement from a future vantage point seems particularly prone to error of bias. While I think some of the analysis of the “second-wave” feminism was accurate and necessary, I also believe it is very important to recognize in retrospect, as much as possible, the different

conditions and pressures that produced the movements of the past. Critical analysis is appropriate, but completely trashing, out of context, is suspect. The predominantly White, queer theory that has become academically in vogue today, notably inherited much, accidentally or purposefully, from lesbian-feminist theorists of color as well as White lesbian-feminists (Garber, 2001).

When I was watching the movie, *Milk*, there was a scene in which the character of Harvey Milk, played by Sean Penn, was standing on a stage at a Gay Pride rally in San Francisco (Sant, Black, & Elfman, 2009). I experienced an intense déjà vu moment while watching this scene because I was standing in the same spot watching the actual, real, live Milk speak during my first ever Gay Freedom Day parade and rally. My first Gay Pride was an amazing, eye-opening, and indeed liberating event for me and was huge, even by historical numbers. Milk was one of the first to call for coming out of the closet as a political strategy, that day, an act that I had already taken for personal reasons. The 70s did not mark the beginning of lesbian and gay rights actions but was a huge decade forward towards the progress that today finds marriage laws opening up to us right and left, East, West, and North, even in Mississippi.

I did not stay in Cupertino long. Water, with whom I had been corresponding, came to visit. We picked up where we had left off. I was soon making plans to move to Minneapolis to be with Water who would introduce me to the Minneapolis lesbian community with new rules. Within a few months of my leaving California, on November 27, 1978, Dan White, a recently resigned San Francisco supervisor, assassinated Harvey Milk along with San Francisco Mayor George Moscone. I watched the riots that erupted in San Francisco on television when White was acquitted of first degree murder but found guilty of voluntary manslaughter on May 21, 1979. White's defense, famously coined the "Twinkie Defense," was that he had gone berserk

from eating too many sweets (Shilts, 1988). The sentence would allow him to be released for good behavior in five years, a decision that was condemned by then Acting Mayor Diane Feinstein and others. Police animosity toward homosexuals reportedly played a role in the Castro area beatings and gay bar raids that occurred that night (Shilts, 1988).

I felt gay, not just lesbian, in a communal sense of solidarity. I felt rage at Milk's killing and White's easy acquittal as did those I felt to be my gay brothers. Not that many years later, when many gay men began dying of the then unnamed Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and the government's lack of acknowledgement or support for those men, I, along with my lesbian/gay community, felt similar outrage.

Minnesota, Where the Lesbian-Feminist Women are Strong

Minnesota held, sustained and provided me a home for 35 years from 1978 to 2013. By comparison, I lived in Texas, my birthplace, for 19 years. People would always ask me, incredulously, why I ever moved to Minnesota from California, Hawaii, North Carolina, and Texas. My answer depended on who asked. If it were someone I did not want to come out to, I would answer, "I met people from Minnesota in Hawaii, came for a visit, and fell in love with the state." If I was out or wanted to come out, I would tell them the truth, "I moved because I was in love with a woman. I moved for love." I stayed because I did fall in love with Minnesota and a couple of other Minnesotans.

Minnesota in the late 70s was a very different lesbian community than the one I was coming from or it felt so to me based on that first group of lesbians I met through Waterdancer. Water, who was Jewish, had constructed a successful career as a psychic. One of her roommates was a graduate student of geography. Another roommate was a witch. Water would have women-only Seders and the witches would have ritual Wiccan dinners. They all shared a big

duplex a couple of blocks from the lake typical of the beautiful old homes in that neighborhood. I found myself a small apartment on Powderhorn Park, close to the area coined Dyke Heights for apparent reasons.

Karen Clark, the first and longest serving open lesbian in the State House of Representatives lived in the neighborhood though she had not yet sought elected office. Allen Spear, the first gay Senator in Minnesota, had been in office already for six years, four of those years as an out gay man. This was several years before San Francisco elected Harvey Milk. Minneapolis felt like a good place to be, an open place with a vibrant gay and lesbian community. I was in love, in a new place, and excited about both.

Waterdancer was eight years older than I, which felt like a big gap to me at the time. She was much surer about everything and securely a member of The Community. I, by contrast, was flying by the seat of my drawstring pants. What sureness I felt was really false bravado. Somehow in Minnesota time slowed. Perhaps it was a function of getting older, trying to be more serious about my life and my future. I was trying to follow my bliss, find my dream, be myself, figure out the color of my parachute, and dance to my own music as all the self-help books exhorted me to do. But without anyone to guide me I was continuing just to go with the flow. Plus I needed to make a living.

I was used to going to the bars, dancing, and partying in San Francisco. There were rules in the Bay Area, too, but maybe they were more diffuse or less stringent because there were just so many more diverse lesbians, something I had grown accustomed to. Suddenly in Minnesota, through Water, I started going to the Women's Coffeehouse, a weekly event that took place in the basement of the Plymouth Congregational Church, located in a centrally located neighborhood of Minneapolis.

According to Enke (2007), the lesbian nature of The Coffeehouse was not emphasized though also not hidden. But like most things then, if it was called a Women's anything, it was lesbian. The Women's Coffeehouse was where I really started to notice how, from a distance, one woman almost looked like a cookie cutout of another at least in their dress. I hate to contribute to the stereotype, but it was true that, on any given Friday night, a large proportion of the women at The Coffeehouse would be dressed in flannel and jeans, another large proportion in button-down oxford shirts with khakis. Many women also sported short barbershop haircuts. Now I have no problem with any of these items of attire and still wear them, but we did comprise a sea of androgyny. Some women who fell outside, the young, White, middle-class dykeness of the bulk of us, thankfully helped begin pushing the limits of what was acceptable garb. Enke (2007) described a similar scene

...racially coded aesthetics reinforced segregated, spatial identities: as Kim Hines [African-American playwright and actress] and Karen Clark [White, Minnesota State Representative] had discovered at A Woman's Coffee House in Minneapolis, "appropriate"—that is legible—feminist and lesbian gender expression seemed to depend on styles associated with whiteness and middle-class privilege in which jeans did not denote "laboring" but rather, "*going out.*" (p. 258)

We were afraid to be too feminine and bound to traditional femaleness and afraid to be labeled as "like men," though I do not know how most of us got around that one. Once there was a special prom night for those lesbians who had not gone to their high school proms or not gone with whom they might have really wanted to go. I attended with my date, both of us in matching tuxedos we had found in the backroom of a local gay-friendly tuxedo shop. In our androgyny, we began pushing gender norms though "woman" was the gender that feminism claimed. Lesbian-feminism, however, had begun to question the category of "woman" as a construction, predating queer theory's blurring of gender.

Dressing “like men,” was not, however, a question of being disruptive for most of us, at least not for me. It was simply that I felt most comfortable dressing like that. I had not grown up dressing much differently than that except for the obvious tuxedo transgression. I did go out for Halloween a couple of times in drag as a man, but that was drag. I also performed in a drag show once, but I could not decide who to dress up like, Lauren Lennox or Boy George, who were both transgressing gender stereotypes by then. I chose Boy George. Perhaps that experience made me start missing dressing in a more “feminine” way.

The Coffeehouse was a sober space, but the room that one had to walk through to get to the main dance room was more smoke-filled than any bar. I smoked off and on also so I did not find it all too objectionable though the contradiction it represented was unavoidable. There were rules. Tobacco seemed to have become the replacement for alcohol in this sober 1970s environment. Most striking, compared to the Bay Area, was that most of these women were White.

Enke (2007) recounted several women’s only spaces that were born in the heyday of 1970s feminist separatist movements, including the Minneapolis Women’s Coffeehouse. Enke’s (2007) description of The Coffeehouse and its accompanying political dramas fit my recollection. I recall one incident that I remember as particularly unnerving but according to Enke was happening in all such venues then. The women were arguing about whether or not to allow boy children into the space. The argument heated up with one woman standing up on stage railing at those sitting in the audience, and audience members railing back at her. I did not understand what the big deal was. I thought, “the boys can’t help being boys.” As was my typical response, I did not join in, choosing instead to ponder the issue on my own.

These sorts of dialectics, predominantly around issues of gender, sex, and a woman's right and need to have a safe, man-free space, were popping up across the country at other women's spaces. The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF) was and still is an international music event where many of these disagreements and debates either began or evolved. One persistent issue was finally resolved in 2006 when MWMF allowed trans people for the first time (Enke, 2007, p. 265). The inconsistencies and divides that became apparent due to the rigid definitions of what a woman/womyn was, contributed to both the unraveling and the reimagining of community. Echoing the insights that lesbians of color, working-class, and non-academic lesbians had made decades earlier, Enke summarized,

Even the most rigidly defined feminist sites are and have always been intersections composed of the meetings, collisions, and exchanges of older and newer activist formations. The spaces of our everyday lives, quite apart from named feminist institutions, also consist of such rich intersections. When recognized as such, they serve as perfect reminders that earlier feminist activism helped make more recent gender-activism and trans-activism, as well as antiracist and class-conscious activism both possible and necessary. Sites of contestation can often be productive sites of connection, coalition, and collaboration. In addition, they still provide useful lenses for understanding the exclusions, transformations, and the continued popular reach of feminist activism. (pp. 266-267)

Community and Marriage

Separation and Intersections

I own a book from my early introduction to the lesbian community that has somehow survived all of my moves, *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement* (Myron & Bunch, 1975). This little lesbian-feminist rulebook, published by Diana Press, contains a collection of essays, all hoping to explicate and invigorate the lesbian-feminist politics that were already under fire. Its authors, a collective of women who named themselves The Furies, had come together to write, critically analyze, and organize around lesbian-feminist politics.

I do not remember purchasing this book, but I surely read it and it most definitely informed me to some degree. It provided a base for me. I did not have many books, though I loved reading always; I was not an academic though I secretly dreamed of being one. I was simply trying to figure it out. This book made it clear that feminists at that time, in addition to the society-at-large, did not really want lesbians. So, the lesbians broke off, theoretically and communally.

In a world devoid of male power and, therefore, sex roles, who you lived with, loved, slept with and were committed to would be irrelevant. All of us would be equal and have equal determination over the society and how it met our needs. Until this happens, how we use our sexuality and our bodies is just as relevant to our liberation as how we use our minds and time. (Reid, 1975, p. 103)

Reid, in her chapter of this little book, *Coming Out in the Women's Movement*, described the world from which she had come—married with children, depressed, no chance for meaningful work—that propelled her to the women's movement first and then to choose to be a lesbian. For women like Reid, the desire to be a lesbian was as much about community as about relationship.

As I described, this was not at all my experience of coming out. I did not have to talk myself into touching a woman, as Reid described. However, I understood the politics and need for solidarity that made women like Reid want to be a lesbian and part of the lesbian-feminist community. I have friends, even today, who lamented to me that they wished they could be lesbians because of difficult relationships they had with men. I hasten to remind them that relationships with women can be just as difficult.

My moral revolution would be one where LGBTQI AND my heterosexual friends, men and women, feel free to be whatever they wish, desire, and feel; free to make community and family as desired; free of the heterosexualist and sexist systems that have restrained us all. Like

Hoagland (1989), many believe marriage is part-and-parcel of those systems. Because of this study, I begin to wonder whether they might be right. But I am having a hard time giving up on marriage.

Without losing our differences and benefits that derive from them, my moral revolution would extend and blur the boundaries as well as continue to expand the intersections of our communities rather than narrow and harden them, as I believe separatism attempted to do. There is much of Hoagland's (1987) ethics and examination of lesbian community that I think must be helpful to any community. The lesbian community that I grew up in sometimes mimicked the exclusions of our larger communities in an attempt to disrupt the heterosexist paradigm. Lesbian-feminism blamed many of the other problems of the world on heterosexism, a view that I find too simplistic. I agree with Hoagland (1987) that heterosexism is intertwined with capitalism, sexism, and racism. But any view that only pits one side against the other is ultimately lacking, and, as destructive as it can be constructive.

As a community practice, the separatism that many lesbian-feminists advocated, does not work to move us forward, except as a temporary solution towards necessary healing. Necessary healing is significant—except in cases of abuse and dishonest engagement when safety becomes paramount—we must continue to try to engage. Yet the lesbian-feminist movement and community, rather than serving only as a cautionary tale and fodder for unfair criticism or appropriated theory, also offers lessons of inclusion and progressive movement.

My experience of coming of age informed by and surrounded by the lesbian-feminist movement of the 1970s was not just a movement of White, middle-class women. An underlying ethic and desire for inclusion was integral to the politics of lesbian-feminism. The California women's community of the time hummed with energy fueled by women of color and White

women working together. California comprised a much more diverse community in general than Minnesota, but many of the ethics and intent to be inclusive, to women, crossed the country and the world. The fact remained, many of those seeming to lead the charge were White women of the middle class. Women of color were not silent, however, and offered a much-needed corrective to the movement. Where the movement failed, in part, was in its ethnocentric counter-reification of the category of woman. The White women of the movement also did not immediately see or understand the experiences of Black, Asian, Chicana, Native-American, and other non-White women who did not share the White privilege of being able to separate from their racial and cultural communities.

Mothers with boys, transgender women and men—and others falling outside the narrow construction of woman that the lesbian-feminist leaders envisioned—began their own protests and criticism within the movement. The rigidity of the vision could not sustain the necessary expansion of ideas based on other identities and experiences. But rather than signify the end of the movement, the ability to criticize and examine ourselves, without annihilating ourselves was a strength that has led to (r)evolution. Queer theory sprung from this. Even the gay and lesbian civil rights movements sprung from the earlier movements' members who debated, criticized, and were brave enough to push for change in a very unfriendly time.

Though I was not very critically aware, I felt both the judgments and the promise of a newly constructed community with revolutionary ideals trying to sustain within the larger, hostile, containing community. A vital challenge of any leadership—and I count those women writers, thinkers, scholars, musicians, and poets of lesbian-feminism as important leaders—is how to stay engaged with the individuals of its community, their real life experiences, and knowledge. The lesbian-feminist movement, perhaps because of some of their separatism, gave

birth to important work and proved that they did not “need” men to survive for that time, in that way. We all need to separate, be alone, and do our own work sometimes (Hoagland, 1988). But we cannot ultimately survive alone on a small deserted island of people who look and think just like we do.

The radical-feminist tenet that all oppression stems from sexism simply did not match the experiences of many women; after a decade of the women’s liberation movement, they made it clear that focusing on sexism alone would not solve the problems of racism, classism, and homophobia in the world at large or in the movement itself. While white middle-class women continued to hold most positions of feminist institutional power in the 1980s, lesbian feminism and the wider women’s movement became largely focused on the agendas of women of color and sex radicals. (Garber, 2001, p. 19-20)

Fasching, Dechant, and Lantigua (2011) recalled, “The feminist movement emerged in its strength in the generation after Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, partly in response to a sense that justice for women was being left out of the struggle for human liberation” (Chapter Ten, Section 2, para. 10). The 1970s lesbian-feminist movement was an important critique to the larger feminist movement in similar ways as other voices challenged those who dominated. From those dialectics grew queer theory, limited in its own ways. The community that matters, that remains relevant and sustaining is that community that continues to dis-cover and include all of our divergent views in an ever expansive and intersecting globe.

Fuzzy Borders

Within two to three years of finding a community where I felt comfortable being a lesbian, I started feeling “boxed in.” I identified as a lesbian and with other lesbians, but I also identified with men, straight and gay. I identified with women who did not identify as lesbian. And I certainly knew that I wanted to be around other than White lesbians, though that would prove to be a challenge in Minnesota. I was a White woman, but my borders were nevertheless not hard but fuzzy. Separatism started to seem really boring.

I was not a leader, which means, I did not have the confidence to behave outside the norms of the lesbian community or to pave a different path for others. I went along. I fit in. Today they would probably call me “soft butch.” Later I preferred “capable femme.” All of us fit a relatively narrow gender conception of what queer theory calls performativity. We were women who had eschewed the feminism of our mothers but were cautious also not to present ourselves as too butch, too much like men. These were the norms of the lesbian-feminist community.

I was not the only one feeling the constraints and expectations of the community rules, written in political analysis by groups like The Furies and disseminated by symbolic interaction. Stein (1997) and Esterberg (1997) reported many other women who tried live within community rules but found the rules too narrow. We were supposed to be radicals and rebels, disrupters. Simply by being lesbians and eschewing the expected sexual roles we were that. Our androgyny and independence from men were also challenging as they disrupted what the larger community said women should look like. We were trying to live our lives and create a safe space within a larger culture that hated LGBT people.

Throughout my life, without much critical or academic thinking as defense, I argued in support of our differences as LGBTQI people, reifying if not deifying our individual and community worth and insight that derives from difference. Though I love our ability and desire to analyze ourselves, we need to avoid the urge to concretize who we are. That process leads to contraction of thought and community rather than expansion. These are the lessons of both lesbian-feminism and queer theories.

Fasching et al. said,

So the quest for the wisdom to know what a good life is requires that we wrestle with the stranger and the stranger’s wisdom (both within and across religions and cultures),

passing over and coming back on our continuing quest for wisdom. And when we do this with courage, humility, honesty, and selfless compassion, we become the good persons we are seeking to become through the very sharing of wisdom on a global scale. (2011, Chapter 3, Section 3, para. 15)

We must continue to challenge what we believe to be normal in all of our communities lest our quest for sameness and safety construct us a different type of closet. One of our strengths and gifts as lesbians and anyone who is different is the insight that comes from our difference and the lifetime practice we have of “passing over and coming back” that Fasching, Dechant, and Lantigua (2011) partially explored as “feminist audacity and the ethics of interdependence” (Preface, para. 3). I believe we all have the need and the challenge to participate in the practice. We all are different depending on context.

How Community Matters

We need community to feel safe to work these things out among ourselves, just like a family. But also just like a family, communities are sometimes so rigidly defined and defended that there is no allowance for the difference that sustains us. Anzaldúa (2012) warned us to listen to those who are different, to those who live on the borders. As Garber (2001) wrote, we need to pay homage to those voices that point to the third way, a different way that allows space for different voices to emerge, that allows for Foucault’s (1980) “subjugated knowledges.” We must continue to expand our community to be one that includes more communities, to enable passing over, coming back, inhabiting, and engaging the borders; to expand the points of our intersections.

Some believe marriage pushes same-sex couples more toward sameness, heteronormativity, and even homonormativity. I disagree. I think it will take more than marriage to make us the same. Though Phelan (2001) argued that we should not settle for such a flawed institution as marriage, Phelan also noted that regardless of rights we obtain, we will always be

other. Marriage will not change the fact of our difference from the hegemonic majority. But that, in my view, is not a reason to discard marriage.

Marriage inclusion means much more than simply gaining more rights and respectability—though inclusion is very meaningful. Marriage is symbolic and the battle for it has made us visible in ways that we have never been, even in the most belligerent and contrarian of the United States. Marriage includes us in the larger community and says that we have reached a point finally where the legal system at least, along with a growing percentage of the population, believes in our basic equality. In the context of my 40 years as a lesbian, the symbolism, visibility, and dialogue brought about through marriage expansion brings meaningful change that will make some of our lives better.

To gain marriage rights does not mean I believe marriage is not flawed. We must continue to push for expansion, inclusion, and the ongoing improvement of marriage itself. I believe we, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Allies (LGBTQIA) people, will do so because I believe it is in our symbolic DNA to push against and challenge, by our very existence, the normative institutions that many believe to be literally set in biblical stone. We as a people might someday move away from the binary and oppositional belief and current understanding about sexuality and gender through our continued engagement with our larger communities. For the immediate future LGBTQI people will continue to need to push, not just for marriage, but for our right to be.

Relationship, Community, and Citizenry

Communities are groups of relationships. Community does not exist without individual relationships of some kind between individuals, presumably individuals who have some likeness of characteristics and/or goals. In discussing what “full citizenship” implied, Phelan (2001)

implicated community; “Full citizenship requires that one be recognized not in spite of one’s unusual or minority characteristics, but with those characteristics understood as part of a valid possibility for the conduct of life” (pp. 15-16). Membership in community and citizenship in the case of the school program “Character Counts” described by Phelan, are not statuses “conferred by the law” but rather include “a general concern and respect for others as well as participation in public affairs” (p. 16). Lesbians comprise one group who has, by necessity and choice, grappled with how to live in community. Lesbians have learned aspects of how and how not to live communally. The lesbian community might better have been termed a social collective in Young’s (1994) terms as I experienced it, sometimes a cohesive force, at other times loosely configured. My personal experience with community has usually been almost as a lurker in the loosely configured collective except during moments of political solidarity with others of my collective. I have desired but often not been a full participant in the political body. I did not see myself as someone who had enough to offer other than a body, a vote, and occasionally an angry voice.

I have always been more comfortable, personally, one on one with someone because I found that type of interaction to be more real and more meaningful than what is possible in a group. Now I see that some of my discomfort was due simply to fear of interaction. But communities, people working and living together have their own power and deficits. Young (2011) suggested an alternative view of community.

I propose to construct a normative ideal of city life as an alternative to both the ideal of community and the liberal individualism it criticizes as asocial. By “city life” I mean a form of social relations which I define as the being together of strangers. In the city persons and groups interact within spaces and institutions they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity or commonness. City life is composed of clusters of people with affinities— families, social group networks, voluntary associations, neighborhood networks, a vast array of small “communities”. (p. 237)

Lesbian families, created through marriage, and other as yet known creative family forms, might thus participate in communities composed of such affinity groups.

The definition of citizenship that Phelan (2001) described in the Character Counts model presumes interaction and helps explain some of what is important about community; “acknowledgement of others as valuable, distinct members of a community” and “acknowledgement by others of one’s membership” (pp. 16-17). Community is something more than just a group of people happening geographically together. Community implies mutual recognition of the others’ membership and citizenry. Rights claims, like marriage, according to Phelan, are a way to “demand inclusion” but they also require “a complex of social practices” (p. 17).

According to the definition of community and citizenship as the Character Counts model that Phelan (2001) used, lesbian-feminist ideas about separation made sense. Unrecognized by the larger community, lesbian-feminists, and others, have needed to create their own communities outside of any “rights claims” (p. 17). But isolated communities are not sustainable in today’s larger, global, world. We need to expand and be part of the larger community, to interact in addition to intersect, to relate to one another and to recognize and respect our differences and commonalities. Lesbians (and others) might still learn from and practice Hoagland’s (1989) lesbian ethics, as a way of mentally and emotionally separating from those hegemonic forces which diminish us, but more importantly, as a way to sustain and reinvigorate ourselves while we continue to live under oppression.

Marriages and Kinship

Same-sex couples have lived outside the parameters of the law, creating relationships all the while. Gaining access to legal recognition of our relationships will not change the fact and

the meaning of the relationships we have had. Marriage will also not change the fact of some of our continued exclusions from biological families, and larger communities. Community is not a panacea any more than relationship is. Community and relationship are connected and dependent on one another. But marriage, in addition to the acknowledged privilege it bestows, offers a bridge, a mutual understanding about the committed relationship, between the larger communities and the LGB community.

LGB individuals have participated in relationships without the privileges of marriage almost as long as there have been LGB people. Those relationships have not all looked the same and have enjoyed varying degrees of community and familial support. Many others, myself included, have only sporadically been able to include community in relationship and relationship in community. Phelan, arguing against the need for marriage said, “Queering kinship will not require same-sex marriage” (p. 158). I agree. Phelan, however, then asserted, “Nonetheless, marriage remains a key concept for legitimating and privileging certain relationships. Extending the right of marriage to same-sex couples will indeed change cultural assumptions about who may and does love whom ...” (p. 158). Phelan summarized that despite the legitimation and privilege of marriage, the institution will not “deeply change assumptions about the relations between kinship and citizenship” (p.158).

I agree with Phelan’s (2001) analysis that extending marriage to same-sex couples will not necessarily change our status as second-class citizens because we are and will continue to be kinship that falls outside the genetic, “intergenerational ‘blood’ ties” (p. 158) that many Americans deem to be family. LGBTQ people have built family on ties that expanded that narrow definition and will continue to do so. But same-sex couples suffered needlessly because of their legal exclusion and inability, legally, to recognize or gain recognition by their

constructed families. Rather than continue to restrict legally recognized, or state sanctioned, marriage and family, we need to continue to expand it so that community does recognize same-sex couples, and other constructions of family as well. And when community, due to its inherent biases, fails to care for and represent those who presume its support, legally recognized families can care for themselves.

Family

In search of my sexual and relational identity, I left my biological family and place of birth and barely looked back. In the process of that search, I found a community, a new home of a sort, at least temporarily. But those lesbian-feminist communities never felt like family to me. I think it was partially because I did not stay put or stay connected with any relationship or group long enough.

The closest I ever came to feeling like family with someone in the first few years after I left my place of growing up was with my husband and his girlfriend. When Ryan was pursuing custody of his children, someone advised him that he should marry Angie, with whom he was living in Texas, except that Ryan and I were still legally married. One day Ryan called me to tell me he needed a divorce so that he could marry Angie. Of course, I said, yes, I would make that happen as soon as possible. Luckily creating a divorce was relatively easy in Minneapolis where there was a no-fault divorce law. I copied someone else's divorce, which matched the simplicity of mine and before you know it, we were divorced. Recently I saw Ryan for the first time in many years. He told me that calling me to ask me for a divorce that time had been really hard for him. He did not want to ask me for a divorce. He had loved being married to me though we were separated and had never really been "husband and wife" because we had never had sex.

However, he said, he loved knowing that somehow, though we were not related by blood, we had legally created a relationship. He had not wanted to break that connection.

Before Ryan told me his story, I never knew that he felt as he did about our divorce. I admit that I did not feel the same way about the legality of our relationship. As I have felt about many of my friends, I felt connected to Ryan despite any legality. But hearing Ryan's story made me pause. Though marriage was not the only thing that created a relationship between Ryan and me, the legality of the marriage meant something. Ryan had always told me that if I ever needed anything, I should let him know. The problem is, when there is not that legal tie, often no one knows whom to call when one does need loved one(s) unless they are a legally recognized family.

Though further expansion of marriage and kinship is outside the bounds of this dissertation, I agree with many who critique marriage for its current limitations. My life has included many types of relationship and kinship that do not fit the limited strictures of marriage but that certainly meet the criteria, at least my criteria, for family. There needs to be some way to include others who are not necessarily related by bloodline as family. Some critics of same-sex marriage point to the reality of what family is to LGBTQ people to ask whether the movement goals for marriage are inclusive enough.

Duggan's (2008) story of trying to find her ex-partner after the September 11, 2001 bombings in New York City, expressed in moving terms the true importance she and her "ex" had for one another. "If anything happened to her, the importance of being recognized as the one most responsible, the one most concerned, arose in my mind then as an absolute emotional and practical imperative" (Duggan, 2008, p. 155). Though, no longer lovers or romantic partners in a relationship that resembled marriage, they recognized one another as one of, if not, the *most*

important other person in their lives. Recognizing and attending to the complexity and fullness of who lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and queer people consider their “family” is critical to discussions of same-sex marriage. Realities of how LGBTQ people have constructed their significant relationships bolster theoretical criticisms of marriage as an institution.

Despite the connection and closeness of my homegrown family, I still longed to explore and find that relationship that would be “the one.” I had already been in love several times. I had also gone along for the ride a few times. I thought I knew the difference. I had figured out that what I felt with women was a far different experience than what I felt with men. Emotion, which translated to sex, was how I defined “being in love.” Thought and rationality were never factors for me in the relationship calculus. If the relationship felt right, then it must be right, I believed. Thus, I followed my instincts from relationship to relationship.

I took a while to figure out that also one of the things I was looking for, along with relationship, was a way back to family. My connection with Ryan and Angie was something other than biological or legal. Through them, as through my old high school friend, Claudia, I first started to learn about connection and the importance of it to me though its importance was not something I could yet articulate. My biological family and I were estranged and irreparably broken it seemed. I was beginning to understand that family; at least any family I wanted meant something other than matching DNA.

Herstorical Reflection: Going with the Flow

I was lucky to be able to buy the car that had been sitting in our rental house garage in Cupertino, California. It was a late 60 something or early 70 something Buick something. It was big and in good running condition. I would be able to fit my foam futon into the back seat with other bags propping it up. Lily, my dog, would be able to travel in style, other than the big couch car’s lack of air conditioning. I was heading east and north, to Minnesota, to be with Waterdancer, Water for short. She had re-named herself while tripping on acid at one of the 10,000 plus lakes after which Minnesota was named. She had seen dancers leaping across the water, from lake to shore to lake.

Water was a psychic and a writer. She had totally constructed her own reality. We met in Hawaii and had reconnected, so to speak, in California when she had visited me there. Though I had friends and lovers in California, I also had created my share of baggage. But we all seemed to have baggage then. We were figuring it out as we went. Mine weighed heavily on me but did not really change my behavior as I tried to navigate the rules in progress. Water and I had re-fallen in love and, as was my puppy like nature at the time, I was willing to follow her anywhere. It seemed like as good a plan as any.

I had almost decided to move back to Texas to be with my old high school friend, Claudia, who had become my lover when she visited California. Water stepped in before that happened and so I was off to Minnesota instead. Claudia and I were friends but we were also sort of like sisters so there was something a little incestuous about the whole thing, plus I did not hanker moving back to Texas. Water was a strong personality and very sure of herself in contrast to my more malleable nature. That combination would attract me more than once, and usually not to my benefit. I needed a tougher skin.

Water who moved to Hawaii to be with Johanna had finally, officially, broken up with her.. Lesbians and their drama made for a complicated affair, I was finding. Though I did not like complications, I seemed to have found my share of them in my short history as an official out lesbian. Lily, my dog, and I set off across the country, going south from San Francisco to drive across the desert. It was late summer. It was hot. People kept asking me if Lily was a coyote along the way. It seemed like a good story so I started saying she was part coyote and I was part Native American. Both of us were mutts I thought. We stopped frequently to hose ourselves down with water to keep from crisping in the desert. I started driving at night to avoid as much of the heat of the day as possible.

I did not have much money, of course, so I slept in the car along the way. I had tried to borrow money from my parents, \$500, to make this move but they were not supportive when I explained why I was moving. I was too honest. My father, according to my mother, thought the only time I contacted them was for money and so refused to help. It was true that I had stopped contacting them much, but I do not remember asking for money much more than this one time since I left home. Water's sister, also a lesbian, loaned me the money instead. She and I both would come to regret that loan. I took far too long to pay it back and she would end up threatening me with legal action to hurry me up. This was one of my first experiences of the downside of not having any financial safety net. This was also one of my first experiences that in lesbian-land it was not necessarily all for one and one for all. I did not speak to my father for about twenty years after his refusal. It was not just about the money. We had a long history, 23 years to be precise.

I am impressed at how much more brave I was then. For someone without faith, I seemed to exude it at the time. I was happiest and most confident when moving toward something, toward someone. Staying still was not something I did well. Traveling across the desert in the middle of the night was a cool but eerie strategy to avoid the heat. Not being able to see anything but the road ahead gave me lots of time to think without the distraction that comes during the day. I had always worked best when everyone else was sleeping. When I saw Thelma and Louise years later, I remembered that trip, especially that scene when the sun peeped up and started lighting the surreal landscape of sand, mesas, and cacti. Louise just stood out there, totally exposed, taking it all in, knowing her life was never going to be the same again.

As I recall my trip so many years ago, I see that I was chasing love wherever it took me. My heart drove me as it always had. My heart, that is my emotions, I thought, was where I

would find my truth. I had not yet discovered Joseph Campbell and his admonition to “follow your bliss,” but I had intuited the same self-advice. This was the era of finding happiness wherever the road, or the river, might lead. Go with the flow. As one of Lily Tomlin’s characters said and her long-time partner, now wife, Jane Wagner probably wrote, “how can you help but go with the flow when the flow is so heavy?”

I had visited Minnesota once, in the spring, before deciding to move. It was now late summer, 1979, and I did not have a clue what lay ahead. The Grand Canyon for all I knew. Nor did I care what I would find in Minnesota other than Waterdancer, the love of my 23-year young life.

CHAPTER FIVE: RELATIONSHIP MATTERS

The “mine” and “thine” of wedded folk
 Is often quite confusing
 And sometimes when they use the “ours”
 It sounds almost amusing

But you and I may well defy
 Both married folk and single
 To do as well as we have done
 The “mine” and “thine” to mingle.

Jane Addams, *Poem to Mary Rozet Smith*, (Brown, 2004, p. 259)

Looking for Love

Summarizing the meaning of one relationship, much less several, is not possible in the space of a dissertation, or a lifetime. Meaning is not static and changes with time, distance, and in the telling and reflection. In the chapter that follows, I will tell a short version of three significant relationships. Two of them were like longer-term marriages and one of them, my current relationship, has been more like a long-term engagement, a betrothal, now with decided marriage potential. By telling my relational stories I hope to convey the inherent complexity of my search for and expression of love and relationship. Love and relationship has been my motivation in life. I eventually learned that both my relationships and my self were important, that I could not have one without the other. Friends and family are relationships also. In the past I called my intimate relationships “significant others,” but many of my relationships with friends have been more significant than with some of those “significant others” or even with my biological family. In fact, I consider many of my friends to be my family, my tribe, or my significant group that is not a community.

Marriage is a framework. As Lauren, my current partner, my betrothed, says, “it’s all made up,” which is to say, we humans have constructed all of this. Like identity, community, and relationship, marriage is a construction, a model that we have choices about. We can change

it and improve it. As my relational journey shows, relationships matter, but they are also not everything.

Marriage is a structure, a legal, communal framework, and familial structure to which, until 2012, I had never had access, if I wished to create a lesbian marriage. If I had married a woman, at least in two cases, I think the structure of marriage might have benefited each of us individually and possibly our relationship. Not everyone has needed this structural framework and some vehemently do not want it. Those of us who have lived outside the bounds of legal structures have, nonetheless, created our own family and relational structures without the benefits of legal status. Marriage might likely change us, but we might likely change marriage to suit our versions of relationships and families as well. As shown, marriage has not ever been a static, unchanging institution but has been reworked throughout its history to suit its participants (Coontz, 2006).

My relationship with Waterdancer was short. After about a year, I auditioned for a gay theatre company and got a part. I was ecstatic. Inspired by seeing Lily Tomlin perform, I thought the stage was my destiny. Quickly upon getting the part, I “fell in love,” was seduced and seduced Jenny. I broke up with Water who was very upset with me. Jenny and I lived together and had a very “passionate” relationship. By that I mean, we fought a lot and the fights were not pretty, in fact, they were scary. I also had several other crushes and one longer-term relationship while working and performing at the theatre company. Jenny and I had broken up and during that time I became involved with another woman from the theatre company. I still have regrets about that relationship because I truly liked her, loved her even, but we never should have moved in together. When I broke up with her a year later, to get back together with Jenny, I did not do it well or fairly.

In my search for love and relationship, I caused pain that I wish I could take back. Though some speak of their relational experiences as exploits to relish, I wish I had known or had counsel about how to do relationships. The chapter that follows goes into greater detail about several more significant relationships which afforded me opportunities to learn. I ponder the realities of my lived relational experiences while considering how marriage might have changed those experiences, using Giddens's (1991) ideas about the "pure relationship," Hoagland's (1988) "lesbian ethics," and Walter's (2014) and Phelan's (2001) views about queer citizenship.

Pure Relationship

In need of a job, I signed up for a program that worked to get women and minorities into the trades. Through the program, I became an apprentice carpenter in the Carpenter's Union, and got a job with a company that did energy retrofitting on low-income housing. I had the potential to make more money there than I had ever made or knew how to make. The company was managed by a woman, and employed other women carpenters. Hannah started about the same time I did and the company assigned her to the same crew.

Hannah and I started commuting together in her little yellow Toyota pickup, a perfect vehicle for a lesbian carpenter. Hannah was quiet, thoughtful, gentle, a good carpenter, a hard worker, and funny. She had a head full of thick sandy hair and steel blue eyes. We liked one another or "loved each others," as Hannah's nephew said when he was a boy, quickly. Hannah and I drove home from far into the western suburbs after a hard day's work on Tony's crew, drinking a beer and then throwing our empty cans into the back of her truck through the cab window; laughing and talking. We would then each go home to our respective

girlfriends/lovers/significant others. I went home to Jenny, she to Lizzie. I began eagerly to await those morning rides in with coffee and afternoon rides home with beer.

In short order, Hannah, Han as her friends and family called her, and I broached the “we need to talk” conversation. We were “falling in love.” “Help me I think I’m falling, in love, again” as Joni Mitchell sang on Han’s tape deck on our long rides home. I was not yet 30 years and Han, not yet 29. There were exactly 1-½ years between us with her birthday being on March 14, 1957 and mine on September 14, 1955. We loved the same music and laughed at the same situational humor. We also each had other girlfriends or significant others. My girlfriend Jenny and I had already broken up once, and then reunited against my better judgment or more honestly without any judgment.

Honesty was still a paramount virtue to me at that time. My father drummed it into me and I did not put much thought into any nuances of honesty— just that one should always strive for it, at all costs. So Han broke up with her girlfriend and I broke up with Jenny, being honest with them about the reason. Han’s girlfriend went berserk, beat Han up, and tried to run her over with her little yellow pickup. Han fled to her friend, our co-worker Rowena’s apartment. When I told Jenny, she also flipped out and proceeded to beat me up, not for the first time. Feeling guilty I imagine, not wanting to back out on a prior commitment, afraid, but hoping for the best, I agreed to accompany her to a show she was doing in Duluth. What was I thinking?

I debated about even mentioning or including descriptions of the violence I encountered in relationship with another lesbian in this dissertation. I decided that I needed to discuss it but did not need to go into great detail. This is without question an important part of my story. I do not want to support continued secrecy about the fact that we LGBTQ people do experience

relational violence. I agree with Ristock (2002) who, in her research of lesbian partner abuse, emphasized,

I write this book as a lesbian and a feminist: as someone who has a stake in both identities. In showing that women are violent. I do not want to thwart efforts to end the huge problem of male violence against women; I want those efforts to continue as they must. Nor, in describing the damages done by lesbian violence, by each other and society, do I want to undo our sexuality. On the contrary, I want to claim the identity space we need to acknowledge the realities of abuse in our relationships. (p. xii)

In the 1980s when I first experienced violence in a lesbian relationship, there was scant support for lesbians outside of individual and couples' therapy. And not unlike what I have heard about intimate partner abuse in heterosexual relationships, there is much inherent shame involved in even admitting that there is abuse.

One incident in my relationship with Jenny, culminated with me sitting outside our apartment sobbing after a "fight" which likely included both physical and verbal elements. A young man walking by, who might have heard part of the whole thing, asked if I needed help or if he should call the police. Filled with shame and fear, I said no, barely looking at him. My simple response was replete with complexity. I did not want to expose Jenny, myself, or our lesbianism to criticism by the heterosexual majority, the patriarchy, the system, and our own lesbian community. I told myself when I left Jenny that I would never let myself lose my power as I had in that relationship. But relationships and the power within and without them are not so simple as I then believed. As Ristock (2002) found, there is a great need for research into violent lesbian relationships, into the many faces of abuse between lesbians in a couple. I agree.

Hannah and I got together under obviously difficult situations, both leaving other people who did not take the news well. Some might see a relationship that starts that way as doomed from the beginning, but that prediction did not turn out to be true in our case. We stayed together for fifteen years and if we could have married, I have no doubt that we would have.

Hannah and I had mutual friends through work and Han introduced me to friends she had from her childhood. When I first visited her family in Northern Minnesota or “up north” on the Iron Range, her sister, Ina, was suspicious. She had seen Han have two relationships at that point that ended rather badly and thought she should be taking a break rather than going from one to the other. She did not know me any more than she knew the others at first and had no reason to believe I would last any longer than the others. Frankly, neither did Han and I, but we did not think of it in those terms. As was typical for both of us, we just leapt.

At the beginning Han and I were sexually very passionate. After about a year, the sex had fizzled to barely a simmer but we still loved “each others” very much, which made, for me anyway, the lack of sex even more painful. Many Sunday mornings began with me attempting to initiate sex and Han attempting to divert, ignore, or otherwise let me know that she was not interested. Enough of these rejections led to my questions and conversations and attempts to figure out what to make of the situation.

I had been to enough therapy by then to be at least an intermediate at the psycho lingo, but Han was a complete novice. These discussions usually led to both of us crying, hugging, making up, and declaring our love for one another, but with no resolution of the initial problem. This pattern of desire, rejection, and reaffirmation would go on for fifteen years. I had not yet heard the phrase, “lesbian bed death,” but later I understood that we seemed to represent the phenomenon. Rothblum and Brehony (1993) provided several stories of “Boston Marriages” or “Romantic but Asexual Relationships among Contemporary Lesbians” (Cover) which interrogated how lesbians define significant relationships. “The term ‘Boston marriage’ referred to unmarried women who lived together in past decades. These women were presumed to be asexual...” (p. 5). These relationships have been researched and some modern day lesbians have

assumed there was a sexual component in addition to the romantic love expressed between the “friends” through letters and deed. But there is rare evidence that sex, the way we commonly think of sex today, was indeed present.

Many women in Rothblum and Brehony’s (1993) book, lived much as Han and I did after our first year. We were very much in love but without “sex” as we think of sex. We “cozed,” that is cuddled, were close physically and in other ways. And we did “love each others.” Some of the women in Rothblum and Brehony’s (1993) were happy to be just as they were. Sometimes one partner wanted sex or more sex and the other did not. I have one main point and this is that a singular, perhaps heterosexual definition of “sex” should not determine the validity of a marriage or partnership. A pure relationship only requires that both partners agree to the terms of their relationship (Giddens, 1991).

Despite our lack of sexual intimacy, Han and I truly loved one another. We had a fantastic time living together and were compatible in many other ways. We had very few fights during our fifteen years and those usually related to us trying to talk about why we did not have sex. I never considered that my insistence on “talking things out” was not very helpful to her need to process. My need for processing (what I now view as born of insecurity, more narcissistic than not) caused my partners (past, future, and present) and myself torment on more than a few occasions. I hope I have learned something along the way, but habits or inclinations are hard to change.

Han and I led relatively autonomous lives, as neither one of us was prone to or wanted to control the other though one might identify and analyze control in more ways than the outright direct bullying we had both experienced from others. In general we could talk to one another when necessary, but I think we also both let a lot of things go in exchange for peace and

happiness and laughter. I wish we had known a different way. I believe that deep shame and familial/societal controls, even subtle ones or those from our childhood, had a major impact on the health of our intimate relationship. Though we lived relatively open lives, as “out” lesbians, in some important relational ways we were not “out” to one another. Some people might call it “internalized homophobia” that is born from externalized, societal, and familial exclusion and being “othered” by others. Neither of us elicited positive responses from family members when we came out though Hannah’s family was far more accepting, in general. Han’s sister, Ina, over time, became our best ally and my good, if not best, friend. I consider her to be still my sister. Therapy might have helped us, but by the time we were seriously ready to try therapy, it was too late.

Our friends and Han’s family were part of the glues that kept us together. Han’s friends from high school and her childhood adopted me, and in turn I adopted them. Rowena worked with us. Jezebel or Jeze was Han’s oldest friend from grade school. They had also been friends with Edna, since childhood back on “de Range.” I felt almost instantly accepted by her friends after Han and I got together. They loved Han, as it seemed everyone did. And Han loved them. They all shared a history of having grown up in a small town in the relatively remote and beautiful northeastern parts of Minnesota. As I had fallen in love with Hannah, I fell in love with the lakes, bordered and dotted by granite outcroppings that Han seemed almost to embody in her beauty, serenity, and remoteness. Jeze and Han shared a language they had developed since they were kids. We all, Hannah, Ina, Jeze, Rowena, Tam, and Edna became a tribe of sorts, with our own constructed language and mutual history.

We named our loosely convened tribe, “The Norbs,” originally after Rowena’s landlord’s best friend Norb who offered comical phrases that we readily added to our lexicon. We invented

names that we assigned to the acronym N.O.R.B like National Organization of Raving Beauties and New Order of Raging Bitches. I imagine that the Shriners or the Masons or the Daughters of the Revolution or other such organizations probably started likewise, but we did not take ourselves that seriously. That was the point. Over the Fourth of July, we gathered together at the lake for what we came to call "The Norb Convention," an event that we would recreate once a year, when possible, for the next 20 years.

The first weekend Han took me to her dad's place on Birch Lake, there was a huge storm. Storms in northern Minnesota can be very impressive and scary. We were huddling in her late Grandma Lena's cabin on the old metal-framed couch. Lightning struck sideways across the lake with accompanying booms that seemed to threaten the rock foundation on which the cabin sat. Watching the light show through the old, rippled, picture window, I felt dramatically in love and at home, as if I had found what I had been looking for.

The lights had gone out due to some lightning hitting a transformer somewhere in that semi-wilderness. We sat on the old couch, the room lit up by the periodic streaks of lightning. Out of the darkness, there was a ZAP! BAM! Suddenly, we were standing, facing one another on the floor next to the couch. Neither one of us remembered how we went from sitting to standing. Her left side and my right were tingling and numb. We realized that somehow we had been struck by lightning. Literally shaken, we sat in the middle of the room away from the window to finish waiting out the storm.

As suddenly as we had gone from couch to floor, Han jumped up and ran out, screen door slamming, into the storm yelling. Not understanding, I too jumped up and followed after her. Then I saw, live, what she had seen reflected on the wall of the cabin. I ran after her barefoot down the rocky path to her dad's house. . "Call the fire department. The renter's cabin is on

fire!” she yelled. Trouble was, that we were in the woods. The reliable source of water around was the lake.

Her dad, who everyone called Huck, in his seventies at the time and probably more than half in the bag at that late hour, jumped up and started yelling at us to get buckets of water from the lake and start throwing them on the fire. He, Hannah, and I, barefoot as we ran back and forth, continued to do this until finally the old country fire truck finally lumbered down the hill toward the fire. They commended us for throwing on even the little bit of water because steam is what really smothers the fire, not the water.

We had saved some of the structure of the cabin, and eventually, years later, Luko, Han’s nephew, became old enough to rebuild the cabin to use as his own. Lightning, the firemen said, had struck a tree right by the cabin and caught the cabin on fire. The lightning had apparently traveled through tree roots to Grandma Lena’s cabin up through its structure into the metal couch where Han and I had been sitting. If we had not got down on the floor, Han would not have seen the flickering on the wall. Even though I identified as an atheist, I was inclined to find spirituality in such events. I felt fused, bonded by lightning and fire to Han that weekend.

Regrettably, I never got to meet Grandma Lena. She had passed several years earlier though I heard so many stories about her I felt I knew her. Hannah had been convinced that she was a lesbian because she was so close to all her church lady friends. When we found a book club book on Grandma Lena’s bookshelf written by none-other than Vita Sackville-West, we were even more suspicious of Grandma Lena’s sexual or at least affectional inclinations. I remember seeing it and gasping, “Sackville-West was a notorious lesbian in her day,” something I aspired to myself. Though I had never read anything by her, Sackville-West was famous partially for her cross-dressing and partially for her affair with Virginia Wolfe. We scoured the

pages for some lesbian content but gave up before finding anything explicit. According to Faderman (1995), the only novel Sackville-West wrote “to present love between women in clear terms” was *The Dark Island*.

We were desperate to see other lesbian depictions of any kind but were not academic in our pursuit to know more. Other lesbians of our day who, judging by the amount of literature that was written during that decade, were apparently very involved in lesbian scholarship and academia. Vita Sackville-West despite her gender ambiguity and numerous lesbian affairs, married a friend, “Harold Nicolson, a gay man who was a career diplomat” (Faderman, 1995, p. 269). One of their sons, Nigel Nicolson, wrote a book later titled, *Portrait of a Marriage*, in which, according to Faderman (1995) he “says that Vita and Harold truly loved one another, but their love was largely platonic” (p. 269).

Marriage, as Coontz (2006) affirmed, has always been something other than a simple institution for the purpose of love. Lesbians and gay men have been creative in how they constructed their love relationships because we had no prefabricated signifiers and structures like marriage. When Minneapolis passed a local bill to recognize same-sex couples in the form of “Domestic Partnership,” Han and I were probably one of the first to stand in line. We did not have a ceremony of any kind. I am sure that we told people, but we did not make a big deal about it. Being recognized as partners, as mates, mattered to us. Even though the piece of paper literally meant nothing to us in any material way, we wanted to be counted. We wanted the government, at least, to know we existed. We wanted recognition though we knew it was symbolic. We half-jokingly complained that we would never be able to get joint fishing licenses the way that married couples could. Not in our lifetimes.

Tired of the discrimination we faced as women carpenters, Han and I got jobs at the Post Office delivering mail. Not exactly dream jobs, except for those beautiful spring and fall days when everyone said they wanted our jobs. We were part of the first lesbian and gay rights group in the Post Office officially recognized in Minnesota and able to march in Gay Pride. When Huck died, I filed a union grievance because I could not use the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) to be with my dying “father-in-law” and my partner. These were small acts of rebellion and attempts at inclusions, but I believed all of these acts made a difference.

Our next-door neighbor was a schoolteacher. She once told us that she used Han and me as an example of a successful "relationship." We did not hide our relationships, that is, we were mostly out of the closet, but we also were not involved in the “community” other than occasionally attending community events and Pride. We had gay and lesbian friends, along with our straight women friends and their boyfriends. Like most other gay and lesbian people, we just lived our lives; worked, went to movies, watched TV, cheered on the Twins in the World Series, and very frequently went up north to “the lake.” Huck and his girlfriend, Ina and her boyfriends, and Luko and his girlfriends were actively a part of our lives. When we finally quit the Post Office, we moved up to the lake for a year, spending whatever we had so far saved for retirement. I had quit the Post Office to go back to school and took classes at the nearby community colleges so that I could start a BA program in the fall.

Han and I shared our lives, but we were not what we called in the therapeutic lingo of the day, “co-dependent.” We shared a lot of interests but were also capable and desired doing things on our own. Han would wake up early in the mornings and make our first pot of coffee. I may or may not have joined her for the first cup and we would choose what project we were going to work on for the day, together or separately. We might go cut down trees, then I would split and

cut up the wood while Han went and built some furniture, painted, rebuilt the outhouse, or worked on the dock. I would join her later for a sauna, then a swim. Han and Ina would swim to the island, while I took off in my canoe to hear the frogs among the wild rice at sunset. We all loved being together and did so very easily. We replaced sex with affection, kindness, and mutual love and respect. Han's family accepted us and even my mother eventually came to some acceptance of us, in her own way. We were for all purposes, in the way of many other couples, married; partners without legal benefits. But every time fishing season rolled around, we would both grouse about the unfairness that married people could buy joint licenses and we could not.

Somewhere around the ten-year mark, I finally confronted my mother and told her that I would appreciate her showing some interest in Hannah. Remember, I said, she is the woman I have been living with and loving all these ten years? After I brought this to my mother's attention she actually started making an effort to ask about Han's family at least, if not Han specifically. We lesbians seem to have to take our small victories as we can or as we demand. Then Han and I broke up. And now it was me who did not want to talk to my mother about how Han was doing.

After fifteen happy, but primarily celibate, years together I fell in love/lust with Cris, whom I met through work and school. I felt like I broke Han's heart and breaking her heart broke something in me for a while. I could not talk or explain to my mother that the reason I was leaving Hannah was essentially sex. Since my mother and I could not even talk about easy things, I did not trust my mother to be able to understand anything regarding my private life. I wanted her acceptance, but I knew I did not have it and believed I never would. When I simply

told my mother that Han and I were splitting up, she admitted that she had always liked Han and felt an affinity with her, “felt like they were on the same wave length.”

When I told Hannah I had fallen for Cris, she suggested that I just have an affair with Cris. She said she was okay with that. It was better than breaking up. In retrospect, I think Hannah was so much smarter than I was. But I could not do it. I was an all-in, one woman at a time, lesbian. I had been raised on monogamy. When I fell, I fell hard. Not long after that, Han and I went our separate ways.

Love or desire superseded all else in my worldview for much of my life. Critical thinking seemed to be the anti-love and had no place in matters of my heart. In pursuit of this primal force that I equated with love, I was willing to put my relationships and myself at risk. Hoagland (1988) in *Lesbian Ethics* might have described my behavior as symptomatic of my entrenched heterosexism.

Often we now act as if a lover were the only one meant for us, and we stifle desire in our relations with others and in our projects...Further, if we find our feelings change...we conclude the relationship has ended, that we no longer care, no longer are able to respond...As a result, when we do observe change in a relationship because someone is changing, we believe the relationship is ending, that only nothingness will follow; or if we suppress that change, we ultimately force the relationship to end because it has become stifling. (p. 173)

I believed at the time that I was powerless to do anything differently. When I left Hannah, I grieved her loss more deeply than I believe I grieved anything up to then. I lost Han, a substantial loss alone, but also her family who had become my family, and to a smaller degree the family we created with our friends.

Marriage, the institution that was until recently only legal for heterosexuals, encompasses many heterosexist traditions and norms. Much of my relational history formed through what Hoagland called the “dominant/subordinate values of heterosexualism (1989, p. 63).

Thus, even though 'lesbian' is a concept beyond the categories of sex, nevertheless we tend to embrace the existing categories both in assimilation and in resistance... We tend to seek meaning by subordinating ourselves to a higher order or system because we seek the semblance of security in something constructed outside of us in which we can participate. Heterosexuality is such a system. (Hoagland, 1989, p. 62)

I question, however, the idea that only heterosexuals contributed to the ideas about matrimony and committed relationships. And I challenge the idea that indefinite separatism and discussion amongst ourselves will disrupt the system. I think we need to be engaged.

Have gay or lesbian wedding dress designers, wedding cake bakers, wedding planners, musicians, caterers, and even officiates existed? I would venture, yes. Feminist, queer, and socialist theories have rightly criticized legal marriage. But to say that marriage is purely heterosexual, though it may seem counterintuitive, is ethnocentric and dismissive. To say that lesbians and gay men have not been influenced by, desired, and influenced marriage throughout the years is naive. This thinking does not fully represent who LGBTQI people have been and have contributed to our larger community. And to say so is not to say that lesbians and gays are heteronormative any more than it is to say that straight people who choose to be single and polyamorous are homonormative. We need to get beyond the binary, dichotomous thinking that queer theory promised to move beyond and has rightly problematized.

Several people, including Lauren my current lover and partner asked me, if I wish I had stayed with Han. I always answered no, that we needed to split up, not just because of our loss of a sexual relationship, but because we were changing in different ways. I told Han when I said I wanted to break up that we had been best friends, the best of friends, like sisters I said. She replied, as she wept, that we had been more than that. I agree now that we definitely had been more than that. We had started as friends, became lovers, then partners, then wives in every positive sense of the word except for legality. Han's family became mine, and even my mother

came to her own acceptance, if not full inclusion, of Han. We were family and I could not imagine not having Han remain my family.

I struggled many years with Han's and my lack of intimacy. Han considered it "her problem" and in some ways I did, too. But it was my problem also and it was a point of irreconcilable difference in our relationship. I vacillated between resigning myself to a "sexless" if not "loveless" relationship, and angst, because I felt my youth and the passion I thought was important in life, fading. But, I did not want to leave Han, our relationship, and our family.

I now wonder, hopefully with some intelligence of retrospect, did our relationship need to end or just change? Were we, especially me, bound by heterosexist or sexist notions of how to do relationships? Surely we all, gay and straight, have been. But at that time in my life, I was powerless to do it any other way. One may assert, "wait a minute, you made your choices." Yes I did, and I do not mean to suggest that I did not. But though I was a lesbian and in many ways was figuring out how to do relationship outside of inclusive rules, I still operated under the same emotional and social constructs, constraints, and beliefs as the rest of society. And still do. And also still do not. Therein lie the conflict as well as the intelligence and the promise of LGBTQI experience. We are both of the heterosexual, dominant, normative world and outside it.

I decided when I was a young twenty something year old lesbian, a.k.a a "baby dyke," that I needed monogamy. I spent many years thinking about monogamy vs. non-monogamy. I theoretically agreed with the premises of non-monogamy and had no ethical dilemma with the practice; yet practically speaking, I could not do it. Frankly, for me, it was and is too taxing and time-consuming. I had a hard enough time figuring out a relationship with one person at a time.

But I also believe lessons and experiences of lesbians and gay men, outside the bounds of legal monogamy, have influenced straight society as much as straight society has influenced us.

Giddens (1992), in exploring what he called the "pure relationship" and "plastic sexuality" stated,

Gay women and men have preceded most heterosexuals in developing relationships, in the sense that term has come to assume today when applied to personal life. For they have had to 'get along' without traditionally established frameworks of marriage, in conditions of relative equality between partners. (p. 15)

Hoagland (1988), in her explication of lesbian jealousy, touches on the issue of non-monogamy/monogamy, a prevalent concern in lesbian communities when I was first coming out in the late 1970s and into the 1980s,

Some lesbians couch the issue [of jealousy] in terms of monogamy/nonmonogamy. I think this is a mistake. As Julia Penelope argues, "Both terms name heteropatriarchal institutions within which the only important information is: how many women can a man legitimately own?" The terms "monogamy" and "nonmonogamy" presuppose that women are the property of the men who marry them. (p. 171)

The constructions that came before formed us, but we also participated in their construction. To say we have been merely victims of a system is to, indeed, strip us of our autonomy, something few lesbians I know would endure for long. Just as we are products, we are producers. So can it be with marriage. Although I tend to agree with Hoagland's (1988) analysis that we are living with and informed by the vestiges of heterosexism and patriarchy, I have not had the energy, and some assert, the privilege, to change its influence in my own life explicitly, other than my continued engagement with my life. Though not a separatist, just living as an out and open lesbian, I disrupt the normative, hetero and homo.

To say that I "lost" Han is much too passive. I gave her up. I left. When I left, I also left her family who had become my family. That meant, primarily, Ina and Luko. The Norbs, thank the goddess, did not desert me though our tribe changed, of course. I could not talk to Ina or Luko about my reasons for leaving and not much to Jez and Rowena. Han needed her family

and her friends. So, I did let them go with great sorrow. One day, a couple years later, out of the blue, Han called me to tell me that Ina had breast cancer and she thought I would want to know. She said she did not want to waste any more time in this life being angry and at odds with one another.

Though I was not happy about the reason Han reconnected, I was very happy that she reconnected. Hannah had a new partner. I was two years into the relationship with Cris. I had no regrets at that time about leaving Han. We had both needed to transition to something else and had not been able to do it together. But I still hated the way I had left her. And I hated losing her and her family (who had become the only family I really knew).

Ina survived her cancer and she and I are still close today. She is one of my non-biological sisters, my family more than my biological family. Han generously shared not only her own love and life for a time, but also her family and her friends with me. Hannah, Ina, Luko, Huck, his girlfriend Clare, The Norbs (Jezebel, Rowena, Pam, and Edna) and all of the other friends and family connections I experienced through them, exposed me to and taught me about true and pure love, relationship, and kindness. My life would have been much more lifeless without knowing them. Through them all, and their acceptance, I learned something essential about the importance to me, of family, something I had sadly not learned from my own biological family.

Our desire is connected to our attention and our choices: who we attend, who we ignore, and *why* and *how* we choose to ignore or attend. Our desire in a certain sense is a microcosm of the macrocosm of our oppression: it has been erased and/or used against us to such an extent that we turn against ourselves and suppress it; and yet when we do manage to overcome what's been done with our lesbian desire and explore it in joy and discovery, it comes out all preprogrammed by the patriarchal institution of sexuality and still erasing, fragmenting, destroying. Perhaps one aspect of healing our fragmentation lies in reconnecting desire with caring — real presence and attention — not the romantic haze of happily-ever-after. (Hoagland, 1988, p. 177)

I believe Han and I knew and were able to live what Hoagland (1988) philosophized, though we were never as close as we had been when together. We each had new partners to attend to that took up our time. We were no longer facing in the same direction or on the same path. But I know that Han would have been there for me if I had reached out in need, as I would have been there for her.

When I Learned to Get Out of My Own Way, the Hard Way

Cris and I met after I started as an intern for the county hospital IT department. She was the head of the Information Technology (IT) department and I had only seen her as she whisked in and out, usually with Beni, who reported to Cris and ran a section of client support. I never interacted with her other than incidental occasions. Eventually, though, I applied to be the night client service manager and got the full-time job. Then, I had more opportunities to interact with Cris. Impressed by her, I was not attracted to her in a sexual or romantic way. School was my focus. Being with Han in an asexual but loving, partner relationship for the rest of my life was the circumstance I accepted.

Cris was smart, ambitious, dynamic, outgoing, active, engaging, and academic. She was sexy in a soft butchy, dominant way. She exuded strength, but also a kind of vulnerability. When we first met she was also with someone else, Benita (Beni for short). Beni was from Argentina and embroiled in the long process of getting a green card. For all outward purposes, Cris and Beni were "roommates." I had my suspicions they were more than that but figured if either of them wanted to talk to me about it they would. I did not hide the fact that I was a lesbian with a "significant other" as we called one another then.

One day, about a year or so after I had left my job at the county in search of more opportunity to learn, I received an email from Cris, asking me to apply to a job that was open,

managing a daytime client service section where I had worked before. After meeting with Cris, who was very persuasive, I agreed to apply. Most likely, because she had recruited me, I got the job.

Beni had a similar position at a different site so she and I started working closely together. She became my mentor of sorts. Cris was actually pretty absent as a boss. She seemed to have many other things on her plate. I would learn later that my intuitions were correct. As Beni and I became friends, she let me further into her and Cris' lives. She invited me over to their home after work for happy hour. Hannah was working nights a lot. I was happy to make friends with other IT people where I worked. Through Beni, Cris and I also started to become friends. Hannah and I also invited Cris and Beni to our home a couple of times and we began to interact as couples.

Part of my attraction for Cris, ironically, was what I believed then to be, her honesty. She had come out to me and shared a work ordeal she was embroiled in. She eventually shared that she and Beni were having problems in their relationship. Beni did not want to be out as a couple and Cris did. They had been together for eleven years and Cris was tired of hiding. Cris also confessed her involvement in a long-running affair. The red flags were unfurling all over the place. But I was not paying attention to them as much as I was to my growing feelings for Cris.

I fell hard for Cris. After I finally left Cris, ten (long) years after we began, I felt like an idiot and experienced great shame, as I looked back at those beginnings. I really believed that love would conquer all. I also believed that love should be, initially at least, measured by physical attraction. Hannah and I had not tended that part of our relationship well. I was tired of waiting for something to change and without thinking too much about consequences, I leapt. I was tired of thinking. I wanted and needed something else.

I left a 15-year, happy relationship because of what I felt for Cris—love comprised of a combination of sympathy, empathy, caring, misplaced loyalty, and yes, lust. When I left, I left the happiest relationship I had ever had. Hannah, our friends, and family were stunned. I admitted my feelings for Cris to Hannah who did not understand how I could break up our home. I could barely understand how or why I could either.

In retrospect, I think Han's idea that I just have an affair might have been far less destructive in the long run. But I had never been able to manage multiple intimate relationships at one time. Where my emotions went my furniture closely followed, or at least my shoes. I honestly have never had much furniture of value, which is probably a good thing considering how much I have moved. I clearly fit the definition of what some have coined a “serial monogamist,” jumping from one serious relationship immediately into another.

Faderman (1993) theorized that the pressure to have a sexual relationship, though every other part of the relationship is good, might be what leads many lesbians to “serial monogamy.” I have to say that Han and I certainly fit the description. Faderman (1993), in explicating the dreaded, “lesbian bed death” or vanishing sex in lesbian relationships, said, “This ‘bed death’ has been attributed to the tendency of lesbians to fuse with their partners and thereby destroy the barriers and differences that are often the most powerful stimulants to the sexual appetite” (p. 39). Faderman asserted that lesbians want both long-term monogamous relationships and sexual relations but that the relationships that last are those that do not expect both. Both of these were important for me as Faderman found.

I was lucky when I leapt into Hannah’s arms without thinking. I would not be so lucky with Cris. Cris broke up with Beni, something she had been trying to do for a while. I felt like I betrayed Beni in a most cruel way, but I felt powerless to do it differently. I had not learned to

look before leaping, to think before hurting. Happily, my guilt was somewhat assuaged when Beni quickly became involved and moved in with someone else who, like Beni, was quite comfortable being in the closet. They had apparently also been having a flirtation at work for a little while.

Very early into my relationship with Cris (before I had officially moved into her house), Cris asked if her parents could move into the house I still owned where Hannah and I had lived together. Newly in love and in shame, I had a hard time being in the house. Cris' parents needed somewhere to live. The story was they were waiting for some other house to become available. Cris did tell me that they would probably be there longer than they said they would and that we might end up having to kick them out. I had no idea what that meant.

Cris's mother and step-dad lived in my house almost rent-free for over one-and-a half years. They would pay something occasionally as they could. The story was always the same. Every two weeks or so, they would say that the money was coming and would be there on Tuesday. Tuesday would roll around and there would be no money and we would all usually just pretend that everything was as it was supposed to be, that nothing had ever been promised or said—until the next Tuesday rolled around. Over time, I became part of their Grand Narrative, the fiction, as were Cris and her brother. Their parents were always waiting for the money from some unknown source.

Over the time Cris and I were together, I eventually pieced together that her parents had been essentially homeless for a while, though no one used the term “homeless.” They all lived in a constructed fantasy unable to speak the truth. Now I was becoming part of the fantasy. I spent too much time in the ensuing years trying my damndest to figure it out; the following is the short version of their story. From my outsider's perspective, the step-father, who seemed to be

the original con, had been born into some affluence but had never figured out or been able to make money or keep a job. He had the appetite of the lifestyle without a steady means to support the lifestyle. Cris, as a child, found herself caught in between her mother and her step-father. She could never break away from feeling responsible for them despite the ills that they wreaked on her life.

As I had with other lovers' families, I tried to be close and supportive with Cris' family but the irreconcilable differences were as much with her family as with her. Cris' mother described my treasured house that they were living in for free as "a dump," a rudeness and snobbery that never made sense to me. I never could trust Cris' family and eventually came to explain their behavior as some weird form of either mental illness or outright chicanery that the whole family enabled. They were from a different world than I in many ways. They appeared to be very devout Catholics and yet behaved in what I thought were very unethical ways, a position that, considering the Catholic church is not all that inconsistent. Though they never overtly excluded me, and even made efforts to include me, I never felt like I was one of them. I eventually saw Cris as being much more like her parents than unlike them.

Lest I wrongly give the impression that everything was rocky with Cris before, during, and after we began our lover/partner relationship, let me quickly right that notion. I fell for Cris because I was very attracted to her with an indeterminate physical, intellectual, and emotional passion, if all of those things can be true at once. I cast all reservations aside, believing in the power of the strong, intangible, connection that I had not felt for anyone in a very long time. The emotions intoxicated me even when we were sober. I believed, they derived, from some mystical, unknowable, force. These are heady words for an atheist. Indeed.

We had a load of fun, sometimes. We could talk for hours, especially at the beginning. Cris could be incredibly supportive and encouraging. I found her amazing. She attained a level in her career and education that for me, at the time, was noteworthy. She seemed to have a big, interesting, brain, and could be absolutely electric and magnetic with her intellect. When Cris focused her attention, eyes, and smile on a person—on me, it felt divine, and seemed, at first, like she only had eyes for me.

I fell hard and I believed the feelings were mutual. But what does mutuality mean and how much does that set up a relationship to fail? We are not all the same. We do not become one. We are individuals, and as alike or connected as we may feel, especially at first, and as potent as that feels, we must never stop tending to ourselves. I do not think we learn this ability, especially women, raised in heterosexualism as we are. I needed to “belong” in some ways to someone, to be a part of a whole composed of two. Like Joni Mitchell sang, “all romantics mean the same fate someday, cynical and drunk, boring someone in some dark cafe” (Mitchell, 1970). I seemed destined for that someday fate.

I find it difficult to look back at those ten years of my life without regret. I have often wanted to erase it but of course I cannot. I started lamenting my relationship with Cris even as we were playing it out. Seemingly helpless to end it, I had innumerable more reasons to leave Cris than Hannah. Yet I could not do it; I was nearly shattered; until I literally felt like the only way I would survive would be to leave. What took me so long? Fear? Love? Faith? Belief?

Cris and I fought, as our next-door lesbian neighbors and probably other neighbors could affirm. We both drank, but Cris always had a capacity that far exceeded any I had ever seen, except perhaps for Han's dad who was well into his 70s and 80s as a practiced alcoholic. But he was not mean, just stupid when he drank. I had no idea what alcoholism and a mean drunk really

looked like, up close, until I lived with Cris. I also had no idea what co-dependence really was, until I became an excellent co-dependent with Cris. As I have alluded, there were always red flags, markers I should have paid attention to with Cris, before we ever became lovers. I certainly saw the flags and markers. I recognized they were there. But I did not understand the depth of the trouble or the extent to which I would remain part of it.

I could easily blame alcoholism. I have friends who still believe that all Cris' other dysfunctions arose from there. But they did not and could not see, as no one can, into someone else's relationship. Especially since I did a really good job of shielding everyone from the truth. Cris lived with a lot of secrecy and lies for a long time, beginning with her growing up and her lesbianism. She used to joke that she had to come out to her mother twice (or more). Her father was an abusive, alcoholic, drug abuser and Cris' mother blamed much of her daughter's dysfunction on him.

When I finally started spilling my guts about Cris and our relationship and all the difficulties we had to our mutual friends, they had a hard time hearing it. Though I know they all knew that Cris had a drinking problem, no one seemed really to know the extent of it, other than me. As I said, one cannot really see into someone else's relationship, which is to say one cannot see into their home. Cris and I had planned to join a few of our friends at their cabin for the weekend. Cris was excited, but I had reached a place where all such social events just made me anxious and tired. They were just occasions for Cris to drink too much, it seemed, and for me to worry about her drinking too much, and need to figure out how I was going to take care of the repercussions of it all. There was nothing about it that was relaxing, for me.

Cris, of course, as did I, started drinking the Friday night before the Saturday we were to drive up. The difference, as usual, is that I stopped drinking and she did not. We were the

classic alcoholic/co-dependent relationship. As one woman from Al-anon said, we were made for one another. Cris did not stop drinking that Friday night, ever. As was our pattern, she drank, I became upset, we fought, and she passed out on the couch for a few hours, while I continued to get us ready to go, packing the car and so on. At this point in our relationship, I stopped being able to tolerate being around her when she was drunk. Her parents were living upstairs in my space, on my bed; so I went down and tried to sleep on my cot in the dark, dank, basement. It was a dismal scene and is still very painful for me to recollect.

At sometime during the night I heard Cris wake up and start walking around and around on the floor above me. I tried to sleep but imagined the worst. Finally dawn came and my fears were confirmed. Cris had been drinking all night. She came down to wake me from my cot, though I was already awake. She had completely forgotten our fight from the night before, as was also the pattern. After a while, I realized she honestly did not remember many of the things that happened between us, probably due to her drunken state. I remembered for us. She would frequently wake up the morning after we had a horrible fight, having forgotten the entire thing while I woke up having barely slept because of the fight.

This morning, when I saw she was pretty drunk already, and unable to imagine taking a two and 1/2 hour drive with her, I blew up. I lost it. I do not remember what I said anymore but I am confident that I, with large amounts of crying and, yes, probably shrieking, said I no longer wanted to go. After much more of this the fight culminated with the car completely packed, including my dog Bella, Cris and I screaming at one another, and her storming off. I was shaking so badly that I could barely drive. I drove two blocks, parked, and called our friend who we were supposed to meet that morning. Sobbing, I said we were not going. And then, for the

first time ever in my 10 years with Cris, I started unloading the truth to someone else about our relationship and our problems.

At my friend's urging, after we met and talked for a bit, I went ahead up north to be with those who were still Cris' and my mutual friends for the weekend. Cris was apoplectic when I eventually got up the nerve to call and tell her I was not coming back that day or that weekend. I was relieved to not be at home but afraid for when I would have to return. I tried to not talk to Cris while there, taking my friends' advice. But they had no idea, how angry Cris could be and what she might do in that state. It is impossible to explain, after the fact, about the abusive extremes in a long-term relationship because it is almost impossible for anyone to understand why someone would stay and continue to reenact them. In this case, I had started to feel like the perpetrator while Cris was the victim because I stayed and she had the "disease." I think we both had some sort of disease that manifested itself physically and mentally. Complicated does not do this scenario justice. Insane does.

I am still wary and weary of telling this truth or my truth of my relationship with Cris. I am cognizant of not wanting to turn this into a confessional, tell-all, even in the interest of some truth. Most people, even friends, maybe especially friends, do not want to know the truth about another's relationship. And perhaps that is as it should be. We all have our own versions of the "truth." I learned, after a couple of babbling stumbles, to keep it to myself, except in therapy, but it was a hard lesson to learn. Cris almost drank herself to death that weekend. I tried to talk to her a couple of times during the weekend, but every time she became more and more angry and incoherent. Her parents ended up having to call the ambulance to take her to detox.

If Cris and I had been married (in many ways, I am glad we were not), the hospital would have notified me. Instead, her mother was the first of kin. Cris, once sober, wanted to see me

but my friends urged me to stay away. I did not know what to do. Given the opportunity then to end it, why did I not? I cared about Cris. However crazy our love had become, I loved her still.

There was the rub. Love?

The notion of innocence is connected both to an acceptance of romanticized notions of lesbian relationships produced by lesbian feminists to counter homophobia, and to happily-ever-after concepts of love produced under patriarchy. (Ristock, 2002, p. 84)

Hoagland (1988) explored the self-sacrificial expectations that women place on themselves and on one another as a kind of lesbian sabotage and evidence of the influence of heterosexualism, and its predominant dominant/subordinate values. Hoagland's thesis was that "the norms we've absorbed from anglo-european ethical theory promote dominance and subordination through social control (what I call heterosexualism)" (p. 2). Heterosexualism should not be confused with people of the same gender or biological sex being sexual, in Hoagland's definition.

Specifically, what Hoagland saw as the root of many societal problems, including undermining lesbian relationships, was "the way of living that normalizes the dominance of one person and the subordination of another" (p. 7). Cris and I were evidence of just what Hoagland described and seemed incapable of operating differently. Though I find the terminology likely difficult and off-putting for some people and my friends who identify as heterosexual, Hoagland's analysis of its ill effects and predominance rings true.

I had no money. I lived paycheck to paycheck and barely did that. Along with my co-dependency, I managed to get myself in so much debt while with Cris that I could not see any way out. Though I was not defaulting and still making all the payments, I figured I would be making them for the rest of my life. During those months after leaving Cris the first time, I lived with Callie and Amanda, who had been our mutual friends. They were very kind and supportive of me, but I was not yet finished with Cris. Cris and I eventually started talking again; she was

“working the [Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)] program” I thought. Though everyone else seemed to know that any reconciliation was doomed to fail, Cris and I agreed to try again. I cannot help but shake my head as I write this. I thought an almost ten-year relationship deserved at least one more try.

I gave Cris stipulations so that I felt safe and assertive in coming back. I told Cris what I needed, my conditions included that: 1) she stop drinking and stay on the AA program or some program (any program) and 2) her parents would have to leave. I could not continue to live with both her drinking and her parents. Both requests, I see now, were probably unrealistic and not something that I could dictate. But I was no longer willing to live the way I had been living. The time away from Cris reminded me of what sanity felt like.

Cris agreed to talk to her parents by October to tell them they needed to move because I was moving back. For a few months, Cris stopped drinking, at least she appeared to. Who knows? I moved back in to a tenuous, at best, relationship. Why did I return? Why did I stay? I thought I owed Cris that? I owed myself that? I had entered the relationship full on. I was willing to give it one last chance and I did so with faith, love, and as much trust as I could muster. As I reflect on this difficult time of my life, I still believe that because I had “committed” to Cris and the relationship, I needed to give the relationship another chance.

I had not yet reached my own rock bottom of “self-understanding” (Hoagland, 1988, p. 111). I might have benefited greatly from Hoagland’s lesbian ethics of self if I had known of them at the time. I learned, through my experience with Cris, and as Hoagland analyzed, that risks in relationship are important, critical to intimacy, but that intimacy cannot be had when only one person in the relationship is taking the risk. And that ultimately, I am responsible for taking care of myself by not allowing another to violate me.

Within a couple of months of me moving back in with Cris, the relationship was in crisis again. Cris had reconnected with an old friend who lived a ways out in the suburbs. Their relationship had ended with unfinished business and like other relationships that Cris had, was complicated, to say the least. Despite our agreement to be monogamous, or at least to talk about it if it arose, Cris had at least two affairs while she was with me that I found out about, at least one affair while with Beni (not including me), and had been in love with this old friend and her sister way back when. Suddenly the friend became part of our lives or more accurately Cris became part of her life. Cris stopped coming home or even going to work. I thought she was drinking but did not know for sure. I began to understand, finally, that I had no power in the situation other than the power to take care of myself.

These are painful memories. What I want and need to express is the utter craziness in which Cris and I lived. I still loved Cris, I thought, but that love had crossed over into something else and would soon evolve to a need for self-reliance. Most, and I could not disagree, would say finally! I cared for her but I was no longer willing or able to stay with her, to sacrifice my own life. Not quite willing or able to give up the mantle of caretaker, I had also begun to believe that my staying with Cris was actually doing her more harm than good. But that is giving myself way too much power and disempowering Cris. The bottom line was that I needed to leave to save myself.

Hoagland (1988) criticized the idea of “unconditional love” that many lesbians and women embrace consciously or unconsciously.

And in general I want to suggest that when we equate self-sacrifice with virtue – something we must exhibit to be considered ethical – and we act accordingly, control begins to enter our interactions as a logical and acceptable consequence. For if we do not perceive ourselves as both separate and related, we will be off-center and forced to control or try to control the arena and those in it in order to retain any sense of agency, of ability to act. (Hoagland, 1988, p. 99)

I had to learn through hard and painful experience what Hoagland called “the option of withdrawal among ourselves, as part of claiming moral agency, when we can no longer accept another’s choices” (p. 228). Lessons such as these cannot be usurped by “heterosexualist” constructions of marriage or relationship as being dominant/subordinate. Withdrawal is a valid option of self-preservation but should not be used, as I had used it as a younger lesbian, simply to avoid situations or relationships. Relationships, I believe, should require some commitment of honesty and risk, as an ethical choice but not as a self-sacrificial one.

A woman in my Al-anon group told a probably common recovery story about when she realized that she was not helping her husband, the alcoholic, despite her best intentions. He called her (as he had done many other times) from a hotel where he was drunk, remorseful, and obviously self-destructive. He begged her to call someone for him, to get him into a treatment facility (as he had done before and she obliged him every time). This time, however, she said, "No. You call and arrange it yourself." She told the story many times before I was sure. She still seemed pained to tell it, to relive that moment. She stayed with her husband and he eventually stayed sober. They had kids together, which I imagine made the decision to leave that much harder.

After several particularly agonizing weeks, I remember lying in my bed in Cris' house, another night having passed not knowing where Cris was or if she was alive or dead, sobbing, feeling like I was dying or wanting to, surrounded by AA and Al-anon books. I would cry, try to sleep, drag myself upright, read another story, take Bella out, feed Bella, and repeat. One of the stories I read was about a woman reaching that point in her recovery when she knew she had zero control or power or sway with the other person. Beattie (2009) likened the process of

acceptance to Kübler-Ross' death acceptance process "denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance" (p. 137). I hit all of those on my way back to myself.

Now, I feel corny saying this, but suddenly, after all of this with Cris, I understood what the woman was talking about. I always struggled with the first step of the twelve steps of AA, the one that talks about admitting that you are not in control; you know the one that people talk about when they recite the "let go and let God" platitude. But for some reason, after going through all of this with Cris, I understood it in a different way than I ever had. I really did surrender. Not to God, or the Goddess, or to any being like that. But I just gave up. I was done.

I could not do anything to change anything for Cris. Whatever I tried was a failure. All I could do was try to save myself. I stayed in my bed all day until it started getting dark. I slept, woke, read, and slept again. I was exhausted after almost ten years of slowly, going, crazy. A therapist, when I was bemoaning to her my relationship with Cris, once asked me, "When are you going to get out of your own way?" I had just, finally, reached that point.

I did not own or have any legal stake in Cris' house though we had lived together there for almost ten years. Though Cris always promised that the house was mine if anything ever happened to her, and though she had always promised to make something legal, she never had. We had no legal agreements of any kind. As far as the law was concerned, I was a "roommate." Meanwhile I, in my codependency and my lack of self-care, went further and further into debt.

Because Cris owned the house and paid the mortgage, I started paying the utilities and buying groceries, toilet paper, and other perishable, periodic items that a house needs. I bought televisions, computer equipment, audio systems, and all the other crap that goes along with that. I worked on the house, painted, gutted, and rebuilt the bathroom, built a deck, and did other physical labor to improve the house, as well as purchased paint, materials, tools for the upkeep of

the house. I paid for gifts for her parents, family, and mutual friends. I bought stuff for her car as well as my own. I bought art and framed it, frames that are still hanging on Cris's walls as far as I know. I paid for veterinarian bills. If it needed paying and Cris was reticent to do so, I paid. I considered myself to be, at least, an equally contributing partner. I did not tally it all up at the time. Hannah and I never had. I operated as Han and I had, as if we were equal partners in a joint venture called the relationship.

How does one quantify all of that? I did it because I cared about Cris, and the relationship, and I enjoyed doing it. I only realized, at the end, that Cris never really behaved as a partner. When she did it was completely on her own terms. Cris made a lot more money than I did for all of those nine plus years. I entered the relationship free of debt, after evicting Cris' parents, and finally selling my house. But over the course of the rest of those years, the things I purchased, I began purchasing largely with credit. Cris abused alcohol, as did I on occasion, but more so I abused my credit cards. As happens, when the credit became a weight so enormous, and our relationship worsened, I truly began to feel trapped.

Cris paid for some things. I do not want to portray this as if I was a victim. I was not entirely a victim during the relationship, though Cris was certainly a bully. Cris did not hold a gun to my head to buy things. Thankfully, we did not own any guns. I entered the relationship within a haze of denial and the relationship became an ongoing attempt to reconcile my reality with Cris' reality. After I started coming out of the fog, I thought that I should have left Cris the first time I saw her drink too much, the first time I let my integrity be compromised, the first time she bullied me. But I wanted to believe something different than what was. I had let my "heart," my emotions, lead me into and through the relationship without much rational thought or self-care. I had been as much in denial as my mother had ever been.

After I pulled myself off of that bed, cleaned myself up, and took a walk with Bella, my memories get fuzzy. I think I called Daisy and Xena. I remember going to a movie, still in a daze trying to explain the situation to outsiders who were kind however could nor fully understand. I know I called Margie. She was the only person who seemed to really understand, if not entirely, at least a little. She had seen Cris at one of her craziest and she had seen me crazily try to handle it. She was there and she cared, I believe, about both of us.

I could go on enumerating the ways that Cris hurt me and I hurt her, but I think I have more than made the point. The relationship was sometimes quite wonderful, but far too many times quite bad. In my memory anyway, the hard times nearly made me amnesiac about the good. Only if I try really hard can I remember that there were good and positive reasons that I left Hannah for Cris.

As one might guess, the situation did not get better or friendlier after I finally told her I could not, did not want to continue trying to make our relationship work; read emphasis on “make” and “work.” She said she was surprised, that she had “not seen that coming.” That, in turn surprised me. I tried to figure out a way that we could part amicably but fairly by tallying up all the money I thought I contributed to Cris and the relationship and what she contributed. By my tally, I could continue to live in the house for a year rent free, and if she paid me said amount, we could call it even. That would give me enough time and money to pay off my bills partially. At least there would be some hope that I would pay them back in my lifetime.

What was I thinking? There was no way in Cris’ or my hell that Cris was going to agree to this. And she was also not going to try to counter with anything she thought was fair. She was not a negotiator. A kind but accurate way of putting it would be to say, it was Cris’ way or the

highway, and Cris was not of any mind even to share what she thought her way was. Simply put, her response was something memorable like, “No way, you crazy bitch.”

Afraid to engage with Cris at all, due to her irrationality and volatility, I just said okay. Then I set about to figure out how I would get as much of what I paid for out of her house. My big mistake was mentioning this, with some frustration, to friends, one of whom felt it their duty to tell Cris what I said. This friend did not understand the volatility of the situation, thinking Cris more rational than she was. This was a case of the community not understanding the specificity of the individual truth. The next thing I knew, Cris changed the locks on the door, essentially making me homeless and removing access to my dog as well as to all of my possessions, even personal items I brought into the relationship. Now, I was apoplectic.

I could take, and obviously had taken, Cris’ cheating, lying, and general inability to deal with me honestly. These were finally the reasons I left. I chalked it up to Cris’ issues, inability to commit, or at least to tell me what the hell she wanted. But I was utterly thrown by Cris’ treatment of me after I said I wanted to end the “relationship.” I confess that I tend to have a relentlessly stupid naïveté but, like Cris, I never saw that coming. Cris did exactly what she always swore that she would never do. She lied, she cheated (again), and she almost literally kicked me to the curb.

Is it wrong to take someone at their word, to expect the best? I think that is what relationships should be. I thought that what we, as gay people, have to offer the rest, is our different way of approaching both relationships and breakups. I still think that is true, sometimes, but as you see, not all the time. Allen (2007) advocated for same-gender divorce after her experience losing not just her stuff and dog, as I had, but her children. She was not their

biological mother and so had no rights. There is a side to same-sex or same-gender marriage that is not discussed as much and that is the breakup.

The months after were as bad as any divorce I have ever heard about. But I had no legal recourse at all. I learned the hard way, the downside of not having the legal protection that marriage gives. Lauren, who went through a very bad legal divorce, reminded me that legal divorce sucks also. But at least there is some protection I thought, something to step in when one or both sides of the relationship are unable to be fair. It seemed better than nothing. I had no resources (other than my kind friends), was broke, and lost everything. Suddenly the structure of my life was upended.

Lesbian and gay male “divorce” or breakup stories can be positive and offer possible insight to heterosexual and other lesbian and gay breakups. Bacon (2012) found the different ways that many lesbians do divorce or breakup is explained by a kind of power feminism in which lesbians desire to empower their ex-partners in service of the maintenance of the relationships and community. I believe that was true for Hannah and my breakup. Alderson’s (2004) participants, including gay men, also reported the phenomena of remaining close with their past lovers. Alderson concluded “They have learned to support each other in creative and unique ways because they did not have marriage, until recently, to fall back on” (p. 117). However, Allen’s (2007) autoethnographic account of the loss of her non-biological son when her relationship ended highlights one of the legal pitfalls of creating “an intentional family” replete with as many legal and social protections as could be conceived, but without the benefit of marriage or ability to adopt her non-biological son. Allen called this tragic loss; an “ambiguous loss” (p. 177).

Heteronormative compensation is a temporary measure that may work for LGBT couples when they are in mutual agreement, but when one of them ends the contract, legal

protection is needed to sustain previous commitments (especially about children) just as marriage and divorce laws do for heterosexual couples and their children. (Allen, 2007, p. 179)

I tried to connect with Cris to figure things out mutually, but I could not trust her, and she apparently believed that she could not trust me. Cris tried to use my dog as a way of getting to me. With some of the greatest sadness I experienced, I told Cris that I was giving Bella up. I had to cut all my ties with Cris for my own good. I never felt so betrayed. I was also furious. I remembered every time I left someone and wondered if this was karma or punishment being inflicted on me, but never had I locked the doors on someone, and taken everything they owned. I need(ed) to somehow express what was to me THE ultimate betrayal succinctly and with less animosity. But I honestly still do not know how. It does not seem accurate or honest to simply say, “It was a bad breakup.”

I guess it was not as bad as it could have been because I am still alive. And so is she, the last I heard. As Gilbert (2010) said when describing her bad divorce, “On the mighty cosmic one-to-ten Scale of Divorce Badness (where one equals an amicably executed separation, and ten equals . . . well, an actual execution), I would probably rate my own divorce as something like a 7.5” (p. 4). Not to compete with Gilbert, but I would have to put my breakup with Cris at an 8.5 at least! No one died, but I was convinced I had just spent nine plus years of my life with a sociopath. I am not sure I believe in sociopaths, but that is how I felt then. I became extremely calculating from that point on when dealing with Cris. I had been stupid, but I would no longer let her in.

After the shock and awe with Cris, I felt cut loose in space. People who have had breakups after longer-term relationships might understand. My feelings the evening I officially cut the cord, approximated a sort of exhilaratingly freedom, but at the same time were

frightening, sad, and lonely. Nine years is not insignificant, even if it was a hard nine years. I did not want to be alone that evening and so dazedly made my way to a party for my work friend who had graduated from the same program that I am in now. Lauren had also been in the program and the same cohort with this friend but had already completed her degree.

Life is strange, serendipitous, and meaningful if you pay attention. I had not really planned on going to the party and did not feel at all festive. I arrived late after the food was picked over and people had been drinking. I was somewhat anonymous which was exactly where I wanted to be that night, with other people talking about a diverse array of interesting stuff. I stayed late until most everyone had left, save Lauren, the host, and the other friend from the program. The other friend suddenly surprised everyone by announcing that she had just told her husband she wanted a divorce. No battles, no fights, he agreed, and so the divorce was happening. The host, who had met Cris at a different event prior to that evening, asked me about Cris. I hesitated but then stopped the conversation by saying, "Well, coincidentally, we also just broke up tonight." Lauren, I learned later, had been interested in me when we first met but was wise enough to know that she did not want a rebound.

Sweet, funny, eccentric, Margie helped me pick up my pieces instead. She gave me a place to live, in her wonderful old eccentric house, which she completely rebuilt and decorated. It felt like a sanctuary at the time. Shortly after Margie admitted she had feelings for me for a while and I admitted I had feelings for her. We had "the talk." Why did there always seem to be some shame or angst associated with these talks? Or was that just me? Not only did Margie give me a place to live, a shoulder to cry on, warm meals, and a wonderful tub to soak in, but also gave me her heart and warm body to be next to, if just for a little while.

At first, like stereotypical lesbians, Margie and I were hot and heavy. However, we each had our own pressures and lives, to put it mildly. I was trying to figure out how to get out of debt, get my stuff back from Cris, and recover from the intense pain I still felt for how the breakup had gone. Margie had money problems of her own, business worries, along with family concerns with aging parents. Margie first suggested we rewind our narrative back to “just dating” and I decided I needed to have my own place.

Margie was not happy that I was getting my own place and felt in some way betrayed. For a moment, we wanted something together that would last—but we were each, I think, coming to the realization that we were not going to be married. Preoccupied with her business, Margie was frequently gone or just absent. I accompanied her across the country on a business trip, which was when the first signals of incompatibility started showing themselves. We truly liked, and even loved, one another. But I, for one, was beginning to learn how to not just listen to those little gnawing voices at the back of my head telling me, “hold your horses. Take your time. If you feel this way now, how will you feel in a year, five years, ten.” For perhaps the first time in my life, I listened to those clues.

Lauren and I started being friends while Margie and I were “together.” Some might ask, as I have, how can one person love more than one person in a lifetime? We are not taught to believe that there is anyone else in the world for a person than one other person. That may be true for some but that has not been my experience. In fact, I think that there is a myth, originated in heterosexual marriage and romance that there is only one person in the world who is the “true” love of another. Giddens (1992) explored the connection between romantic love which he asserts has affected women more than men, by both active engagement with “the maleness of modern society” as well as by helping to keep women “‘in their place’—the home” (p. 2).

Giddens said, “Romantic love presumes that a durable emotional tie can be established with the other on the basis of qualities intrinsic to that tie itself. It is the harbinger of the pure relationship, although it also stands in tension with it (p. 2).

I do not want to be too cynical sounding about it because I do not want to diminish those relationships that truly have been the “loves of their lives,” but my experience of love has not been that. I believe I have been incredibly lucky to have several loves of my life, all differently significant. I have come to the belief that cohabitation, similar values, and mutual abilities to communicate and work things out are as important as anything. Yes, initial attraction is also important but as most people who have been in a long term relationships knows, the initial fire does not stay ablaze. It takes stoking. A lasting love takes mutual negotiation and agreement. Hoagland (1988) emphasized “self-awareness” as prerequisite to intimacy, which is counter to what are often considered the “feminine virtues” including altruism.

Self-understanding, which is the prerequisite for genuine intimacy in our lives, seems also to be the prerequisite for a moral revolution, the natural starting point of Lesbian Ethics. It is here, in deep understanding of self and in relation to others, the lesbians hold the possibility of female agency independent of heterosexualism. (Hoagland, 1988, p. 113)

Lauren and I became friends. We talked on the telephone, though on Sunday nights, Lauren insisted that we talk only after the television show, *Mad Men*, had ended. At that time I had never seen *Mad Men* and did not watch that much TV, but I began catching up on the episodes by myself. I began eagerly to look forward to my phone calls with Lauren. I began to love hearing her voice and her laugh.

Lauren invited me over for pizza and champagne on her condo balcony after she learned that she had been “reorged” out of her job. Another time, Lauren invited me to go with her to a backstage tour of the new Twins stadium. I was nervous. I wanted and needed friends. Lauren

was single and I worried that she wanted more from me than I was ready to give. Though things were starting to feel pretty shaky with Margie, I was still recovering from my breakup with Cris and the detritus generated.

I was nervous, in general, but especially about getting involved with anyone again. I always thought and actually said out loud that if Cris and I did not work out, I was finished with relationships. I did not feel I could withstand another emotional roller coaster. Then, I got involved with Margie after Cris, though my therapist did not think I was as crazy to do so as I did. She asked me one thing, “Does it feel good?” To which I replied, “Yes!” There went my resolution to remain single. I never intended Margie to be a “rebound relationship” and did not feel that way about it during it even though I know that some of my friends thought that is exactly what it would be. They had seen these things before. I had told Cris about Margie soon after we began which was when Cris decided to change the locks.

Margie and I moved too quickly. We had flown right past dating to something else. Suddenly we were living together and talking about forever. I met her parents, brother, sister, nieces, nephews, and sons. I started realizing, as Margie may have also, how different our lives were. I could not, at my age and point in life, just give it all up, even though I did not have much, to live the life of an artist’s wife. I think Margie may have wanted that, but it started feeling too confining, restrictive, and familiar. For one of the first times in my life, I listened to what my insides were screaming. I think Margie did too. We ended the short but very sweet relationship in a basically mutual way. Giddens (1992) would describe it as a “pure relationship.” I agree. Giddens, recognizing that the term “relationship” was a relatively new one to denote an emotional connection, introduced, “pure relationship” and described,

The term “relationship”, meaning a close and continuing emotional tie to another, has only come into general usage relatively recently. To be clear what is at stake here, we can

introduce the term pure relationship to refer to this phenomenon. A pure relationship has nothing to do with sexual purity, and is a limiting concept rather than only a descriptive one. It refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it. (p. 58)

I believe Hannah and I had a “pure relationship” and despite the love we truly had for one another, the relationship, that is, our association stopped being mutually satisfying enough, for me at least. Our relationship was not a failure, in my view, as I fear Hannah might have felt. Margie and I also had, though short-lived, a “pure relationship.” I am so happy we were able to exit it when we did before dragging it out to an unhappy end as Cris and I did.

Betrothed

I walked into the Red Stag, a local “Nord’east” Minneapolis bar and restaurant. The roughed up wood interior reminded me a little of an up-north cabin though in truth there probably were not many up north that were as nice as the “Stag.” Lauren was already sitting at the bar in a black skirt with her legs crossed sipping a lemon basil martini. Lauren and her drink both looked delicious but intimidating.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” I said as I walked up. I felt strangely butch, or I identified it as such then. I was slightly uncomfortable being attracted to Lauren’s outward display of femininity. I had not ever identified as being butch, though I think I was often type cast as such because I was “capable” of things like carpentry, electrical work, and physical labor. I usually did not go out of my way to femme up but had clear moments of desire that seemed predicated on a more feminine object desire. At times, however, I wanted to play the more stereotypically feminine role. As I used to say to Cris who personally, if not in an outward way, identified as butch, “I can go either way.” But, of course, these roles are all constructions that, most likely, we adopted or

inherited. I think lesbians and gays are more likely to understand these roles, as partially play and another part essential though I might be wrong about that.

Was she sending me a message? I have always been abysmally slow at picking up signals, flirtatious and otherwise. I was still involved with Margie but the sweet novelty and relief of our lover relationship was starting to feel less simple and more fraught. I felt guilty for feeling attracted to Lauren. My intention then was to be friends with Lauren. I did not want to complicate my life further and I needed friends. I was worried that Lauren wanted something more. And honestly, there was a part of me that was intrigued that she might.

I apologized again for being late and ordered wine. We started talking easily. I told her a little about the difficult conversation Margie and I recently had. Margie had written me an email telling me that she thought we needed to “just date.” First of all, that Margie needed to send me an email was not a good sign since I was living in her house. I had been starting to notice other signals like this one that spoke of a difficulty communicating. Second, it is true we had very quickly gone from being friends to being married-like. Margie originally told me she thought she wanted to marry me. Now, suddenly, she wanted to “just date?” I was confused. Truly. I was confused.

So I told Lauren my story and explained how confused I felt when Lauren blurted out, “I’d date you.” I steadied myself on the barstool. I said nothing. I stared. No clever retort came to mind. Is she flirting? I think she is flirting, I thought. Stunned, stupid, and worried, I froze. How do I change the subject or respond gracefully? Before I could say anything, Lauren said it for me, “Well, that was awkward.” I nervously laughed; we gulped our drinks, ate our fries, and changed the subject. After a relatively short time we said good night. I think we both doubted whether we would even remain friends after having somehow crossed a line.

Battered as I felt from the tumultuous ten years with Cris and the six turbulent months with Margie, I was not looking to be involved with anyone else. I thought I was finished with relationships after Cris. But I always had a hard time passing up potential. I have always been looking for that one other person with whom I could spend my life. The difference was that I was now 55 years. The rest of my life was more immediate than it had seemed at 25. Beginning a relationship at 55 is on one hand the same as it always was, a great leap of faith, head following my heart. But I had learned something, finally, with Cris. I held something of myself back.

Lauren invited me to go with her to a picnic, food extravaganza event on a summer Minnesota Sunday afternoon. I told her I couldn't because I had other plans. The other plans were to go see Margie and to have the breakup conversation. There, in Margie's studio, we agreed to end. There was no fight, no mean words said, just some tears, mostly mine, a couple of cigarettes, and perhaps a couple regrets.

I must say, I did not regret being involved with Margie. She was a welcome respite and contrast to what I went through with Cris. I truly, genuinely, liked and loved her. But as the song goes, "what's love got to do with it"? If we tried to stay together, I predict, that our end would have come probably sooner than later and it would have been difficult. Some people should not be married. That does not diminish the importance of the relationship for that time.

One night soon after, unable to sleep due to thinking about Lauren, I texted her and asked if she was still up. I needed to talk to her. She said "sure" though I now know that she had probably already been long settled in for the night. She is an early to bed kind of woman (unlike me, at the time). But then I took her at her word. I went over. We did not talk. We did not have THE conversation. We just held one another, kissed, and made love.

One of the first real “dates” Lauren and I went on was when I invited her to join me at what was to be the wedding of the year in my circle. The friends that Cris had decided I could “have” from our group were in fact the friends that I really wanted. My friends were my lifelines during the breakup and after. The summer before the final breakup when Cris and I separated, Callie and Amanda had offered to let me live with them and I accepted thankfully. I met Callie when she was with Marie. When Callie decided to end their relationship the breakup was really hard on many of their friends, including me. Breakups create fissures in community with lines being drawn, sides taken, alliances sustained. Marie moved away from Minnesota after the breakup. Callie and Marie’s friends became Callie and Amanda’s friends. And so it goes. The circles expand or contract and intersect.

Callie and Amanda planned their wedding for a year or more. I saw the beginning of the planning while living with them. Callie was not one to do things in a small way, least of all her wedding. The big Elizabethan weekend frolic was coming and so I invited Lauren to join me. I thought of this as a date but it ended up being slightly more like a really fun test. I suppose all dates are tests. I had not done much dating but this outing seemed like a fun thing to do.

The wedding took place on Callie’s friends’ property outside of Minneapolis about an hour, of course, near a lake. Many of us elected not to rent a motel room and decided to camp. I could not afford a motel but I had a tent and one cot. I brought another cot and an extra sleeping bag for Lauren. Together, both cots just fit into the tent without a lot of headroom. It seemed better than lying on the ground. I did not know Lauren very well then but lying on the ground did not seem like something she would do happily.

Lauren and I loaded up the car on a gorgeous October weekend in Minnesota. The woods were kaleidoscopic, oranges, reds, browns, and greens, each color essential to the full effect. The

sky was one of those amazing fall blues that I think I have only seen in Minnesota. There were no clouds and if one was lucky to also be by a lake with a sky like that, the lake and the sky almost seemed like mirror reflections of one another. Of course, at this time of the year in Minnesota, what goes along with all of this vibrant beauty is a bone-chilling cold; especially at night, in a tent, in the woods.

The wedding atmosphere was theatrical, musical of course, with great food, and drink. Everyone, as far as I could tell, seemed infected by the good feelings, even ex-partners who themselves had gone through bad breakups. One of those was there with her now wife, married during the brief pre-Proposition Eight period in California, the other with her now live-in girlfriend. Callie and Amanda had a wide range of friends, family, acquaintances, business and personal. Many people attended and many of us worked together to make it all happen, which I think made it even more special. For most this was their “first gay wedding,” though same-sex marriage was not yet legal in Minnesota. Callie and Amanda’s legal wedding would occur a month later in Boston and would be a low-key affair by comparison. Apparently there was some behind the scenes family drama, thanks to Amanda’s father who did not entirely embrace the event, but it was not visible to most of us players.

Part of that drama was due to religious differences, ironically. Callie had been reared as a devout High Church Lutheran, which apparently means something very close to Catholicism in its ritual. Amanda had been reared and still considered herself to be a fairly devout Jew. Folks on each side were having some issues with the melding of these two traditions almost as much as the melding of Callie and Amanda though it was not news to their families that either of them was lesbian. What was different is that they were celebrating it, in public, before both of their Gods, family, and friends.

Amanda's mother, who did not have a problem with Callie and Amanda's union, performed the Jewish marriage rites under the homemade birch wood chuppah with close family and friends attending the corners. Unlike the heterosexual Jewish tradition where the bride walks around the groom seven times, Callie and Amanda each walked around one another seven times to begin the ceremony beneath the chuppah. Amanda's brother ended the ceremony with a beautiful interactive story in which he had us all hold up our hands to symbolize the community that would be needed to continue to hold Amanda and Callie up during their marriage.

I do not think I was the only person with cold tears on my face this October day. I cry at weddings. I cry at a lot of things, but weddings are a sure bet. I cry at the public display of love, but especially love that for most of its history has "dared not speak its name." Although my intellectual mind can deconstruct and analyze these heteronormative events until the cows come home, the expression of love and commitment that marriage symbolizes still deeply touches me. I have a hard time giving up on marriage, despite its oppressive anti-feminist history and potential to assimilate. I am a sappy romantic. I stopped crying long enough to sing a song that Callie asked me to sing with her for the ceremony, from her own religious tradition.

Lauren and I survived, indeed thrived, at the wedding. All of us in tents or car camping had to move into the big tent to keep warm for nights two and three but it just added to the richness and community of Callie and Amanda's wedding story. We worked, laughed, drank, ate, sang, and danced. We celebrated in love and community. It was a great way to start a marriage, legal or not.

Bringing someone to a wedding on a date of sorts tends to stimulate one's own questions about one another's potential for marriage. I do not remember us broaching the subject that weekend but we would within a couple of months. The conversation went something like, "so

how do you feel about marriage?” To which the other replied, “oh, yes, I would consider it. You?” To which the other replied, “Sure. Would you wait until it’s legal here?” “Yes, I think so. Yes, I’d want it to be legal here first.” The conversation(s) we have had about marriage then and since have been a little more verbose.

Lauren and I explored, as many, the meaning of marriage, its difficult history for women, the reasons for it then and now. Will we change it? Will it change us? Lauren had been married to a man and indicated that she could probably take it or leave it. It was not a deal breaker. I remembered my therapist, who, like Lauren, had been married to a man and had children before coming out as a lesbian, saying something similarly unexcited about the institution. My initial explorations of the topic with Lauren are what eventually led to this dissertation study.

Lauren and I began exploring the marriage option more vigorously shortly before the Minnesota Senate passed a bill to put a proposed amendment to the state constitution on the ballot that would ban same-sex marriage (“Freedom To Marry”, n.d.). We, like most other LGBTQA Minnesotans were riled. Good organizing made the difference in the amendment being defeated that November at the polls—52% of Minnesotans against. There was not exactly a landslide but just enough to defeat the discriminatory amendment. Rapidly, seizing the day or the dais, the opponents of the amendment became proponents of same-sex marriage, turning from defense to offense. On May 14, 2013, just six months later, Governor Mark Dayton signed the “the freedom to marry into law, one day after the Minnesota Senate voted in favor of the marriage bill” (Freedom to Marry, n.d.).

Phelan (2001), arguing that rights acquisition, like marriage, is not enough to ensure citizenry, stated, “The greatest danger of a narrowed focus for activism is the conceit that legal admission to a few select institutions constitutes citizenship. Citizenship requires

acknowledgment and inclusion in institutions, but it also requires a public culture of acknowledgment” (p. 148). I emphatically agree. We cannot believe that simply gaining marriage or any right will suddenly change our social status or how we are viewed in the society. However, I still am not ready to give up on marriage, but I want our version of marriage.

My friends, who had gone to other states like Iowa, Massachusetts, and California during the pre-Proposition Eight period, also then became married in Minnesota by default on August 1, 2013 in Minnesota. Minnesota attempted to mitigate some of the issues that arose in other states for couples whose marital bliss turned to something more like entrapment. Couples who traveled to distant states to marry who now wanted to divorce were held to the same residency standards for divorce, which sometimes meant establishing residency for a year in the state where one wanted the divorce. Minnesota only requires that one of the couple live in Minnesota for 180 days before filing for divorce. In addition, if a couple was married in Minnesota after same sex marriage became legal on August 1, 2013, AND both people live in a state that does not allow same sex divorce, either may file for divorce in Minnesota without needing to live there.

As a family attorney friend of Lauren’s said, “What a mess.” Like divorce is not messy enough. Despite her skepticism about the viability and likelihood of same-sex marriage coming to Minnesota, after the legislature and governor signed the law, Lauren’s attorney friend (and her partner of 35 years) were married that first day that same-sex marriage became possible. The attorney’s partner’s father, a Unitarian minister who, coincidentally, also married Lauren and her ex-husband, performed the rites. Lauren had originally met the attorney when she had been Lauren’s divorce attorney.

Lauren went through a bad divorce with her husband. Five years ago I went through a bad breakup in which I wished I had the privilege of divorce. I may have ended up better off

financially if not emotionally. Now I am not sure how I feel about divorce among lesbians. Perhaps the bad breakup is still better than the litigious divorce?

Hoagland (1988) argued against the idea of a social judge, “social justice” or the state exerting control to rectify a situation between lesbians that truly may be unfair to one. “A system of punishment allows us to continue to ignore the other’s agenda only at a certain level; it structures our agendas, too” (p. 271). I agree with Hoagland’s point to a degree. In the case with Cris, I needed to understand and take responsibility for the part I played in giving up my power to her. Doing so ultimately allowed me to withdraw from Cris and the situation in a way that I might not have been able if a socially imposed structure, like divorce, was employed.

I assert, however, that many lesbians do not clearly and/or honestly decide together what their mutual obligations, property, and definitions as a couple are when they co-mingle. I have never seen the lesbian Utopia that Hoagland (1988) imagined where one lesbian has the luxury to spend years picking up the pieces from an abusive relationship, as I had to do. But perhaps Hoagland’s (1988) point was that in order for a legal system or structure to protect lesbians, lesbians must be included in the structure and the structure must not be assembled in the dominant/subordinate paradigm. I think Hoagland (1988) may have been asserting communities also create such structures. In some future world and land, and perhaps a narrow past, Hoagland’s ethics would work. But we are not there. I live now and am informed and constructed by the institutions we have. I am not sure Hoagland (1988) would agree, but I think inclusion in the existing structures, like marriage, may help.

But talking about divorce before marriage does dampen the spirit and the positive hopeful emotions of the event. Callie and Amanda had a contract also signed by two witnesses, in their non-legal marriage, witnessed by all their family, friends, and acquaintances attending their

wedding. The contract, which was not legally binding, is called a ketubah in the Jewish tradition. Amanda's mother, who had also performed the ceremony, had penned this document, a beautiful, artistically rendered work of art, which is now framed and displayed reverently in Callie and Amanda's home. Before Callie, Amanda claimed, she had never wanted marriage or even a marriage-like commitment, and had scorned the idea. Callie and Amanda's community and Christian and/or Jewish God witnessed and committed to their non-legal wedding. There are many essential parties to a marriage party, legal or not but legal marriage invites the government with all the power it bears.

Shortly after Amanda and Callie's wedding, Lauren went to Italy. She had been planning the trip after leaving her job of many years. She wanted to write, to explore, and to feel what it felt like to go to Europe on her own. She had never been and this was a gift she was giving herself, despite the admonitions of her financial advisor and family. I liked that about her. She invited me to join her.

Of course, I really wanted to go with Lauren to Italy. She had originally been planning on spending three weeks in Italy and then three more in Spain. That was before we became lovers. I really, really wanted to go but I could not afford it. I was barely three months into paying off my five year Chapter 13 bankruptcy, necessitated following my breakup with Cris.

Lauren offered to pay my airfare. It would cost her no more for me to be there with her than it would for her to be alone, she said. Very persuasively, she told me I just needed to accept her gift. I vacillated. I wanted to go but I felt I could not accept such a gift. She insisted. What would this mean? Nothing except that we could enjoy Italy together, she said. Right up until dropping her at the airport, I vacillated. I wiggled. I debated internally. I waffled. Finally I told

her that I could not accept her offer. Lauren was visibly disappointed. We were about ready to leave for the airport and she got very quiet.

I am not very good at saying “no” and disappointing people or myself. And, yes I wanted to go. I had never been out of the country other than to Thunder Bay, Ontario and that does not really count when you live in Minnesota. Accepting such a gift seemed to imply so much more, more than we might have been ready for. My fear returned. I was trying so hard not to leap as I had always done in the past. I wanted to be deliberate this time.

We loaded up the car in silence, not with excitement, as Lauren should have been feeling. She had her brand new luggage, packed perfectly and efficiently. She looked just as perfect in her boots, skinny jeans, and red leather jacket with scarf, and her beautiful white hair. (One advantage of being with Lauren is her gray, excuse me, platinum hair that she has had since her thirties. I can always find her in a crowd, at least a younger crowd.) The ride to the airport was painful. And then I said to myself, “Shit. Why pick now to be rational. What the hell?” I leapt.

“Yes, I want to go,” I said as we passed the Mall of America, minutes from the airport. “Yes! Yes! Yes!” “I’ll have what she’s having,” Lauren probably replied, quoting one of her favorite movies, Harry Met Sally. Excitement returned. Let the adventure begin.

Because of my delay in deciding, we then had to make all the arrangements for me to go, with Lauren already en route. I had to get a passport. I needed to provide my divorce papers and my marriage certificate for my legal marriage that was long in the past and never “consummated.” But that was part of the required paperwork to leave the country apparently. One of the downsides of marriage, I noted. So I had to kick the process into high gear. Lauren was able to get my ticket through her travel agency, but they needed my passport before finalizing. I had about a week.

I started digging through all my old disorganized papers that I had somehow still kept. I needed those documents to leave the country. After I found the papers and finished the paperwork, I went directly to the passport office. I got up to the counter where I learned that in order to expedite leaving the country by the time I needed to leave, I would have to request an emergency passport process, which of course I did. That meant I had to go wait again in a dark little old government office. Finally, I was ushered into an even smaller, mustier, cube and was quickly, without event, issued my passport. I would now have to wait to receive the official one in the express mail. They assured me that it would arrive in time. Having delivered mail in the past, I had my doubts.

Nevertheless, I had faith. I always thought that I was not a very faith-filled person, though revisiting my whole life for this paper has enabled me to see that I have operated on faith more times than not. The whole concept of faith has been one that I have grappled with for most of my life. I have never been able to adopt my mother's version of faith, for instance, a version that seems devoid of questioning. "How do you know that what you believe is the only truth?" I asked my mother once. She replied, aghast, "I just do because I have faith." Then she said, "Gaaa-eeee-yyyy...?" in that inflected way my mother has of saying my name that is both certain and incredulous at the same time.

I finally learned, though it took a while, that I would never win the faith or religion argument with my mother or even get a foothold into the dialogue. Since my relationship with Lauren began and I entered graduate school and began questioning these things, I have begun to articulate my own version of faith starting with that trip or leap to Italy. About ten days after dropping Lauren at the airport, I was back there with my new virgin passport, Italy bound. Firsts are always exciting.

I boarded my connecting flight in Paris en route to Florence, Italy where Lauren was going to meet me at the bus station. I landed in Florence, figured out how to hail a cab, and took a harrowing ride to the bus station so that I could meet Lauren and bus back to Sienna. The driver pulled in to the bus station and I got out and stopped to look around for a moment at where I was and to look for the main terminal area. My pulse was racing. I was in Italy! Suddenly I looked across the bus docks and there was Lauren, just as I had left her at the airport, cute little hiking shoes, skinny jeans and red leather jacket, scarf, and of course, her platinum hair. She had purchased hiking shoes while there because of all the cobblestone walking she was doing. She looked absolutely adorable. We walked toward one another and hugged like it was our first night together again.

I do not think I am the first to observe that Italy is a fantastic place to fall in love, or more in love. If two people can travel together, the chances that they can live together are good, at least in my experience. I have had bad, good, and in between experiences traveling with a lover/partner. One learns a lot about someone traveling. Lauren and I, as with the wedding tent, passed that test with “flying” colors. I am so happy that I quashed my fears and said yes to Lauren. The question is always whether the honeymoon can be sustained over the course of a marriage. Marriage is more than romance, right? I learned that lesson finally I thought. I was ready to try again.

Toward the end of our trip we walked through a section along the Cinque Terra trail where we were staying named Via dell’Amore or The Way of Love where thousands of lovers clasped padlocks to whatever fence or structure would hold them secure. These lovers created symbols of their love, at least the love they had at that snapshot in time that lasted until the locks rotted away or someone came to cut them off. How many of those loves lasted as long as their

locks I wondered? How many fell into an illicit category like lesbian or gay? How many married or were already married?

Legend has it that villagers had rarely married anyone from outside their Cinque Terre town. The path between Riomaggiore and Manarola has been closed periodically due to landslides but when reopened after World War II became established as a “lovers’ meeting point for boys and girls from the two towns” (Steves, 2009, para. 2). My guess is that there may have been more than just boys and girls, possibly a few same-sex couples meeting along the way as well. According to Steves (2009), “This new lane changed the social dynamics between the two villages, and made life much more fun and interesting for courting couples” (para. 3). As Coontz (2006) showed, there have been many changes to courtship rituals and marriage relationships due to any number of other social changes. The Italian government, a minority among European countries, has not yet recognized same-sex relationships through marriage or civil union rights due largely, some assert, to the opposition of the Catholic Church. However public opinion has been trending in favor as it has in the U.S., and even the Catholic Church appears to be softening its stance thanks to Pope Francis (Hooper, 2014).

If Lauren and I had been carrying around locks and spray paint we might have left our own memento of our love and romance on the Via. Our symbolic acts would have to wait. Lauren and I sipped our wine and ate our antipasti overlooking the Ligurian Sea that evening. Again, we tiptoed around the subject of marriage though we were basking in the overt expressions dell’Amore we had experienced that day. We made no mad pronouncements or plans but instead opted to just enjoy the moment as we had resolved to do since we met.

After our dreamy trip, Lauren and I returned together to Minnesota. We did not leave a lock symbolizing our love in Italy but we did make wonderful memories. Good memories, I

believe, are not unlike the locks along Via dell'Amore. They help to connect us, to clasp us together, to symbolize meaning, at least for that moment in time. The benefit and sometimes the curse of memories is that we carry them around with us to revisit and remind. Soon after our trip home I started spending most of my time at Lauren's condo. When my lease was up at my apartment, I officially moved in. We enjoyed about a year of official and unofficial joint domicile before our next disruption.

Lauren was unemployed the entire first year we were lovers. This had, in fact, been the impetus to her desire and ability to go to Italy. She began opening up her options and applied for jobs out of Minnesota, especially in warmer climes, thinking that she might at least get a trip to a nice place if not a job. I had been working through my Master's degree and was seriously considering applying for the doctorate program for which I am writing this dissertation.

I asked Lauren what she thought. She looked at me and asked, "Why do you want a doctorate? What do you expect to get from it?" I replied, "I have always dreamed of the possibility even before finishing my BA later in life. I love learning, have loved my MA coursework and don't feel ready to stop. It's personal." She thought that was a good answer though I do not think she was sure she wanted to be in a relationship with someone who was involved in doctoral work. She had been through the same program and so knew the timeline.

I applied nevertheless. The department accepted me. I applied knowing that if accepted, I would need to apply then for the tuition remission, given to one employee per year in each doctoral cohort. If I did not receive the remission, I could not do the program because I could not afford it and was not willing or able to go into that much debt at this stage of my life. I was trying to get out of debt, not take on more. When I received notice that I received the remission,

I cried. I could not believe that I would be able to pursue something that I had never dreamed possible.

One Sunday at the Unitarian Church we attended periodically, Lauren and I volunteered to be on a Habitat for Humanity crew helping build a multifamily housing development. Later that summer, we were on site; Lauren was actually hanging from a beam, when she got a call. After climbing down she called the number back. It was a university in Southern California where she had applied for a job. She interviewed with them once for a job, but they now wanted her for something different. Lauren was intensely feeling the need to work again for financial reasons. She was also excited for something new and so agreed to apply. She did a long distance interview having already met most of the players. She got the job and accepted. She moved to California in October, a couple of months after I had started the doctoral program.

In the past, I would have dropped everything that I was doing to go be with her, believing that “love” trumped everything else, including my own needs. One of the lessons I learned through my experience with Cris and following that with Margie was that unless I was also taking care of myself any lover/partner/marital relationship was not worth the cost. I had known this intuitively, but the need and romanticism I attached to love had always taken precedent. I had changed. Hoagland (1988) described self-sacrifice among lesbians as not helpful and certainly not part of the moral revolution Hoagland envisioned.

I need and want attention; but this comes from those who are actively pursuing their own goals, who have ideas which rub against mine, and who spark and are sparked by an exchange. This pursuit of goals is neither a matter of self-sacrifice nor of selfishness. It is a matter of weaving tapestries of lesbian value, it is a matter of creating meaning in this living. (Hoagland, 1988, p. 90)

Lauren and I agreed that we would stay together but live apart. We both knew we could not continue that arrangement indefinitely but thought we should try. We approached it as an

adventure. “So when we decide to interact, we do not need to regard ourselves as compromising or losing anything, but rather as embarking on an adventure” (Hoagland, 1988, p. 92). That October 2011 we drove Lauren across the country. On our way we spent a couple of days at the Grand Canyon. We hiked as we had in Italy and I thought I had astonishingly found the perfect woman for me after all these years, someone not afraid of hard work but who enjoyed a little luxury when possible. We were also making choices to be both for one another and for ourselves.

We beat Lauren’s furniture to her new apartment in one of the many run-on cities connecting Los Angeles and Orange counties. Because she had no furniture, no bed, no dishes, nothing other than a credit card, we had to purchase a blowup bed and some bedding at Target. At least they had Target, our hometown store, in California. When I left to fly back to Minnesota, I could barely do it. Everything in me wanted to just call up, quit my job, quit the program, and stay with Lauren. I probably would have in my past. Instead Lauren took me to LAX, a trip that we have now made many times, her putting a brave face on with me crying as I left her. All I could think of was Lauren alone on that blowup bed. And so we began the long distance chapter of our then-short relationship.

We each flew the 2000 miles from Minneapolis and Los Angeles several times a year for the next couple of years. I flew to California usually if I had a job interview but also for a couple of holidays. Lauren still has family in Minnesota and was teaching a class that allowed her to fly back once a month. We made it work but it was not optimal.

The first year we were apart was when the campaign to define marriage as restricted to “one man and one women” was launched in Minnesota. The counter-campaign, “Vote No Minnesota” launched in response and ultimately succeeded in defeating the campaign intended to

write into the constitution a restriction of rights for the first time in history. Rather than just breathe a sign of relief after defeating the exclusive amendment, the “Vote No” campaign morphed into a “Marriage Now” campaign, figuring they had the momentum and public sentiment on their side. Many same-sex couples my age and I started asking ourselves how we felt about marriage. Now that it seemed actually possible in Minnesota, was it something we even wanted?

When same-sex marriage became legal in Iowa due to an Iowan Supreme Court ruling two friends who had been together for over 10 years and raised a son to adulthood together went to Iowa and married. Cris and I were together then and someone asked Cris when she and I were getting married. I also asked her and distinctly remember the reticence with which she did not answer. We had problems, but I remember feeling disappointment and a little confusion at her obvious lack of enthusiasm. That should have been a clue; she did not want to marry and she would not even discuss it. Why did I even think that marriage was a good idea? I wanted a commitment and Cris could not give one though she expected one. It would have been nice to know.

Marriage and asking the question puts formality around the relationship that I have never experienced in all of my previous relationships. My previous partners and I had just fallen into living together, cohabiting, “merging,” seemingly without any pause or barely any recognition of what we were doing and what it meant. For some people that method probably worked out fine. They did not need anything formal to know what they were about. They stayed together or not and were able to fairly maneuver the relationship. But that was not my experience. I think a little seriousness might have been a good brake or at least a check on the runaway U-Haul trailer that I seemed to have permanently affixed to my rear bumper.

But does the State or government need to be involved in this restraint setting? No, not necessarily, but who then? The Church? Whose Church? Whose State? Whose Government? Lesbians and gay people have desired inclusion into these institutions of citizenship and community. LGBTQ people have created their own churches, but churches only confer symbolic inclusion, not insignificant. But LGBTQ people desire and could benefit from the benefits, protections, and symbolism of government inclusion.

For those of us who do not attend or who are not privileged to be privy to such pre-marital counseling, are we destined to bumble along until finally, at age fifty something, we've figured something out about how we want to do relationships? Not that there is anything wrong with experimentation. But I, and I imagine many other lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, could have used a little primer on relational life. We have been excluded from even the most minimal sexual education training in schools. Marriage will not change that. Walters (2014) questioned, as many others have, the movement goal of marriage and "tolerance" as being not near enough, "The absence of overt and legalized discrimination is not the presence of gay positivity" (p. 258).

My first lesbian wedding of friends, Terry and Jo D in Iowa was beautiful. Callie and I sang at Terry and Jo D's request, "*Grow Old With Me*" by John Lennon, inspired by a Robert Browning poem, in answer to Yoko Ono's song "*Let Me Count the Ways*" inspired by Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem. The ceremony was Terry and Jo D's own creation as every lesbian wedding I have attended has been, generally light on religion and heavy on personal symbolism. It was also Pride weekend so the town was infused with celebration. Terry's biological son who has lived with Terry and Jo D their entire relationship and Jo D's brother stood by their sides. Pastor Peg, tattooed and motorcycle riding lesbian, was a busy pastor that first year of same-sex marriage in Iowa.

My second lesbian wedding with Lauren was for my friends Xena and Daisy who had originally been skeptical about the whole notion of lesbians getting married. Both identified as life-long lesbian feminists as did I. Xena had a tattoo of a labrys, a lesbian feminist symbol circa the 1970s, on her arm as evidence of her life-long feminist commitment. Daisy and I had first met in the late 1970s at the Women's Coffeehouse. Lauren traveled back to Minnesota for the weekend and we drove to Dubuque, Iowa for Xena and Daisy's wedding.

When Callie and Amanda announced their marriage, Daisy had asked me what I thought about the fact that all their friends, lesbian couples, were getting married. She said then that she and Xena did not feel the need to "jump on the bandwagon." Within two years, a month before Minnesota legalized marriage, Xena and Daisy were married in Dubuque, Iowa. I am sure they would have waited if they had known Minnesota would sanction same-sex marriage; though Dubuque, a sweet little college town, was a fantastic venue for the event. Lauren flew out from California for the wedding and we drove down together in heavy, spring Minnesota snow. I sang, at Xena and Daisy's request, "*True Colors, True Blue*" by Cris Williamson, a "women's music" icon from the 70s. Another friend sang what has become a wedding standard, "*Grow Old With Me*".

You're
 one-of-a-kind I always said about you
 One in a million, the one that I knew
 Now you're the one for me, and I'm the one for you
 True Story True Blue

(Williamson, 2005)

Soon, couples no longer needed to drive from Minnesota to Iowa to marry. Governor Mark Dayton signed the legislation legalizing same-sex marriage in Minnesota on May 14, 2013. I joined thousands of other jubilant Minnesotans on the grounds of the state capitol mall, on a

gorgeous, bright day, to witness the signing. Co-sponsors of the bill, Karen Clark, a lesbian Minnesota House representative since 1981 and a gay Minnesota Senator since 2003, Scott Dibble, flanked Dayton. Clark and Dibble's accompaniment of the governor is symbolic itself of lesbian and gay inclusion in the public sphere. After the signing, the Minnesota Freedom Band led a celebratory crowd to downtown Saint Paul for a party where the Minnesota United marriage equality campaign theme song, "*Love is the Law*" by the band the Suburbs, blasted through the city streets. Xena, Daisy, and I walked behind the Freedom band, and met Terry, Jo D, and other friends at the party.

Our next lesbian wedding was for Lauren's divorce attorney and her partner, the daughter of the Unitarian minister who married Lauren and her ex-husband. Yes, it is a small world. They, too, had been skeptical about getting married when the campaign to win marriage ensued. Three days after August 1, the day marriage became legal for same-sex couples in Minnesota; they were married in a gorgeous ceremony of their own creation in their own backyard gardens that they had nurtured together for many years. Family and friends stood as the proud retired father, in what was likely his last official act as a minister officiated the marriage of his daughter and her partner of 35 years. Their dear friend read as part of the ceremony, the decision language from the *Goodridge v. Dept of Public Health*, which legalized marriage in Massachusetts in 2003 and got this US same-sex marriage party started.

Marriage is a vital social institution. The exclusive commitment of two individuals to each other nurtures love and mutual support; it brings stability to our society. For those who choose to marry, and for their children, marriage provides an abundance of legal, financial, and social benefits. In return it imposes weighty legal, financial, and social obligations. The question before us is whether, consistent with the Massachusetts Constitution, the Commonwealth may deny the protections, benefits, and obligations conferred by civil marriage to two individuals of the same sex who wish to marry. We conclude that it may not. The Massachusetts Constitution affirms the dignity and equality of all individuals. It forbids the creation of second class citizens. In reaching our conclusion we have given full deference to the arguments made by the Commonwealth.

But it has failed to identify any constitutionally adequate reason for denying civil marriage to same-sex couples. (*Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, 2003)

One friend of a friend was not sure she and her partner would marry. Her partner said that was because she still was not openly lesbian. Marriage would certainly out them in ways at least one partner was not comfortable. Two other close friends of Lauren's were married at the end of the year, shortly after I moved to California, thus Lauren and I were unable to attend. Lauren had attended, and worked on, their commitment ceremony 20 years earlier and felt that had been the "real" wedding. One of the last unmarried couples of the group of lesbian friends that I had in Minnesota, were married toward the end of last year, but Lauren and I were unable to attend. It had indeed been a boom year and one-half for lesbian marriages, at least in Minnesota. Regardless of theoretical arguments against marriage, at least in my friends' group of mid-life lesbians, many chose marriage.

In June 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court struck key parts of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) (*US v. Windsor*, 2013) and returned Proposition 8 as lacking legal standing, thereby once again enabling same-sex marriage in California. As many observed, among them many queer and feminist opponents of marriage, make no mistake, marriage, same-sex or not, is a conservative institution. Upholding traditional values largely sold it. "The move to 'normalize' and sell same-sex marriage as suburban humdrum comes through at every level of this campaign—both national and local" (Walters, 2014, p. 185). Further, Walters pointed out, after implicating the likes of David Koch as being among other ultra right-wing supporters of gay marriage,

This isn't just a case of political pragmatism but rather the kind of (very) strange bedfellows that should make the hardiest of gay-marriage advocates scream in terror, because it argues for a single civil right while embracing a politics that would deny many other rights to a whole range of disenfranchised groups. (p. 190)

Regardless, I and many other same-sex lovers and couples want marriage.

The sound of a Skype call interrupted my sleep one evening, “deedle dee, deedle deedle.” Ugh, I had begun to hate that upbeat, incoming call sound. I wanted to hear from Lauren, of course, and Skype had really kept us sane and probably together. We usually Skyped in the morning and at night, but with the two hour time difference we sometimes missed each other. Sammie, my little white poodle/bichon mix, and I usually perked up and ran to the computer when the sound began, but lately it had started to bug me. Lauren and I were both taking a bit longer to answer and not wanting to stay on the line as long. We decided that something had to change. It was time. Each of our leases was coming due. It was time for me to leave my job. In fact it seemed as if my job would make that decision for me soon if I did not make it myself. I leapt. California, here I come.

Trust, Relationships, and Change

Before delving too deeply into the meaning of marriage, but after Lauren and I had spoken more seriously about it as an option, I asked Lauren, “So, can I say we are engaged, betrothed, to be married?” “Sure” she replied. And so I did when I sent my farewell email to work colleagues before leaving Minnesota. I told my father in an email. I did not mention it to my mother. My circuitous journey through, around, in, and potentially **to** marriage has been a truth/troth-seeking passage. The truth, which I have sought, has been about identity, for sure, but identity in relationship, which implies a community.

How does my experience and understanding as a mid-life lesbian illuminate how lesbian identities, relationships, and community might transform with the introduction of same-sex marriage rights? To answer the question, I chose to revisit with a critical eye what experientially felt like a random path along which I constructed my identities, relationships, and communities.

From my current view, I can see how each of these has continually influenced the others in a structure that resembles more a conical shell. Marriage might make lesbian relational constructs more like heterosexual constructs, perhaps more symmetrical, and less random. But that would presume that lesbians and gay relationships are the only relationships that do not adhere to some “normal” structure. I assert that there is diversity in all relationships that marriage will not change, regardless of sexuality.

In this chapter, I began to explore how marriage will change lesbian relationships, specifically. As the sprint toward legal marriage continues, lesbian couples across the country will soon all have the ability to marry. The ramifications of this new right will be different in different places, and for different people. We lesbians are not all the same. Some of us whom others might see as lesbians do not identify as such. We intersect multiple categories. We are not monolithic nor do we agree on everything, despite the Utopian desires of some of our members. Several of the authors I cited have lamented and analyzed the LGB movement’s fight for marriage rights as being “heterosexualist” (Hoagland, 2007, pp. 166-185), not aiming high enough (Phelan, 2001), or an example of our misguided acceptance of merely assimilation, acceptance, and “The Tolerance Trap” (Walters, 2014). Not surprising, to me at least, I have not adopted any of these views completely but find wisdom in them all. That is our lesbian strength, as I believe Hoagland would agree.

I did not inherit my mother’s religiously oriented proscriptions about marriage, but I learned from my family and society to desire something akin to a traditional, long lasting, happy, ever-after, marriage. I believed and practiced romance and the power of love almost as religiously as my mother practiced her Southern Baptist-ism. I have been what some have

termed a “serial monogamist” because I had an amazing facility for falling in love. Despite the ups and downs of my relational life, I still believe in love.

At some point, someone suggested to me that perhaps I was in lust all those times, not in love. I am still not able to distinguish easily between falling in lust and love. I know some people are much more able to enjoy sex for sex alone, but without a strong emotional or loving attraction the sex alone has never worked for me. That alone is part of how I identified as a lesbian, emotion transmuted into sex. I do not mean to suggest that emotion does not have its own reasoning. But emotion and desire should also not presuppose the U-Haul; should not have always culminated in that I should marry the objects of desire.

My emotion and my reasoning were not integrated. Hoagland (1988) described this separation as a symptom and a limitation of growing up with patriarchal notions of passion, emotion, love, and their supposed antagonist reason. The love and lust I felt was a romantic sort, which led me to leap off figurative cliffs without thinking first about what was at the bottom, without fully choosing. Though I struggled with the concept of faith most of my life, my relationships were full of it; faith in another person, faith in the power of love, and faith in myself to make it work.

As quickly as I fell in love, I fell out of love. Falling out of love felt for me like a visceral, sudden, deep, unhappiness, almost like an inability to stay in the relationship one second longer. I might have loved that person, cared for them, never would have wanted to cause them harm or hurt, but often I was also unable to sacrifice myself for very long in a relationship where I was unhappy. And usually, I had already begun to fall in love with the next relationship, to feel the newness that meant, when I ended the current relationship, the one I perhaps should not have begun or at any rate extended.

For a long time I carried around a lot of shame about the way that I fell into and out of love and relationships. I believe that shame along with loss of self is partially what made me stay in some unhealthy relationships longer than I should have. Like my lesbian community, I was trying to figure it out. I did not have much of a guide other than the barometer of my own feelings. I thought that if I felt it, it must be right. And in some ways, I believe I was right. The desire and connection I felt toward other lesbians and my expression of it came from an integration of self. However, when I/we impose a heterosexualist, patriarchal structure upon our desires, the split occurs. Hoagland (1988) stated, “Perhaps one aspect of healing our fragmentation lies in reconnecting desire with caring—real presence and attention—not the romantic haze of happily-ever-after” (p. 176).

The problem was the inevitable hurt and pain of breaking up, for those I broke up with and for myself. There was no one to talk to about any of this other than the next girl friend, lover, or relationship partner who was not unbiased. We were figuring it out for ourselves; against a backdrop of feminist, lesbian-feminist, and separatist theories as they emerged. Much insight came from those scholars, poets, musicians, thinkers, and writers. But I, and I think many of us, were not accessing that insight then, when we might have needed it. We cannot lose these insights in the glow of attaining access to a historically patriarchal institution, marriage.

Relationship troubles eventually led me to therapy. There was no shortage of therapists, even specifically lesbian therapists, especially in the Twin Cities. The cities were a hotbed of lesbian therapy. Therapy became the way that many of us would learn to navigate through relationship as we figured ourselves out mid-flight. There were singles, couples, and group therapists. Singles therapy was helpful every time I grew unhappy enough to use it, if only to

have someone with whom to talk. Couples' therapy, however, was of limited value and primarily served to point out in more stark relief the relationship troubles.

In one case, every time my lover and I left the therapist's office, whatever promises had been made there were forgotten quicker than you could say, "I feel." The more we learned about the pitfalls of "you" statements, the more apt we seemed to degrade into them. Then we were fighting not just about whatever the original incident was but also the words we were using to express the issue. These are not bad tools and often they may be helpful, but they do not work when only one partner agrees to use them.

Hoagland (1988) considered the role that therapy played in lesbian lives. "Again, the institution of therapy reinforces the idea that our issues are individual and our feelings private; it focuses us on inner states rather than on the context from which our feelings gain their depth of meaning" (p. 182). I agree with Hoagland's critique that therapy can serve to let society, politics, and community interaction off the hook. However, society, politics, and community are also not enough to sustain a lesbian's (at least this lesbian's) emotion and desire. Intimate relationship with another individual or a few other individuals is what has proven of sustenance for me and what I am prone to want to protect.

I had several significant relationships in my past. I focused here on those of longer duration and want to consider how they might have been different if marriage had been an option. I also want to consider what is important in my current and future relationship. In one of the past cases, I believe if we could have married we would have. And the contract might have been enough to keep us together, perhaps to our individual detriments. In another case, marriage might have been a trap but also served as a protection.

Hannah and I lived lives that resembled heterosexual married couples in many ways. And yet, we were not heterosexual, nor very sexual when considered in the context of the fifteen years we were together. But comparing that aspect of our lives together against heterosexuals or frankly any other persons' relational life is not fair to any of them. One cannot know what goes on in other persons' relationships unless they choose to divulge it and even then the "truth" of the relationship in the retelling is more nuanced, complex, and layered than can be retold.

Nonetheless, the story is not without value, both for the teller and hopefully for the reader. For most of us all are more alike than not, and connecting our common themes is the thread that keeps us whole. One of those common themes, in fact, is the desire that many of us have to connect in intimate as well as communal ways. Our rights to do so should be protected and expanded.

Registering for a Domestic Partnership certificate as Han and I did it back in the '80s was a largely symbolic act. I believe these acts over time have had meaning. We were counted, as we had wanted. However, we received nothing tangible for our declaration of partnership except the satisfaction that we had put ourselves on a list with city hall to make a claim, to let other people know we existed, we loved one another, and we mattered. We never thought that actual marriage would ever happen. We did not even think about it. Like every other lesbian or gay man that I knew, we just lived our lives. Might a legal arrangement, which bestowed actual benefits and expectations and was recognized by community and family, have had greater meaning? I suspect so.

I did not worry much about Han and me not having a legal connection. I was close with Hannah's family and I had no fear that they would prevent me from seeing Hannah in the hospital, or consider me as first of kin in other cases that might require one. There were a couple

of times, that doubt entered my consciousness, however. Though her family was more loving as any in-laws I could imagine, in some dark place in my brain, I always knew or feared that it really was not the same. I really was not family in the way married people are treated.

Likewise, I worried what would happen if I became ill, hospitalized, and unable to make my own decisions. The thought that my family who had been unsupportive could and would sweep in to do what they wished was a real if distant fear. We did not let it rule us, but the fear and uncertainty was there. And there are cases of just that happening with other unsupportive families. Hannah and I did what we could, like create living wills, health care directives, and the like. We put our house in my name while the family lake property was in Hannah's name. But, legal marriage would have given us a more concrete security.

There are numerous reasons that marriage can be beneficial for a couple. These have been enumerated in multiple places by now and my goal is not to re-enumerate them (Wolfson, 2004). There are numerous privileges that are attached to being married and there is no good reason, other than discrimination, that same-sex couples should be denied those. As Walters (2014) put it, "In case I seem too antagonistic to marriage, let me be as clear as I can: as a civil rights issue, same-sex marriage is a no-brainer. To deny individuals access to any social and legal institution simply by virtue of their 'gayness' is patently discriminatory" (p. 174).

The larger LGBTQI societal debate is whether or not marriage should privilege anyone and that ongoing discussion is what has driven most feminist, queer, and lesbian and gay arguments against marriage. Some of those not so privileged are indeed our LGBQ sisters and brothers. But there are also responsibilities and commitments that go along with the benefits of marriage. And my question is, do we throw the baby out with the bath water? Using the same metaphor, Walters (2014) wrote,

The political stance of sameness can only get you tolerance and can never get you comprehensive inclusion. I'm concerned about gays becoming stripped of their vivacious difference too, but even more concerned about the tolerance trap that both contains and exceeds that assimilationist homosexual. Too often, I think, the baby is tossed out with the bathwater. Or maybe it's just that we need to think beyond both babies and bathwater, past the tired old oppositions of righteous liberationism and assimilationist acceptance. (p. 271)

I share Walters' concerns and desire to move beyond the binarisms with which we continue to debate one another. We LGBTQI are not all the same. We have come from everywhere and consequentially our desires, needs, experiences, and insights are all different. This is our strength and not only must we use our strength to continue to grow but also to share our unique knowledge(s).

As it turned out, Hannah and I might have had to go through a painful divorce if we had married. Instead we were able to dissolve our partnership, relatively painlessly, by figuring it out ourselves. That was the nature of our relationship anyway, and I do not believe it would have been any different if we had been married, then divorced, than it was to not be married and split up. When I finally got my divorce from Ryan, my legal marriage, I did it all myself, a 'no-fault' divorce. I sent him the paperwork in Texas, which he signed and mailed back. I showed up in divorce court and it was done. That was who we were together and apart.

With Cris, on the other hand, I can only imagine how painful a divorce would have been. But the breakup, as I have explained, was painful also, for me at least. I think adding the state or the legal system to the mix, might have extended the pain, but would have made the end result fairer. Though the marriage rights folks like to focus on the happy, positive, aspects of our lesbian and gay relationships, there are obviously many that do not fall into that category. I speak from experience. I wonder whether having the option to marry, might have forced Cris

and I to commit in a formal way; that is forced the question of whether we really wanted to be in this for the long haul or not.

The problem I have with that scenario is that I probably would have opted for marriage, and if perchance Cris did also, ending it would have been that much more difficult. All of this is hypothetical, but it is instructive to imagine “what if?” When Cris was taken to detox, I would have been in the loop, so to speak, whether I wanted to be or not; whether I should have been or not. When anything happened with Cris regarding the law or her health, I would have been informed and expected to show up. That might have been good or bad.

If we had been married, I do not think Cris would have legally been able to just lock me out of the house, and take possession of all of our joint possessions and my dog. I would have retained a place to live or we would have had to figure out how to separate jointly. She would not have retained all of the control. Cris also would not have been able to control the entire split and the dissolution of possessions, or rather, parsing out of possessions, as she was. And perhaps marriage, a contract, would have made me pause.

So, there are some protections involved with including the state in ones relationship. Although I appreciate Hoagland’s (1988) desire and vision that all we lesbians might figure it out amongst ourselves, sadly, my experience of relationship and of community has not always been thus. Whether or not that is because we grew up in heterosexualism and patriarchy, which I was inclined to believe as a young lesbian, the ability to overcome that social construction is not one I have always possessed.

In at least a couple of cases of involvement with “mean and nasty lesbians [going around] intimidating others” (Hoagland, 1988, p. 267), namely me, I desired someone to intervene, either lesbian justice or just equally “mean and nasty” legal justice. In both of these cases, I did not ask

for help from the state because I did not want to add to the negative stereotypes of lesbians.

When I did ask for help from my microcosm of a community, I received help but not equity. In each case, the perpetrator potentially could continue her meanness with someone else.

I applaud and encourage our ongoing attempts to figure these issues out for ourselves and not rely wholly on the legal systems, which are, I agree, not unbiased either. However, we must engage with these systems, rather than think that somehow we are entirely separate from them. We must disrupt them through our engagement.

A younger lesbian I work with recently recommended a hotel, “My wife and I were married there. It is very special to us.” It is still strange for me to hear a lesbian referring to her “wife.” Is this some internal homophobia I carry around with me? Possibly. Though I have lived almost my entire adult life as an “out and proud” lesbian, I sometimes wonder how truly proud I lived. Hannah and I came closest, but we also lived under some cloud of shame, shame of being the sexual creatures that we declared ourselves to be as lesbians. We were not political lesbians or activists other than in our voting choices. We were asexual, “natural” lesbians, who had become lesbians, come out, because we were “naturally” attracted to other women.

I think that my lifetime of relational ups and downs have taken a toll. When I was with Cris, I used to think and even say out loud that if we broke up, I was done with relationships. They felt too hard and I felt too incapable of being successful. And of course, as soon as Cris and I were done, I started up with Margie. And when Margie and I ended, I started up with Lauren. At this stage of my life I cannot help but wonder, why? I look at my relational life and those I have left behind or who have left me and wonder what has this all been for and for what have I been searching?

What have I been chasing might be the more accurate metaphor. I have straight friends who had one significant relationship that ended and so decided one was enough. After one friend married her long-time lover, under pressure to do so by him, he quickly had an affair and they divorced. She never remarried or had a long-term lover relationship again. Another friend, a couple years younger than I, as woman in her middle age, had a couple significant and hopeful relationships, that ended for various typical reasons and now she seems finished with significant intimate relationships. Certainly, it gets harder to put oneself out there at our age. Both of my friends have strong biological family systems that have provided them family. But they have also expressed a desire to love again, for someone “of their own.”

Is this what I have been searching for partially; a family to replace my biological family? I had a family with Hannah and broke it up when I left her for Cris. I had a family through Cris, but one where I never felt I belonged. We still cobbled out a difficult, uneasy coexistence and acceptance, well at least tolerance. But I agree with Walters (2014) about tolerance, “My argument is that the framework of tolerance actively prevents the development of a more inclusive and powerful sexual and gender freedom. It stands in the way” (p. 273). I want love and family.

Lauren and her ex-partner both had children from previous heterosexual marriages who were teenagers when Lauren and her ex got together. Often, pre-existing families can get in the way of creating one’s own. But, if the desire was mutual, family construction happened throughout history, with or without marriage. In the poem that Jane Addams wrote at the turn of the 20th century to her long-time companion, roommate, and friend, whether or not they were also sexual seems irrelevant. They were certainly a family and a couple, of sorts.

The “mine” and “thine” of wedded folk
Is often quite confusing

And sometimes when they use the “ours”
It sounds almost amusing

But you and I may well defy
Both married folk and single
To do as well as we have done
The “mine” and “thine” to mingle.

(Brown, 2003, p. 259)

Since writing about and researching the topic of marriage and its expansion to include same-sex couples, I have been alternately persuaded and dissuaded by many of the arguments presented by feminist theorists, queer theorists, lesbian feminist separatists, and lesbian and gay rights activists. Wow. I thought it would be so easy. As a gay man I used to work with said after Minnesota legalized same-sex marriage, “I’m afraid that everyone will go get married, just because they can.” I admit that throughout my own research, even when I have been most suspicious and doubtful about marriage as a goal and especially an end goal, I have held on to a secret desire to marry anyway. I recognize this as a purely emotional response. I want to marry because I can. AND I never thought I would ever be able to. AND I have a wonderful partner who I would choose to do this with. AND I want to protect our future together, more than ever, now that I am very close to sixty. And for all those other reasons that have been enumerated.

That is not to say that I am not suspicious, very suspicious, of some seemingly overnight changes of heart by otherwise very right-wing people. One of those, unfortunately, is not my mother. I am also even more aware than I was before, that marriage has a shady past, and privileges some relationships over others. I am frankly not sure how to resolve, for myself, those worries. I still want us, as I did with Hannah, to be recognized as humans who are in caring relationships with one another, just as deserving as the heterosexual families that dominate the familial structures. I have been waiting my whole life for my relationship to be recognized, and

validated, and respected. Though I feel vulnerable saying so, I have found, miraculously, a woman whom I want to spend the rest of my life with, to grow old with, to love if not obey, to care for and have care for me. I feel very lucky to have another chance at love.

I spent my entire life in search of and working out what I wanted out of a relationship. My journey connected me with others and with myself. I found family, lost family, created family, and expanded family. I value all of my relationships with family, friends, lovers, and partners, for I learned and grew through all of them. But I desire and prefer to live my life, if possible, with one other person in intimacy, love, desire, and partnership. I am not finished yet.

I entered each of my significant relationships with the intention of them lasting the rest of my life. However I was not willing to sacrifice my life, or perhaps my partner's life to make eternity happen. Along the way I have risked a lot to leap into and out of relationship. Along the way, I have learned a few lessons about how I want to do this.

I also believe that bisexuals, lesbians, gay men, transgendered, queer, intersexed, all of us who have by necessity or choice, lived outside the norm, have learned a few things. We have had to construct relationships differently and because of that, have some insights to offer. I believe we have already proven disruptive, in a good way, to the mainstream ways of creating sexual and intimate relationships and families. We will continue to do so even as we begin to enjoy the privileges of marriage.

Giddens (1991), considering primarily heterosexual marriage, relationship, and sexuality, and the "contradictions of the pure relationship" (p. 134) in them, interestingly used lesbian relationships, as reported by the well-known Hite Reports of the 1970s. Giddens, in a generally rare moment of recognition about what insight gay and lesbian relationships might impart to heterosexuals said, "Yet since marriage 'in the traditional sense' is disappearing, it is the gays

who are the pioneers in this respect – the prime everyday experimenters. They have for some while experienced what is becoming more and more commonplace for heterosexual couples” (p. 135). This is not news to most LGBTQ people.

Without going into further explications of the role or not of gender in relationships, a topic that is intriguing but beyond the scope of this paper, I agree that the way many lesbians and gays, but not all, have learned to create and sustain relationships and to end relationships follows Giddens’s “pure relationship” model. This is just one example of how LGBTQ people have influenced the large society’s models of relationship. Giddens, in 1992, prior to the recent advances in marriage equality, noted,

Heterosexual marriage superficially appears to retain its central position in the social order, making the prior discussion of lesbian relationships at best rather marginal. In reality, it has been largely undermined by the rise of the pure relationship and plastic sexuality. (p. 154)

To review, Giddens defines a “pure relationship” concisely as “a relationship of sexual and emotional equality, which is explosive in its connotations for preexisting forms of gender power” (p. 2). Plastic sexuality, an essential precursor to the “pure relationship” according to Giddens refers to a sexuality that “is decentered sexuality, freed from the needs of reproduction” (p. 2). Lesbians, gays, and bisexuals have been at the forefront of living with such “pure relationships.”

Some believe that NOT participating with marriage would be the ultimate disrupter, but I do not think we LGB are a big enough group to make that change. Perhaps this is the old “change the system from within or from without” argument. Hoagland (1988) wanted a moral revolution, but I do not see that happening through separation. Phelan (2001) said we should hold out for “a better offer” (p. 161), but I do not see that our numbers are such that we can demand what we want.

Phelan's (2001) observation that "cultural change is always a matter of gradual introductions of changes that do not seem possible until they happen" persuades me more (p. 161). If we are not completely transformed into lesbian and gay clones of heterosexuality, and I just do not see that happening, I think marriage can be that gradual change. Walters (2014), despite her similar critiques of marriage and concerns about losing our special differences post-marriage, entreats us to "Repeal, enjoy, sign up, and pledge your troth to God and country and legally wedded spouse. But do not imagine that this is all that we can imagine" (p. 276). The LGBTQ community has long participated in relational commitment, fought for marriage rights, and now marries. These structures and institutions, though created by a public citizenry and power that once excluded LGBQ people, have been adopted by, even embraced by, LGBQ people. Phelan (2001) advises that we can do better and Walters (2014) is similarly critical of marriage; both push us to a better understanding of relationship and family than we now have. I agree with both and add that LGBQ engagement with marriage and the government will necessarily make the institution more inclusive. Making one institution more inclusive, due to simple matters of inconsistency, will cause other institutions and larger constituencies to ultimately follow. We must retain and continue to gain our visibility and voice, to share what we know and have learned about relationship, community, and family creation and sustenance. We have something to offer to other lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender, and queer. We have learned something from the closets and our struggles. We have something to share.

Herstorical Reflection: Otherwise Engaged

I had one more week to get ready for Lauren's final trip to Minnesota to see me. I had been sorting through everything I still owned to get it all down to a quantity that I could pack either in or on top of my Toyota Matrix. Ruthlessness was becoming the modus operandi for culling what I had left. I had already mailed boxes to our new home in California mistakenly using the wrong zip code. I would never see some of these boxes and their contents, my few

possessions again. Other boxes would straggle into California, barely held together by tape, battered and broken through their rough trip across the country.

I had been divesting myself of stuff for several years now. This was the last of a process that had begun when I left Hannah. That move and split up had been rough. We had accumulated 15 years worth of a variety of tools, dishes, furniture, books; you name it. Han and I had agreed, after looking at what seemed fair and easiest, for one of us to get the house along with the credit card debt. The other would walk away free of both. Han decided to walk and move up north where she had longed to always be anyway. Feeling guilty, I let Han take whatever else she wanted.

Purging myself of old possessions felt good but sad. I was eager to begin again, though I knew I would miss Minnesota and my friends/family created there. If I had not used it in a year, the Oprah rule of cleaning house, it had to go. I had helped Han do the same thing with her toolshed up north just a little over a year before. Everything we had hauled out to be taken away, she had hauled back in within months after I left, much to her sister Ina's dismay. Han had started having a hard time letting go of things, almost compulsive in her desire to hang on. I was determined not to hang on.

I picked up Lauren at the airport that Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving, before we were scheduled to leave. She was a little taken aback, I think, by how much there still was to do but she did a good job of hiding it. I had been finishing up my job, writing my literature review which was due in a month, and trying to get through two storage units. I had got it all down to fitting in my little studio where Sammie, my little poodle/bichon mix, and I had been living for the last year. Lauren arrived and we kicked into gear. Lauren helped me cull the items I had vacillated on before she arrived. After most of my furniture had been sold or given away we mapped out the interior car measurements on the floor so that we could pack most efficiently.

Saturday morning was our deadline departure date. The weather in Minnesota was about to go from fall to blizzard in a day. That weather would be following us the whole way across the country, which we did not want to get caught up in. That and my job interview, moved up Wednesday, determined our aggressive schedule.

Saturday morning arrived. We packed the car as much as possible the night before sans the last few remaining items. We ran out of room. Plus, we now had no room left to take things to the Goodwill. Lauren called her good friend to help. When she got there, and took measure she called her partner to bring over their rooftop storage bag. We loaded up their car to take to Goodwill sans everything that they could not use themselves. My old bicycle, cameras, my old family chair in need of repair, tools, electronics, old albums, vacuum, and other miscellany of varied value had to go. I tried not to think about it but it was hard. I did not think of myself as being overly possessive but this last divestiture left me feeling vulnerable. I had no job, would be accruing student debt, and was heading off to a new place with faith and hope that my relationship with Lauren would thrive once we were together.

We all worked on getting the remaining stuff into and on top of the car. Lauren took one last load to an organization that was not the Goodwill but close. I hated to use them because of their reputed anti-gay policies but we were desperate to get on the road and so support of LGBT rights took a back seat. Finally, thanks to the help of friends, Lauren, Sammie, and I took off. It was a beautiful fall day in Minnesota.

All we were thinking about was getting some distance between us and the weather and the real bed we got to sleep in that night. We slept on a blowup mattress in the studio, which, like every other blowup mattress I have ever slept on, slowly deflated as the night went on. Though

Lauren and I were very happy to be together and to be starting our new life together, the conditions started to wear on us.

For the first few hours on the road, Sammie whined. He had never been fond of car rides, having experienced some trauma in a car I believed. Eventually his whine became simply heavy panting. We were all happy when we rolled into our first hotel of the trip and slept pretty much straight through the night. Waking early, we were off again.

Lauren's driving makes me nervous. She knows it. My nervousness makes her nervous. Her nervousness makes Sammie nervous. This does not make for a relaxed trip across the country. I really tried to relax, but relaxation was proving to be an effort. We were making pretty good time with no incidents to speak of except for the weather on our tail. Either while driving through Kansas or Missouri, I looked up and suddenly saw a deer starting to cross the road. Of course, one assumes that it will be crossing in front of your car thus necessitating a slow-down.

I experienced this very same scenario once with Hannah, which might be the source of some of my nervousness of other people driving. That time we hit the deer squarely in the windshield, leaving bits of deer fur inside of my car. Han had not seen it in time. We survived but had to limp our car to the nearby Moose Lake to try to find a mechanic. That symbolic incident marked when I decided to end my relationship with Han. We choose the symbols we need when we need them, I thought.

This time, because I apparently tend to lose the ability to speak coherently in such circumstances, I said out loud to Lauren, "Deer... [no reaction] DEER... [Still no reaction] D-E-E-E-R-R-R!" to which Lauren finally replied, "What?!" Right about that time Lauren saw the deer herself and expertly slammed the brakes on, in the middle of the highway, without locking them or causing any other drama. The deer flashed in front of us, as it had with Han, but only barely nicked our headlight with its foot, or our headlight only barely nicked the deer's foot. I am sure the deer saw it differently than we did. Meanwhile Lauren, just as expertly, slammed on the accelerator to get us back up to speed before the semis behind us could reach our bumper.

We did not speak for a good five minutes. When we finally did start speaking, I asked if Lauren had not heard me saying, "Deer, Deer, DEER!" She said, yes, she had heard me saying, "Dear, Dear, DEAR!" I think we needed a little excitement to break us in. Though a couple for a little over three years already, other than our first year of bliss, while living apart we had only been "together" for little bits at a time. We were breaking new relational territory.

The "deer/dear" incident served to remind me to relax a little, enjoy the ride, and to begin to trust again. I had forgotten how to do that after Hannah. I think that relationships require different levels of trust, depending on the type of relationship. What does marriage have to do with it? Short term or periodic lovers often do not experience the daily business and work of marriage-like relationships. The legality of these would seem to have nothing to do with their struggles or their ease. And my long-term relationship commitments had both. But the work cannot overtake the desire and love.

I thought back to the short-term affair with Margie, before Lauren, and the cross-country trip we took together, probably more stressful for her than me. For me it was an adventure, but her driving made me equally nervous and she also did not enjoy me mentioning it. The way that we resolved the difficulty and inability to communicate would signify one of the first "red flags" between us. The lack of communication was a problem. Lauren had no problem communicating. In fact her willingness to communicate and to essentially call me on or at least not take on my shit was one of the things I loved about her. And still do.

I thought about Han on that long trip. She had been a big part, the biggest part, of my life in Minnesota, of my life. Through Han I had truly learned how to love. I would not be who I was now without Han, and Ina, and the Norbs. They, and my other Minnesota friends who had once been kind strangers, were were my family. I thought of the day Han had called me at work to tell me of her diagnosis. Stage four. One to two years. I had walked through downtown Minneapolis after, tears wetting my face. That was March, 2012. After giving her all, Han passed June 30, 2013. I had spent the week with her, Ina, Han's partner, Scout, and Han's old college friend, Smithie, at Han's bedside in hospice. Smithie had been Han's first lover and came back in August to speak at Han's funeral. I sang (barely squeaking by), at Han's request, Blackbird. I had never really listened to the words to that song before. I felt learning that song was one last gift Han gave me.

After three very long days of driving, Lauren, Sammie, and I finally hit the California border. We had not tarried or detoured to see the Grand Canyon as we had when we first drove Lauren out West. We knew the weather that had been tracking us was about to turn into wind storms across the California desert all the way into Los Angeles. It was going to be a long day and Lauren and I agreed that I would drive us across the desert and she'd take over when we hit the freeways of the city.

Our weather had been postcard perfect the whole way and the closer we got to California, the better it was. The sun that we had been driving into all afternoon, finally started to set. We were tired and quiet, except for Sammie's panting, as the background sky and foreground desert slowly changed from bright yellow to the complementary purples and pinks of sunset. I had never experienced such a long-lasting sky display of gradient and hue. We were traveling West at almost the same rate as the sun was setting. Almost. If we had not been so dog-tired and ready to be home I would have just pulled over to watch it. In another half hour, the sky was dark blue. The gradient had changed to flashes of lights from the cars that seemed to be coming at me from all directions. We weren't in Minnesota or Kansas anymore, Sammie. I pulled into our last gas station of the trip and happily let Lauren take us home.

CHAPTER SIX: COMMITMENT MATTERS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Changing Marriage?

...we need to reckon with why gay marriage has become the sign of all things gay—for advocates and opponents alike. Why did a walk down the aisle replace a walk on the wild side, and why does marriage and family rhetoric hold such powerful sway? (Walters, 2014, p.174)

I began my story of identity, community, and relationships with the question of how the expansion of marriage to same-sex couples will transform those aspects of life for lesbians of my mid-life age. Because of my research, I have come to wonder whether lesbians, gay men, and queers have written and analyzed more about same-sex marriage than any heterosexual has written and analyzed about different-sex marriage in its much longer history. I believe that LGBTQ people especially might have thought more about marriage and whether or not to participate in it than heterosexual people ever have or ever would. We LGBTQ people, especially the academics among us, have been so thorough in our analyses I fear that we have just about squeezed all the emotion out of love and marriage. I know much more about this topic and myself than I did before my research. At the same time, I do not believe I answered my question fully. My original question morphed as I reflected and wrote, and a larger question emerged from my writing intimately connected and foundational to marriage. That greater compound question asks how I came to an ethics of commitment and how I learned to create a community and family of choice, in the context of a life lived without marriage. And so, in the context of this SPN, I asked, how does my story lead us to understand and apply in real lives an ethic of commitment/friendship/relationship?

In the preceding chapters, I interrogated my own life history and memories to make meaning of what the expansion of marriage rights means to my LGB cohort. Marriage provided an opening out of which commitment, community, and family emerged. SPN provided a means,

a tool, with which to conduct my enquiry. In this final chapter I sought to summarize what I have learned through my process of revisiting my life experiences of identity, community, and relationship. I also considered what further implications and need for future research still exists.

Changing Identity

In the decade when I was growing up, a lesbian implied something hidden, shadowy, and dark. In the decade when I was coming out, a lesbian was a feminist and sometimes a separatist. Being lesbian has often equaled being the punch line, a fashion question, and more recently a fashion statement. Like any other identity, the label and its meaning depends on perspective.

Your identity, Stein argues, is a function not of anything intrinsic or essential about you, but rather of there being some experiencing subject—any dog will do—to remember and identify you. Entity, by contrast, has nothing to do with memory or identity.
(Ashton, 2002, p. 602)

I began my interrogation of identity firm in the common and politically advantageous belief that I was “born this way.” I have become less secure in that belief and now recognize how the emphasis that our political leaders have placed on that belief helps locate us within the “tolerance trap” that Walters (2014) elucidated. Following Stein’s “rose,” I am a lesbian because others see me *or need* me to be so. Identity matters, but entity, or how one describes self is essential. Extending Stein’s line of thought, identity might include how others view an individual and how that individual views herself, construction and essence working together to create a unique individual. As I have shown, there have been many critiques and analyses of the identity or essentialist vs. constructionist ideas about sexuality and how indeed, we became this way. At the end of the day, or at least this dissertation, my truth lies somewhere in between those two presumed oppositions.

Part of what being lesbian and feminist has meant to me, how others and I have constructed this identity, is as someone who does not blithely accept and live what is deemed by

the dominant paradigms to be normal. I have reveled in that aspect of my identity. I learned to question more critically over time as I realized that I did not fit into what my parents, church, society told me was normal. As Phelan (2001) and Walters (2014) noted, just attaining marriage rights will not change the outsider status of LGBTQ people. Marriage will not ensure our full citizenship. We are “granted” citizenship insofar as we “self-police” (Walters, 2014, p. 153) to look like whatever the current version of normal looks like.

In that sense, gay access to deep citizenship depends at least in part on what the current contours of acceptability are at any given historical moment. So if marriage, for example, has historically been (in the US but not necessarily elsewhere) a sign of citizenship (indeed, it remains the easiest way for an immigrant to become a citizen), then gay access to that institution signals to the world that these gays (the ones who want to marry) are at least recognizable as potential citizens. (Walters, 2014, pp. 153-154)

I believe as we pushed more and more for inclusion into institutions like marriage, we have risked more and more those aspects of our former identities that made us different. As my friends Xena and Daisy wondered, “Will we become boring now?” We have desired inclusion and have settled for “tolerance” and “acceptance.” Like Walters (2014) asserted, I am not satisfied with just tolerance, and full inclusion probably does not go far enough. Except inclusion implies full participation. And full participation means that LGBTQ people have access. Marriage is just one inroad into a more full citizenship.

LGBTQ people have often spent lifetimes considering questions of identity and their attached meanings for themselves individually and as links to community. Despite my early assertion that “normal” lesbians and gay people are just busy living their lives like other “normal” people, that is not to say that we have not thought about the conditions of our lives while living them. Some were brave enough, assured enough, and had enough time to put their thoughts down or out into the world. Those thoughts influenced others of us who, as I observed, quietly went about, voting perhaps, enacting their small protests, attending gay events, checking

off the census box, living and loving as same-sex couples or LGBTQ single individuals, both inside and outside the figurative closet. Identity as group affiliation and for building community, though amorphous and changing, has mattered as a force moving us out of the closets and into the courtrooms, demanding equality.

While people cannot be identified by just one identity, how one identifies sexually often has great importance and ramifications to how one lives in relationship with others. But lesbians, at least, have also constructed intimate relationships sans sex, as Rothblum and Brehony (1993) explored. And whose right is it to assert that one loving relationship without sex is less worthy than another loving relationships with sex. Prior to the beginning of marriage rights for same-sex couples in the US, Rothblum and Brehony (1993) observed, "...married couples are considered married even when they are celibate or when they are having sex with other people. However, for all other couples (lesbians, gay men, and cohabiting heterosexuals), their relationships are defined by the presence of sexual activity" (p. 6). Though sex is considered to be a presumption of the marital relationship, many long-term marriages might not include sex, same or different sexed. And why must that be the precursor for beginning or sustaining a happy marriage?

The cockeyed optimist in me wants to believe that marriage alone will not transform us into same-sex replicas of the Cleavers. Historically, lesbians have adopted differently gendered identifications, going from strongly gendered butch/femme roles, to androgynous representations, and back again. But just as the representation of our sexuality and intimate relationships are constructions, so is gender. Lesbians have always created our versions of relationships. We have not felt compelled to hold to what some believed to be a heterosexual norm though we have absorbed many values of heterosexual relationships. As Stein (1997)

commented, “We were constantly reminded of our difference, and built an identity that was based on it” (p. 28). My contention is that marriage is not just a heterosexual invention. Some same-sex couples prefer monogamy, some do not, and some practice their own interpretation or negotiated version of monogamy. We have long created intimate, lasting, committed relationships, marriage by many other names. I cannot imagine that changing, but who knows? I cannot imagine that we will forget how to dance, celebrate, and disrupt.

So, identity change, as my stories have demonstrated, will take more than marriage. I have lived a life without marriage, had several marriage-like relationships, have even been legally married. These relationships have changed me but not due to their legality or illegality. If identities do change because of legal marriage, subsequent generations will likely be those changed. But they would have changed anyway, as we all do. Heterosexual identities will change right along with ours.

I believe we all will change marriage and by participating in marriage help blur the binaries between hetero and homo. As lesbian feminism and queer theory has informed us, our identity categories are what people have created to explain ourselves to others. But we all are more than just singular categories. Rust (1993) said that a changing identity should be seen as “a dynamic process...that occurs as mature individuals respond to changes in the available social constructs, the sociopolitical landscape, and their own positions on that landscape” (p. 74). As marriage becomes just one of those available constructs, in parallel with LGBTQ people coming more fully and openly into view, we will help change the view. And from my perspective the vista will be brighter, more open, more expansive, not just for LGBTQ people but for everyone. We have a unique perspective about commitment to other people and creating family and community, even without legal benefits, that could benefit people in general.

If we as humans aspire to a world in which we continue to strive for some equality of rights to happiness and love, then marriage rights seem to me to be one small step forward. My LGBTQ community went from the darkest shadows of the closets and criminality to at least legal status in my lifetime. We may see a time when my friends' children's children or Lauren's grandchildren's children, or my niece's children do not stigmatize LGBTQ people because, finally, they do not see them as other. They fit into the same familiar constructs as everyone else. I cannot see that as anything but progress.

Whether or not marriage, the legal entity, survives, or whether it should survive is a different question than whether one constructed class of individuals who love and care for one another should be treated differently than the dominant constructed class. Marriage, the institution, will best change when it expands to include all of those who construct their lives according to the current understanding of marriage. Marriage will change the individuals who comprise the fluidly constructed class called lesbians; even if only in material benefit though I have shown that will likely not be all that changes. Some lesbians and gay men will potentially change how we do marriage, and thus help change the institution itself, based on our different understandings and experience of relationship and commitment.

...with one foot anchored in heteronormativity and the other in homosexuality, today's same-sex spouses are likely to express the cultural contradictions of their lives in the form of complex marital arrangements that bring together tradition and innovation, with the effect of both reproducing and subverting traditional marriage. These are, indeed, *queer* unions. (Green, 2013, p. 399-400)

Changing Community

Communities are made up of somewhat like individuals who are in some sort of loosely organized group relationship to one another. Our individual identities inform our community identities. And so, a few questions arise. As LGBTQ people become married couples, and not all

will, will LGBTQ communities change into some lesbian/gay version of suburbia? Will LGBTQ segregate into communities of just married gays or lesbians? Or will LGBTQ continue to merge more deeply into the larger, now dominant communities as they already do? Gays and lesbians have lived in small towns, the country, the woods, urban, and suburban locations and have intersected with their other communities in varying degrees, probably depending on the other community's general lack of homophobia. Will this change because of marriage?

Lesbians, as many straight people, generally like being around other compatible people. But that can mean many different intersections of identity. When I first came out, I was relieved and strengthened when I found that there were other people like me. Then, having lived as "other" for much of my life, I wanted to live in a world in which I was free to be whatever kind of woman I was, free to love other women. Despite my sometimes disaffection or discomfort with the lesbian community, as with a small town or any other small community, it was the greatest comfort knowing other lesbians were there.

The lesbian community's decline has been well documented by some who lamented it and others who were happy to usher it out. Marriage will not change the lesbian community that I was a part of because it does not seem to exist in the way that it did before. There may be other intersectional lesbian communities that will be affected. One of the lessons of "the community" was that it did not encompass or embrace all, despite its best intentions to do so.

But while many lesbians felt 'at home' within feminist lesbian communities (and many continue to do so), many others felt pushed to the margins, outsiders looking in at the 'family' inside...From the vantage point of the 1990s, the notion of a unified lesbian community seems hopelessly romantic. (Esterberg, 1997, p. 116)

From the vantage point of 2015, almost 20 years beyond Esterberg's (1997) study, reading and remembering the lesbian communities of the 1970s seems anachronistic, especially in the current context of considering marriage. Yet, as Esterberg and others asked, what does it mean to have a

community? Esterberg noted, “Lesbians speak of community in strikingly similar ways. *We feel* a sense of community, of shared identity, with these other inhabitants of our social space, and in so doing create a sense of community” (p. 119). This sense allows me to imagine not just a lesbian community, but a gay community, an LGBTQAI community, and beyond. In this way, I applaud queer theory for stretching the understanding of identity and so, community.

Through her interviews with others who either felt in or out of a lesbian community, Esterberg (1997) found “there is no one center—and no single margin—to ‘the’ lesbian community” (p. 124). She suggested “we may be better off acknowledging that lesbian communities are really overlapping friendship networks, and sometimes exclusive ones at that, with multiple centers and fuzzy boundaries” (p. 175). The lesbians I know interact with their larger communities, their lesbian and gay communities, and their small friendship/family communities, to greater and lesser degrees already. Legal marriage does not seem poised to change that. Perhaps single people would be more apt to participate in the LGBTQ community, by going to bars or other venues for single people, but that is already the case. LGB people already “marry” in the sense that they already create more or less monogamous couples together. There is no reason why legal marriage should change their community involvement. Lesbians and gay people may become more visible in their communities because of their marital status. However, my critical point is that the expansion of marriage rights, though it feels miraculous, does not change much about the actual living conditions of lesbians and gay men. Some married lesbians and gay men will have more legal privileges now than their single sisters and brothers. Will that privilege change lesbian and gay community? Perhaps. But really, how?

The LGBTQ community replicates the larger community in its privileging some, and marginalizing of others. I still like to think that lesbians, in particular, have generally been more

open to embrace and problematize differences of all kinds. That has been my experience of lesbian community. Because we felt the pain of exclusion, discrimination, and derision, even from some of our gay brethren and feminist women, many (but not all) of the lesbians that I have known have an increased sensitivity to the experience of being “other.”

As we have already stated, we reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly Black men, women, and children. We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society: what they support, how they act, and how they oppress. But we do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness, *per se* — i.e., their biological maleness — that makes them what they are. As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. We must also question whether lesbian separatism is an adequate and progressive political analysis and strategy, even for those who practice it, since it so completely denies any but the sexual sources of women’s oppression, negating the facts of class and race. (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002, pp. 238-239)

Lesbians of color and working class lesbians, first saw and expressed the limits and the borders of “the” lesbian community. Some of those included Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, the Combahee River Collective (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002), who called out to the larger White community and suggested that community borders should not be rigid ones and for lesbians of color could not be. The larger communities, and other lesbians, still have something to learn from those lesbians who have lived on the borders. Their experiential wisdom about commitment to self and community, not often heard beyond those borders, is important to retain and share widely. We should not presume or think valid only the ethics, only the truths developed by the White, powerful men, who have largely ignored other voices. That view of community is small and narrow indeed. While outsiders to that hegemony may have participated in societal construction, though subversively, we all stand to gain by opening up the windows and allowing fresh air to contaminate those hegemonic ideas. What I recommend is not wholesale tossing out of what has come before, like marriage, but rather a thorough shaking out

and review of ethics, ideas, and institutions through inclusion and engagement with them.

Hoagland (1988), developed her ideas about a uniquely lesbian ethics through interaction with the age-old ethics many, at least in the West, live by. This is the type of subjugated, hidden, suppressed knowledge that we all can benefit from AND embellish.

Clearly, the “Limits of Community” about which Phelan (1989) wrote and analyzed, were recognized first by women who lived in and experienced their limits, “women of color and those white women who have seriously addressed the fact of their race and social location... These are the voices, within us and among us, to which we must listen” (p. 161). Anzaldúa (2012), Phelan (1989, 1994, 2001), Esterberg (1997), Garber (2001), Lorde (2007), Mohanty (2003) are a few of the lesbian and queer voices who have pointed the way to a community in which we “resist the impulse for total separatism and for purity in our allies in favor of workable coalitions and porous but meaningful communities” (Phelan, 1989, p. 166). My experience of the community has been that, because LGBTQI are everywhere and are part of multiple intersecting minority, majority, and oppressed communities, we have learned a thing or two about community inclusion. That is not to say that LGBTQI communities do not have the same hegemonic forces at work as the larger community. We cannot forget our history. We, LGBTQI, will need to remember and to critically interrogate our history, present, and imagine our future.

Phelan (2001) observed that in extremely marginalized communities, as the LGBTQ community has been, the privilege for some of its members becomes dependent on the “secondary marginalization” (p. 161) of those in the community who are most stigmatized. Phelan argued, at least prior to 2001, that the relations between the individuals who comprise the LGBT of the acronym could barely be called a community. Phelan used the example of the B and the T as example of stigmatization within the LGBT constituency, but also acknowledged

that these do not comprise all of the stigmatized groups of the LGBT communities. LGBTQ communities, in my experience, make relatively great efforts to be more inclusive; however, many of these communities retain the inherent stigmatizing qualities of the larger community in which they live. LGBTQ communities intersect and perhaps supplant or disrupt to a large degree the lesbian community. To some degree then, the goals of expanding the community succeeded, though I am not sure if the success has expanded to include all races and classes.

Fast-forward to 2015 and I see signs of inclusion for our B and T in what seems sometimes to be the best harbinger of change, television. There are bisexual characters, transgender characters, and recently a whole series, *Transparent* (2014), that provides greater exposure and dialogue about transgender, bisexual, lesbian, gay, and questioning individuals. The television series is of course not real life, and like any portrayal is privileged in its specific point of view, but it is one creative attempt to show a different view of how we LGBTQ have created commitments and family. However, I agree with Phelan's (2001) assertion that

... rather than extending existing understandings of sexual orientation and gender to 'include' bisexuals and transgendered people, lesbians and gays should use the understandings of bi and trans people to reexamine their assumptions about what it means to be lesbian or gay. They should do this not in order to eliminate meaningful differences among the groups, but in order to envision an ontology and a politics that actively confront the position of strangeness in modernity rather than running from it or reacting to it. (p. 116)

I further agree with Phelan (2001) who rightly described marriage as an institution which privileges and legitimizes some relationships over others. Phelan cautioned

By extending an institution that feminists and others have widely identified as a linchpin of patriarchy (even as this institution is under attack for other economic and social reasons), we run the risk of reconsolidating the idea of the responsible citizen as economically independent (or at least married to a provider), thus removing the burden of notice and care from other citizens. If tax law and insurance benefits simply recognize the new households, citizenship will not change in any significant way (although certainly the cultural life and the daily lives of citizens would be importantly different). (p. 158)

While these criticisms and warnings are persuasive, I do not believe that deciding *not* to participate in marriage will have any effect on marriage and its privilege. At least by participating and disrupting marriage, same-sex couples might help change marriage. Though withdrawal and separatism, as Hoagland (1988) argued, are valid and ethical choices of resistance to oppression, to be full citizens, we must participate. Hoagland (1988) also asserted that withdrawal is not the same as lack of engagement and I agree. But in the case of LGBTQ rights, withdrawal does not seem a powerful enough option. Conscious grappling with authority and partaking in leadership and decision-making create change. I spent too many years lurking outside the participation, safely silent. We must risk interaction and offer our unique perspectives for consideration. In a sense, I believe it is our civic responsibility to participate. Though we might choose to withdraw at times, for reasons of health or rejuvenation, we LGBTQI are an important part of our society and our society, I believe, needs us as much as we need it.

Many of our community desired marriage for reasons like those I expressed. It is symbolic of our inclusion. However, I agree with Phelan (2001) that same-sex marriage alone will not “queer citizenship” (p. 158). Despite the persuasive articulation of many of our LGBTQI scholars who, like Phelan and Walters (2014), believe we are selling ourselves short by wanting to become virtually normal through institutions like marriage, I am still not ready to disengage from marriage. Like many others of my communities, I want marriage. I want the privilege and protection that marriage expresses, as I also want to shake marriage up. I want the recognition of the government and my broader community of my intimate relationship that comes from marriage.

I do not think lesbians and gay men will do marriage exactly the same way as heterosexuals. I think we will relate to one another in a similar way as we have always related except that now we will be privileged in the same way as different-sex couples. Will being so privileged cause us to forget our pasts? Or remembering our pasts, will we continue to work toward further expansion? And so doing, will we queer, lesbian, gay, bi, or trans, transform marriage? Heterosexuals have had lots of years to tinker with marriage. I do not agree that introducing LGB to the mix will cause great harm. Instead, I think that marriage will provide a symbolic and literal leveling. We have survived worse than not having access to marriage. But I am ready to move beyond mere survival.

The danger that Walters (2014) articulated is that once we attain marriage rights we will forget that we have not yet attained citizenship. We must continue, married or not, to push equality forward. We must continue to push for equal rights for those who do not choose marriage in our communities. We must not become complacent and think that a wedding band will give us the power of invisibility or normalcy. And why should we want that? We *are* different. We should embrace our difference and expect not just tolerance or lukewarm acceptance, but only if we act like heterosexuals. As Walters asserted, we should instead proudly declare that we have something to offer *because* we are different. In some ways, we may, by virtue of our adoption of marriage become a little more recognizable to some of our straight community members and so expand all of our communities; our affinity groups.

Changing Relationships

The most apparent transformation that lesbian relationships will undergo due to marriage benefits will be simply to gain access to those benefits. The financial benefits have been well documented by now and hardly seem disputable. The bigger question is that marriage privileges

some relational types over others and why should it? Most people, especially in the straight world, have not questioned that this should be. Many in the LGB world, likewise, have not thought about whether or not marriage might be configured differently than the version of the marriage relationship as currently configured. Many LG people argue vehemently that we do want the same types of relationships that straight people do. There is now ample evidence that lesbians and gay people desire marriage and are, in fact, marrying.

Walters (2014) explored and successfully argued that much of the logic employed to attain more rights is just wrong, not at all logical, and places us in a potentially more risky and dangerous position. I agree with many of Walters' and Phelan's (2001) points that we should not assume that we have reached a post-gay era and that there is nothing left to worry about. There are many statistics about bashing, suicide, and anti-gay violence that tell a very different story according to Walters. That is not to say that we cannot see any rights attainment as progress. But we must continue pushing forward. And part of pushing forward is to not just accept the sameness category. Accepting sameness does not disrupt any existing categories and they need disruption. Marriages, and heterosexual relationships are not beacons of relational perfection to emulate. We LGBTQ have something to offer to the concept of relationship. I continue to assert, though I believe marriage to be an important step forward in some ways, marriage could also be a trap, if we do not bring to it our many years of experience of different models of relationship.

Access to marriage may change our relationships and indeed, make them more stable, because of the benefits and societal structure that is inherent in marriage. But as I have shown, we always created marriage-like relationships and we will continue to do so. I created long lasting non-legally binding or benefitted marriages. If legal marriage had been one of my

choices, I may have not so readily jumped from marriage-like relationship to marriage-like relationship as I did. If the marriage construct had more than a relational template but an actual option, I might have taken it a little more seriously, and frankly, I wish I had. I think it is beneficial to question whether a legally binding relationship might have forced or rather encouraged me to be more reflective and more careful. Most of those jumps were hard and took a toll on me personally, financially, and in many tangible and intangible ways. I sometimes wished I could have some sort of relationship or marriage counseling prior to jumping in. Did I learn some stuff along the way? Yes, but I honestly wished I had not had to.

The relationship losses I suffered were difficult and took as big a toll on me as I imagine a divorce would. Divorce, in some cases, may have been more difficult than just splitting stuff up, but not necessarily. My legal divorce from my husband was the easiest, but we did not have intertwined lives. One of my breakups, while very sad, was fair. In other cases where my relational other or I was unfair or more likely just irresponsible; an impartial judge might have benefitted the fairness of the outcome.

I would like to think that we could figure out how to break up without intervention as Hoagland (1988) suggested we should, but my experience has not indicated that lesbians are any better than anyone else at endings. Though I tried to be fair, I hurt people and people hurt me. The less power and access to cultural and financial capital one has, the more devastating a breakup can be, not unlike a medical emergency. These are not light issues.

On the lighter side of relationships, some lesbians I know who married, claim their families treat them and their spouses better now. Xena's octogenarian mother, who has been supportive of Xena and Daisy's relationship for 20 years, suddenly expressed some concern and sadness after Xena told her of their plans to marry. When Xena asked her what was wrong, she

said she was worried that Xena, the oldest daughter, would not take care of her anymore, that her responsibilities would now be for Daisy. Most lesbians I know would not suddenly stop taking care of their mother, if they had been doing so all along, because they now had a spouse. This may be a gender and generational issue.

Daisy never fully felt accepted as an in-law in the same way that Xena's siblings' husbands and wives were treated until they were married. But, faced with the actual marriage, a wedding, Xena's mother was fantastic and fully embraced her role as the mother of one of the brides. When Xena told her mother they decided to have cupcakes at the wedding, because they were easy, Xena's mother said, "Oh no. Oh no, you can't have cupcakes at a wedding! I'll buy you a proper wedding cake." She very sweetly and happily did buy the cake and played her proper and expected role as mother greeting guests as they streamed into that old Iowan church, wedding bells ringing.

Not to put a downer on all the sweetness, but my parents will probably not even show up and frankly, I probably will not even invite them. Maybe my father, but I cannot even talk about the eventuality with my mother. I probably will broach the subject in the interest of giving my parents the benefit of the doubt, but it is not a conversation I am looking forward to. The last thing I want at my wedding, should I have one, is disapproval and bawling. At least with my mother, I know where she stands. She is not mean, by any means, but she knows what she believes and same-sex marriage is not one of the things she believes in. I never understood how people like my mother say they "don't believe in homosexuality." Now they say, they "don't believe in same sex marriage." Like lesbian comic Lea DeLaria quipped about her parents, "It's not like the Easter Bunny, your belief isn't necessary" (DeLaria, 1997).

So, it is different for everyone. The family standing up for me at my wedding will be; my ex, Hannah's sister, Ina who is my sister, the Norbs who are my dear friends and my family, other dear friends from here and there, and maybe my ex-husband if he and his wife can make it. I have learned that relationships and family are complex, complicated in Facebook relational status terms. I love my complicated family. LGBTQI people disrupt families all over the place, push boundaries, and blur borders. I do not think we will stop doing so when we marry. Call me a cockeyed optimist. I just do not think we will stop being gay.

Lesbians are a diverse group and I have learned over time my relationship methodology does not necessarily work for someone else. Through telling our individual stories, as I have with this SPN, I think we can speak to one another about our experiences of being lesbians. I believe we can also share our stories with the larger community who often knows little about who we are, though we might live right next door. Lesbians cannot lose our ability, with marriage, to understand that there are different and no less valid ways to relate intimately to other people. I know, for myself, regardless of what Lauren and I choose, I will continue to support changes to marriage, domestic partnership, and *family* laws. California, for example, retained its domestic partnership law, which is equivalent to its marriage laws when it opened marriage up to same-sex couples. Minnesota did not have domestic partnership as a state and after passing its equal marriage legislation disallowed domestic partnerships where they existed elsewhere. I think this was a mistake because there is need to continue to examine marriage privilege and consider where and how rights can be expanded to others, regardless of relationship. There are, as shown, many different ways to make a family. Sex, same or different, often has nothing to do with it. As Robin Williams said, "You could talk about same-sex marriage, but people who have been married say 'It's the same sex all the time'" (Kristobak, 2014, quote 8).

Will marriage dramatically change the essential nature of our relationships? I do not think so. I am worried about the issues that many raised, that marriage will continue to privilege the few, except that now, part of those privileged will include LGB people. Will marriage change me? Yes. I am a White, middle class, woman. Though I am probably a couple of paychecks away from not being middle-class, I have educational credentials and experience that will hopefully enable me to get a job. But that is uncertain. As a woman who is close to being over 60, getting a job is not as easy as it once was. I do not trust the community to take care of me. Perhaps it is the Texan in me, but I am more apt to want to ensure that my partner and I can care for one another given the same tools and resources that other committed couples have.

An Ethics of Commitment and Communities of Choice

This study began by questioning how marriage might change lesbians, but, as I wrote my stories, my primary question quickly became how I created an ethics of commitment or love without marriage. How did I engage with and create a community and a family of choice? My stories, though unique to me, are not unique in a general sense. I believe that many lesbians and gay men have had similar stories with divergences. I also believe that people beyond my LGBTQI community of sexual and gender minorities might connect with my stories of societal alienation and carving out a life none-the-less. As I have shown, I have had many opportunities to learn lessons. I believe a legally sanctioned structure such as marriage might have made a difference in how I conducted my relational life.

With marriage comes a different sort of stereotype about lesbians and gay men. Married, we have become commonplace, recognizable to other married people. Though many of us might cringe at being common, the fact of it is that we are not all that different. We live our lives in very similar ways as different-sex couples. Most LGBTQI people, I assert, also desire love,

relationship, family, and the benefits and responsibilities that come from that. Without legal marriage, we have created our own versions of relationships. We have created commitments without marriage.

As a young lesbian, I struggled to find my way. Without rules or with new rules, I needed to figure out how to be with other lesbians. I needed to figure out how to be in community. And rejected by my family, I needed to find or construct a new kind of family, not dependent on biological ties. Through all of these relational constructs, though the ups and downs of learning the hard way, I developed an ethics of commitment to others and to my self. Commitment does not require marriage as I demonstrated through my stories.

I spent much of my young adult years without any sense of commitment. I brought to those years a sense of ethics from my youth. The Golden Rule guided me, as did my mother and father's admonitions to always be honest. There were no rules passed on about fidelity though one might assume those to fall under the honesty imperative. My parents and grandparents assumed many ethical questions to be self-evident, it seemed. We did not question the rightness of our Whiteness, despite the belief that we thought we were not entirely White. We did not question our religion or the existence of God. We did not question much as I recall. We did not question or even consider ethics of any kind. "The Bible" was the first and final word. When I finally did encounter someone else who questioned and had come to different conclusions, I also began to question. That's when all heaven and hell broke loose.

With only my youthful sense of self and desire to guide me, and retaining those ethics or rules that still made sense to me, I set off on my own. I tried out other religions that might have been more accepting or inclusive of difference, but I found little solace or reconciliation with any of those. I am not sure I would have stuck with religion even if most religions had not rejected

me. I have a hard time now imagining being a “believer.” I took issue with one of my professors who called those who did not subscribe to a religious “faith” as “non-believers.” To cast one side as a negative and its opposite as positive seems to fall into the same binary trap that keeps us literally at odds, in opposition. There are many reasons a woman might not agree with a religious bias that asserts a male deity as supreme. But the power of religion is strong and I cannot argue that many people find meaning there. Though I tried many years to convince my mother of my own righteousness of belief, I finally realized the futility and the arrogance of my approach. What I do believe is that religion has caused much harm and broken apart families, but I cannot deny that some religious people have also used their beliefs to help people and not just condemn them.

So, having cast rules aside, what does a young lesbian do to create an ethics, prior to Hoagland’s (1988) book dedicated to that effort? I read Hoagland’s (1988) book just a year ago when I began this study in earnest. The rules I grew up with were inconsistent with who I felt myself to be. I muddled through; making many of the mistakes that Hoagland (1988) detailed as signifying our entrenched heterosexuality. I caused unintentional pain, to others and myself. Those I interacted with were all on similar paths, living and loving, using their own set of constructed rules. But all of our rules were somehow created through interaction with one another. A more deliberate and reflexive approach would have been helpful. It seems inevitable in reflection that we caused one another unconscious pain.

I do not remember where I learned to use the word “committed” as a word to mean a serious attachment to another. As I recall, the word seemed to be ubiquitous to the time and community, having supplanted the youthful “going steady.” Lesbians had “commitment ceremonies” though I am not sure many had thought about the implications of the word or the act

any more than I had. As I learned too much later, “dating” meant something else. When Margie suggested that we slow down and just “date,” I seriously did not know what that meant, especially given that I was already living in her house at the time. Early on I did a lot of “dating” I suppose, but I do not recall thinking of it that way. The feelings were always so intense, much more intense than dating implies. I did not have models, language, or rules for the romantic relationship, other than my parents. They had certainly not wasted much time dating, it seemed. So, some of my ignorance stemmed from my parents’ example and some of it stemmed from the stark lack of societal and cultural models for lesbians. Society barely acknowledged lesbians’ existence and it certainly did not ascribe any morality or ethics to lesbian life, just the opposite.

And yet, even without a rulebook, I still attempted to craft for myself an ethical life, based on some combination of the remainders of my moral upbringing, mistakes, and simply listening to some inner guidance system. Other people’s anger and pain was a clue, as when I carelessly became involved with my roommate’s lover. But that did not immediately stop me from making the same or similar mistakes more than once. Hoagland (1988), in her critique of the liberal, individualistic view, was unwilling to ascribe what she called our “power-from-within” or our focused emotional interaction as negative. Describing the social aspect of such interaction, Hoagland (1988) said,

While we experience urges and pangs and leanings, for example, we develop those inner states into full-blown emotions and beliefs and intentions through interacting with others who react, reflect back, and themselves engage, and against the backdrop of our social and political context. (Hoagland, 1988, p. 163)

Reflection, which I also did rather subconsciously, did not reap direct results. I seemed to need to make the same mistakes, in some cases, more than once, as I referred, not to an ethics so much, as my own inner guide, desires, and impulses. I did not think of myself as entirely self-concerned but now I see that I often was, not because I did not care or was not empathetic, but

because I did not know how to do relationships differently. Outside the morality that did not include me and was fundamentally nonsensical to my lived experience as a woman and lesbian, I tried to do my best.

In those days and perhaps still, commitment meant monogamy. When we reached a point in our intimate relationships, usually because we could not bear the thought of our beloved being with someone else, we “committed” to one another. In my experience, this seemed to happen relatively quickly. My history demonstrates that I suffered from what Hoagland (1988) charged was a split or a fragmentation between my emotion and reason, as if they could not exist together. Many of my struggles with Cris, beyond my simple fear of her abusive potential, occurred because I could not reconcile what I felt and described as “love” and my rational mind. In addition, what I felt towards Cris overtook the care that I felt for myself. The belief that emotion implies losing control/passion and that reason implies re-gaining control derives from the heterosexualist, patriarchal paradigm, according to Hoagland (1988). This oppositional understanding is what leads to our fragmentary behavior. Not until I experienced my relationship with Cris did I understand that the two, emotion and reason, can and should exist together. Concurrent self-connection along with reason is the model that Hoagland (1988) advocated. An ethics of commitment, as I have carved it out of my own life, allows for emotional connection, attention, and sometimes withdrawal, rather than lack of control.

Commitment can and should go beyond romantic, primary, domestic partnership type relationships. We can commit to others who are sharing this earth with us, regardless of the strength of our biological connection to them. LGBTQ people know through experience that being a strong DNA match to someone is not a required component for commitment. There are, sadly, many cases where LGBTQI people have not been able to rely on their biological families

of birth for family support. Many of us have had to create our own versions of family. My family has included lovers' families, partners' families, friends from many walks of life, my ex-husband and his wife, ex-partners and their partners. Though we have often been stereotyped in an opposite way, many LGBTQI are uniquely qualified to understand the possibilities of connection, commitment, and expansion of family and community.

It may be that legalized commitment provides a necessary persuasion for some to commit. Legal connection is important and symbolic, more to some than others. My ex-husband, for example, indicated that he did not want to divorce because he was afraid of losing that connection. And in fact, we did disconnect for many years. But what he really desired, it seems, was not marriage but a legal familial relationship. And why should we not be able to choose our own families. Society would benefit from such an expanded opportunity for legal connection, responsibility, and commitment. An ethics of commitment is an ethics of connection and a promise of engagement. An ethics of commitment goes beyond the marriage between two individuals. Though a marriage or love commitment is significant, limiting our commitment to other individuals should not end with marriage.

An ethics of commitment must also include a commitment to self. Only when I learned to care for and attend to myself was I ready to "get out of my own way." I need to remind myself of this principle frequently. We, especially women, are not programmed to think of self first. Hoagland (1988), along with implicating capitalism and heterosexualism, examined the characteristic of patriarchal society that determines altruism to be a feminine virtue. Self-sacrifice is not generally considered to be an expectation for men and children. But self-sacrifice by anyone in a relationship is not ethical, in my view. We all need opportunities to flower. And we all need opportunities to grow, on our own, unencumbered but a well-meaning caretaker.

One of my lessons from my relationship with Cris and its end, was that I did not do her or myself any favors by staying.

Free choice is a component of an ethics of commitment. One might choose to sacrifice momentarily for the benefit of someone else whom you are committed to, but this should not become a way of life. Commitment implies making choices and balancing one's own needs against the needs of those to whom one is committed. An ethics of commitment deserves much more consideration and has implications far beyond women and lesbians. One should be taught such an ethics growing up. If I had learned an ethics of commitment, I would not have spent so much of my life having to figure it out, a project that will likely occupy me until I die. Hoagland (1988) invoked a "lesbian ethics" and a "moral revolution but asserted that doing so did not imply "a new dualism" (p. 297).

The two frameworks [lesbian value vs. heterosexualism] are not opposites—one the denial of the other—like good and evil. If we embrace a conceptual framework which has dominance and subordination as its axis, we will simply be focused differently than if we withdraw from that framework and create lesbian value. The one set of values is meaningless within the context of the other set. (p. 297)

Hoagland's (1988) focus was lesbian ethics. Many of the ethics Hoagland (1988) put forward, however, speak to an ethics and practice of commitment beyond lesbians. An ethics of commitment has universal implications.

Conclusion

First, we must understand that no single right is the brass ring. To shift metaphors for a moment, putting all our eggs in the basket of marriage (or any single "right" for that matter) is a mistake both practically and ethically. We know this from history, from the story of women, of African Americans, of Jews, of Latinos. We know—even though we too often avoid the discussion—that individual civil rights are core to integration but are not the whole of it. We know that gaining those rights can provide safety and the imprimatur of legitimacy and can also change hearts and minds. But we also know and

have learned the hard way that, for example, “the civil rights movement ended legal segregation in America, ... but it simply couldn’t build an integrated America. (Walters, 2014, pp. 264-265)

Marriage, and frankly a little privilege, is important to me at this point in my life. I do not want my brother to be able to swoop in and take control of my life, in lieu of any other next of kin. I do not want what few assets I have to be tied up, fought over, in the name of some sanctimonious, holier than thou bigotry. I want to be able to care for and be cared for by the person I choose to be my partner, my lover, my darling, in life and love. If marriage can provide these securities I will probably join the many other lesbians who have decided to leap.

However, marriage should not be seen as the end-all and be-all for LGBTQI people. We have not reached a post-gay era as Walters’ clearly explained as part of the “tolerance trap.” Walters said, “It’s hard not to paraphrase the feminist response to the similar statement that we are living in a post-feminist age: I’ll be post-feminist when you’re post-patriarchy” (p. 273). I agree that LGBTQ people are unlikely to reach that Utopia if tolerance and acceptance are the only goals. We still have work to do. Marriage should not symbolize the end of our project toward inclusion and citizenship.

Marriage has come to represent the acceptance denied to people like me for almost 60 years. Will everyone accept me? No. As Walters reiterated, mere acceptance should not be the goal. I cannot imagine my biological family coming to my wedding, if I choose a wedding. They and others who do not equate my love with theirs will probably never accept me. But my chosen family will be there. And I will be speaking a language about relationship, love, commitment, and responsibility that many understand. I will be pushing against those borders and blurring the lines. Already, LGB folks who have married their same-sex partners have found that some of their families view them now as members of the family when they had not for 20

years or more. Our communities are changing, no doubt, but they will survive, love, and thrive as we always have, marriage or not.

Hoagland (1988) called for a “moral revolution” (p. 297). I desire an ethical evolution, a change away from the ethical ties that have bound us to one way of thinking about love, marriage, relationship, and more. My reflection of my relationship, communal, and familial life has been more than just a search for marriage. Legal marriage is a governmental endorsement of a particular kind of relationship between two people. I do not disagree that such relationships should be as privileged as any other such now sanctioned relationship. But there are other types of relationships that can be just as meaningful and beneficial. My narrative about my personal search for love exemplifies how an ethic of commitment to love in its many permutations helped me create a community and family of choice, outside of any hope of legal marriage. Equal civil rights, marriage in this case, should be a presumption of any society which hopes to progress to a more truthful democracy. But marriage or not and no matter what we name our commitments, I will not stop loving. Marriage has never been the arbiter of love.

Herstorical Reflection: It’s Raining Marriage

I am lying on a bed in a hotel, laptop on my lap and surrounded by books, this time books about lesbians, love, queers, and my latest obsession, marriage. I needed to move away from home for a time because I needed to be alone to finish my stories. I am ready to let this go. I want to return to what’s left of my life with my beautiful and supportive partner. Ironically, I have missed much of who I am, my community, and relationship in pursuit of the meaning of marriage.

Lauren and I spoke earlier and she told me that our friend, Adam, who I know had flown in from Denver for a weekend with his boyfriend/lover, Ralph. Though Adam is the same age as Lauren’s sons, Lauren and Adam were the best of friends when Adam was in California and they were still working together. Lauren said, “They’re picking me up.” I asked, “Where are you going?” I was frankly jealous that she was spending time with them and I could not. She said, “to Sue and Michelle’s.” “What’s happening?” Suddenly, I remembered. Oh shit, was that today? I had totally forgotten. Our California friends, and we do not have many, were getting married! Damn it. The irony did not escape me.

I suddenly felt terrible, lonely, and sad. Sigh. I am also worried that by the end of this Lauren will be so tired of me she will not want to either continue living together or marry, if we

choose to still do so. I am worried that I have analyzed relationship to death. As Lauren would say to me if she were here, just keep going.

I pulled myself out of my depression and continued working, trying not to think about the big party. Finally, Lauren texted me that she was home. She had fun and she would tell me more in the morning. Just keep going. I persevered writing into the night.

The next morning when Lauren and I talked she told me the details. They all understood why I was not there. Really? I am not sure I would have. Ok, well, move on. She said the wedding was beautiful. It was supposed to be a “surprise wedding,” folks came under the pretense of celebrating Sue’s birthday but then there was a wedding. I’m not convinced that anyone was surprised because Michelle and Sue have been sporting some beautiful engagement bling rings for about a year now. Lauren said they had a big tent on the beach, and asked everyone to go into the tent. Sue and Michelle, one blonde and one brunette, were both dressed in long evening gowns. Sue, the blonde, was in white. Michelle, the brunette was in black. I am sure they were both spectacular. Michelle’s mother and siblings were there with their respective boyfriend/girlfriends. All of their friends lined up as Sue and Michelle walked down the aisle.

The ceremony was officiated by one of their friends who got one of the cheap licenses to marry people easily available in California. The dog trainer/walker walked Sue and Michelle’s two dogs, the ring bearers, Tig and Paris down the aisle. Sue and Michelle were then married. Kiss the bride. Kiss the other bride. After Sue and Michelle led the first dance, others joined in. Lauren is a great dancer and I’m sure she and Adam danced up a storm, which takes a lot of dancing in Southern California. I was jealous again.

At some point, Sue and Michelle said, “hey everyone, come out here, we have one more thing we want you to do.” Everyone went out and were handed little lanterns that had big thick wicks running up into them. Everyone lit their wicks in their lanterns and the brides asked their friends, and family, that is, their personal community, to let their lanterns go after making a wish for the new brides. The biodegradable lanterns, fueled by the hot air of the lit wicks, rose into the night air and floated away across the beach, and into the Pacific Ocean. Every lesbian wedding I have attended to-date, has been beautiful in its uniqueness, and expressed the personalities of their wives, sweethearts for life, partners, or whatever they had decided to call one another.

I really miss dancing with Lauren. We are great dancers together, if I do say so. We have recently learned that Lauren needs hip surgery. I am worried about the surgery, as I know Lauren is. One of my worries is that we currently have no legal ties or connection. On paper, I am just the roommate, renting a room from a house that Lauren is officially renting. The legal twists that gay men and lesbians can get tied up by rival any Fifty Shades of Grey (2014) scenario. I call our many permutations of construction, Fifty Shades of Gay. We, like Blanche Dubois, often live at the mercy of “the kindness of strangers” (Williams, 2004). Williams, a gay man, knew what he was talking about though he put the words in the voice of a woman.

In the state of California, Lauren and I could be either married or domestic partners, each which essentially have the same rights. That is not true nation-wide. We currently have neither of those statuses though for the purpose of insurance, we can claim to be domestic partners without having a license proving that we are. Sigh. I worry about these things.

My job, though I have a very understanding boss, still requires that one be married or domestic partners to legally sanction particular dispensations. For Lauren’s surgery, because we are not officially “family,” it may be that I am legally not allowed to take sick leave to be

with her when she has surgery. There are privileges with being married, make no mistake. One just gets tired of worrying about such things after 40 years of relationships.

This is Not the End

*Lauren's surgery went well. I brought her home yesterday afternoon. The physical therapist (PT) came this morning for some exercises and all looks good so far. Six weeks of recovery to go. So, this is what our lives might consist of, as we grow older together. This is different than being 20, 30, 40, or even 50 for sure. I just hope we can either create our own old dyke's home or find a gay-friendly one when we need to. These are the things we worry about now. What happens when...? Marriage might make some of that easier. I think we just might leap. If at least to let people know **we** were. I want my genealogy chart to include not just my marriage to a man but my marriage to a woman.*

But either way, we will with luck have a lot more time to cook, clean, fight, love, talk, laugh, work, travel, walk, play together and with our friends, families, and community. We will continue reconstructing who we are as individuals and together until the end: loving, laughing, and learning. That is my desire. I also can't wait to dance again.

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