CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE: CURRICULUM STUDIES IN ACTION

CRITICAL STORYTELLING in UNCRITICAL TIMES

EDITED BY

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and

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SensePublishers

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Volume 16

Scope

"Curriculum" is an expansive term; it encompasses vast aspects of teaching and learning. Curriculum can be defined as broadly as "the content of schooling in all its forms" (English, Fenwick W., *Deciding What to Teach & Test: Developing, Aligning, and Leading the Curriculum*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2010, p. 4), and as narrowly as a lesson plan. Complicating matters is the fact that curricula are often organized to fit particular time frames. The incompatible and overlapping notions that curriculum involves everything that is taught and learned in a particular setting *and* that this learning occurs in a limited time frame reveal the nuanced complexities of curriculum studies.

Constructing Knowledge provides a forum for systematic reflection on the substance (subject matter, courses, programs of study), purposes, and practices used for bringing about learning in educational settings. Of concern are such fundamental issues as: What should be studied? Why? By whom? In what ways? And in what settings? Reflection upon such issues involves an inter-play among the major components of education: subject matter, learning, teaching, and the larger social, political, and economic contexts, as well as the immediate instructional situation. Historical and autobiographical analyses are central in understanding the contemporary realties of schooling and envisioning how to (re)shape schools to meet the intellectual and social needs of all societal members. Curriculum is a social construction that results from a set of decisions; it is written and enacted and both facets undergo constant change as contexts evolve.

This series aims to extend the professional conversation about curriculum in contemporary educational settings. Curriculum is a designed experience intended to promote learning. Because it is socially constructed, curriculum is subject to all the pressures and complications of the diverse communities that comprise schools and other social contexts in which citizens gain self-understanding.

Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times

Undergraduates Share Their Stories in Higher Education

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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
CRITICAL STORYTELLING IN UNCRITICAL TIMES

"In the cacophony of opinion fostered by an age of constant communication, it has become ironically difficult for one's voice to be heard. Often, attempts at self expression feel akin to casting notes in bottles, the search for truth becoming less a journey and more a slog. In defense of one's own agency, the importance of the individual story is paramount now more than ever. Offering students a platform to propose questions few think to ask, and answers none wish to consider, *Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times* defends the unheard, affording its contributors the breadth necessary to unfurl their experiences. Lovingly curated and holding an expansive palette of topics, ranging from bullying to modern Paganism, the stories contained within provoke and stimulate, elucidating the nuances by which we live, breathe, bleed."
– Victor Shaw, Student and Winner of the 2017 Global Crossroads Scholarship Competition, Wayne State University

"Too often in academia, we get bogged down in precision and stripping the humanity out of what we do. We break things down into numbers, into codes, and into false profundity. *Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times* breaks down these walls between the academy and the humanity behind it. This introspective collection delves into the realities of what it means to step out of the Self and into the Other… to investigate who we are and how we got there. Opening old wounds relating to whiteness, privilege, bullying, sense of self, among a host of others, this collection allows the reader to experience, first-hand, what it means to be human."
– Andrew T. Kemp, Ed.D., Associate Professor of Curriculum and Instruction, Augusta University

"Some will find echoes of their own stories here, but many more will discover models of possibility, opportunities for connection, and portals leading to richer understanding and a profound respect for other lives. As universities scramble to stay human in an age of increasing focus on the instrumentality of education, this volume of deeply personal stories lights the way."
– Todd Petersen, Ph.D., Professor of English, Director of Project-Based Learning, Southern Utah University

"At a time when the dominant narratives are far from critical, Nicholas Hartlep, Brandon Hensley, Carmella Braniger, and Michael Jennings with their student authors exemplify the need to tell critical stories as counternarratives. The best teachers often talk about the need to know and care for students. Too often, however,

students—even at the college level—are not tapped for the stories they embody. How can we know and care for students if we do not listen to their stories as a source of their perspectives, ideas, possibilities, and movements? A remarkably insightful way to listen is to provide space for students to publish their stories. *Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times* does precisely this. It provides a variety of vantage points for seeing concerns, insights, and understandings of undergraduate students as they draw from multiple disciplines and diverse realms of experience. It is an example of inspiring critical storytelling by college students, using critical stories of students as a basis for teaching, and acting on such stories to counter the tidal wave of uncritical domination that besets us. Educators should read, ponder, and emulate this book."
– William H. Schubert, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus of Curriculum and Instruction and University Scholar, University of Illinois at Chicago

"Just what is 'critical storytelling'? In *Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times: Undergraduates Share Their Stories in Higher Education*, undergraduate essays on topics ranging from pagan religion to growing up fatherless to ethnic identity to depression and more, the writers address subjects from vantage points traditionally silent, even absent, as the editors note in their introduction.

And yes: the undergraduate students who crafted these immensely interesting essays are writers. Even if, more than 20 years ago, Linda Brodkey argued that undergraduates could not be 'real' writers, at least in the eyes of the academy, because they didn't publish. She also noted that undergrads were sentenced to writing passion-less pieces with little to no application to their lives outside the university.

Critical Storytelling disproves the idea that today's university students can't write. What the various stories demonstrate is that students not only write, but that given topics that engage them? They can write *well.* And that what they write about is important for us to read, as the editors remind us: '… reading the unadulterated stories of undergraduates is important for those in higher education because theirs are often the most neglected and unheard voices in the academy.'

Justin Hayes' 'Silent Judgments: How I Came to Terms with Depression,' for instance, paints a darkly nuanced picture of his battle with depression, as he struggled to overcome his deeply ingrained image of depression as only affecting people 'with real problems.' Not a successful college student. Anonymous's (no name for this still-struggling writer) 'To Be Continued' reminds us that not all personal crises resolve neatly, or at all … While Daniel Searcy's comic 'First Day of School' makes poignant points about race and difference in his visual medium. And in her timely piece on being an immigrant, Zuzana Sukova tackles the complicated tangle of assimilation and respect for home culture.

Because the collection also includes pieces by the faculty editors, what readers see is how secondary extensive writing experience is to the narratives' power. Does Zuzana write as well as Brandon? Does it matter? Both narratives—all the stories in

the collection—demand that we listen, pay attention. What better way to show new writers just how much their stories and voices matter?"
– **Britton Gildersleeve, Ph.D., Director Emerita, OSU Writing Project, Editorial Board, *Nimrod Journal*, https://teaandbreath.com**

"In this inspirational sequel volume of *Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times: Stories Disclosed in a Cultural Foundations of Education Course* (Hartlep & Hensley, 2015), Nicholas D. Hartlep, Brandon O. Hensley, Carmella J. Braniger, and Michael E. Jennings work with a group of courageous undergraduate students across disciplines (i.e., Psychology, Communication Studies, English, Business, Sociology, etc.) to manifest critical storytelling, liberative counternarrative, counteraccounts, personal memoirs, and testimonios of their struggles against oppressive living conditions in schools and societies. Their gripping stories and critical reflections inspire us to understand, 'to question, to think, [and] to act' against all forms of oppression and injustice. Their critical storytelling, as theories and methods, expose unjust and dehumanizing ideas, policies, and practices, contextualize silenced and unexamined narratives of their experiences and experiences of underrepresented or disenfranchised individuals and groups, raise challenging questions, protest against the supremacy and normality of meta or official narratives, and transgress orthodoxy and dogma epistemologically and methodologically. This publication advances the field by exemplifying critical storytelling to honor necessary voices which are historically silenced or ignored, and to cultivate 'critical and political consciousness' that brings the light to darkness in contested and unjust times."
– **Ming Fang, Ph.D., Professor of Curriculum Studies, Georgia Southern University**

"*Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times* is an exploration of diverse voices that can often times be marginalized in university spaces, whether intentionally or unintentionally. This volume of *Critical Storytelling* confronts the reader with alternative narratives to those typically considered traditional in the academy, thus serving as a megaphone for students who are screaming to have their stories told, considered, and appreciated. *Critical Storytelling* pulls back layers of what it means to contemplate who we are and how we exist and negotiate our very being in the academic spaces we inhabit. In the midst of ever-increasing challenges of our country's current socio-political climate, *Critical Storytelling* reminds us of what is at the heart of our work in higher education and beyond; and, this story compilation exhorts the reader to think more critically, feel more deeply, and act more compassionately. This is a must-read for any college student who feels their voice(s) have been muted, devalued, or silenced as well as any college or university faculty, staff, and administration who want to better meet the affective needs of the 'whole student.'"
– **Ngozi Onuora, Ed.D., Associate Professor of Education, Millikin University**

"*Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times: Undergraduates Share Their Stories in Higher Education* is a timely book that explores the intersection of theory and experience that positions students as the constructors of knowledge, through an analysis of experience with critical frameworks that question race, gender, inequality and our collective stories. This book will be a perfect complement for any undergraduate or graduate course that wants to delve deeper into the common threads that connects us to each other."

– **Abraham P. DeLeon, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Educational Leadership, University of Texas at San Antonio**

NDH
For my wife and children.
✪
I love you very much!

BOH
To my loving wife, my supportive family, and the friends, colleagues, and heroes who've inspired me.
✪
And to all who hear the call of critical storytelling, let's do this.

CJB
To my beautiful daughter, Hannah, and my sister, Chesna.
✪
Critical storytelling empowers us all to make change.

MEJ
To my wife Qena, and my children: Ryan, Kaden and Addison.
✪
Thanks for all of your love and support!

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PREFACE

> Good writers craft every element of their work, down to the joints between the words. During this meticulous process it's nearly impossible to step back and experience the text as a new reader would. While writing, one needs that close-up understanding of words, adjacent ideas, characters' motivations, and the nuances of possible scenes. But to edit, one must come to the text fresh, mimic the sensibility of a first-time reader, and make the parts work together.
>
> From *Telling True Stories* edited by Mark Kramer and Wendy Call (2007) p. 197

> You don't have anything if you don't have the stories.
>
> From *Ceremony* written by Leslie Marmon Silko (1977) p. 2

INTRODUCTION

The use of personal narrative and reflection in academic and scholarly contexts is a growing trend. Academics everywhere are crafting their critical stories. But why narrative, why now? Pat Schneider (2003) writes in *Writing Alone and With Others* that "[t]he act of writing is a tremendous adventure into the unknown, always fraught with danger. But the deeper you go and the longer you work at your art, the greater will be your treasure" (p. 5). Academics and non-academics alike are turning to writing to reap the rewards inherent in uncovering and unveiling truths about our lived experiences that reach deeper than what is—to recognize the gaps and silences in dominant ways of knowing and seek to illuminate counternarratives.

Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times: Undergraduates Share Their Stories in Higher Education is an anthology of autoethnographies told by undergraduate students across disciplines. As pre-service teachers or majors in Psychology, Communication Studies, English, Business, Sociology (and more), they are our children's future educators. Frequently, the storytellers in academia are not undergraduates. While Hartlep was the professor of a Cultural Foundations of Education course at Illinois State University, he and Hensley edited a graduate student anthology, *Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times: Stories Disclosed in a Cultural Foundations of Education Course.* This landmark volume sought to grapple with issues of white privilege, racial microaggressions, bullying, cultural barriers, immigration, and other forms of struggle in educational settings in personalized ways. In the book's preface Hartlep and Hensley (2015) write,

> The idea for writing a book as a class was born in a doctoral-level Cultural Foundations of Education course I taught during the summer of 2014. Initially, uncertainty permeated the course, especially during the first day when I informed the class that we would collaboratively write the syllabus for the course. The class was composed of doctoral students with a wide range of backgrounds, experiences, and professional interests. Second-year students shared the space with those who were nearing their comprehensive examinations. We had various disciplines represented as well, such as School Psychology, Communication Studies, and Higher Education. Some students had previously published book chapters and/or articles, while others had not yet published anything. These dynamics caused students to be pulled outside of their comfort zones. However, over time, our uncertainty and anxiety dissipated and transformed individuals into a community of learners. One of the course's many strengths was the collaborative spirit that stitched it, and the book that stands before the reader, together. (p. xvii)

The second volume in the series complements the first, as undergraduates comprise the storytellers and the universities and courses from which the students write their stories are numerous. Braniger and Jennings joined the editorial team in order to participate in the editing of the chapters, but in actuality they have been involved (in)directly for quite some time. Jennings authored a chapter entitled "After the Love Is Gone: A Coda on the Importance of Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times," which appeared in the first book. Acknowledging the work of Bruner (1990), Jennings (2015) writes the following: "Telling stories shapes our existence vis-à-vis the world around us, and helps us sort through all of the complexities that it embodies" (p. 93).

Braniger is an Associate Professor of English and Global Studies Coordinator as Millikin University, where Hensley worked until moving to Wayne State University, where he currently serves as Basic Course Director and Lecturer in the Department of Communication. Braniger and Hensley co-taught a hybrid course at Millikin entitled "Critical Storytelling: Global Consciousness." The course focused on reading and analyzing personal narratives through the lens of global cultural and critical studies. Performance-learning elements were integrated into the writing intensive component of the course, with the goal of writing, revising, editing, and preparing student critical stories for publication. Braniger and Hensley secured an internal grant through Millikin's Performance-Learning based initiative in order to support the work of undergraduate publication. Their project was program- and curricular-based, and extended beyond individual faculty efforts, emphasizing highly collaborative efforts between faculty and students. The course they develop and co-taught focused on reading and analyzing personal narratives through the lens of critical and cultural studies and on developing personal critical narratives in order deliver on the ethic of autoethnography, which is to write personal, critically reflective stories of cultural involvement to work toward greater understanding and social justice. Teaching for

social change, they shared with students the power of stories to engage, transform, and catalyze social action. In order to prepare for their collaboration, they both read and discussed, as a part of their professional development, Carmon and Luschen's (2014) *Crafting Critical Stories: Toward Pedagogies and Methodologies of Collaboration, Inclusion, and Voice.* Moreover, Braniger and Hensley participated in their own critical storytelling in order to prepare for teaching students to access their critical stories. They modeled for students the reflective process in which students were asked to participate. Reading and writing critical stories allows students to reflect on what it means to be democratic citizens in a global environment. These narratives also promote student reflection on what it means to lead a life of meaning and value. The final publication of student reflective and critical work and the process leading up to it will prepare students for professional success, both as published writers and as critical consumers of others' work.

Hartlep's students, all pre-service teachers at Illinois State University spent an entire semester drafting, writing, re-writing, and peer-reviewing their classmates' stories—in essence attempting to gain "writing tools" (Clark, 2006). The students had a difficult time selecting a story to tell because telling critical stories was an unnatural task for them. The students, the majority of whom are "No Child Left Behind" kids born in the 1990s, experienced an education that relied on rote, routinized, and emotionless regurgitation of "facts." Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner's (1969) aphorism, in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity,* "Children enter school as question marks and leave as periods" (p. 60) captures this sad reality.

Each of the editors of this project, all educators, would agree with the notion that well-developed critical stories raise questions that provoke readers to dig deep and think again, from a different perspective. Narrative can empower researchers, readers, and the storyteller to question, to think, to act, and to question yet again the social arrangements and cultural norms that constrict marginalized voices and keep critical stories out of the spotlight. Our evolving conceptualization of "critical storytelling" in our classrooms is difficult to pin down in terms of a singular method, process, or form, and we would resist any such prescriptive definition that privileged one storytelling practice or medium over another. We (the editors) do agree that the students who each crafted a "critical story" for this volume grappled with the push-and-pull of autoethnography—reflexively exploring key life events that have called them to go inward, connecting the personal to the cultural. Autoethnography—and by extension the critical storytelling exhibited in this anthology—makes use of introspective critical reflection and qualitative research techniques including, but not limited to participant observation, fieldnotes, and analysis which positions stories as the raw data of life.

Although we'd like to document here that we are the ones to come up with the term "critical storytelling," if we are honest with one another and you the reader, assuredly we have not created anything novel or new. Individuals for quite some time have been arguably telling stories; and what exactly are "critical" stories? By "critical storytelling" we are referring to both counternarratives and also narratives

that have been absent and/or silenced. Critical storytelling, then, in many ways fights what Paulo Freire refers to as "naïve consciousness," instead raising critical and political consciousness (*Daily Struggles*, 2017, para. 8).

We feel strongly that reading the personal stories of undergraduates is important for those in higher education because theirs are often the most neglected and unheard voices in the academy. While there are some publication spaces set aside for undergraduate research and publication, faculty and administrators—for the most part—dominate the literature on higher education issues, burying beneath the institutional bureaucratic underpinnings students' needs and lived experiences. Rarely do you see undergraduate students publishing alongside graduate students and faculty. However, we believe all students have a critical story to tell. And more importantly, we believe they should be telling their stories to a wide audience. And that we, faculty and administrators alike, should be listening to them. Students have a great deal to teach us about the current state of educational environments and about their engagements with, in, and even adjacent to those environments. Our students are our greatest resource for understanding and shaping the future of higher education. They are the stakeholders of the future, our future teachers, judges, politicians, business people, etc. How the millennials and "No Child Left Behind" children understand themselves, their cultures, and their experiences and relationships within those cultures tell us much about how they will take charge and move our country and world forward through new change. Teaching them not only to tell their stories but that their stories are worthy to be told and heard goes a long way toward shaping self-aware, reflective, citizens and leaders. More importantly, listening closely to what they have to say now can only bring us all closer to the change we want to see in our lives, our country, and our world.

The editorial team, along with the students, painstakingly drilled deep into the stories—what Kramer and Call (2007) would describe as "down to the joints between the words" (p. 197), during what can only be labeled a "meticulous process." Most likely, when we re-read this volume in its published form, we will not be able to "experience the text as a new reader would," but we hope you will. As Silko (1977) reminds us in the epigraph above, "You don't have anything if you don't have the stories" (p. 2).

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STORIES OF MARGINALIZATION, SILENCING, AND ALIENATION

GREGORY MICHAEL BREWER

1. PAGAN RELIGION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Myths, Stereotypes, and Mass-Media Misrepresentations of Multicultural Spirituality

INTRODUCTION

Come with me on a journey! It was the first day of May, the day of Beltane—an ancient fire and fertility festival of pre-Christian Europe, more commonly known as May Day. Over two dozen people in long, flowing robes of various colors gathered at my home to celebrate the height of spring and the promise of life and rebirth. There were flowers, smiling faces, and a pious ambiance of mystery and mirth. Flaming torches decked the yard in the form of a circle, and upon a table in the north were representations of earth, air, fire, and water and an offering of bread and juice to the Divine. In my yard stood a tall wooden pole with thirty colored ribbons attached at the top, freely stretching to the earth below.

Beltane is a celebration of fertility and of the divine union of the Goddess and God, the archetypal masculine and feminine aspects of the universe. The pole physically represents the masculine aspect and the wreath atop represents the divine feminine. Each participant grabs a ribbon, and the dance of the maypole is the height of the celebration. The weaving of the ribbons represents the act of procreation, and the dance is one of life, gratitude, and merriment.

Before we began our celebration, several nearby neighbors decided to take on roles as spectators. Some stood on an adjacent street corner, some watched from their yards, and a couple passing pedestrians stopped to inquire and observe. A few children in the neighborhood slowly inched their way over and approached us with questions. One that I will never forget came from a boy, about ten years old, who asked us, "Why do you hate Jesus?" His parents had seemingly told him this was the case. Of course nothing could be further from the truth. Pagans, myself included, hate no one. Still, to this day, folks in the neighborhood stop me and ask if we worship the "devil." Once a young girl whispered "Satan" as I walked past her. I put quotes around Satan and the devil because we do not believe in or acknowledge the existence of any such entity.

STEREOTYPES OF PAGAN RELIGION

Within Pagan religion and culture there are many ethnic groups and minorities. Much like other marginalized cultures and subcultures, Pagans regularly face

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 3–9.

stereotypes and are accused of worshipping false gods and idols, taking Harry Potter too seriously, causing harm to others, living as heretics, desiring to perish in hell, and so on. Pagans have literally been burned at the stake and have historically been ridiculed for belief in witchcraft and possession of superpowers. While the term Pagan is an umbrella term and includes a vast array of cultures and ethnic groups—such as those who follow the ancient Celtic traditions, the Norse, Greek, and Roman Pantheons, Native American beliefs, ancient Egyptian practices, Hinduism, Voodoo, Santeria, Shamanism, Wicca, many Witchcraft traditions, and realistically too many to name—we have to question why such false stereotypes are still alive today and pulsing with venomous hatred and misunderstanding.

As a practicing Pagan of more than 23 years, I've not only personally seen this discrimination at work in my own life, but I've heard multiple reports from fellow Pagan parents that their children are bullied or made fun of in the school environment. If the (in)famous European and Salem "Witch Trials" ended long ago, where do these false stereotypes come from and why do future teachers and students need to be aware of them? A grand portion of these myths are to this day perpetuated by popular media. Movies, news, television shows and books have inoculated the public with misconceptions manifesting in the mainstream collective conscious of contemporary society.

I aim to present the actualities of Pagan religion and spirituality in the 21st century and to debunk prevailing misguided myths with truthful sources, factual practices, and firsthand experiences. I argue there is a need for teachers to be knowledgeable of various cultures in any given classroom setting. Unfortunately, many Pagan children are taught to be silent about their faith, or their parents choose not to raise them as Pagans until the teenage years, because of the gross misunderstandings of teachers, students, and parents. Likely you will have or have had in your classroom a student who is Pagan or whose parents are Pagan. I believe it's time to learn.

So, what is Pagan religion? According to *Webster's Student Dictionary*, a Pagan is a "person who does not believe in one of the established religions; a person who is not Christian" (p. 328). In other words, Paganism can include any religion that is not one of the three Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity). However, there are religions that fall outside of these and are not Pagan either, such as Satanism and Scientology. This definition serves only to fuel the fire of misunderstanding and misrepresentation of what constitutes a Pagan. We have a joke in the Pagan community that if you ask 10 Pagans "What is Paganism?" you will get 100 different answers. Paganism, according to *my* experiential knowledge and research, is defined as a religion or spirituality that is polytheistic as opposed to monotheistic—that is, Paganistic belief can be comprised of more than one god or deity. It's an Earth-based religion, and *Pagan* literally means country dweller; one who is apart from the general society and in tune with the cycles and seasons of nature ("Paganism," 2010, para. 1).

I have been greatly informed by extensive talks and interviews with Reverend Selena Fox. Rev. Fox is Senior Minister of Circle Sanctuary, a rural church

headquartered near Barneveld, Wisconsin that has been serving Nature religion practitioners worldwide since 1974. Fox received her M.S. in Counseling from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and she is a spiritual counselor. Fox's writings and photographs on nature, folkways, psychology, and spirituality have been widely published in print and online. She travels internationally presenting workshops and facilitating ceremonies. Active in interfaith work for over 50 years, Fox is a member of the Madison Interfaith Dialogue Group and has been a speaker and organizer of a variety of regional and global interfaith events, including Wisconsin's Interfaith Awareness Week and the Parliament of the World's Religions. She is a consultant on religious diversity and Pagan religion for the U.S. Department of Justice and also the Religious Practices Advisory Committee of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (Fox, personal communication, March 5, 2017).

According to Fox (2015), "Pagan pertains to a Nature religion or a practitioner of an ancient and/or contemporary Nature religion; it is also used to refer to a Nature Spirituality, Earth-centered Spirituality, and/or Goddess Spirituality group or practitioner." Clearly it isn't possible to present an entire history of Paganism; thousands of books have been written on the subject. A mere introduction could take hours. It's therefore essential to examine a cornerstone of contemporary Pagan practice.

A fundamental aspect of Pagan religion in the 21st century—now termed Neo-Paganism to differentiate the modern Pagan movement from the antiquated versions—concerns the eight major holidays commonly accepted and celebrated today. By the year 2000, over 400,000 copies of the book *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* by Scott Cunningham (2000) had been sold worldwide. Although this book is explicitly Wiccan and represents only one Pagan practice, the greater Neo-Pagan community generally celebrates the eight holidays mentioned. Since Pagan religion is a nature-based spirituality, it stands to reason that the eight common holidays are also nature-based. These holidays represent the changing seasons. Four of them mark the first day of spring, summer, fall, and winter, and the other four are the halfway points between.

The eight holidays, in brief, are as follows:

1. *Imbolc*—February 2, now known as Groundhog Day or Candlemass—is a time to celebrate the return of sunlight.
2. The spring equinox, generally falling on March 20 or 21, is called *Ostara* or *Eostre*, known today as Easter, although the Easter date most are familiar with has been changed to the first Sunday that follows the first full moon after the spring equinox.
3. May 1 is *Beltane*, as previously mentioned.
4. June 20 or 21 is the summer solstice and represents the height of the sun.
5. *Lughnasadh*, also called Lamas or loaf mass, is celebrated on August 1 or the night before and is the first of three harvest festivals—this is the time to celebrate and give thanks for corn, bread, and grains.

6. *Mabon* is the first day of fall and is generally considered Pagan Thanksgiving.
7. October 31 is called *Samhain* (pronounced Sow-en or Sow-een); it means summer's end and is the final Harvest celebration, the Celtic New Year's Eve, and a time to honor friends and family who have passed away. Although now commonly known as Halloween, the Pagan celebration of Samhain is different.
8. The eighth Pagan holiday is called *Yule* and is celebrated on the winter solstice, generally December 20 or 21.

The use of holly, ivy, mistletoe, the colors red and green, the Christmas tree, and many other Christmas customs are of ancient Pagan origin. Yule, or winter solstice, marks the point when the sun begins to rise a bit higher above the horizon each day and therefore is the celebration of the birth or renewal of the sun. Since the sun was seen as a symbol or representation of God, the Roman Catholic Church declared that the birth of Jesus was to be celebrated at this time. As the song *Deck the Halls* goes, "Join the ancient Yuletide carol fa la la la la…"

Why was it necessary for me to cover the eight common Pagan holidays? I would argue that in order to debunk the myths, stereotypes, and misrepresentations portrayed by the media, people need to have the facts.

Pagans use a vast array of symbols from many ancient and contemporary cultures such as the Celtic cross, the Egyptian Ankh, the triquetra, the spiral, the hexagram or "Star of David," the World tree, the Yin and Yang, and the list goes on. Perhaps the most common symbol is the pentagram—the five-pointed star. This symbol is often seen surrounded by a circle called a pentacle, and has been portrayed in numerous movies *in its upside down position* as a sign of devil worship.

The meaning of this symbol is crucial to understand. Ronald Hutton, Professor of History at the University of Bristol who studies the ancient history of Great Britain, writes about the pentagram in *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. Hutton (1999) states the five points of the pentagram represent the elements of earth, air, fire, and water while the fifth point represents spirit. He goes on to say that the five-pointed star has been found in ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman art, and was also used by the Christian church in the early Middle Ages. According to Hutton, the pentagram was used as a symbol of the microcosms, the earthly reflection of the divine plan and divine image.

In actual Pagan practice, the pentagram represents earth, air, fire, water, and spirit. The key is that the top point represents spirit and the bottom two points represent earth and fire, symbolizing the triumph of spirit over flesh and desire. This is a statement that spirit (or the Divine) keeps in check all things material, emotional, and intellectual. Satanism employs the pentacle in reverse, much like an upside down cross, and this symbolizes flesh and desire over spirit. In a nutshell, the five-pointed star is and has been a sacred holy symbol for many, but also has been distorted to mean something entirely different.

In addition, Wiccans live by a code of ethics known as the *Wiccan Rede*, which has multiple versions, but the last line of each is the same: "And it harm none, do

what you will!" The emphasis is on love, acceptance, and never causing harm to a living being. Now that a very basic understanding of what Paganism is has been established, we can take a look at how the media has misrepresented Pagan religion in the 21st century.

When I mention books, movies, and television programs such as *The Craft*, *American Horror Story: Coven*, *Bewitched*, *Supernatural*, *Sabrina the Teen Age Witch*, *Merlin*, *Hocus Pocus*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *Charmed*, *Harry Potter*, *Snow White*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Crucible*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, or even *The X-Files*, think for a moment and ask yourself what images of a witch, wizard, or Pagan come to mind? The media has portrayed images of fear, evil, and fantastical impossibilities. Spells and curses, flying on broomsticks, magical wands that can emit lightning bolts, and even devil worship are among the images spoon fed to the masses. In February of 2013, *Fox News* aired a short "news" report about Wiccan holidays on the campus of the University of Missouri. The report claimed Wiccans have 20 holidays and that most Wiccans cannot name half of them. The reporter goes on to state any religion whose favorite holiday is Halloween cannot be taken seriously. The *Fox News* reporter also used the false term "Wiccanism," which doesn't exist among Wiccans. As mentioned before, Wiccans have only eight major holidays and these holidays are well known to them, so the news media has, in the example of *Fox News*, demonstrated ignorance and willful distortion of the facts.[1]

I remember when petitions circulated around the country demanding that someone from News Corporation (the media conglomerate that owns *Fox News*) apologize on air. Thousands of people signed, and Pagan groups and organizations were in an uproar. Rev. Fox and The Lady Liberty League also wrote a formal letter to *Fox News* asking for an apology. An anchor on *Fox News* indeed apologized on air shortly after. Because of the persistent media misrepresentations in regard to Pagan religion, it's important for teachers—current and future—to be aware of the facts in order to better understand Pagan children and to address possible bullying in the school environment.

IMPLICATIONS

Unfortunately, discrimination, stereotyping, and misunderstandings of Wiccans and Pagans don't end with the media. Prior to 2007, over 30 religious symbols were approved by the National Cemetery Administration (a division of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs) to be inscribed on U.S. veterans' memorial headstones, except for the pentacle. In 1997, many Pagan and Wiccan organizations and advocates, including Circle Sanctuary and Rev. Fox, began the 10-year fight to win the right of the pentacle on the headstones of Pagan veterans, and the struggle was successfully realized on April 23, 2007. One has to wonder why it took so long and why a multicultural spirituality that's loving, tolerant, and ecologically friendly has been portrayed as evil and undesirable for so many centuries.

I don't have ample time to account for the history of the last 2,000 years, but Pagans were being oppressed and persecuted in the year 325 C.E. under the Roman Emperor Constantine, who himself was a Pagan. For political control, he declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, and in the proceeding centuries over 50,000—and some reports claim up to 9 million—people were tortured, burned alive, hung, or otherwise put to death for merely being accused of following the older Pagan religions. It seems to me that the struggle between Pagan and Abrahamic faiths has been one of political control, and for this reason all types of Pagans have been and still are stereotyped as either evil or crazy.

Interestingly, Pagan religion is on the rise in the public's general attention, and since the late 1940s has had a substantial revival. In 1948, the well-known author and poet Robert Graves published his book *The White Goddess.* This, in turn, brought the ancient European version of Paganism back to the public eye. Today, there are hundreds of Pagan festivals that occur in the United States alone, such as Pagan Spirit Gathering, Pan Pagan, Pantheacon, Starwood, Beltania, Free Spirit Gathering, Paganicon, Heartland Pagan Festival, Wisteria, Summer Solstice Gathering, Circle Quest, Summerland Spirit Gathering, and the worldwide Pagan Pride Days.

Pagan Pride Project Worldwide is a 501(c)(3) non-for-profit tax-exempt entity that sponsors annual events throughout the United States, Canada, Central and South America, Europe, and Australia. Regarding Central and South America alone, there are 14 Pagan Pride Day events that occur in Brazil, 2 in Chile, 1 in Perú, 2 in Columbia, 1 in México, and one in República Dominicana. As a board member of the project, I can proudly state that our aim is to promote tolerance and understanding between people of different faiths via education, activism, and charity. We seek to educate the public and to debunk the numerous myths that Pagans encounter on a regular basis. And guess what? There is no charge to attend a Pagan Pride Day, but we do ask for donations of non-perishable food items and pet supplies that are in turn given to local shelters and organizations to support those in need.

As a future teacher candidate, it is my humble opinion that all who seek to be knowledge facilitators—or those who currently serve as educators—mustn't only be proficient and passionate about the field they teach or aim to teach, but they should also be aware of all minorities, cultures, subcultures, faiths, religions, and stereotypes in order to best promote knowledge, tolerance, and development. If we are aware of the world around us, we can better protect humanity against senseless bullying, discrimination, and intolerance. But we can only do that if we are informed, knowledgeable, and accepting of each and every human being.

NOTE

[1] You can find the video called "Fox News Bashes Pagans and Wiccans" on YouTube if you'd like to see the full version.

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ALLISON CUMMINGS AND AMANDA GLESING

2. GENDER AND THE MEDIA

Degradation of Women in Popular Culture

INTRODUCTION

It's fair to say that we live in a culture that is mediated by television, music, movies, and other forms of popular media. The entertainment industry is one of the most influential aspects of our society simply because of the rate at which people consume popular media. Many citizens have access to media in the palm of their hands: smartphones. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the media (news, television, film, advertisements, etc.) influences our daily lives deeply. Sometimes this influence can be positive, for example, when it comes to staying informed about the world in which we live; but in many cases the media is infiltrating our thought processes in negative and even harmful ways (Herman & Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent,* 1994). One glaring example of the media's negative influence comes in the form of sexism as a norm of American popular culture. Hollywood's portrayal of women is directly related to the self-esteem and personal value that ordinary women and girls feel (Harper & Tiggerman, 2008). The glorification of unrealistic female body types, as well as the continuous sexualization of the female figure, is prominent in film, television, advertisements, and other forms of popular culture. Major media outlets have a huge hand in shaping the attitudes of females in our society—which can be associated with eating disorders, psychological issues, and overall levels of confidence. It's essential to be aware of these important issues if we hope to combat them and positively represent gender equality in the media.

SEXISM IN FILM

As long as we have been alive, women have been an integral part of the film industry. But, according to objectification theory, the way in which women have been portrayed in movies over time has contributed to women's' self-objectification and mental health risks (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Although some may say that the film industry has come a long way in how they portray women, there is still an alarming number of modern films that do not even pass the Bechdel Test, which questions (1) whether a movie has at least two female characters who have names,

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 11–18.

(2) if they talk to each other, and (3) if they talk to each other about anything other than a man ("Bechdel Test Movie List," para. 1).

There are a number of very successful movies from a range of genres that fail to pass this test. Some of these movies include *Mortdecai*, *The Spongebob Movie: Sponge out of Water*, *22 Jump Street*, *American Sniper*, *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, *The Imitation Game*, and many more. If so many of these mainstream films cannot pass the simple Bechdel Test, there would seem to be a lack of interesting, well-rounded, strong female characters in modern cinema. According to statistics from *The Representation Project*, in 2011, only 11% of the protagonists in movies were female. By relying heavily on male main characters, the film industry implies to their audience that female characters are less significant, and thus that the female gender is ultimately less significant.

Another way we see the film industry contributing to women's self-objectification is their common objectification and sexualization in all manner of movies. Sexual objectification is when a woman's body is separated from her as a person and she is viewed as a sex object instead of a person. We see this repeatedly in the film industry. Sometimes sexual objectification is blunt and even a part of the plot of a movie, as in *Superbad*, *American Pie*, and *Sex Drive*, where the main characters are on a quest to lose their virginity and value the female characters for their sexualized bodies. In other movies, such as *The Wolf of Wall Street*, *Swingers*, *The Social Network*, *James Bond*, and many more, the male character's success is equated to how many beautiful women he sleeps with. All of these movies treat female characters as sex objects, and normalize sexual objectification.

Amanda and I are repeatedly reminded by the film industry that it is normal for women to be treated this way, and that it is normal for women to objectify themselves, think of themselves as trophies, and throw themselves at "successful" men. By presenting audiences with the normalization of sexual objectification, the film industry and other purveyors of media reinforce and legitimize the expectation that men are supposed to possess the power and be the active subjects of their own sexual pleasure while, on the other hand, women are supposed to be submissive and serve as the objects of men's desires (Ross, 2011).

Reinforcing these sexual norms in society can be rather problematic. Studies have shown that instances of sexual objectification are frequent for many American women. For example, Janet Kay Swim and her colleagues conducted studies that revealed that 94% of undergraduate women in college experienced unwanted comments that sexually objectified them at least one time each semester. They also found that women reported being verbally sexually objectified more than men (Swim, Cohen, & Hyers, 1998; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Sexual objectification is not only common in movies; it's common in real life. Since sexual objectification can lead to issues with women's health and self-esteem, normalizing sexual objectification in film needs to be challenged with stories that disrupt the hegemonic portrayal of women.

SEXISM IN TELEVISION

When glancing at a list of the most popular television shows, the lineup is unsurprisingly male dominated. Dramas and sitcoms were among the most popular television shows of 2014. *The Big Bang Theory*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *The Walking Dead*, and *Sons of Anarchy* were among the top-rated hits. The unfortunate reality regarding these shows is that they represent the female population in an extremely negative way. The way female characters are portrayed is representative of the larger problem of sexism in our society.

One of the most popular characters on television in recent years was Barney Stinson (played by Neil Patrick Harris) in *How I Met Your Mother*. Barney began the series as a womanizer who occasionally objectifies women he sleeps with, making one or two offensive comments while still having complex storylines involving his career or his friendships. As the show progressed, Barney's character became increasingly misogynistic, partaking in behaviors that are downright cruel and abusive. His character lost depth, becoming a sex-crazed "bro" whose one and only goal was to sleep with as many women as possible.

We argue that the popularity of *How I Met Your Mother* (and shows like it) reinforces sexism, which has become accepted as nomal in social situations. Men and women are taught that it is okay to make jokes at the expense of women—treating them merely as sexual objects—because Barney Stinson is "awesome" and his character is one of the best-loved on television. But Barney Stinson isn't the only offender: think Charlie on *Two and a Half-Men*, Joey on *Friends*, Russell on *Rules of Engagement*, or any other male character, who represents the "cool" ladies' man, who treats women with disrespect and prejudice.

With such prevalence of these harmful male characters, one would at least hope that the representation of female characters would maintain a balance of some sort. Sadly, according to "Boxed In: Employment of Behind-the-Scenes and On-Screen Women in 2013–2014 Prime-Time Television" by Martha M. Lauzen (2013), only 37% of primetime television characters are female. And along with such a huge disparity between the number of female and male characters, the female characters that are represented on popular television shows are largely shown in stereotypical roles that don't challenge society's sexist norms in any way, but instead contribute to the myth that women and girls are inferior to men and that women exist simply to satisfy men.

One example of a harmful female stereotype played out in television sitcoms is the "dumb blonde" trope. Penny of *The Big Bang Theory*, Jenna and Cerie of *30 Rock*, Kelly Bundy of *Married…With Children*, Hanna of *Pretty Little Liars*, and many more represent this character. Additionally, "dumb blonde" stereotypes such as these exist in shows aimed at young girls, such as Emily Osment's character Lilly in *Hannah Montana*, or Heather Morris playing Brittany on *Glee*. The prominence of characters like these in television can have an impact on the self-esteem of females. Women are taught that they need to dumb themselves down in order to be liked, and that men are only responsive to ditzy women whose only value is their looks. When we teach

women that their value comes solely from their external appearance, we significantly devalue other personal qualities, such as intelligence or sense of humor. However, in the face of these stereotypical representations of women in television, it's important to recognize the few programs that work at portraying women in a positive light.

We believe that the NBC sitcom *Parks and Recreation* has two of the most positive female characters on television. The hard-working, determined Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler) will stop at nothing to achieve her goals, holds fast to her values, and is unafraid to be herself. Another character who represents a challenge to several stereotypes is Donna Meagle (Retta). She's a black woman who is firmly in charge of her own personhood. She rules her sexuality, and her positivity and success come from her confident view of herself. Although television shows are rarely perfect, these characters show the way that television could progress as our society moves forward.

According to statistics from *The Representation Project*, women only own 5.8% of the television stations and only 6% of radio stations. When we are faced with this statistic it may become more obvious why women are significantly underrepresented in our television programming. This disparity in ownership is one of the most striking examples of the way in which television is a reflection of the problematic nature of our sexist culture. Women watch on average 4 hours of television per day versus men's 3 hours (Nielsen, 2013). If women make up more television viewership, then why are they not owners of these media companies?

Since women are commonly portrayed as sex objects in movies, it is important to note how the ways in which women's bodies are "made up" to look in film and animation—including movies for children—commonly fit in with the American beauty standard. That means that they're typically thin, white, and have long voluminous hair, large breasts, and full hips. The media often depicts a strict and nearly unattainable standard of women's physical beauty and links this standard with a woman's sexiness and worth (American Psychological Association, 2007). It's common to see female characters in animated movies with very small waists and large bust sizes. The hourglass figure is often exaggerated in animated films, particularly Disney movies. In *The Lego Movie*, the main female character, Wildstyle, has an hourglass figure painted onto her rectangular body, while the male Lego characters do not.

The thin beauty standard is exaggerated in cartoon movies, but it exists in films with an adult demographic as well. Women's bodies draw attention from the camera and viewer gaze in movies of almost any genre. In romantic movies, horror flicks, dramatic films, and virtually any other popular film category, the female actresses often seem to have bodies that fit an unrealistic beauty standard for most women. It would benefit women and girls of all ages if the film industry hired actresses with a variety of body types for main roles, because unrealistic beauty standards in movies can lead to female self-objectification and decreased self-esteem (American Psychological Association, 2007). According to Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), women internalize the messages that media outlets send about the ways they're supposed to look and act. To us, this internalization can lead to unhealthy

thoughts—that we're supposed to be judged by the way we look—and unhealthy experiences of feeling like objects to be gazed upon.

These unhealthy thoughts and tendencies are what Fredrickson and Roberts refer to as self-objectification, which can have many negative psychological consequences. Self-objectification can lead to increased body shame, anxiety about physical appearance, reduced flow and internal awareness, and anxiety about personal safety. These things, over time, can lead to mental health issues such as depression, addiction, and eating disorders.

SEXISM IN ADVERTISING

In reference to advertising strategies, everyone has probably heard the phrase "Sex sells." People see hundreds of advertisements every day, and many of them are "sexy," even if the product has no relation to sex. It is common to see sexy ads for just about anything: clothing, shampoo, body wash, food, cars, energy drinks, beer, soda, gum, and more. The problem with the "sex sells" strategy in advertising is what kind of sex they are selling, and to what audience. There is a significant amount of sexual objectification and exploitation of women in advertisements.

Some may say that men are presented as sexual objects in advertisements too, which is true. However, it is fair to say that the exploitation between the two genders is highly disproportionate. Women are objectified in advertisements vastly more than men, and, typically, the "sexy" advertisements have a male demographic. If sex sold equally to men and women, there would be the same number of men and women objectified in advertisements, but that is not the case (Ross, 2011). Anyone can go on to their mobile phones or devices right now and Google "sexy car ads," "sexy food ads," or any ad imaginable with the word "sexy" in front of it, and most of the images that show up on the search will be of women or women's bodies. Because the "sex sells" strategy primarily exploits female bodies, it is fair to say that sexy advertisements and sexist advertisements live in the same space.

One example of sexist advertising in the media is the Hardee's and Carl's Junior advertising campaign that features models and actresses such as Paris Hilton, Kate Upton, and Charlotte McKinny, all of whom fit the typical American beauty standard. They have flat stomachs, hourglass figures, and blonde hair. In the advertisements, these women are shown seductively eating cheeseburgers while wearing little to no clothing, often assuming sexually provocative poses. The models in these commercials are treated as if they are sexual objects to accompany the food that the company is trying to sell. Another example of sexism in advertisements is the campaign for Axe brand products. Many of these ads feature an unhappy man before he uses Axe products, and he is usually made to seem unsuccessful.

After the man uses the Axe products, thin, "beautiful" women are draped over him, and he is made to look happy and successful because he now gets to fulfill his sexual desire. Women in Axe advertisements usually never speak, and if they do, they are saying something provocative or something that indicates their desire for

the man. They are treated as accessories for success and happiness, objects instead of individual human beings. This sends the message that women are inferior and exist only to please men. Hardee's/Carl's Junior and Axe are only a couple examples of this issue that is so prevalent in the advertising world.

Advertisements that feature thin "beautiful" women are almost everywhere. Women are fed images of unattainable body types in multiple forms of media, especially ads. Because advertisements are directly linked to wants and desires, the pressure to conform to beauty standards is very strong through this branch of the media. Being a female consumer and seeing images of unrealistic beauty standards can make it difficult to have body confidence.

According to statistics from *The Representation Project*, 53% of 13-year-old girls are unhappy with their bodies, and 78% of 17-year-old girls are unhappy with their bodies. 7 million out of the 8 million people who struggle with eating disorders are women, and 65% of women in America have struggled with an eating disorder at some point in their lives. Companies who advertise products to the public can help prevent these issues by ceasing to degrade and objectify women in their ads.

SEXISM IN OTHER MEDIA FORMS

As evidenced by our research (and our lived experience), sexism exists in many places in our popular culture. Two other examples aside from network TV, films, and advertising are the news media ("entertainment" news included) and the fashion media, such as fashion magazines or red carpet fashion events. As in other forms of popular culture, women are no less objectified in these often-overlooked forms of popular culture. According to a study by the Women's Media Center, 63% of bylines in print news and on-camera appearances for many of the major news networks were men, showing that women are grossly underrepresented in journalism.

Fox News is a controversial yet popular cable news network. They have long been accused of having only classically attractive women as anchors, as well as few-to-no older women. A recent survey of their on-air personalities shows that Fox News employs mostly white male anchors, and the female anchors they do employ largely represent the classic American beauty standard and are, again, mostly white. This vast underrepresentation of minorities, especially minority women, is detrimental to all women, and women of color in particular. Representation is extremely important for consumers of media, and the lack of female representation in the news media sends a message to women that information lies in the hands of the male population.

Magazines are another culprit in the hyper-sexualization of women. Magazines like *Cosmopolitan* infiltrate the minds of young women and girls with messages across the cover: "How to drop 10 pounds fast and easy!" or "How to dress for your body type" or even the glaringly sexist "How to please your man in bed! 10 Secrets from real guys!" All of these messages tell women that they are supposed

to be thin and sexy, and that getting your guy off is the most important sexual task. In a world in which *Cosmo* and other fashion magazines plaster our grocery store aisles, Facebook pages, and phone screens, the wrong message is being broadcast to a willing and impressionable audience.

"Who are you wearing?" is the most common question asked to women at red carpet events such as the Emmys, the Academy Awards, the Grammys, and other formal affairs. TV cameras line the red carpet, as celebrities flaunt their elegant gowns and smart suits. In recent years, however, the focus has increasingly fallen upon the "looks" that the rich and famous sport to the affairs. In response to that question, the actress can really only answer with the name of a designer (usually male). This detracts from the reason that the actress is at the awards show in the first place. Her fashion sense overshadows her accomplishments, and the stereotype that Hollywood starlets are vapid, vain idiots is perpetuated. How are these women to break that stereotype if they are only being asked about their outfit choices? *The Representation Project* held the answer for this year's red carpet award season. It came in the form of a thought-provoking hashtag, #AskHerMore. This social media campaign offered an opportunity for actresses and others to speak out against sexist trends in the entertainment media.

CONCLUSION

In this piece, we've made the case that there are multiple ways that sexism is perpetuated through different media outlets. New storylines need to emerge, for women, by women, and in the aim of greater understanding so we can begin challenging patriarchal narratives in the media and beyond.

Hollywood makes patriarchy a norm in popular culture, and this is reflected onto civilization. The portrayal of women in film, television, advertisements, and other forms of media not only reinforces the patriarchal system in our society, it also has negative effects on women's self-esteem and mental health. Although some may say that Hollywood has made improvements with the way it depicts women, it still has a long way to go.

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JUSTIN HAYES

3. SILENT JUDGMENTS

How I Came to Terms with Depression

"Happiness is a choice."
"Every day it's your decision to make that day a bad one or a good one."
"Surround yourself with happy people and you will feel the same."
"People are as happy as they allow themselves to be."

I hear these phrases and phrases just like them from friends, family, and strangers in daily conversation. People say these things with positive intentions and as words of encouragement. I can personally recall countless times I have tried to make light of situations with people in my life by telling them that happiness ultimately comes down to a conscious choice. I believed this for myself, and I believed it to be true for all people for a large portion of my life because I simply had no reason to think otherwise. It was not until a few years ago that I started to notice I did not think or feel the same way that those around me did. I started to constantly feel down and was unable to snap out of it with positive thought. I was ultimately going to find out that I am one of the 350 million people worldwide who suffers from some form of depression.

Throughout my life I never considered myself to be an unhappy person. I had my good days and bad days like anyone else, and I was a firm believer in the idea that I had no "real" reason to ever feel down because I led a very privileged life. I was doing pretty well in school, I had a great group of friends and an extremely loving and supporting family, and I lived in a nice suburb. I was known by most people in my life as someone with a calm demeanor and a great sense of humor.

I can recall the first time ever feeling symptoms of depression was around my junior to senior years of high school. I quickly shrugged any of these feelings off as just part of growing up. When I felt down, I would assure myself that nothing could be wrong because nothing extreme in my life was going on to cause this. At this point, I knew as much about depression as most people do who live without it. I would have defined it then the same way someone could try and define it now as a feeling of sadness or emptiness that does not go away. I believed that individuals with depression felt this way because of some sort of loss or other traumatic event in their life, and I thought this could be cured with positive thinking brought on by therapy and perhaps some medication for those who really need it.

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 19–23.

As someone who now lives with clinical depression, I find it important to think back and reflect on my own beliefs before I began to recognize what it is and to live with it. This is important because it reminds me not to ever become frustrated with someone who has not lived with it but tries to offer what they believe to be words of encouragement such as "Happiness is a choice." This sadly reminds me that unlike a lot of physical illnesses, the pain behind depression is mostly invisible, and I often find explaining it to be nearly impossible. It would be very easy to label someone as ignorant for not understanding what an individual with depression goes through on a daily basis, but understanding usually begins with conversation. Conversation that is oftentimes very difficult to have.

I ended up graduating high school and getting into the college of my choice without ever fully acknowledging that anything could be wrong with me. Things were going great for me, and I still felt that I had no reason to complain. It was not until the second half of freshman year that I started to realize something was not right, but depression never crossed my mind because I still believed that was something that could only be triggered by having what I considered to be real problems. I constantly felt fatigued, distant from those around me, and I stopped getting any sense of enjoyment out of what I once considered to be very fun activities. My grades were not what I knew they could be, and I had a very difficult time focusing on classes and even on daily conversation.

I felt a lot of guilt for feeling this way because I knew so many people who were facing serious problems in their daily lives and they seemed better able to deal with them and keep smiles on their faces. I habitually questioned why I had the right to feel so down, and I used this train of thought to keep shrugging off the fact that something might be wrong. I assured myself that there had to be a valid reason why I felt this way, and the one thing I was able to try and blame it on was a relationship I had been in for a few years. I never considered myself to be a rash thinker, but I quickly decided that the relationship just had to have something to do with it. I ended the relationship thinking I had made a big and positive change for myself. The symptoms worsened after the breakup, but I reassured myself that everyone feels this way after getting out of a relationship and that it would pass within a month or two. But it didn't. It only got worse.

For months on end I felt what I can only really describe as emptiness. Before those later months, I would pride myself on my ability to keep that feeling inside and hidden from strangers and those closest to me. I had my same sense of humor and still kept everyone around me laughing. Getting myself out of bed and all other daily tasks, even the fun ones, felt like a huge chore, but I did my absolute best to never reveal I was having difficulties. It was in the summer months, while back at home that my closer friends started to notice I was not behaving like myself. The breakup I was going through at the time in a strange way gave me something to blame that on, which provided me with the chance to open up to my friends. I finally had a reason in my head for almost justifying this feeling, and with the help of a very close friend who told my parents how I had been doing, I made a decision to

get some help. No matter how open I am today about this, I still fear how much I could have let myself go if it were not for this friend who made the choice to reach out. With the help of my parents, I arranged to meet with a therapist near my home. I was extremely uncomfortable with making this decision because I never could have imagined myself being someone who would need to go to a therapist. I shamelessly attached a stigma to individuals who seek help for themselves through counseling, and I never wanted to see myself as one of "those people."

Within one meeting with this therapist, I was able to describe everything I had been feeling for the prior few years. In that same meeting, this therapist told me I almost definitely had clinical depression. I instantly denied this until she explained that depression can happen to anyone and it does not always need a triggering event. I went home and researched clinical depression right away and read several individual stories from people who have dealt with it. After reading all of the stories, everything I had been feeling for the past few years suddenly made sense. I had felt so isolated until I read all about the illness and discovered that no case of depression is exactly the same. Being able to put a label on what I had been feeling for so long was a massive relief.

Going back to school at the end of the summer, I was faced with the fact that I would no longer be seeing the therapist I had seen and opened up to weekly for about a month. I was able to seek out a free resource on my campus that I never knew existed and get counseling. My school offers twenty free sessions with a therapist, and I was able to meet with someone within a week of coming back to school.

I was told by this therapist that things oftentimes get a lot worse before they get better when treating depression, and this was very true for me. I struggled my way through the first semester of school and still did my best to hide this from those around me. I still felt empty and fatigued through my day-to-day life and found it almost impossible to just get myself out of bed and to classes. I was advised by this therapist to exercise more often to combat the depression, which I did, and I found that it helped temporarily relieve some of the symptoms. My appetite had almost completely gone away, which was something I had never experienced. I was pretty overweight throughout my life and ended up losing around sixty pounds over the course of my second year of college, partially because I made myself exercise more often, but mainly due to my inability to make myself eat. The weight loss felt like something I should have been proud of, but at the time it was only a reflection of how awful I was feeling.

It took me some time, but I ended up being very open with friends when I began therapy. I am fortunate enough to have an amazing group of family and friends who all did their absolute best to understand what I was going through and try to help. Finally being able to process my feelings with those closest to me helped me more than I think I will ever realize. All of these support systems such as a therapist and an unbelievably supportive group of family and friends often came with a sense of guilt about where I would be without those systems and where a scary amount of individuals end up when they do not have similar resources. I was able to deal with

that guilt and many other feelings through therapy. I have learned that I should not feel so guilty about my own situation as long I am able to listen and understand the stories of other people in worse situations and why they may be in those situations.

Eventually, in the first months of therapy, medicine was suggested. This was an idea I had considered, but I'd also attached a stigma to individuals who took medicine for mental illness in the same way I'd previously thought about those who need therapy, and I really wanted to believe that no matter how bad I got, I would not be one of those people who needed to take medicine for a mental illness. Therapy helped me come to the realization that mental illness, like physical illness, often needs to be treated with medication. Many people hold strong stances against this, but I believe anyone who felt the way I felt would come around to at least giving it a shot.

I arranged to see an on-campus psychiatrist who was very understanding about how unsure I was about medication. He thoroughly discussed the many different medications that are out there and helped me weigh the pros and cons of all of them. After we made a decision, he started me on a low dose for a few weeks to gradually build me up to the regular dose. Within a few weeks, I was already feeling more like myself. Day-to-day activities did not feel as mentally and physically draining as they had before, and my outlook on life began to return to normal. The symptoms of depression did not magically vanish with medication, but I found myself having an easier time dealing with those symptoms.

I stuck with this medication for the remainder of my second year of school and ran out of the free counseling sessions the university provided at what I felt to be a good enough stopping point. I continued taking the medication through a month or two of summer and decided with the psychiatrist that I was able to try weaning myself off. Some of the fatigue associated with depression returned, but overall, I felt a lot better. I am now over halfway through my third year in school, and I have been dealing with a lot of recurring depression symptoms, which is all too common for individuals with depression. Thanks to therapy, I am in a better place than last year and have been able to recognize when these symptoms start to recur and am now in the process of deciding to try a new medication. I know that depression is not something that often goes away within a year, but I have fortunately been given several opportunities to learn how to try and combat it.

I am not telling my story as a way to seek pity or attention, and I have come to feel strongly that the fact that I feel the need to express this is problematic for individuals who are in similar situations. Those who are open about their depression are often criticized and labeled as attention seekers. This is a huge problem because I have found that almost nothing has helped me to combat depression as much as simply reaching out and talking about it. Despite my present openness with close friends and family, I still find myself staying quiet, solely because I am scared of the *silent judgments* people might make about my possible intentions for speaking out.

I still feel the need to express how grateful I am that I have such an amazing support system and the privileges and opportunities I have been presented with before I ever tell my story. I still continue to work on getting over the belief that

certain people have more of a right to feel the way I do than I do. The point is, although the support systems and opportunities to deal with it might, depression itself does not discriminate. People may never get the help they need just because they are fearful of being seen as self-seeking. I would like to live in a society where mental illness is perceived with compassion and where people who need help are able to comfortably reach out and get that help. I will do everything I can to advocate for myself and those like myself to help create a world where every person is given the same chances.

ANONYMOUS 1

4. TO BE CONTINUED…

It's so strange how you can live 20 years on this Earth and only remember bits and pieces of your time. I can remember hardly anything about my childhood and adolescence. It's all one big, messy blur. What I do remember isn't the greatest. I don't remember fun birthday parties, or family vacations; I can only remember how awful life was. I wanted nothing more than for everything to go away, year after year. Death was the only option for me, the only way to make everything and everyone go away. Killing myself was my only hope.

Ever since I was a little girl, I've felt the pressure to look a certain way. I didn't start to notice it until I was in third grade. I had always been bigger, if not the biggest, of all of my girlfriends. I didn't really care. I was a kid, and the last thing on my mind was feeling the need to lose a few pounds. Unfortunately, that all changed. I remember one day I was at my friend Kenzie's house with two other friends. I had left the computer room to use the bathroom, but before I walked back into the room I heard my name being said. I'm not sure why, but I stopped and listened to what my friends where saying. Anna started off saying something along the lines of, "Kenzie you're so skinny. You're like a twig; Michaela is like a branch … and Cat is like the tree trunk." Then they all laughed and laughed like it was THE BEST JOKE EVER. I turned back around and went into the bathroom. I looked myself in the mirror and began to notice, for the first time, how I was significantly bigger than my other friends.

Now that I knew this information, I didn't like that about myself. I started to see what they saw. I never told my friends that I heard them talking and that what they said had truly hurt my feelings. I just went back into the room and joined in on whatever they were doing on the computer. From then on I was very conscious of how I looked compared to all other girls. I started to make detailed comparisons between other girls and myself. I would pick at myself, say awful things about myself, and really started to hate my body and who I was. This continued for years, and only got worse.

When I was going into middle school, I was still unhappy with how I looked. I started wearing makeup the year before. I had gotten some boobs, and I started my period, became a woman *blah blah blah*. I did not like being a girl. In middle school there were these girls who actually called themselves "The Plastics." Bet you guessed: Anna was one of them. Our friendship had faded away, and she was now a cheerleader. For some reason I wanted to be her friend still. She was skinny, pretty,

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 25–28.

popular, had a lot of friends, not to mention she got attention from boys. I wanted to be like her. Throughout my two years in middle school I went from a size 10–12 in jeans to a 00. I had stopped eating. I would eat a few saltine crackers for breakfast and had a bottle of water for lunch at school. I was never hungry. I never actually felt hunger until I was in pain. My family rarely ate meals together, so no one noticed. I had to make my own meals if I wanted to eat, which I didn't. For the occasional dinner we would eat together, I would say I didn't feel good and only eat a few bites. I also got into the habit of just sleeping through dinner. No one noticed.

At the time I didn't realize how sick I really was, so I never noticed how much it grew inside of me or how deeply rooted it had become. My depression led me to sleep away every second of my free time, causing me to lose touch with most of my friends. Even if I had wanted to spend more time with my friends and family, my anxiety made that almost impossible. I was so anxious and worried all the time. I was constantly thinking that everyone was looking at me, judging me, looking at my stomach, talking about me. I would dream of the fat melting and peeling away. Or that I could cut it off with a knife. I also remember sucking in my gut 24/7. I was only 13. I never told a soul about what was going on inside my head.

I had become the master of acting like a different person to my family and peers. No one said anything about how I was acting *off* or different when those rays of darkness shown through my facade. I also have extreme difficulties expressing what's going on inside of me. It's so hard to put things into words. I would just bury everything deep down inside and completely forget about it, or at least try. This story does not do any justice to the pain I went through and still continue to go through every day of my life.

I had lost a bunch of weight, and even though I had that physical evidence, I still thought in my head that I was the size of a whale. You've probably seen that picture of the super-skinny girl looking at herself in the mirror, but seeing her reflection as obese. That was literally me. Since I never reached out to anyone and no one reached out to me, I soon spiraled into a deep black hole I thought I could never climb out of. I felt so alone, like I had no one. No friends or family who would support me or even acted like they cared. I grew to accept that I was never going to be capable of any sort of happiness. At times I longed for death, for it seemed like the only answer. There's so much more I wish I could express as to why in late May of 2009, I tried to kill myself before school. It started out when I had a mental breakdown over a fucking zipper on a dress; the smallest things could trigger a meltdown. I just wanted to wear that dress. It was so beautiful with pink and blue water-colored flowers. It made me feel good. It made me feel pretty.

I had never let any of those emotions show in front of my parents, so they never knew about the years of emotions bottled up inside of me. I guess they just thought I was a moody teenager who liked to be alone and sleep. They never asked any questions. Or maybe they didn't know what to do. My mental breakdowns are not quiet at all. I couldn't control myself once I reached a certain point. Once I cracked open, everything came pouring out of me. I had shattered my mother's favorite

mirror and slit my wrists with a chunk of the glass. I had locked the door to my room, and by the time my parents got the key to open it, I had swallowed pretty much half of the bottle of my mom's Excedrin. I was ready to die. I wanted to die. I finally decided that there was no way I could go on living like that anymore.

A lot of what happened after that is blurry, but I had my stomach pumped and was admitted into the Robert Young Mental Health Center. I stayed there for three weeks. I ended up missing the rest of my freshman year of high school. Robert Young sucked, and it didn't help me at all. I'm not even sure how I was released. Due to not getting any help there, I continued down a dangerous path. I often still thought about death. And about how I couldn't kill myself because I saw how it hurt my family. I didn't want to do that to them again, so I wanted to die on accident. I would think about walking into traffic all the time. I preferred to be hit by a city bus. Or just jumping out of the car while it's moving. Which I attempted during one meltdown one time. Dad had those dang child locks on! Since my parents knew what was up, they kept an eye on me for a while. I tried three different counselors over the rest of my high school career. I even tried some type of group therapy bullshit.

For four more years, I struggled with my body image and the battles that were taking place within me every single day. It was a struggle to simply carry on. I put on weight, but I was still a size 3 until sophomore year (I got a job at Dairy Queen… Ice cream is my favorite food). As you could've guessed, I became obsessed with my image. I dolled myself up to try and make me like something—*anything*—about my reflection. Since I put up a show for just about everyone, I felt so empty and alone. I was thin, and I did figure out that makeup made me feel slightly better about myself, so guys started to take interest in me. I started to fill myself with the affection of these guys. Looking back, it was like I was never satisfied. I could never be satisfied no matter how many boys I could get to fall in love with me. Well, a fake version of me.

By the end of my senior year, I was like a whole different person. I had found the right therapist, the right medicine combination, and ways to cope with the depression and anxiety. Looking back at my past and thinking about who I was compared to who I am now, I am a different person down to my cells. Even though my past got pretty bad, I'm glad it's my past. I've learned so much about myself, and how to love the skin I'm in. I still have my days where I wish I was thinner or prettier or whatever, but deep down I know this is the most I've ever loved myself.

I would like to say I maintained some sort of happiness and hope for two years after high school. College has changed me for the better, but the chemicals in my brain aren't how they're supposed to be. I weened myself off of my medicine throughout my freshman year in college and relied on my coping skills and meditation to keep me balanced. All without my parents or doctor knowing. I was doing so well for that year and in the first semester of my sophomore year. I am currently in my junior year, and I'm sinking. And sinking fast. I wish I could express how I feel, but I truly can't talk about what's going on or what I need. So, I'm not sure what I was thinking when I decided to write this chapter.

ANONYMOUS 1

Every day is so difficult for me. It's so hard to even wake up. Or to get out of bed and stay awake, to get ready for class, to walk to class, then actually pay attention and retain something. Then to apply that knowledge! It's so hard for me to focus sometimes. Especially on my numb/empty days. I can sit in a class and think I was listening, but the second I leave I don't remember a single word. I have such horrible, racing thoughts at night. My insomnia is back. I've struggled with that my entire life, but I refuse to take sleeping pills again. What is the hardest for me is the numbness and the exhaustion I feel deep inside of me all of the time. Even if I don't feel completely numb, it's still lingering between spurts of emotion.

I feel nothing a lot of the time, and once again I have no appetite ever. So far I've lost roughly 30 pounds. To me it's a good day if (1) I convince myself that I'm in too much debt to miss any classes so I better attend, and (2) I remember to eat more than once that day. I know I need help. I want to try and find someone to talk to and to get back on medicine, but I'm so scared. I'm already up to my nose in stress from school. If I were to try and find someone to help me that would mean I would have to open up. I would have to relive everything and tell them everything so they could understand and try to help. There is no possible way I could do that to myself AND have hours upon hours of homework every night and weekend. It's mental health or education, it seems.

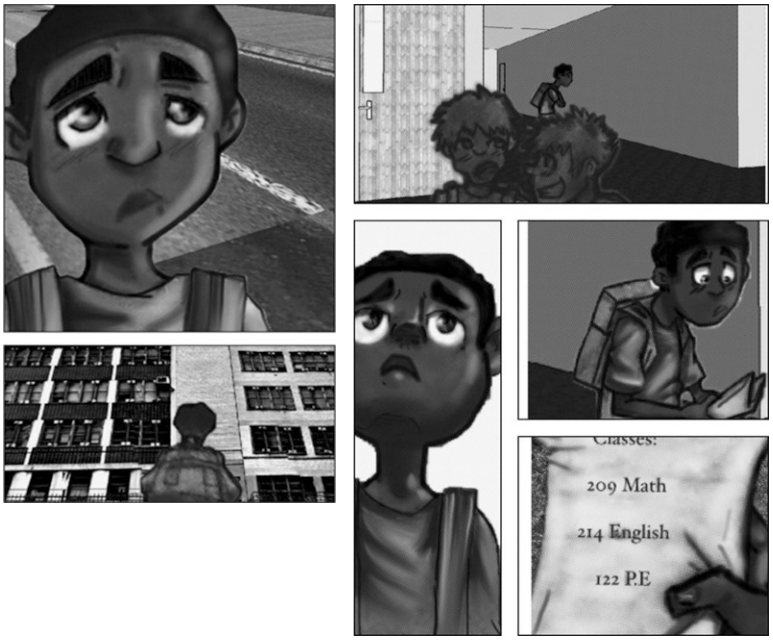
If I keep my mind busy with school and on my ultimate career goal, I'm hoping I can suppress everything until I have time for myself to start to get help again. Suppression may help temporarily, or it may make my life even more awful. No matter what, I feel hopeless about a lot of aspects in my life, which isn't okay. I know for a fact that I do need help. So, my story is *to be continued*.

DANIEL SEARCY

5. FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

INTRODUCTION

Throughout my childhood and early adolescence, I attended a number of different schools. In many of those schools I met some children who extended a hand towards me and became my friends, but I also often met other children who were not as kind. Some of the aspects of my comic "First Day of School" are loosely based on a few of those experiences. However, the comic as a whole is meant to show some of the things (both good and bad) an individual may encounter during their first semester/term at a new school.



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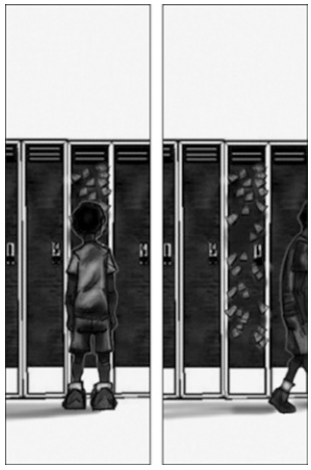

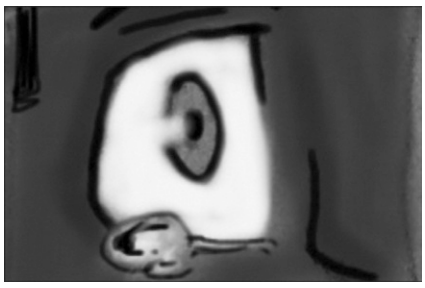


LAME
go away
crap
dork
Douche
Loser
Loser
screw you!

JAYCE SORRENTINO

6. MOM, I'M GAY

INTRODUCTION

When we were children, our parents always told us as we were growing up to be whoever we want to be, to do the things that we want to do, and to be truthful about who we are. We were told that we didn't have to fit in and that we were born to stand out and express our individuality. The most common thing for them to say to us was "Be who you are, not what everyone else wants you to be." Being different was never a bad thing when we were young; that's how our parents made us feel better when we felt as though we didn't belong. But what happens when being different becomes something other than what your parents expected? How are we to forget everything we were ever taught when it comes to being the person we truly are?

COMING OUT TO MY MOM

I was seventeen years old, a senior in high school, when I "came out" to my mother, telling her I was gay. To be honest, I didn't think it was something that needed a huge conversation or explanation. To me it was normal. I didn't understand why some people saw it as a "coming out" to their parents, because to me coming out means you are trying to hide your sexual orientation. But I wasn't trying to hide; I never saw a reason.

For many people, the coming out process is difficult because they fear rejection from those who are supposed to love them unconditionally, such as siblings and parents. In *Narrating the Closet,* Adams (2011) describes his experience coming out to relatives, stating that one family member no longer allowed him in her house and another refused to speak to him for months. I never saw it that way because I didn't think it would be a big deal to my family. I was not one of the many who were afraid. I knew my mom would love and accept me for who I was.

I fully believed when I told her my sexual orientation that she would understand. She'd see, surely, that my sexuality had always been part of my identity. I imagined that once I told her, we'd be able to talk about everything without me being punished. Because I was raised to be who I truly am, I felt I could be open with her, like I'd always been.

The tragedy is that coming out to parents is never what you expected, at least not in my case. Apparently, all those years of being told to stay true to myself and hearing that being different is okay only counted when my identity fell into the heteronormative category of what is considered "normal" in society.

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 33–35.

I Thought It Would Be Different

My mother came into my room one night while I was getting ready to meet with some friends for dinner. While we were casually chatting, she asked me if I was dating anyone. I said to her, "Mom, I'm dating a girl, you know the one that has been coming over all the time." I think deep down she had an idea that I was dating girls for some time, but did not know how to ask.

When my mother decided to speak again, the conversation started with, "You disgust me," and ended with "I can't even look at you the same anymore." Of course, there was a lot of discussion in between that fell along the lines of typical homophobic comments like "True love isn't real with people of the same sex," or "I'm sure it's just a 'phase'—let's keep this between us and forget it ever happened," or, one of my favorites, "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve."

The conversation stuck with me. The one person who was supposed to understand and be on my side was no longer there for me. From that moment on, my views of society shifted. There I was, in complete shock trying to fathom what just happened. If the one closest to me didn't accept me, no one would. What my mother said during that conversation opened my eyes to what I would face in the world around me. What I didn't expect was the lasting impression it left on me.

It has been almost ten years since that first conversation about my sexual orientation with my mother. Our conversation drastically shifted my perception of how others view me. By "others," I mean individuals who are not part of the marginalized lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. *Isolated* is the first word that comes to mind. In class I'm the minority; when I'm at my mother's house, I feel that I have to conceal who I am; and when I'm with my heterosexual friends, I feel outnumbered and out of place. This feeling of isolation was never a problem for me until I felt rejected by my own flesh and blood, by the woman who brought me into the world.

Scholarship on the dimensions of coming out for many individuals has confirmed my experience. As Johnson and Amella (2014) note, LGBT people are at greater risk for feeling social isolation from their families and friends after their coming out and are at risk for increased mental health disparities. It's one thing to feel out of place in a single location, but for some in the LGBT community, it's much more than that. Johnson and Amella (2014) indicate that there is self-isolation, where individuals socially isolate themselves from social systems, such as family, friends and school because we put up a defense mechanism against future possible rejection. There's concealment of identity because of the pressures to be normal, again, individuals isolate themselves from social interactions to conceal their identity.

It's important to understand that every action has a reaction. In my personal situation, the isolation comes from recognizing I am different from heteronormative society. I detach myself from this society to reduce any further harm. My mother's negative reaction still compels me to reveal my true self only to those who are similar, or those who don't know me well enough to decipher my sexuality.

How does one's sexuality affect another individual? What does homophobic hate do besides cause conflict and isolation? Why is sexual orientation reason to kill, as we witnessed in the tragic June 12, 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting that left 49 killed and 53 others wounded? Why do I have to live in fear that I will continuously be judged for something that is part of me?

It is hard for older generations, like my mother's, to change what they have always believed about homosexuality because that is how they were raised. My mother came from a generation where homosexuality remained hidden, and was completely unacceptable in her household. She was raised to be Catholic and follow the traditional path of marriage by the church. By the time my mother had me, her faith hadn't changed but society had. The acceptance of homosexuality had become more prominent, so when she raised me, she was either unaware that homosexuality could exist in our home or she was so close-minded by the way she was raised that she was blinded to the possibility. So when she told me growing up that it was okay to be different, it really wasn't, because it wasn't okay for me to be gay.

The relationship I have with my mother is nothing like it was before she knew my true sexual orientation. We are distant, we don't talk much, and she still denies the fact that her own daughter is a lesbian. There is no happy ending to my story (yet). I am a gay individual who accepts the person I am, but I still shield it from others for protective reasons. I feel different and less-than because heteronormative society tells me that I am. I'm not "normal" because I am part of LGBT society, and the dominant narrative in the United States is that this community is *abnormal*.

My belief that the world was accepting was crushed by the closest person to me; this changed my entire view of life. Because of the distinct image of my mother's response, I isolate myself from others to protect my identity from being discriminated against. Even though I shield who I am, I'm not afraid of who I'm revealing myself to be to you, the reader. I hope my story will help and encourage others to share their stories of their coming-out experiences.

In closing, I will *practice* what my parents told me in empty clichés when I was young so that future generations will have it easier than I did. No longer will they feel as though they are different because, in reality, we love the same way everyone else does, just not in the ways society sanctions.

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IDENTITY POLITICS, SEXISM, RACISM, AND RELATIONSHIPS

ZUZANA SULCOVA

7. ASSIMILATION OF AN ALIEN

INTRODUCTION

My name is Zuzana Sulcova, and I am an alien. This could be seen as a metaphorical title, but according the U.S. government, that is my legal title. The following is my story of how this title became one of the most important aspects of my life. This is a story of perseverance, fitting in, and acceptance in a world where "different" is bad and "cool" is being a part of the group.

ASSIMILATING

I was six years old when I gained the title "alien," when my parents and I moved to Illinois from the Czech Republic because my dad got a job in Chicago. This was a huge deal for multiple reasons. First, my whole family lived in the same small town in the Czech Republic, literally five minutes away from each other. My parents and I went from seeing our family on a daily basis to once a year, if we were lucky. Second, neither my mom nor I spoke English, and my dad spoke very little English. Third, the money we had in the Czech Republic did not amount to much in the United States, meaning that we were really poor. All of these factors played and still play a huge role in my family's new life in the United States.

Because I was so young, I don't remember much of the actual move to the United States. I remember being on the plane and being scared to put my feet on the floor because I was scared that if I pushed them down too hard the plane would fall. I remember my mom pulling out a map and showing me where our old home was and where our new home was going to be. I remember when we got to the Chicago O'Hare International Airport I was hungry so my parents bought me McDonald's (a fortuitous first meal in the United States). I remember not really understanding what was happening, but I know I was never scared or nervous.

Maybe it was my age at the time. But, looking back and thinking about the move, I'm so amazed at my parents' level of confidence that moving would work out and that the benefits would outweigh the costs. They took a huge risk coming here, and they had to leave a lot of things behind, including our family and my mom's job. My dad took the job in Chicago in hopes that one day it would help provide a better life for us, but there was no certainty of it. Because I don't remember having any negative emotions about the move, my parents must have done a great job of remaining calm and confident around me so that I wouldn't be nervous or scared.

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The apartment we moved into was small and only had one bedroom. The furniture that we had was either bought from Goodwill, salvaged from the alleyway, or given to us by neighbors who no longer wanted it. We didn't have a car, so we relied heavily on public transportation and walking. To go get groceries, my mom and I would walk 30 minutes to Aldi, and we could only buy enough food that we could carry. We did not have much money, so we did not have many things in our apartment. Money was so tight that even things from Goodwill were too expensive at times.

I started off first grade in the United States. I had to take the bus to a different local school because the one closer to me didn't offer an English as a Second Language (ESL) program. I was placed into a general classroom, and I would get pulled out of class for a few hours a day to go to ESL. In my ESL class, it was me and five other students who spoke Spanish. The teacher also spoke Spanish, so it was easy for the other students to communicate with her. I was left to figure things out for myself, although I never remember really struggling to learn English.

I don't remember much from first grade, but I do remember my first Halloween. I was a witch, and because we didn't have enough money for a costume, my mom made me a homemade costume. Unfortunately, I forgot the word "witch" when I went to school, so I told everyone that I was a "scary old lady." I don't remember feeling embarrassed that I didn't know, and I don't think I was embarrassed about my homemade costume either. I don't think that was an emotion I had experienced yet at that age, but I remember when that started changing.

When I got to second grade, I switched schools because I no longer needed ESL. I spoke, wrote, and read in English just as well as my peers. But I started noticing differences between myself and the other students. First, I dressed differently than the other girls. I still wore clothes that we brought from the Czech Republic, so the style was noticeably different. In the Czech Republic, it was common for girls to wear pants that were essentially like leggings with different designs on them.

I remember one day at school, I was wearing those pants and a group of girls come up to me and said, "Why are you wearing just tights? That's so weird." And then they laughed and walked away. Unfortunately, my family couldn't afford new clothes, so I was stuck wearing "tights." We also couldn't afford new school supplies. I had to use supplies from the previous years, so I didn't have Lisa Frank folders and notebooks like the other girls had. Because I often felt out of place, I was very quiet and shy, and I had a hard time making friends.

Another thing that set me apart from my peers was my Czech heritage. My parents did a really nice job of keeping traditional Czech customs for various holidays, but then we also integrated American traditions as well. This made things really complicated to explain to my peers. For example, Christmas in the Czech Republic is celebrated on December 24th; baby Jesus brings the presents that night. This was really hard to explain to my elementary-school-aged peers who strictly believed in Santa Claus.

Because I would often get a negative reaction when I talked about my family's cultural practices, I stopped mentioning them. I would pretend that my family celebrated holidays "normally." At this point, I was fluent in English; most people

wouldn't be able to figure out I was "different," and I liked to keep it that way. I did everything I could to prevent people from knowing I was an immigrant because all I wanted to do was fit in. One of the main ways people figured out that I was "different" was when they met my parents and heard their heavy Czech accents. I actually had one of my teachers ask my parents if I was adopted because they had an accent and I didn't. After people found out I was an immigrant, it would usually follow with:

"Can you say something in Czech?"
"Do you celebrate Thanksgiving?"
"Did you get here on a boat?"
"Are you illegal?"
"How do you know how to speak English?"
"Did you have electricity in the Czech Republic?"
"So you're from Czechoslovakia?"

Answering these questions so many times started to annoy me, so I did everything I could to avoid being asked.

In middle school, assimilation got a little easier because we had to wear uniforms, so fitting in was simpler in the fashion aspect. The only hard part was "dress-down days," when we didn't have to wear uniforms. At that point we still got most of our clothes at Goodwill, so dress-down days were hard when all the girls would wear name-brand clothes and I would have my washed-out Goodwill clothes. For my birthday in seventh grade, my mom took me to Aéropostale (a brand that was really popular at that time) and let me pick out two shirts. It was one of the best presents ever because I finally had something I could wear that would help me fit in. For the rest of the dress-down days in seventh and eighth grade, I would rotate those two shirts.

My parents and I would go back to the Czech Republic for a month or so every summer until I was in high school. I always looked forward to going back to visit because I got to see my family and friends. As I got older, going back got less exciting because I was no longer an age where I could go play with my old friends. I started to have a really hard time relating to them because their lives had become so different from mine. Their conversations would be about people I didn't know and events I hadn't been around for, and I couldn't relate to a lot of their conversations. When they would ask me about the U.S. and my life, they couldn't really relate to that either. When I would go visit my family, they would always ask me where I preferred living. The correct answer was the Czech Republic (my mom told me to say that), but it was a lie because I did prefer the U.S. since that was where I spent most of my time.

For a long time, I felt like I lived in two separate worlds, but I had to pretend to be somebody else in both those worlds. So, essentially, I didn't belong anywhere. I felt like I was caught in the middle between what my family wanted me to be and what my peers in the United States wanted me to be. I had a really weird identity crisis, and it took me a long time to figure out how to balance and mix the two worlds in my life. Towards the end of high school, I became a lot more accepting of my culture,

and I became more comfortable with sharing it with others and educating them about my customs and traditions. Today, it's one of my fun facts that I always share with people because I want people to know that this is a big part of my life.

ZUZANA TODAY

Looking back on my elementary- and middle-school experience, I wish I wouldn't have been so hesitant to share my heritage and so willing to deny it. But it was also the time when I finally started to accept myself and where I am from. This was really meaningful and played a huge part in my becoming the person that I am today.

Today, I am still an alien, but I also get the title of *permanent resident* and, hopefully soon, *dual citizen*. I no longer have to hide behind a title that I used to believe put me at a disadvantage. I am proud to be an alien, an immigrant, a resident of two countries. I am proud to be unique.

I am proud to be Zuzana.

BRANDON O. HENSLEY

8. "BRAIN DEAD"

Words as Weapons in the Cultural Sanctioning of Bullying Practices

"BRAIN DEAD BRANDON"—RECALLING MY FIRST NICKNAME

> [H]egemonic forms of masculinity are both engaged with and contested as children grow up. Gender is made in schools and neighborhoods through peer group structure, control of space… homophobic speech, and harassment. (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 839)

From about kindergarten until fifth grade, I spent my summers at Happy Time Daycare Center. My parents both worked grueling jobs in social work (as full-time counselors), so that meant eight-hour days for me at a place that was anything but happy. I remember the mornings. Tired, I would trudge across the asphalt parking lot to the smudged glass doors of the entrance, dreading each and every day, trying any way I could to get out of Happy Time.

"Do I have to today? I don't feel good."
"What if I go to grandma and grandpa's instead?"
"Please, just let me come with you to work."
"I hate it here."

None of these feeble pleas ever worked. My parents reminded me, "We're paying good money for you to go here. Just make a new friend and the days will fly by." My mom and dad were supportive, but they were always late to pick me up; consequently, the days never flew by. To make matters worse, finding friends proved difficult at Happy Time, *namely* because of a nickname I'd acquired: "Brain Dead."

This moniker was generously granted to me by Tyler,[1] a tall, older boy with a mullet haircut who presided over Happy Time Daycare Center more than the employees.[2] Tyler "misbehaved" loudly, violently, and without reprisal from Tammy, the middle-aged woman in charge of the Big Bird Room (the room for 5-to-8-year-old children). I don't remember exactly when or how I was given the nickname, but I remember Tyler saying it the most, so I suspect it was him who bestowed the nickname on me. Regardless where it came from, once I had the nickname "Brain Dead," it stuck.

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I sit at my desk in my campus office, coffee flowing, mind working slow, trying to stay focused while writing a recommendation letter for a student. After filling

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in contact information for the graduate program my student is applying for, a task which requires some web searching, I succumb to my habit of getting sucked into the Facebook rabbit hole—scrolling down the newsfeed of weddings, babies, and pretty dishes I didn't cook—without thinking.

As seems to happen in election years, one cannot escape the binary, us-versus-them vitriol slung across social media and news outlets. However, when I think of *bullies* in 2017, none looms larger than Donald Trump. Americans are in the midst of an election cycle administration unlike any I've ever witnessed or read about.

Sprinting beyond the backdoor electioneering tactics seen in Bush v. Gore, or the racist "Southern Strategy" Willie Horton appeals made by George Bush, Sr. against Michael Dukakis ("How Bush Beat Dukakis," 2013), Trump enters the national political discourse with teeth bared and fists clenched: he spouts hateful attacks without mercy (videos can be found on YouTube where Trump mocks a disabled reporter, for instance); assigns and repeats toxic labels (nicknames) to candidates and entire countries; and overtly sanctions verbal and physical violence through his Tweets, speeches, and campaign rallies (see the *Washington Post* editorial "Donald Trump, Bully in Chief," 2016, among scores of other political commentaries on Trump's behavior).

Take, for example, Trump's numerous verbal calls for violence, using imagery of "punching out" the competition and even encouraging his supporters to beat up protesters at campaign events. As I worked on this chapter, Trump was a candidate. But he was elected the president of the "free world." His presidency is dangerous for many reasons. Under Trump, I fear the United States will become a world where unbridled anger, misunderstanding, division, and aggression reign supreme.

SAD TIMES AT HAPPY TIME DAYCARE CENTER

My stomach growled as the smells of "lunch" wafted into Big Bird Room. Tuesday was always grilled cheese day. I dreaded life less on this day, because it was the only day of the week we got apple juice instead of room-temperature, sour-tasting milk that I couldn't stomach. Because of this milk, which I now realize was probably spoiled, I developed a taste aversion to milk for many years.

Happy Time Daycare Center was comprised of several identical rooms connected by a long fluorescent hallway; the only difference was the Sesame Street Character painted on the door and interior walls of each room. The heavy metal doors that opened out to the playground were each painted in corresponding colors: yellow for the Big Bird room, red for Bert, orange for Ernie, and three other colors/characters on the other side of the facility.

I don't call these rooms "classrooms," because I don't remember many classrooms with threadbare, urine-steeped carpet. No chalkboards, computers, or any other means of delivering a lesson, only a TV that played continuously on the same channel each afternoon in the final hours of the day. A row of cubby holes for

personal items lined one wall, but otherwise the rooms we Happy Timers occupied were rooms for neglectful babysitting.

About 25 blue cots were always stacked vertically in the corner of the room, many of them ripped from overuse and abuse, a constant reminder of "nap time," an hour-long period after lunch where we were forced to remain silent, lying on our backs so as to be easily monitored.

For once, though, I was not dreading nap time, because we were doing one of the few activities I liked to do at Happy Time before our lunch. This activity involved us kids spraying shaving cream on the rectangular wooden tables where we ate, and rubbing the shaving cream in circular motions until it disappeared from the table. Something about this always mystified me, the tall ball of Barbasol sprayed into my hands, eventually rubbed away to nothing, lost in the wood grain. When we did this activity, I would often pretend I was disappearing too, with each circular drag of hands across the surface.

However, as was customary at Happy Time Daycare Center, my fleeting hope of a respite from hell was dashed. Tyler had managed to procure his own bottle of shaving cream, and while Tammy was dispensing the shaving cream, he came up behind me, jerked my crew-neck collar back, and sprayed a liberal amount down my shirt. I could feel the cool touch of the shaving cream between my shoulder blades as Tyler smacked me, sending the shaving cream across the rest of my back and ensuring that my shirt would be a mess.

"What's wrong, Brain Dead? Dont'cha know what to do?" After gleefully reciting "Brain Dead, Brain Dead" in a sing-song tone, Tyler ended his chant with "He's got no brain!"

YES I DO! I screamed silently in my head. I had not brought a change of clothes, so Tammy gave me a wrinkled shirt out of the lost and found cubbyhole, an XL even though my size was a child's small. It fit me like a dress, and I wore it the rest of the day until my mom picked me up, late.

I was always one of the last to leave Happy Time. As we drove home, I thought about Tyler, how I wished *he* would disappear, or at least realize that *I did have a brain.* He received a "time out" that day, but it amounted to ten minutes of extra time on the cot, something I know I'll pay for the next day, when our daily routine would involve being bused to the local pool in the Happy Time van. The pool was a fun place for many, but was agonizing for me; it was a place where I was held underwater or would hide from Tyler and the others until we were bused back to "Sad Time" to watch TV, usually *Full House* for several hours while waiting to (finally) be picked up.

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I realize, after typing the above asterisks, that this is the first time I've ever written about this experience. My summer-long sentences at Happy Time Day Care Center only existed these past 25 years in the back alleys of my mind, held at bay by newer memories, better memories, *any* other memories.

As Kenneth Burke (1935) reminds me, a way of seeing the world is also a way of *not* seeing the world; any particular vantage point or interpretation is simultaneously a reflection of the world, a selection of lenses through which to see it, and a deflection of the other possibilities of re-presenting the world through the word. This notion keeps me cognizant of the doors that are always opening, closing, or remaining cracked open in my interpretations of the world, as well as my values, beliefs, and ways of being. To take Burke's words seriously means, in part, recognizing that the way I've (re)presented myself to the world has been a performance of hiding and concealing the real feelings that gnaw at me just below the surface, while I tirelessly reiterate how I am *composed/with-it, educated-but-still-salt-of-the-earth,* and *obedient to dominant masculine* (hetero-patriarchal) *norms I perform in my day-to-day life. From nickname to degrading nickname, I've learned a performance of detachment, nonverbal (non)immediacy, and unemotional indifference.*

I use "(hetero)norms" to mean heteronormativity, which Jackson (2006) defines as "the numerous ways in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of social life" (p. 108). Cuellar (2015) builds upon this definition by noting, "Every instance in which heterosexual behaviors are given approval and every act that contributes to such understandings reifies the premise that heterosexuality is normal" (p. 283). Often, the suspicion of homosexuality is a catalyst for bullying, as are other markers of marginalization and difference. R.W. Connell, a key figure in masculinity studies, is apt in stating

> [R]elations of alliance, dominance and subordination…are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on. There is a gender politics within masculinity. School studies show patterns of hegemony vividly. (Connell, 2005, p. 37)

So then, the more vividly we can render experiences of bullying to outside audiences—through vulnerable storytelling and uniting with other suffering storytellers—the more, perhaps, we can dismantle bullying practices and the systems (and people) that sanction them. I believe in the power of story to alter human living for the better. The many autoethnographers and critical scholars who've pulled at my heartstrings remind me that *my story matters*.

However, part of the ethnographic responsibility of critically investigating and laying bare my interpretation of events is accepting the fact that there are other vantage points and stories that can be told by other kids and employees at Happy Time. Another large responsibility is shouldering the tough mind, body, and heart work that is required when revisiting traumatic memories. Beyond that, I've gotta admit when I've been papering over (or willfully ignoring) the true(r) story (Goodall, 2000). A lot of the time, living the autoethnographic life necessitates being just plain tough on yourself—asking if you're being ethical, accurate, and vulnerable with your narrative representation while remembering that it's never

just one person's story (*cf.* Ellis, Bochner, Denzin, Lincoln, Morse, Pelias, & Richardson, 2008).

For example: I realize, as I type this, that I wasn't being completely honest when I brazenly stated, in an academic journal, that my story of being bullied from middle school to high school was "*the End of Amnesia. Amnesia regarding past, body, (in) security, and postmodern (un)becoming"* (Hensley, 2011, p. 58, original emphasis). I was still choosing to ignore, or certainly avoid revisiting, prior experiences of being bullied in neglectful environments.

Still am. This chapter originally had three different narratives of nicknames that've been assigned to me *before middle school*, but now only one remains before you.

If I'm *really* being honest about my prior published proclamation—asserted with capital letter certainty—and performance since then, I've gotta call bullshit on myself. In 2011, I tried to show the world I could take (therefore was *done taking, no need to revisit*) the hard knocks of bullying and institutional cruelty perpetrated by the U.S. schooling system. It's all been an act.

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An older version of myself arrives in Mt. Vernon, land of fast food and new—always fucking new—gas stations and hotels, in June 2016. I stub out my "last" cigarette in my car ashtray and pull off the Exit 95 ramp, greeted by the sight of familiar and new structures; a taller Marriott blocking the seemingly just-built Hampton, the BP still there, tucked between them. I promised everyone I'd quit smoking either when I turned 30 or when I got my Ph.D.; both have happened, so the promise has been deferred.

My reason for coming back to my hometown was to help my parents clean our house, so it'd be ready to show to an interested family. I return here a few times a year for holidays and during the summer, but I mostly make my visits short, a few days at the most. I hate being in Mt. Vernon. Feeling like an outcast for most of your life doesn't breed nostalgia or much to reminisce about. Years later, I still reflect on the time with bitterness and loathing.

Over the years, I've driven by the daycare center (it's been renamed) to pick up pizzas for my family—going by Happy Time happens to be the quickest route. I've grown accustomed to blocking it out of my vision every time I drive to Papa John's in Mt. Vernon. My Happy Time "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1990) has been, until now, a routine performance of deflected attention and willful amnesia. The shortcut route I usually take to Papa John's involves navigating a pothole-laden alley, barely big enough for one car. Usually the alley requires enough attention that it's hard to divert one's eyes from the road. Today though, as I drive past the brick facade of what used to be Happy Time to turn into the alley—which runs the length of the chain-link fence that kept us in—I feel compelled to slow the car to a complete stop halfway down the alley.

As the driver's side window rolls down, I give the current incarnation of Happy Time my full attention. It's about 7:00 p.m., so the daycare center playground is a ghost town. Where there isn't asphalt or gravel, the grass grows tall. The doors on the side facing the alley—once shiny, dark red, orange, and yellow—are now faded beyond needing a new coat of paint. I survey the scene with a combined sense of pity and sorrow that this shit-hole place is still here, damaging others' chances of experiencing a positive childhood. Perhaps it was never as bad for other people as it was for me (I hope).

Eventually I roll the windows up and put the car in drive. I have lost track of how long I've been parked in the alley staring at the building (and into unlocked memory images) where I was abused day after day, summer after summer. I don't really remember finally rolling the windows up and continuing to my destination. I'm disconnected from the present, lost in my mind but acting fine, when I enter Papa John's to get the pizza. Just phoning it in, just going through the motions. Happy Time and its requisite memories have ensnared my attention and pulled memories from somewhere I'd buried, cemented over, built over, and thought I was over (as in past it), but now I know I'm not. End of Amnesia, my ass.

Suffice to say, I didn't *plan* to drive by Happy Time during this particular stay in Mt. Vernon. Then again, I didn't think I'd ever revisit *these*—I say "these" like they're arranged—countable, tidy—in the palm of my hand, but really there are more coming by the minute: unresolved memories. *I don't know why (yet) but I have to write about this; the time must be now.* In answering the inexplicable urge to write about this period of my life, I've had to return—in mind and body—to Happy Time Daycare Center.

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When Dr. Braniger and I began typing our first blog entries for our Critical Storytelling summer class, we prompted the students to write a story from their lived experience on our newly created WordPress blogging accounts. Any story. The first thing that came to mind.

As soon as I opened a blank WordPress screen myself, *something* in my subconscious became dislodged and snapped into the now, the way a rubber band slingshot will snap and reverberate when released from fingers holding it back at maximum tension. That day, a jumbled mess of childhood memories—suppressed for 26 years—shot up into unobscured view. Images of summers at Happy Time surfaced so forcibly that my mind's eye could not look away.

I began the blog with the first words attached to the unspooled, unbridled, unchained force of memories I'd ignored for too long, because they hurt too much. One name floats to the top: "Brain Dead." When my colleague beckoned the students and me back from our writing worlds, I'd written several paragraphs about a time and place I thought I'd effectively rendered invisible, nonexistent.

WHAT NOW? COMBATING CULTURAL SANCTIONING OF BULLYING

I'm still asking myself: Why was *this* the story that called out to me; not just a call, but a scream? I could have talked about the first summer I wasn't shackled by a Happy Time sentence, when I attended a Christian summer camp and was called "monkey boy" mercilessly because my ears stuck out.

Do we ever wonder how these stories choose us, whether we're really totally ready to tell them or not? Autoethnographers surely ask themselves this sometimes, I think. The call of critical storytelling, I suppose. A call that, as Spry (2011) poetically suggests of autoethnography,

> is body and verse. It is self and other and one and many…It is personal, political, and palpable…It is messy, bloody, and unruly…It is danger, trouble, and pain. It is critical, reflexive, performative, and often forgiving. (pp. 16–17)

Inspired as I am of others' autoethnographic accounts of overcoming and later forgiving their bullies (*cf.* Berry, 2016; Hartlep, 2015), I don't know if I can ever fully forgive the bully that nicknamed me "Brain Dead." In rendering this account real, I am in the process of healing. I'm hoping the strength comes to forgive, but not forget (as I tried so hard to do).

It is abundantly clear—when watching documentaries such as *Bully* (2011), reading Berry's (2016) anthology *Bullied: Tales of Torment, Identity, and Youth,* and witnessing the growth of anti-bullying advocacy movements (#Iamawitness)—that bullying is indeed a global problem. It's also evident, though, that people are standing up to the practices that constitute bullying culture, standing beside the bullied, and speaking out against practices that sanction bullying—such as nicknaming, harassment, and physical violence. An author in *Awake!* observes,

> Whether in the schoolyard or workplace, all bullying seems to have a common trait—the use of power to hurt or humiliate another. Why, though, do some people bully others? What are the effects? And what can be done about it? (p. 3)

A call to action is in order in a Divided States of America, a call to unite against bullying in its localized, individualized, and systemically sanctioned forms. If a flagrantly hateful bully who preys upon those perceived to be "weak" (such as women, minority groups, people with disabilities, and others dubbed "losers") can rise to the Republican nomination for president, citizens are living in a society where bullying is condoned and even rewarded and glorified.

This kind of hate can be combated by love, a theme echoed numerous times in speeches at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. From soaring calls for love from First Lady Michelle Obama to Cory Booker's impassioned address, where he said, with conviction, "At our best, we stand up to bullies." Whether you take "our" to mean Americans or the polity writ large, Booker incites us to stand up to

bullying, and I know one way that is difficult: critical, vulnerable storytelling—heeding the imperative to make sense of lived experience of suffering. But, as Tim O'Brien (2009) reminds me from *The Things They Carried,* "this too is true, stories can save us" (p. 214). O'Brien's words ring true, and in my experiences teaching brave students who have to shoulder more than one soul should, I am called forth when seeing voices of the suffering banding together and galvanizing to share their experience being bullied, whether online, in school, or in the workplace. I call on you, the reader, to keep the stories coming, using all forms of media to spread the word that bullies are always overcome by love and compassion. I know there is awesome power in life experience, and I still have more writing to do.

NOTES

[1] Names of individuals have been changed for anonymity. Also, asterisks indicate shifts in time or authorial voice.

[2] I suppose that as "Monkey Boy" [a nickname I'd receive at a Bible Camp before sixth grade, the first summer I was "old enough" to be somewhere other than Happy Time Daycare Center], my particular permutation of masculinity was seen as less than, well, human. My beanpole body, "generic" clothes that were too big, disheveled brown hair, and my "big ears" made me a target to the boys at camp. When everyone was screaming the chant—"Monkey Boy, Monkey Boy"— I probably felt more like a sub-human, caged, and enraged object of abuse than at any other point in my childhood. In the face of a hegemonic masculinity passed down to American children in the Midwest— a set of rules and ideals that often include willful participation in teasing/tormenting/bullying, physical appearance, material status through brands (my mom would never buy me Tommy Hilfiger jeans or brand-name shoes)—my brand of boyhood didn't pass muster. My circle of friends from St. Mary's abandoned me, and while they didn't join in the taunting or talk about it when we went back to Mt. Vernon, I still wonder if they remember me standing alone, encircled by boys in a feeding frenzy. They may have called me "Monkey Boy," but they were animals too. Animals who sensed I was "different" in some way, and animals who could pounce with words. I cannot agree more with Evans and Giroux (2015), who write of the seduction of violence in the age of spectacle. Breakneck brutal hierarchical competition becomes a vicious cycle promoted to boys from childhood on, the kind of culture that sanctions this kind of abuse and feeds on the imagined superiority of hegemonic masculinity.

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ELIZABETH NUNEZ

9. COLLEGE STUDENT, FUTURE EDUCATOR, NOT AN "ANCHOR BABY"

INTRODUCTION

I am born to two undocumented immigrants. To answer a question many people ask me: Yes, they did cross the border to get here, and that itself is something that I admire about my parents. Today, there is a dominant notion that we should keep people like my parents out, that all they do is take jobs and money, but many also believe that their children should not be considered citizens. About 7% of K–12 students had at least one unauthorized immigrant parent in 2012 (Krogstad & Passel, 2015), which means it is likely that I, as a future educator who is going to be primarily in bilingual classrooms, will have students who have grown up in a similar situation as I have. This story is not entirely about me; it is about the two most important people in my life who have sacrificed everything just for me.

MY MEXICAN LINEAGE

My mother is from Mexico. When she talks about growing up, she always mentions that she came from a very poor town that was in the middle of nowhere. There weren't any luxuries like television, and living with seven other siblings was difficult. I know that my mother helped a lot with her siblings and did not get much schooling. My father on the other hand lived a very different lifestyle.

I've visited where he grew up, a populated town with all modern technology. He only had two other siblings, and the stories I hear from my aunts and grandparents suggest my father was fairly spoiled. Clearly there were differences in both of my parents lives, yet they still made the decision of leaving it all behind and coming to America. We all would like to think we know the answer to why people make their way to the States (the "American Dream"), and I suppose this idea could be true for my mother, but I have always wondered why my father left. All of his family reside in that same town under one roof where my grandparents ran their own business.

I haven't had the courage to ask him because inside I feel somewhat guilty. The reason is because my father decided to cross the border at the age of sixteen, and by eighteen he had me. My father is very loving and I am the typical "daddy's girl," but I can't help but wonder if he ever just wants to go back. Do any of these immigrants working day in and day out just want to go back to where they come

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 53–57.

from, where their families are, where they know a sense of belonging? I know the answer. Yes.

How do you mentally prepare yourself when you find out that your mother will be leaving the country and don't know when she will return? This was my reality the day my sister turned twenty-one. I am not too familiar with immigration reform and the details behind what can be done with every particular situation, but I did know that steps could have been taken when my sister turned of age. In my family there is my older half-sister, my younger brother, and myself. I was sixteen at this point, and my brother was only eleven, so we were kept out of the loop until everything was finalized.

My family began preparing for my mother's departure. We had expected that the time she would be away would be a year maximum, but that wasn't even close. Thinking back to those times, it is evident I was oblivious to what was happening. Who could ever anticipate no longer having a mother? My mom, the one who is the best cook I know, the one who spends all her weekend cleaning up after my family, the one who pushed me to be here today… She was the one who was the disciplinarian, so of course there was a moment where I was thinking about all the things I could possibly get away with while she was away, but this little ounce of joy was gone in an instant. My father was going to be left with the financial burdens of my family, of lawyers, and of sending remittances to my mother. This never entered my mind until I saw the days where he looked helpless. These are the things people have to go through every day even without the stereotypes and policies that alienate my family.

In the United States today, families are being torn apart due to deportation, and children are going to school knowing that they might possibly never see their parent(s) again. I was lucky enough to know that, one way or another, I would be able to see my mom; I just didn't know when. The reality of my mother being away did not hit me until a few months had passed. It was the thought that she wasn't on some vacation but off in another country that was no longer familiar to her that made me wonder when I would have her back. My mother had not been in Mexico for over twenty-one years.

I know that people may believe she must have been extremely happy, but this was not the case because it was not the place she calls home. Telling people about my situation was difficult. I tried to avoid the situation altogether because the less I talked about it the less of a reality it was. None of my teachers knew what was going on in my life, nor did I show it. My friends did not know what was happening either; all I ever mentioned was that my mother was gone. Keeping it all inside of course had a down side. I remember sitting in my room at times crying over not having my mother at the most crucial points of my life.

When I was growing up, my love for reading and school was perceived by my mother as the chance of going to college. I was going to be the one to make it all the way, and she never stopped pushing me. Applying to colleges without the one person I needed to be there the most was difficult, but the hardest part for me to overcome

was walking that stage during my high school graduation. Graduating *summa cum laude*, knowing I was heading to Illinois State University, but looking out and not seeing the person who led me there was heart breaking.

There is so much to say about how I felt during the three years my mother was gone, but I truly was saddened whenever I thought about how the rest of my family felt. My father is the best man I know and who I will admire forever. He was the one who worked endlessly to provide for my whole family during this time, the one who would not give up, and the one who took the role of my mother while she was away. My brother, who was just in middle school when this was happening, was most strongly attached to our mother, and it was clear he needed her. My sister, who had children of her own, had to deal with legal work while also keeping up with our brother, and she never let us down. Knowing my mother was away from her family in a place she hardly knew was the thing that upset me the most.

Seeing her again after just one year was a great surprise. My brother and I were fortunate to visit our mother in Mexico around a year after she had left. We were going to the place where my father grew up because my mother was invited to stay there during her time in Mexico. It was a surreal time, and it felt good feeling like I had a mother once again, but if I had the chance to go back I would have not gone on the trip. Being in that airport saying goodbye to my mom and not knowing when I would ever see her again left my brother and me in tears. It is one of those moments where it hurt, and I would never want someone feeling that way. There were, of course, special moments in that trip that I look back at and think about how much fun it was, but it was very difficult leaving my mother alone once again.

After quite some time more action was being done to know when my mother was coming home. There were always these comments in my house about how my mom would be home in a month or the month after that, and soon it became this guessing game in which I did not want to guess anymore because I did not want to get my hopes up.

Holidays were the worst; the one person who would always bring the family together and had the best cooking was missing. There were holidays where it would be just my dad, my brother, and myself. I remember the Christmas when my brother and I did not receive that one gift we asked for. My father's face looked so upset, and his words were "I promise next year," and I could not bear it anymore.

The conversations with my mom over the phone weren't always the best. I did not want to update her on everything that was happening in my life just because I did not want to cry to her. I felt that in some way me crying would result in her feeling guilty about making the choice of leaving. I would never want to make my mother feel guilty about a choice that would have put all of our lives in a better place. She has sacrificed so much for my family; I would do the same for her any day.

Today, looking back, it all seems like such a blur. My mother is back home; yay, right? No. Nothing was moving forward, so she decided she had been away from her family long enough. My father invested a lot of money for her to come back the

same way she did over twenty years ago, crossing the border. This is what makes my mother so brave, not having to do it once but twice in her life. Going through this journey where people get killed and are left dead, and for that I will be forever grateful that she made it here safely.

Things are back to normal, and all I can think about that experience is how many people have to live through that? I can't be the only one. Why is this not something people are more aware about? These types of situations should not be okay, and change needs to happen. My parents are not criminals; they have not even had a single driving ticket; they work so much and deserve better. I will make sure that if my students are ever in this situation I will help as much as possible; it the reason why I wanted to become an educator.

Coming to college has opened my eyes to the number of people who are so uninformed; they don't even know what children of undocumented immigrants go through. I want to take my opportunity of being here to shed a little light into what I have been through and what many others are going through. I want to take my experience from a negative to a positive. I am a proud daughter of two undocumented immigrants from Mexico to whom I owe the world. The following is the first piece I ever wrote about my experience living in a world that classifies me as "illegal" and "undocumented":

MY TESTIMONIO

I grew up in the suburbs.
Daughter of two immigrants from Mexico,
They are some of the most hardworking people I know
Working six days a week just to give my family what we need.
They always told me I could achieve great things
And I wasn't going to let them down.

Knowing my parents could not speak English and were constantly working
I knew my school experience is not like the other kids.
No help on homework,
Translations from me to them and from them to me,
And missing important school events.

I thought this would be the hardest it could get…
Until my mom went away.
Being a child of an immigrant can be complicated,
Being a child of an undocumented immigrant is hard.
Can we travel? No.
Can we drive without worries? No.
Can my parents sign for my loans? No.
This baggage becomes part of me,

Like a backpack that soon feels like it is not there
Until it is taken from you.
Bye mom I'll see you soon…

The U.S. government said okay you could become documented
And to do so my mother had to go back to Mexico for some time.
How much time? I don't know, no one knows.
It is my junior year of high school.
My family invested time and money.
I could say I was upset, but really I was upset for my parents.
My mother living in a country she no longer knew
And my father had large burdens, financially and emotionally.

Birthdays, my high school graduation, here I come ISU
All without my mom.
My family struggled, but I was sheltered from a lot.
I did not look for answers because I did not want to get my hopes up.
My conversations with my mom were short and simple,
Neither of us wanting to let the tears out.
I want to make you proud mom.

Why a teacher? A bilingual one at that.
I know some of their challenges, I can relate, and I want to help.
I know what it means growing up bilingual,
How great it can be.
When I work with children who grew up like I did,
I can't help but see myself.
My mom liked this decision.

Three years later…
It is my sophomore year at ISU.
She came back home.

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DEISHA MARSHALL

10. GROWING UP WITHOUT A FATHER

As a child, I never knew what it was like to have a father who took me to the park, or called me his little princess. It never really crossed my mind that I was different than the other little girls who had fathers.

I had a loving mother and a stepfather who cared enough for me, to the point that I didn't need my real father. I never understood why my father wasn't in my life, and when I asked my mom she simply said, "I'll talk to you about it when you get older."

From that day on, I chose never to bring him up, and life moved on until I finally got to meet my father. It was my tenth birthday party at Odyssey Fun World. My mom pulled me to the side and told me that my father wanted to meet me.

In my mind I would make up what he looked like, the kind of job he had, what kind of car he drove, and what his house looked like. I was scared I would meet someone who was nothing like I imagined. As I walked out the door to meet my father for the first time, I noticed my mom crying hysterically. He reached out his arms to give me a hug, and at that moment I felt complete.

At the age of twelve, I went to live with my father for seventh and eighth grade.

The plan was to live with him for those two years, then come back to live with my mom for high school. School in dad's district, visits to my mom's on the weekend. During those two years, I got to know my father and a new side of my family I never knew about. I gained a grandmother, four aunts, two uncles, and a lot of cousins.

My father taught me about budgeting, how to cook breakfast, eating healthy, how to drive a stick shift, and most importantly he taught me about love. I never understood how important the love and protection from a father was, until I no longer had it. I am now a junior in college and I haven't seen my father since my eighth grade graduation.

You may be wondering why a happy beginning came to such a sad ending. When my mother was pregnant with me, my father stabbed her multiple times. It is a blessing that both my mother and I are alive today. My father was sentenced to six years in jail, and when he was released, he changed his life around and made a good living for himself. My mother made the bold decision to let me live with my father despite the things he'd done to her, so that I could get a chance to get to know him and form a relationship.

Today, my father lives with his new wife and newborn son. I tried to keep in contact with him and believe that I wasn't being excluded from his life, but I learned that he was doing just that. My father doesn't know how beautiful I looked on prom,

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 59–60.

or that I graduated from high school fourth in my class with honors. He doesn't know how well I'm doing in college, nor does he know what college I attend. My growth has been simply amazing, and I didn't let *not* having my father in my life affect my life in a negative way.

Instead, I use it as motivation, and it keeps me going. Even though my father is not in my life, I surround myself with loving and caring people who remind me every day that I can make it without him.

JOEY DUNDOVICH

11. MY REALIZATION

The time I ran into the bathroom and hid there for the remaining 90 minutes of freshmen homecoming when my teammates brought the most popular cheerleader over to dance with me, all because I was socially anxious and had never danced with a girl before… The time I was shaking so much before a group presentation that I volunteered to be the PowerPoint slide clicker, just so I didn't have to stand up, because I was socially anxious.

All the times I knew the answer to a question the teacher asked in class and didn't raise my hand out of fear that I would stutter the answer, talk too fast, or have my voice crack, all because I was socially anxious… All the times when I planned out what I would say as well as how I would say it in order to ask out the girl I had a crush on, but all the planning was wasted because as soon the final bell rang I would start sweating and chicken out, all because I was socially anxious.

All of these moments sent me to a boiling point the summer before my senior year of high school. I had a desire to be a high school teacher and football coach, to inspire young people and help them overcome their fears and weaknesses. But how could I stand up in front of 25 teenagers and give them a lesson as well as be a role model for them, when I couldn't even attempt any of those actions previously listed?

Since the eighth grade, I had already been to four different psychologists to talk about my Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), none of whom had made a dent in my problems. I told my mother that if I was going to be able to live on my own and accomplish my dreams of teaching, I *had* to get over these issues before the end of senior year. She then scheduled an appointment with a new therapist, who, upon meeting me and seeing my strong desire to improve, said it was in my interest to be in an intensive daily program built around overcoming anxiety at a mental hospital an hour away from my home.

I always felt (and still feel to this day) that educators and the media do not put enough effort towards educating people on mental health, whether it's about the various types, their prevalence, how to seek help, where to seek help, or that you CAN overcome it. The last time I can remember any real national attention being given to mental health disorders was the week that Robin Williams committed suicide from serious depression on August 11, 2014. I would question why the media would only seem to talk about these issues when it's "too late" to save another victim of a mental health issue. After all, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) (2014b), 18.1% of all United States adults had at least one mental illness featured in the DSM-IV.

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 61–65.

Despite this, only 36.9% of those who currently have an anxiety disorder (like I had) are treated each year, based on a study conducted by NIMH (2005). A large part of why I wanted to conquer my mental illnesses was to serve as an inspiration and educator about mental health to my future students.

I would have virtually no free time between football practice during the mornings, the anxiety program during the afternoon, and attempting to be more sociable at night. I felt hesitant due to the stigma of having to be "insane" to be in a mental health facility. Sure, I knew that if this didn't work out I could potentially be out of options before the start of college. I didn't care; the way the therapist praised the success rate, coupled with the one-on-one therapy I had just started with him, drew me in. I was all in, and ready to push myself. The facility was in the back of an emergency care hospital, which made the first long walk to it all the more scary. The people I would see on the way to my area had horrible physical issues; some were in rehab after surgery; some were missing body parts and trying to adjust to life with one less limb; some were preparing for their next cancer treatment while puking into a bucket as a friend held their remaining hair back.

Yet, there I was, a (physically) healthy 17-year-old walking by all of them, feeling like crap as I saw the optimism on their faces. "Look at how bad they have it," I said to myself. I had previously had the mindset of *one day it'll just click and I will be able to talk to anyone in any situation*. Like how one day my facial hair just started growing. Like how one day I noticed my voice deepen. Like how one day I seemingly grew two inches. The difference is I didn't have to "practice" those things; they just happened.

I met the young, overly happy, and excited pair of therapists assigned to my case. They were fresh out of graduate school and shared the names of the hit television show *Friends*' couple Ross and Rachel, which made me think I was on an episode of *Punk'd*, and Ashton Kutcher would pop out at any moment to further add to my long list of humiliating moments in my life. They made me make a list of my top ten most feared social situations, along with a few weekly goals based on helping me get to the first of my feared social situations. It seemed like a simple process: they quickly prepared activities to get at my thought process whenever my anxiety would peak during a "exposure," as they called it (an exposure is when you're exposed to a trigger for anxiety in order to practice how to act in that situation to reduce your anxiety and overcome that fear). These exposures helped more than anything I've ever talked about or been told by my previous therapists, but the other main portion of each therapy session was what really pushed me to push myself.

Because the hospital was so large and covered virtually every mental disorder I've ever heard of, there were many people who were in the program for anxiety just like me. After my individual time, I anxiously, yet somewhat optimistically, walked into the group room. I was told I wouldn't be judged or laughed at for whatever struggles I would share with the group and vice versa. However, as soon as I walked in my whole concept of not being able to live a successful and happy life with anxiety changed forever.

There were "adults" in the group. Sure, a majority of the group members were only a few years older than me, but the fact that there were all employed, some were married, and a few even had kids of their own blew my mind. Getting up each morning when my alarm hit to prepare for a day at school was scary enough, but these people *had* to be successful at their places of work to stay employed and provide for their families. Yet they were in the same boat as me, anxious for whatever reason to the point of being recommended for and admitted to the program! Some had even been in the group for over six months, but, according to their therapists and their own personal testimony, they had been making huge strides. I was so set on getting all of my problems solved before I headed off to college in order to have any chance at succeeding in life, but these people had already been doing that with their own demons.

One man in particular, I'll call him Ray, had a recent string of panic attacks while driving. The most recent instance of this, which caused him to apply for the program, happened after he had picked up his young daughter from elementary school. He stated that he was always on edge while driving, but after seeing a deadly car crash on the news about a year earlier, his anxiety had gone into overdrive. His optimism about getting better while always providing funny jokes and stories to the group inspired me. He even admitted that when he told his company he was taking a sabbatical from work that some of his coworkers called him a coward and a pussy. He stated that he didn't care what anyone thought of him; he just wanted to get over his fears so he could be there for his daughters, drive his group of friends to Chicago Cubs' games, and be able to peacefully drive during bumper-to-bumper rush hour traffic.

Although Ray was the most memorable and inspiring group member I met, there were other members whose dedication to overcoming their own fears helped me realize that I really could accomplish my dreams despite my history of social anxiety. Some of my peers were excessive "germaphobes" to the point of having to shower five times a day. Some had fears of going to a college away from their parents, to the point that they declined scholarships in order to spend two more years at home and attend a community college. There were even a few who were anxious because they had recently lost a close relative or friend or because they were expecting their first child and had become overly anxious about being a parent.

We shared our weekly goals and how they went; sometimes they were great and sometimes they were bad. We gave each other words of encouragement and advice about how we dealt with the issues others were also struggling with. But most of all, we gave each other a carefree community atmosphere where we could openly share our innermost thoughts, secrets, and fears without fear of judgment. While I'm sure there were some initial judgments by everyone in the group, including myself, when we first found out why other members were there in the first place, those judgments were quickly cast aside as we shared stories and the progress we were making.

I'm positive that these group sessions, although an enjoyable experience, made my effort and commitment to meeting my daily goals so great that I was able to conquer every single one of my initial top ten most feared social situations in a matter of eighteen days from my first day as a patient at the facility. It started off small by ordering my own food at the cash register of a fast food restaurant, then it escalated to saying "hi" to girls I found attractive at the mall when I was with my friends; then it moved to giving presentations to summer school students about a topic I wasn't an expert in. The day I finally conquered my top two fears (asking a girl out followed by going on a date with a girl), I couldn't help but drive to an empty parking lot and shed tears of joy as soon as I dropped off my date back home. I held my head in my hands as I leaned down to cry for twenty minutes.

Once the tears stopped, I leaned back in my car seat as I laughed and punched my car horn yelling out an ecstatic "Hell yeah!" When I turned in my final paperwork to Ross and Rachel, they asked me what it was that made me work so hard and improve so quickly. They said the average time for a patient to exit the program successfully was four months, yet I had done it in under three weeks. I immediately told them the following: "The realization that there are people living with anxiety much longer than I have, and yet they are strong enough to seek out the help they need without fear of what anyone thinks of them."

I've now made great strides in my college education to become a future high school English teacher. Beyond educating students about actual content, teachers serve as role models for the youth they educate by offering stories about their own experiences growing up, sharing what they're passionate about, and instilling compassion/respect for the adults of tomorrow.

Having overcome SAD and depression, I plan on sharing my "passion" about mental health with all of my students, even if they aren't showing any signs of having a mental illness. The NIMH (2014a) states that teens between the ages of 13–18 have a 25.1% chance of experiencing any anxiety disorder throughout their lifetime. In addition, they also state that in 2014 (NIMH, 2014c), 11.4% of adolescents between the ages of 12–17 in the United States had at least one period of major depression in the last twelve months. Therefore, if I can potentially help a student seek out the proper help they need, inspire them to push themselves to work on overcoming their mental illness, or maybe even save someone's life, I will have truly accomplished something wonderful in my life.

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CHELSEA BERG

12. MY LIFE WITH TRICHOTILLOMANIA

From the outside, I look like an average 21-year-old girl, but I also struggle with a disorder called Trichotillomania (TTM). TTM is a disorder classified as an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. As stated in *Trichotillomania: Identification and Treatment*:

> TTM is distinguished by repeated hair pulling to reduce anxiety. The DSM-IV-TR requires five criteria for the diagnosis of TTM: (a) "recurrent pulling out of one's own hair that results in noticeable hair loss," (b) "increasing sense of tension immediately before pulling out the hair or when attempting to resist the behavior," (c) "pleasure gratification or relief when pulling out the hair," (d) "the diagnosis is not given if the hair pulling is better accounted for by another mental disorder," and (e) "the disturbance must cause significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning." (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 677)

I was "diagnosed" with this disorder when I was about eleven or twelve years old. At first it was very confusing for me, because I didn't know why I was pulling out my hair. I did it in secret, because I knew that people would find me different if they knew what I was doing. My parents started noticing that I was missing significant amounts of hair from my scalp, eyebrows, and eyelashes. They started researching the topic and found out that I had TTM. According to research from the TLC Foundation for Body-Focused Repetitive Behaviors, "about 1 or 2 in 50 people experience Trichotillimania in their lifetime" (para. 2). TTM affects the lives of many children and adults and is an under-recognized disorder.

My parents were divorced at the time, but they collaborated and found out how to help me. The only therapist for this condition was about an hour away, so they took turns taking me once a month. I talked about what I was going through with the therapist, and she gave me strategies and techniques to stop pulling my hair.

Kids at school started to notice, and I became an easy target for bullying. They'd ask if I had cancer or why I was missing my hair, but I would never tell. School became a major stress in my life at this time. I would go home and pray that I would never have to go back. I remember having very few friends. My family and a few of my teachers were the only people who knew what I was going through.

I felt like I was hiding from the world, and I was so mad that I was one of the people who had to deal with this disorder. It felt unfair and, as much as people tried to understand, they weren't in my shoes. I was shutting the world out one person at a time. If it weren't for my parents, I honestly don't know if I would've

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 67–69.

pulled through. They were the most supportive people in my life, but I treated them horribly. I remember yelling at them when they tried to talk to me about my disorder, even though I knew that they were on my side. They did everything they could to help me, and I made it my ultimate goal to stop pulling—for them and for me. The process was definitely a long and a hard road I had to travel.

Kids at school were horrible to me and singled me out every chance they had, making my struggle harder. I slowly transitioned into a state of depression. I don't remember if my depression and anxiety symptoms were obvious to my family and friends, but they are clear to me now. After I started going to a new therapist, I remember being asked questions about depression and suicidal thoughts. They wanted to put me on medication, but I knew that I wanted to battle TTM on my own. I lied to my family and I lied to my therapist when they asked me if I had thought about suicide. I had. It wasn't to the point where I would've ever done it, but it still crossed my mind.

The new therapist helped me a great deal. I stopped pulling out the hair from my scalp, and my eyebrows grew back in as well. This was about the time I was getting ready to enter high school. I tried out for the Putnam County High School cheerleading team and made it. I had moved past those horrible years of junior high. I still struggled with the bullying and being singled out for my looks, but it was not nearly as bad. However, I remember one specific person bullying me from fifth grade until my senior year of high school. To this day, I still despise him. I would try to avoid him, but in a school with only 350 kids, it was harder than you might imagine.

Every morning I would wake up early to make sure that I had time to put on my makeup. Because I still struggled with TTM, I had very thin eyebrows and no eyelashes at all. I would cover this up so that it looked like I was just another face in the crowd. I think that without makeup I would have been singled out in high school. The bullying would've been just as bad as junior high. To this day, I find it very hard to go anywhere or see anyone without putting makeup on to cover up the missing hair I have. It's even hard for me to see family or close friends without covering up my true face. I don't remember what it was like to have eyelashes or normal eyebrows, because I have never fully overcome TTM.

Due to my struggles with Trichotillomania, self-image has always been a huge factor in my life. I strive for the approval of others because of the self-image problems that I held and still hold about myself. Over the years, I have realized that it's not as important to me to stop pulling completely. I know it takes a huge amount of willpower to overcome and, at this point in my life, I don't feel the need to change myself. I am happy with the person I am.

Even though I use makeup to cover up the fact that I have a hair pulling disorder, at least now, when people ask, I tell them. I'm not afraid of what they will think. I realize that this struggle has made me a stronger person. I think that my story about TTM can be relevant and useful to people struggling with self-image problems. Kids and adults can be insensitive to others and point out what makes a person different. It's important for people struggling with self-image problems and bullying

to remember who they are; those who are important in their life will not care what they look like.

To this day, I am still learning more about myself and the life I live with Trichotillomania. I've discovered how it affects the way that I see others and the world around me, the relationships that I have, and especially how I view myself.

I won't let this disorder control my life, and I hope that anyone who has experienced TTM or is experiencing it now can let go and realize you don't have to let it control you. I tell you this from the perspective of someone who has struggled with TTM for years. Don't let other people determine your past, your present, or future. You are in control of how you view yourself and others.

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ANONYMOUS 2

13. A LETTER TO THE FACELESS

Sometimes I find my mind wandering through the "what ifs," the "I wonders." Other times I hear a child's laugh and I think to myself *if I would have been able to make you giggle on a cloudy day*. I made a selfish decision, and even though you are not present, I continue to live with you day in and day out.

I wonder how my parents would have reacted when I told them about you. I wonder if you would have changed things between your dad and me. I wonder what life would feel like from the inside. I wonder if you would have had my smile. I wonder if your eyes would be as dark and empty as mine are when I ponder about you. And then I wonder if it hurt you. Or would the pain of living with a mother who regrets your very being be worse. I wonder what I would have named you. Would you have had a nickname? A cheesy stamp of a nickname from your features, like freckles, like mine, which we might have shared. I wonder if you would have been athletic, intelligent, or funny.

I wonder how we would have celebrated your first birthday. And then I wonder if I would even be mentally present. I wonder how a person can be so cold as to make such a drastic decision and not think twice about it. I wonder if you would be afraid of the dark or fear the monster under the bed. I wonder how long it would have taken you to learn to walk, get your first tooth, and talk. By now you would be 4. Would you know your ABCs? Could you count to 10? How many finger paintings and ornaments would I already have saved of yours? Would I brag about everything you touched or would nothing ever be good enough?

Did you know I would not even look at the ultrasound when the doctor wanted to show me? I could not even muster up the gall to take a moment to acknowledge a tiny life blossoming inside me. Did you know you would have been born to a coward? How can a coward raise another human being? 5 years ago, almost to the date, I made a decision I can never take back, and I owe you an apology. I apologize to you for never giving you a chance; I am sorry for robbing you of your voice; I apologize to my parents for taking away their grandchild, and I apologize to your father who doesn't even know you existed. I made a decision I can never take back. To this day I wonder if I made the right decision.

You deserved an opportunity to inspire, encourage, and thrive. I know, deep down, you would have concurred with it all. I took that all away from you in a hasty decision. I keep a calm exterior to fool the public, but I hurt and live for you every day. I made that decision; I ended your life, and sometimes I still wonder.

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 71.

MCKENZIE SAUER

14. ANGELS OF THE NIGHT

INTRODUCTION

I have always lived in a world where the only time race was discussed was either during history class—which was quite minimal—or during Black History Month, when we celebrated how far people of color have come and also celebrated equality. While school systems would like to implement a false sense of racial utopia into the minds of its consumers, my heart and mind always longed to know the truth. Dr. Brandon Hensley's class *Topics in Persuasion: Dismantling Racism* was one of those eye-opening, heart-wrenching, unhooking opportunities for me. This poem began as an assignment in which we were supposed to speak our personal narrative concerning race, and in the midst of everything I wanted to say, I retreated to what my heart spoke—poetry. This poem has since turned into much more than a simple assignment for myself. It is my vulnerability, my own removal of my blanket, words that have begged to be spoken, and emotions that have needed to be felt. Nevermore will I allow myself to be silent in the face of oppression, and this poem is only the beginning.

As a child, mind new to the world
Ten thousand hands shaped, molded, unfurled.
A mind not constructed, truly unknowing
Of the dangers of actions and words overflowing.
Into the hearts of others, the souls of many
And how my people took any.
Chance they could find
To ambush my innocent mind.
With the dangers of black, the safety of white
All in the hopes that I might.
Not question their system because of my skin
But they forgot love starts from within.

With every image I was shown
Like a jury locked in a jail cell of their own.
Forced to judge a criminal by melanin not crime
Because apparently whites never do any time.
And of course black is the only color that breaks the blue line
But from where I see the blue line is colorblind.

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 73–75.

And the words that molested my ears
The “N word” as though on their grave it appears.
Screw the name they were given, that is all they are
And if you marry a black man, you’ll set the bar.
As the disgrace in our family, will never be accepted
To my young mind, these words were directed.

As my mind grew, my heart grew as well
And the disconnect was my personal hell.
For while society tried to fit me in a box
My heart was born knowing how to pick the locks.
Even at my birth, the ten thousand hands were too late
To teach me how to discriminate.

Notice how I used “teach,” because it’s learned
To judge a person by their skin has been burned.
Into the pages of the past, and the branding iron’s hot
Because racism is still alive, lest we forgot.

I cannot change the color of my skin
But the love I have for people comes from within.
And I still have so much to discover
As I lift the blanket of my whiteness and uncover.
That there is a world that needs to recover
From the hate my people have towards others.
Although the blue line can’t see the black, red, and green
The bloodshed of many must surely be seen.

Shut up with your “All Lives Matter” and sit down and listen
Close your mouth, Open your mind, let the truth christen.
Your selfish ways, your selfish cries
Take a moment and realize.
That white lives do matter, no one is saying they aren’t
But every day a black family’s life falls apart.
Because of the greed of our important lives
Now that is something I dare you to televise.

Enough of the excuses, understand your part
As white people, we’ve been given the opportunity to master the art.
Of power—now use it
Stop trying to abuse it.
Turn the pistol from the other and point it at the issue
Suddenly you’re looking at the mirror, and it scares you.

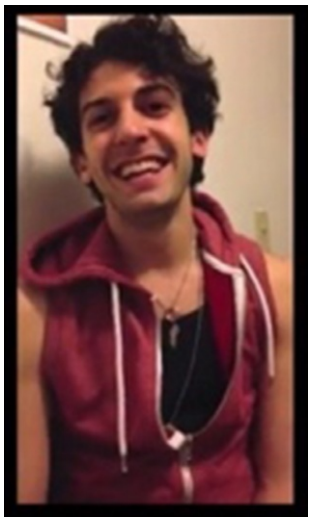
Doesn't it? Looking down the barrel of a gun
Because of the color of your skin, at least you have time to run.
Because you are in control, what's new?
The torture of many benefits a few.
And I am not putting all the blame on you
It's on all of us white Americans, me too.

Let's become those ten thousand hands and raise up our peers
Put down the guns, settle your irrational fears.
Put down the fists, silence your cries
And let the success of others be your lullaby.
Understand that you're white, and that it is okay
But it's not okay to look the other way.
Become one with the world, and never end the fight
It's time for us to make things right.
Then, surely, we will honor the angels of the night.

NATALIE KOZELKA

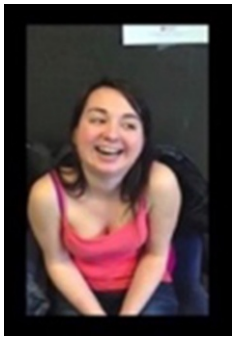
15. FAMILY TIES

I created a video about different family units. I interviewed a few people to see if there was normative family unit in this day and age. The video can be accessed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zXVgVy8DMps

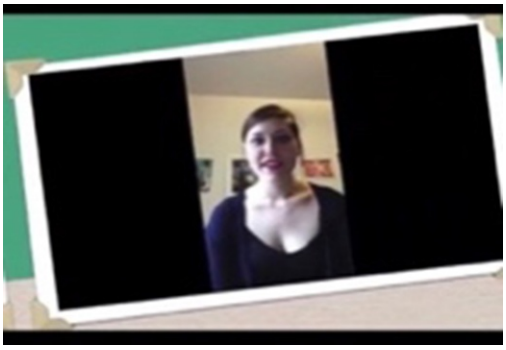


This is Josh. He lives with his mom and her partner Karen.

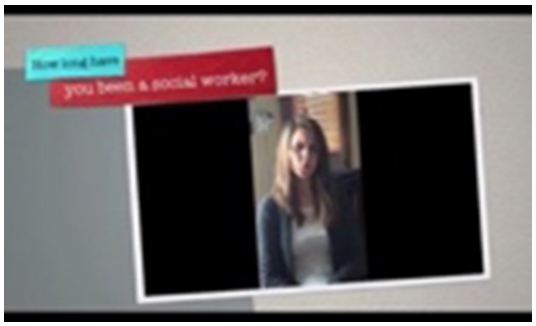
N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 77–79.



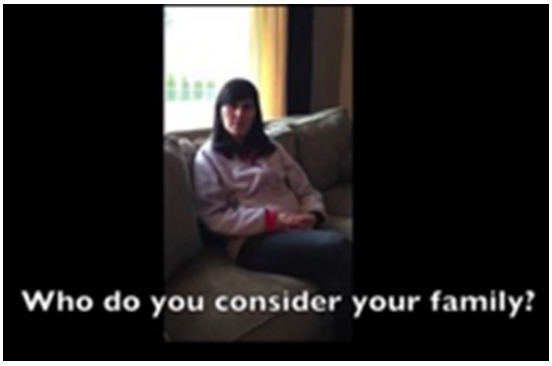
This is Olivia. She is one of four children and comes from a divorced family.



This is me. Before I went to college I lived with my sister and cousin.



This is my sister, Alyssa. She is a social worker and she talks about the different families she encounters everyday.



This is my mother. She talks about how she was raised.

CONCLUSION

I found out through this project that every family is different, and there really is no normative family unit. This is what makes life so interesting and why people are so unique.

MENTAL HEALTH, THE BODY, AND ISSUES OF STIGMATIZATION

AMANDA REYES

16. WHO AM I? STRUGGLING WITH MY IDENTITY

Am I white? Am I Hispanic? As far back as I can remember, I've struggled with who I am. Some can identify themselves with one word like "German" or "Mexican," but what about those who are more than one ethnicity? I can say I am Puerto Rican, Irish, and Native American. However, society still likes to fit people into one schema at a time. This is what I have struggled with my whole life: being multiple ethnic identities.

According to Khanna's (2010) article "'If You're Half Black, You're Just Black': Reflected Appraisals and the Persistence of the One-Drop Rule," most people in society view people who have "one drop" of another ethnicity as non-white. While I am not black, I still feel like this applies to me because this rule is what has kept me from being able to identify myself and has kept others from accepting me. I was simply not white enough for some and too white for others.

I've always struggled with who I am in terms of how to identify ethnically. Since I can first remember, my mother's family, all 100% Puerto Rican, never considered me Hispanic. Instead, they constantly teased me for my inability to "roll my R's," saying I "sounded white" when I attempted Spanish. They would comment on my fair skin compared to theirs. The whole family, including my mother, referred to me simply as "the white girl," which they would not only say in the comfort of our own home, but in public as well.

I quickly learned to accept this name and to be okay being called "white." After all, I am 1/4 Irish. I took to being "white" and purposefully made fun of myself speaking Spanish. In fact, I would make myself sound "white" in any attempts at speaking Spanish. Eventually I gave up trying to learn Spanish and even referred to myself as the "white girl." However, my ability to identify with at least part of my ethnic background quickly came to a halt as I entered middle school.

Throughout elementary school, I was the only "Hispanic" person in my whole school, but, since I didn't identify as Hispanic, no one really questioned me or even cared. In middle school, I went to a slightly more diverse school where I no longer fit in as "white." In this school I no longer was grouped in with the white students. Instead, they hardly approached me. But the Hispanics would, until they found I couldn't speak Spanish. I realized, in that moment, I had no one (or so I thought).

I eventually found someone like me, and she forever changed my view of how I saw myself and how others saw me. Her name was Erica, and her parents were

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 83–85.

Irish and Mexican American. Like me, she didn't speak Spanish, yet she didn't have features of a typical white person other than skin tone. One day, Erica asked me what I was.

I proceeded to tell her "Puerto Rican, Irish, and Native American."

I can still hear her response in my head to this day. "So you're a mutt like me?"

I remember being so shocked and confused by this response. Was this how everyone saw me? No better than the dogs that roam the streets?

I attended high school in a part of Florida that was predominantly white and Puerto Rican—the ratio was nearly 50/50. Again, I found that I didn't fit in with the Hispanics, strictly based on the fact I didn't speak their native language. According to Howard's (2010) research on the social psychology of identities, language is something many people use as part of their identity. It is one of the basic ways to group oneself. Was I a traitor to my ethnicity for never learning Spanish? Did I benefit from the possible privileges of being ambiguous in terms of my racial identity?

One girl, who I still consider my best friend, grouped me as "white." Maybe it was just more convenient for her, or maybe she didn't know I was Hispanic as well as other ethnicities. Regardless, I found myself being treated as a fellow white (Harrison-Kahan, 2005). I knew she was treating me as white when I observed she was comfortable talking trash about Hispanics around me. Did she think she could get away with saying "…but not *you*" after racist remarks?

I still find myself being grouped by other people. For example, while attending a conference about multiculturalism at my university, a fellow student from my clinical experience sat by me. Never had she talked to me before this, but she decided—in that moment when she knew no one else there—I would be her friend, her "white" friend. For some reason, she thought it was acceptable to talk to me (a Hispanic, Native American, and first-generation college student), about how there is no problem with the diversity here. She even had the audacity to tell me "they just want to talk about minorities just to make us feel guilty; they really need to stop letting them in from Chicago too. They're making it dangerous here."

I was flabbergasted—*I am a minority.* I just kept silent, shrugged my shoulders, and tried to move on with yet another slight. I regret not speaking up because she was clearly in the wrong and needed to know right away that what she said was unacceptable. I wish I knew how to be more than one ethnicity at a time and stand up for who I am as a whole, whether people see me fully or not. Is there an instruction manual I missed somewhere?

Here I am, still trying to figure out who I am, struggling to remain hopeful. A *truly inclusive* society wouldn't force its citizens to "check one" box on government sheets, applications, etc. I am tired of hearing "I knew you weren't *Mexican,* but I couldn't put my finger on it." or "What else are you?" or even "You're *Hispanic,* but you don't speak *Spanish*?" I know I can be more than one thing, but I'm waiting for others to see me as more than one cultural category, to just see me as who I am.

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KENDALL KELLER

17. JUDGING FROM THE OUTSIDE

First appearances are worth a thousand words. It is a depiction of the character that is instinctive. People judge others by this one strategy, unintentionally. First appearances depict a person's actions towards others and how they perceive or think about the person. This has to make you wonder, what do people think when they see me? My parents always expressed outer appearance to me. In the real world we only go off of outer appearance to influence our actions. My mom believes that the way you dress is the difference between getting arrested and getting a warning. The way you dress is the difference between an A on an assignment or a C. Appearance is key.

In my life I am always told this, because for an African American male this is fact. What people see is what they perceive. If I am dressed similar to the same Black males getting arrested and getting in fights, then that is how I will be viewed. If I dress more "sartorially," then I will be categorized with the "Good Samaritan" Blacks. Sometimes the way you dress is never enough. I am Black, so I cannot change my skin as I do my clothes. A person's perception of a Black male, whether it be from prior experience or from what the media portrays, influences how people look at me and treat me. I notice when people look at me with disgust. I hear when members of the dominant group call me derogatory terms. I have been spit at due to my skin color. All because of my appearance. I wonder, why do they hate me? Is it because I am Black? Am I not human just like the people around me? I have a record cleaner than the woman clinching her purse as I walk by in the elevator, but you wouldn't guess that from first glimpse.

Being a black man in college, I realized fast how my first appearance would either carry me or sink me. Instructors, police, students, peers would all go off what they first saw out of me. First appearances are also shaped by what we are a part of. I am not only a Black male, but a member of a fraternity, a former Division I athlete, and an employed collegiate citizen. These all are part of who I am and help people label me. I have to hear members of the dominant group state that I'm fast because I'm Black. My dad never wanted me to join the track team. He thought that if I joined the track team then I'm just playing into the Black athlete stereotype and that I should break the normative social identity of who Black males are. My freshman year of high school I listened to him and played lacrosse. The culture change was different for me; however, eventually I started loving the sport. I joined the varsity team near the end of the season. This made me feel, somewhat, happy until halfway through the season. We traveled to a rich and predominantly White and prestigious school, because those were the schools that had lacrosse teams. Not many minorities joined

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 87–89.

a sport like lacrosse, so I stuck out like a sore thumb. I did not have the latest lacrosse equipment, and my lacross stick was bent up and in bad shape. Numerous schools stared at me and laughed, and some even made mumbled judgmental remarks from afar while staring right at me.

One game I was making a fast break and splitting the defenders. I had an isolation with just me and the goalie. As I prepared to shoot, I heard footsteps coming closer. A gigantic defender approached from my blind spot and knocked me to the ground. The play was dead, but as I lay there the defender circled me.

He screamed, "Sit down boy! Fucking monkey ass bitch." The referee ran over and ejected him from the game. I lay on my back, appalled by the amount of hatred that was shouted at me by a complete stranger. I never will understand why he was so racist.

My coach went to talk with me more about it; however, the injury from the hit was his first priority. During the offseason, I tried out for the swimming team like my father wanted. He wanted me to counter the stereotype that "Black men can't swim." The only issue was that I wasn't a strong swimmer. I was actually pretty terrible; however, I am competitive so I tried out anyway.

As everyone was in Speedos, I came to tryouts wearing long swim trunks. Not only was I the only Black guy trying out, it didn't help that I was dressed like I was going to the local community pool. After swim tryouts, I wanted to do anything that did not have to do with water. I joined the track team and have loved it ever since.

Students at my school thought that I got a track scholarship because I was Black and that being Black gave me an advantage over White athletes. However, track is built into my culture, and I worked hard every day to ensure I was in the top fifteen in the state for all my events. My achievements were undermined, and people thought I was given affirmative action opportunities when I succeeded; however, they never gave a reason for when I was done wrong.

My academic story is interesting, to say the least. I am majoring in Education, which is extremely underrepresented by people of color and Native Americans. This is mainly due to the fact that dominant society practices equality but not equity. I do not have the same opportunities as the White students in my major. I got in trouble with the education department because I was unable to register for classes in a timely manner, due to the amount of money I owe to the school. My counselor explained that this is hindering me from graduating and getting into key classes, which I understood. However, they were not the people paying thousands of dollars. They always state that they're glad that I'm in this major and state that they "need" more Black males in this major. They don't always act like it.

I attend a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) and every time I go to class, I'm surrounded by a sea of white people. It looks like Black males are going endangered, if you analyze a typical lecture hall. When I walk into a classroom and I am one of the few Black males in the class, I like to be viewed as an intellectual. I don't want people to look at me and think that my grade won't be high in the class. I want to

represent my race in a respectful way and change people's perspective of Blacks. My actions will not be enough. I have to fit the image that will show that I am a good student. Although I am one of the few Black males present in all my classes, that does not stop teachers from mixing up me for the other Black student in class. Every year I usually have a member of staff or a student assume that I live in a single family household, live in Chicago, or that I want to be the spokesman for all Blacks when something racial occurs.

The police mastered judging individuals. Police target Blacks. People never understand why I have an extreme fear of the police. They have been harassing me for years. I used to attend a university that was number one in law enforcement, so the freshman cops got to go on route around the school to gain experience.

After a while I began to constantly fear the police. They harassed me and people who look similar to me for years, and I fear them still to this day. It is a constant reaction to seeing their uniform or their vehicle. I can be innocent and still get pulled over. The media shows constant murders of people who look like me, who are shot by police officers. I pray that I won't be on the news. To avoid this, I make sure I avoid trouble at all cost and have an appearance that makes me look like less of a threat. I believe that when I dress a certain way that I am less inclined to getting targeted, prosecuted, or convicted falsely. So I dress in a way that is less threatening to the police and Whites.

First, appearance is key. I talk, dress, and act in ways to avoid being labeled in negative ways. Because my skin is Black, I will always be viewed differently. The closer I get to graduation, the more I begin to understand how difficult it is for minorities. The more I succeed the less I see people who look like me. I am an honor student, I am a former Division I athlete, I am a member of a fraternity, I am a working citizen, I do not have divorced parents, I do not live in Chicago, and I am Black.

I guess people do judge books by their covers.

LAQUINTA MOY

18. A KIND OF MY OWN

Who is she, that girl over there?
That girl with the kinky, yet long beautiful dark hair.
She is a *kind* I have once never seen.
There is something about her look that is ever so keen.
I know she is a part of that particular *kind,*
The *kind* that have the wide noses and lips,
And whose women have the curvy wide hips.
The *kind* where watermelon and chicken are an essential diet.
When they find things are wrong they seem to only riot.

Of course, how could we have not known?
She has something else added to her mix.
She is a part of the *kind* that does not use forks, but instead chopsticks.
Her eyes swirl similar to that of an almond.
The only specific *kind* I can think to be common,
Are those who say "Ching-Chong,"
And don't they all come from Hong Kong?
But her skin does not compare to those yellow folk,
They usually look like the pigment of an egg yolk.

Could we be wrong, or we can be right?
It's weird, you would never see those two *kinds* together in sight.
She is too dark to be with the yellow *kind*,
And not "ghetto" enough to group with the darker *kind.*

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 91–92.

So our curiosity is outreached.
We have to know what's underneath.
What could she be? Who could she be?

And in response I say, I am simply just ME.
Throughout my 21 years of life, I have had to deal with those who judge.
It came to a point in time when my parents had to teach me not to
hold a grudge.
My parents also explained to me that some people may not understand,
That society has matured and evolved
Where no matter the race, we can all be hand in hand.

So yes, my father is Chinese American and my mother is African American.
And I have received criticism from both sides.
However, I do not let my race define who I am.
I am the only one who gets to judge who I am, and who I am going to be.
Because I am simply ME.

CARMELLA BRANIGER

19. "HEY, SISTER"

Utterances, Sexualities, and Dialectical Tensions in Sibling Relationships

> *…when one writes, one reads what one writes, just as in saying something one hears oneself saying it…*
>
> – Foucault (1994, p. 214)

It was a beautiful day at the end of the Spring semester, the day before final commencement. My colleague Dr. Brandon Hensley and I had just finished our presentation on harnessing students' critical stories at the Twelfth International Conference of Qualitative Inquiry at the University of Illinois, in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. We were debriefing our way down the dusky basement hall of the neglected, 1970s-style academic building, where our paper presentation was held. Brandon and I decided we needed to relieve ourselves before going to the "free" (the conference cost me $360 to attend) BBQ dinner and cash bar. Reading the not-so-well-marked bathroom signs, Brandon took off to the left (men's) and I took off to the right (women's). We didn't think twice about which bathroom to use.

I finished first and sat out in the hall on a metal folding chair, while waiting on my colleague, who was taking longer than I'd expected. As I shuffled through my canvas conference bag to find my phone, two individuals approached, both dressed in blue dress shirts, ties—one navy blue and white stripped and the other pale yellow with navy polka dots—polished black dress shoes, and khaki pants. Both were hefting weighty backpacks on their shoulders. I stood up and stretched my legs as they approached and then crossed the hall to finish waiting on Brandon. As they passed me, one of the two individuals darted into the women's restroom, the other lingering behind.

"Excuse me, did he just go in there?" I asked his traveling companion, the one with the yellow tie, as his partner, with the striped tie, pushed through the women's restroom door. I was hoping that, together, we could save him the surprise and embarrassment that might ensue from his "accident."

"Oh, yes, he did. Don't worry. It's the right bathroom." Gulp.

"Oh, ok," I said, and turned around in my own embarrassment, as I met my colleague coming out from the men's restroom.

Outside in the bright sun of May, we stopped at the nearest bench to continue our debriefing conversation. I couldn't help but feel the urge to tell my colleague about my *faux pas*. We had just presented (in a basement, no less) on the power of

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 93–105.

critical storytelling to unearth and analyze our assumptions about race, gender, and class, among other things. I consider myself an open-minded individual with strong connections to the LGBT community and a teacher who works to provide space in the classroom for individuals of all identities. How could I have made such a mistake in what seemed like such a routine conversational courtesy?

As I detail the incident to Brandon, he nods his head contemplatively. He seems to know what happened, and he's ready to analyze it with me.

"Sometimes we forget the vestiges of heteronormative privilege in our words and reactions, especially under the guise of politeness, you know?" says Brandon.

"Yes, I know," I agree. "I thought I was *helping*. I didn't even think about the recent civil rights issues being raised about transgender individuals and bathroom choices."

"Those signs weren't very well marked," Brandon offers, attempting to comfort me. We change the subject to course planning and make our way to the white tents of the conference dinner.

***

> *The expression of an utterance is constructed as much by the anticipated listener as by the particular speaker.* (Baxter, 2011, p. 31)

Every night, we would lie in our beds across from one another and review our day. One night she said she had something important to talk about. I had suspected, from earlier conversations, what she might have to say, but I remember lying in bed looking at the ceiling, tracing the circled swirls of paint; open, still, and listening. Anticipating. Ready to construct meaning with her.

"Mel, I think I might be gay," said my sister, an eighth grader at the time.

"What makes you think that?" I asked, not wanting to judge, but curious to know how she might have access to this knowledge about herself.

"I really want to kiss this girl on the basketball team," she replied.

That seemed valid. I had never wanted to kiss a girl before. I'd had my share of boyfriends by that point and plenty of opportunities to kiss, but never had this particular feeling toward another female. I wanted to be close to females, emotionally, perhaps closer than I wanted to be to males in that regard. But sexually, the thought of engaging a woman hadn't really crossed my mind. So I tried to put myself in her shoes.

"Who is the girl?" I asked.

"Heidi," she replied.

How did I know? They had been getting close, spending lots of time together before and after practice. Heidi was admittedly a beautiful girl. I could see the attraction, but I still didn't quite understand it.

"She's pretty," I said. "Do you think she feels the same about you?" I asked.

"I don't know," she blushed. "But please don't tell mom."

I carried my sister's secret for years before I would have to mediate the conversation, first with my mother and then my father and grandparents. There were

a "polyphony of voices" (Baxter, 2011, p. 33) involved in creating both our family narratives and each of our individual narratives of self. I spent a good portion of my twenties being a springboard for my sister and her escapades.

Even then, we were constructing our identities through dialogue, "an ensemble in which the simultaneous interplay of multiple different utterances produce meaning at the moment" (Baxter, 2011, p. 32). She would eventually figure out she was bisexual. Like me, she felt strong emotional connections to other women. Unlike me, she wanted to make those emotional connections physically *and* sexually. We were only beginning to explore the gaps of difference between us.

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I grew up in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains in the Ohio Valley. In my working-class family, we were used to living from paycheck to paycheck. I was the first in my family to attend college, a first-generation college student. My grandfather on my mother's side was a hellfire-and-brimstone Baptist preacher.

My rural hometown was small; I graduated with 76 others in my class. Everyone knew everyone else and their business. My sister's coming out shook up the family and the community at large. She suffered a great deal of agony in her high school years, as horny teenage boys and even male high school teachers found her interest in women evocative, while girls and women tended to shun her and tried to quiet her presence. Not only did I mediate the family situation, but the community situation as well. Because I loved my sister, I wanted to show her as much support for her sexual orientation as I could. Whenever someone tried to make fun of her or even hit on her inappropriately (especially males who liked the idea of watching two women together), I intervened.

In college, I became an active supporter of gay rights and, with her permission, openly shared my sister's story with like-minded individuals. I often found myself hanging out with gay or bisexual men and women and, though I was straight myself, was always welcomed as a part of their community. My sister's story was always enough to make me a credible sympathizer. Though I never admitted how difficult it was for me to understand how she actually felt. Clearly, I was an outsider with some inside access. But I could never have complete insider knowledge, as I hovered on the heteronormative cusp.

***

In the act of mutual authoring, selves become. (Baxter, 2011, p. 25)

The line buzzes three times before she answers.

"Hey sister! What's up?" I hear her typing on the other end. She's busy.

"Not much," her reply. "Just working on a sociology paper."

"What's it about?" Though I'm excited to hear about her paper, I'm even more excited to share with her my recent insight from reading Foucault.

"I'm looking at the genre of the coming out narrative," she says, "and the socio-historical conditions which have given rise to it."

"I think I might have something that will help," I say, excited to segue. "I'm reading Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* for a class on postmodern fiction. He brings up the classic debate we've always had about sexuality, whether it's biological or socially constructed."

"What's Foucault say?" I can still hear her typing on the other end of the phone.

"Well, it's complicated, of course." I settle into the recliner and open a beer. "First, he establishes that sexuality has been repressed since the enlightenment, carrying all the way through the Victorian era, only to turn around and argue that we haven't really repressed sexuality at all. When people are repressed, they transgress. But there are certain, sanctioned spaces where it's deemed *appropriate* to talk about sexuality. It's a paradox—only through repression is a space created for transformative discourse on sexuality. People are talking about sexuality more than ever. Hell, Foucault even says there's been more official discourse generated about sexuality in the last three hundred years than all the centuries before."

"So, we *make* sex taboo in order to transgress?" she asks.

"Exactly. Foucault (1978) says, 'If sex is repressed, that is condemned, to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression'" (p. 6).

"Where is the discourse located?" she asks. "Who is doing the talking?" She doesn't yet see an abundance of open discursive spaces for dialogue on transgressing the socially engineered gender dichotomy.

"The church is the first point of attack in Foucault's (1978) work. He charts the way that the confessional space of religion was one of the original institutional places where discussion of sexuality was allowed. Confession is a paradox, too, right? It suggests secrecy but at the same time creates the space for discussion of the most secret things. Foucault (1978) says the "scheme for transforming sex into discourse has been devised long before in an ascetic and monastic setting"; however, "the seventeenth century made it into a rule for everyone" (p. 20). But during the Victorian era, talk moved from the sacred confessional to the secular fields of medicine and law. Anyone who could objectify sex could talk about it. Subjective perspectives, however, were to be kept to oneself, or shared only with one sanctioned for sharing such material—the priest and the therapist."

"Wow, Mel," her voice grows with excitement, "In my paper, I was just talking about the transgressive nature of the genre of the coming out stories. Sounds like there's a common confessional element here I might be able to tie back to the history of sexuality, in general."

Telling stories is a powerful ritual. I start to realize this for the first time when I respond to my sister. "Yeah, there is a confessional quality to the genre of coming out stories. And its focus on the development of an authentic narrative self relies on the same transgressive qualities as those of the old-fashioned confessional. Both require a listener. Someone to hear the other's story—the priest, the therapist, the reader.

The listener of the confession creates a sanctioned space specifically for such uttered transgressions. Seems to me the coming out narrative is the kind of space Foucault is talking about. Foucault (1978) would definitely welcome a cacophony of diverse and personal voices into the discourse on sexuality, and not just those sanctioned by the church, the law, or medicine."

After we talk, I type the following MLA reference into my 1990s word processor:

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage-Random House. 1978.

She would end up calling me later for the citation. She found a way to paraphrase our discussion into her sociology paper. I wonder what her college professor thought of her burgeoning autoethnography skills. This wouldn't be the first time my own reading would influence my sister's scholarly path.

***

My sister's question is one I still ask. Who's doing the talking? Even now, with the recent emergence of the transgender bathroom debate, our culture is not far removed from the discourse practices on sexuality experienced by those "Other Victorians." The doctors, lawyers, and academics are still the sanctioned voices allowed to discuss sexuality. A quick search in our university's library databases was revealing. I started this morning by looking for sources to help me define the term *transgender*.

What does "transgender" mean? I'd been listening to the news, about North Carolina and then Mississippi, but very few anchors felt the need to clearly define their terms. A more authoritative voice and one sanctioned by the medical field is one Editor-in-Chief of the *British Journal of Nursing* Ian Peate. In his article "Transgender Equality," Peate (2016) defines transgender as "an umbrella term, in what is a constantly changing area" (p. 239). He goes on to explain that in most cultures, sex is assigned at birth based on physical characteristics. However, gender identity and presentation may not always align with the sex assigned at birth. Those individuals whose gender identity and/or presentation/performance do not align with their biological sex are considered transgender.

In his call to action to nurses to provide equal care and concern to transgender individuals, Peate makes clear the negative consequences of transgender discrimination not only in the medical field, but in family homes, schools, and other peer groups, as well. He is particularly concerned with the rate of suicide among trans adults and youth. His call is not only to the practitioners in the medical field, but to organizations like NHS to make and implement change. As I start to contemplate my sister's gender identity and presentation, I type the following citation into my Google Document: Peate, Ian. "Transgender Equality." *British Journal of Nursing.* 25.5 (2016): 239. Print.

I remember one of the many identity mediation sessions with my mother. It was time for my sister's senior pictures.

"Mel, she can't just wear flannels and ball caps and low riding jeans and work boots all the time. She needs to look and dress like a lady for some of these," my

mother practically spit into the tense air between us. “You looked beautiful in that black velvet and silk lace-collared dress you wore for senior pictures. Why can’t she just be more like you?”

As a high schooler, my sister played with gender bending, especially with regard to the way she liked to dress. Luckily, by the time the early ‘90s came and grunge was in, she at least had fashion on her side as she sported her short, clipped hair beneath the Eddie Bauer ball cap she wore along with her Dr. Martens work boots, ripped jeans, t-shirt, and flannel top. Clothes that covered her sex and presented a more masculine sexuality.

In a conversation about these senior pictures, and mom’s reaction to them, I recently asked my sister about her more recent gender transformation.

“Why have you become more feminized since moving to Taiwan?” I had just been to visit her and her girlfriend in Taipei. She’d been there long enough—five years—for her short clipped hair to grow out down her back. She no longer wears men’s shoes and flannels. Instead, she wears dresses and skirts. She accentuates her breasts, waist, and hips. My mom loves it. I realized, even before I asked her, that she has always been gender fluid.

“The butch/femme dichotomy here is more binary than in the states,” she explained. “It’s more customary in female gay culture here to pick one or the other. I was tired of the butch look, and I’m small framed anyway, so I decided to identify more with femme.”

“That must have been a hard decision,” I tried, again, to sympathize. In this case, I might have actually empathized a little too. As feminine as I might have been in my senior pictures—which I conformed to on so many levels to make people besides myself happy—I am known to show up to class these days in my yoga pants. I don’t necessarily bend any gender clothing rules, but I sure don’t like anyone telling me what to wear when nor how. I prefer comfort and flexibility over fashion, a fashion statement in and of itself. So, I did understand Chesna’s need to explore identity through fashion.

I am reminded of an article I read earlier today from a law journal. Again, the juridical and medical fields, in their quest to objectify and categorize the world, are allowed to talk freely about sexuality. Still, today, we are not fully aware of the ways in which our culture represses to transgress. We continue to use sanctioned modes of discourse to bring attention to what we are trying to rid from the forefront of our minds. We have not come far since Foucault.

I type the following citation into my Google Doc:

> Gilden, Andrew. “Toward a More Transformative Approach: The Limits of Transgender Formal Equality.” *Berkeley Journal of Gender, Law & Justice*. 23 (2008): 83–144.

Gilden tackles a topic of global scope here—the limits of transgender equality. As a part of his argument for the limits of transgender equality, Gilden’s (2008) article includes a section on Native American gender variance and fluidity. Foucault left

out the history of the Native American culture in his sweeping history of sexuality, a history specifically confined to the West. Before efforts to assimilate Native American culture to Western culture, around 113 Native American tribes recognized gender-variant roles (Gilden, 2008, p. 121).

As in the West, gender was assigned to the individual at birth, based on genitalia, but individuals did not adopt a culturally defined social gender role until adolescence. Encouraged to explore a variety of identities, individuals had a choice as to what gender identity they might adopt. Even then, individuals crossing gender norms might or might not dress across gender binaries, making gender variance more fluid. Tribal culture also highly regarded child autonomy, tribal collectivism, and gender egalitarianism (Gilden, 2008, p. 125), all cultural values that respect variations to the norms.

The Native Americans present an example of a culture free of the repression Foucault (1978) addresses in his treatise on the history of sexuality in the West. My sister's early transgressive behaviors would not have been a problem for the Native Americans, because they would not have been considered transgressions, but instead, variations on a theme. Conversely, as much as she might have resisted early on, even Chesna has felt and responded to the domineering patriarchal expectations and heteronormative gender roles that still dominate gay and straight culture in Taiwan. To be limited to two types of gender presentations must feel stifling for my sister, whose subtle yet striking gender fluidity seeps through whatever she wears.

***

> Any concrete utterance is a link in the chain of speech communication of a particular sphere. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 91)

In the classroom now, a week removed from the ICQI conference incident, I type notes—branches to focus on—for the chapter I'm crafting alongside my students and Brandon.

Delve into the development of relationship of sistership difference through dialogue. Bring in Leslie Baxter's work on relational dialectics. Beyond binaries. Difference vs. unity. The struggle to create meaning. Relational dialectics theory. When did the dialogue become a monologue? What discourses are in competition, struggling to gain dominance? Utterance, Bakhtin.

Then I take note of the way one scholar uses Baxter and Bakhtin to weave together a summary of the four links in the Bakhtin's *utterance chain*:

> Pivotal to RDT is the utterance, or, what Bakhtin (1981) often termed "voice." The utterance is a space where multiple discourses are at play (Baxter, 2011) and emerges in light of an anticipated or actual hearer (Baxter, 2011). In this regard, an utterance serves as a link in what Bakhtin (1986) calls the *utterance chain*. If conceptualized as a turn in talk or a link (Baxter, 2011), the utteranceresponds to what has already been spoken and anticipates what has not yet been spoken (i.e., a response or answerability; Bakhtin, 1986). This connection of response and anticipation constitutes the utterance as intertextual. Specifically, Baxter

> (2011) identifies four links in the utterance chain: (1) distal already-spoken, (2) proximal already-spoken, (3) distal not-yet-spoken, and (4) proximal not-yet-spoken. (Scharpa & Thomas, 2016, p. 34, emphasis mine)

I take note of the citation for this reference:

Scharpa, Kristina M. and Lindsey J. Thomas. "Family "Bonds": Making Meaning of Parent–Child Relationships in Estrangement Narratives." *Journal of Family Communication* 16:1 (2016): 32–50. Print.

I finally turn back to the Baxter book Brandon loaned me, *Voicing Relationships: A Dialogic Perspective*. In it, Leslie Baxter theorizes a relational dialogic perspective that contends that meaning in relationships is made through difference, through the dialogue or the interplay of competing discourses. "Put simply, dialogue is counterpoint among multiple competing discourses, or systems of meaning" (Baxter, 2011, p. 32). However, these discourses are not given voice with equal force—multiple discourses compete for power. Through the exchange of power, the back and forth play of correspondence between self and other, identity formation occurs. This formation occurs, however, usually in relation to some identified problem.

In her later article, "Problematizing the Problem," Baxter establishes that all discourse struggles start with a problem. Baxter (2007) says about the vexing problem that it "is generally understood as difference and the intellectual question is how to contain difference in order to accomplish its opposite: unity" (p. 118). However, her research problematizes the end goal: to find unity. Instead, her theory seeks to find a way to embrace and live with the difference that arises.

Arguing from the perspective of Bakhtin's dialogism, Baxter (2007) says, instead, that "the vexing problem is an orientation toward unity and the intellectual problem is how to embrace difference" (p. 118). Rather than constantly seeking unity among diverse family members, Baxter's dialogic perspective encourages dialogue and interplay among diverse and competing discourses, which are struggling for power. Through difference (not unity) arises meaning and the possibility for identity creation and development. In other words, difference encourages growth.

I pause in my reading to reflect on my competing dialogue with my sister, one in which my voice has always been dominate. I'm the older sister. I have always set before her a path by which my sister might travel, a sample ethos. Examples: I got her first job at McDonalds. She went to the same high school, college, and graduate school as me. She is using Martin Heidegger in her Ph.D. dissertation on Eastern Philosophy, which is the scholar I used to frame my own dissertation on poetics and aesthetics for my Ph.D. in English. But, what may appear to be little sister following around big sister is more complicated than that. Our relationship was symbiotic, at best. Being the more aggressive, dominant sibling, I always guided her along. Being the laid-back middle child, she found it easy to follow. There was an ebb and flow to our relationship. But it was always a relationship based on difference. We were not alike. Not just in our gender identities and presentations, but in our outlook on

relationships, in general. We, perhaps, got along so well because we weren't so much alike. Most importantly, it worked because neither sought the unity about which Baxter writes.

Early on, Chesna and I shared a keen sense of how to develop a relationship of difference through dialogue. As we grew and changed through important formative years together, we developed a unique discourse. Meaning, ideologies, and points of views were developed collaboratively by us. Through our exchanges over the years of utterances, through our intertextual play, emerged collaborative voices and collaborative identities.

Both of our voices and identities were very much involved in the utterances that we shared with one another. We were always there as listeners for one another, linking our own lived experiences together in a chain. But now that I look back, through Baxter's lens, hers was certainly always competing with mine, and mine with hers. For it was through my identity, shaped by hers (and hers shaped by mine), that we often found defense for the choices that we made.

Recently, Chesna and I have broken the utterance chain to which we had become accustomed. Family trauma often causes such breaks, but this one isn't healing as quickly as I thought it might. I got back to Scharpa's and Thomas' summary of the utterance chain. I ponder. Is it because we cannot reconcile the already-spoken nor can we any longer anticipate the not-yet-spoken, that we are no longer listening to or making utterance or voice, therefore leaving us both in a monologic trap?

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> Utterances do not merely repeat the past … An utterance also sits at the dialogic boundary of the said and the unsaid. (Baxter, 2011, p. 30)

It all started this spring in North Carolina. The "bathroom bill" or the "bathroom law" is the North Carolina law that prevents transgender individuals from using the bathroom appropriate to their orientation. This law, which mandates that people use restrooms that correspond to the sex on their birth certificate, has sparked a major backlash from LGBT groups.

Throughout May, I followed along in the news, hoping this event might make my sister pick up her phone and send an iMessage, or at least post something to Facebook I could "Like." I remember the historical day gay marriage was made legal in the United States. Our dialogue that day had been rapid and full of excitement and new possibility.

I text her.

Hey Sister, Did You Hear about the Supreme Court Decision?

Utterances are sites where a variety of kinds of discourses are at play.

She responds.

Hell, yeah! The most important civil rights case of our generation. I can hardly believe it gained enough momentum in my lifetime to become a reality!!

All those years of LGBT campaigning paid off! I'm really happy for you.

It's been a long journey since Stonewall.

What Does All This Mean for You?

My questioning approach reveals my unwillingness to allow a previous conversation, voice, or utterance to stand in for fixed knowledge going forward. As Baxter (2011) says, "meanings are not fixed" (p. 31).

Well, if it had happened five years earlier, I might have married Heather and stayed in the states.

Really?

Yeah, I loved her. You know that.

I knew she loved Heather, but not enough to marry her. That was new information.

But you left?

The push and pull of the series of texts, the questions and answers, reveals the dynamics of our utterance chain and the various discourses at work on the surface and below.

We've been over this. I needed to
know I could do things on my
own. You know. Like live without
a mother or a keeper.

And then the conversation, riddled with the already-said, or as Baxter (2007) puts it, the "already-spoken" (p. 122) takes a new direction. But not before it bounces forward into the not-yet-said, or "not-yet-spoken" (Baxter, 2007, p. 122). Prompted by my call to attention of the now.

And now?

Bonnie and I are talking about
coming back to the states and
getting married.

Wow!! I'd love that. So would mom.

I know.

Every utterance in our Bakhtinian utterance chain is a rejoinder in some way to previous utterances, and are transformed into new possibility as the present continues to unfold from them. My sister and I need each other to balance the other out. When she comes close to letting one utterance stand as a fixed, stable aspect of our identities or our relationship, I always keep questioning. However, being my opposite, her dialogue reminds me of the co-responsibility of the past and future to determine the present moment of revelation of being. Together we both make ourselves new as we bring the past forward into future possibility.

As Bakhtin (1986) observes, ''an essential (constitutive) marker of the utterance is its quality of being directed to someone, its addressivity" (p. 95). An addressee can be distant, as well, someone who is not a fellow participant in the immediate conversation, but who may respond to the utterance at some future point. This could be a specific person or a generalized other. My sister's and my utterances definitely create a communication chain, but underneath the current of our rapid-fire excitement, our utterances are also directed at our mother, something we both acknowledged before the dialogue above took a new direction. But when I acknowledged, I stood with my mom in agreement. I shifted my power.

As I reflect on the conversation, I notice the way Chesna's reminders of the already-said shed light on our own conflict now. She doesn't want a mother or a keeper. Even just last summer, I was coming too close to my mother's position. I wanted her home. And she wasn't ready yet to come. She still isn't. The need to coach, to fulfill the role of nurturer, of "polite lady who only wants to help" also caused me to make my social blunder at the conference in May. Just thinking and writing about my sister makes me realize, though, what I did right after I made my embarrassing politically incorrect assumption. I can almost hear her saying it.

"You didn't let your critical voice fall into silence, Mel," she'd say. "You took up the dialogue with Brandon. And you're taking it up here."

As I wait with patience for my phone to buzz, vibrate, or ring, I desire her utterance. For her to utter *anything*.

***

My daughter is out of town with friends, and I've had a long day of teaching and planning with Brandon, so I hop in the car and head across town to pick up some sushi for dinner. The June sun beats down through my sunroof. NPR plays on the stereo. I'm thinking about relational dialectics and my sister and the lack of dialogue between us right now. The monologic pain is killing me.

A story comes on the radio about another transgender bathroom situation. Meredith Russo (2016) published an op-ed story in the *New York Times* about her own lived experiences of being transgender, exposing the discriminatory measures taken at her place of work in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Her words, which the announcer reads from her story, echo in my head: "Some insisted that I was in the wrong place."

I can't help but think about my sister, in Taiwan, and the hours my ex-husband and I spent helping her perfect the Fulbright application that landed her an academic gig there in Taipei. My mom's words come back to me: "She's in the wrong place, Mel." Here I was again, negotiating my sister's identify for her. Mom didn't want her going halfway around the world. And neither did I. But it wasn't my decision. Still isn't. So this was the nature of our relationship with our mom. Chesna would do the unthinkable, and I'd be right there to try and logically explain to everyone why they should let her be who she is.

Our recent silence haunts me (even as I write these words). The fall into monologue tells me she needs this space to (re)construct her own narrative. But in doing so without me there in the dialogue, the space of difference widens. Without the dialogue to mediate the distance, a facet of my own identity seems vacant, abandoned of growth. And I think it must be the same for her also. And wonder how she endures the pain. Even during our worst communication lapses there has never been an insurmountable wall, like there is now. Our difference, which has always kept us healthily at least arms-length, is no longer fluid, but rigid, impenetrable and fixed.

Sometimes I wonder. Can I (re)learn to live with and love the difference, no matter how wide?

***

As I sit here tonight and try to think of a way to conclude this critical story, I turn again to my shelves; this time the literary correspondence rises to the surface. Van Gogh's letters. Theo kept them all, even the one they found on Vince's person when he died in that lonely French Inn of (self-inflicted?) ballistic trauma. The two brothers couldn't be more different. Hardly any of Theo's letters survive. Van Gogh was not fastidious about those things. Not the way Theo was. Right next to their collected letters, another favorite: Toni Morrison's (1982) *Sula*. Another story of sisterly difference. I open the cover to find a note from my sister:

Carmella~

This novel is about sisterly love so I found it appropriate to give to you. This is one of my favorite novels... [In it] you find strong, liberal, stubborn black women. We share the years of our childhood like these two women, but we dug deeper and found a love unbreakable, strong ... I love you and wish you the best birthday ever.

Love,
Chesna

I am saddened that our relationship has fallen into betrayal and lies, or untruths, just as the sisters' relationship does in Morrison's novel. What is to gain for either of us? I try to untie the knot in my stomach when I remember Sula's greatest betrayal of Nel, how closely our stories match. Then I realize, it's Chesna's (and Sula's) blatant

disregard of social conventions that justify and perhaps even call for their betrayal. Is it betrayal then after all? Or one more aspect of difference left to overcome.

More important than the plot line though (and Chesna points this out in her note) is the quality of Sula and Nel's correspondence—the way they constructed one another through their own utterance chain. Like my sister and I, the two sisters developed a discourse, a collective voice. In the novel, the narrator describes it this way for Nel: "Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself ... Sula ... helped others define themselves." (p. 95). This mirroring quality is gone now between my sister and me.

The stunted growth I feel is the loss of the space Chesna provided for me to converse with myself, to define myself. This loss, which causes a deconstruction of identity, requires then a reconstruction or recreation of self. And a new establishment of others on which to project oneself safely out into the world in order to see and converse with that self.

My phone buzzes. It's Brandon. I'm excited to tell him about the new section of this essay. I might be almost done.

***

It's mid-summer and the heat is rising. There's a mama doe and her fawn living out back. Neighborhood boys let off firecrackers in the distance. Lightning bugs buzz. Orlando mourns its dead. For once, I don't imagine getting a call from my sister. But instead, I sit on the back porch taking it all in, waiting, anticipating, willing to forgo desire for unity, ready to listen to the cicada's song full of difference.

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ALEXA DUNCAN

20. MEAN GIRLS, INTERRUPTED

The Complexities of Female Friendship

INTRODUCTION

From *Valley of the Dolls* to *Heathers* to *Mean Girls*, America's young women have been subjected to countless messages from popular culture about who they are and who they should be. You have to be skinny; you have to be white; you have to be popular; you have to be blonde. Existing outside these parameters is, to quote *Mean Girls*, "social suicide." Associating with the right people is a must as well. If said people are girls, they will inevitably turn on you. Or, if they don't turn on you, they'll harbor their hatred and always secretly resent you for being prettier, smarter, more popular.

That is what too many young girls are taught to think in their interactions with other girls. It has taken me years to get over this internalized hatred toward my gender. Growing up primarily around boys, I had few female friends. One of them was and still is markedly different than me. She is pretty, smart, and popular. Skinny, blonde, and bubbly. Judging by outward appearances alone, we should not be friends. Strangers pass us by on the street and no doubt wonder, *how are these young women friends?* If *Mean Girls* is true and accurate, we shouldn't be. Let alone for the fifteen years we've known one another. Nevertheless, here we are, defying expectations. Just because we defy social norms does not mean we are immune to problems.

Friendship is complicated. Friendship, while female, even more so. What follows is a chronicle of my life with my best friend, my quasi-sister, my soul mate. It isn't always pretty. It isn't always nice. But it's honest. And it's sometimes, painfully, real.

BELLA SWAN GOES TO PACSUN

Dee sifts through rack after rack of shoddy t-shirts, their fronts embossed with glossy logos so that anyone who wears one will automatically do time as a walking advertisement for the store.

"There's no way I'm paying twenty-five dollars for one shirt," Dee mutters, flinging another hanger aside as she looks.

I hang back, nervously fiddling with the hair-tie around my wrist. I hate places like this. The pressure to be cool is overwhelming, omnipresent. It lingers in the

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 107–115.

peppy pop-punk music playing over the intercom, the artful tears in the seventy-dollar jeans, the confident gaits of the well-dressed employees.

As I stand dutifully near Dee, anxiety roils in my stomach. I don't fit in here. I'm too awkward, too nervous, too sweaty. Coolness isn't something I possess. Dee does. Dee is what anyone wants her to be at any given time. Dee is blonde. Dee is bright-eyed. Dee knows how to talk to people. She is the only reason why I ever leave my house in the first place.

At fifteen, I pride myself on my supposed individuality. I don't want to be an advertisement. Dee doesn't much care. Clothes are clothes. She buys what she wants and she looks good in all of it.

I, however, liken myself to my childhood heroes: idols in black who would scoff at me for daring to step foot in a PacSun store. Wednesday Addams wouldn't go near a PacSun. Too bright. Too much yellow. Neither would Emily the Strange. She'd be down the way at the Hot Topic. Maybe she'd meet Wednesday at Off the Wall to look at the various swords and axes mounted behind the cashier's desk. Daria would be there, too. The perfect group. My people, acerbic and dark and always ready with something witty to say.

Instead, I'm with Dee. Alone with my insecurity, sweating it out while Dee scowls at the shirts. She picks another. Hot pink. I hate it, personally, but I don't tell her so.

I want to be a good friend.

I don't want to hate her for being everything I'm not.

My thoughts drift absently to Bella Swan of *Twilight* fame. I read the first book a couple of years ago, my thirteen-year-old brain voraciously gobbling up every word, every sentence, every paragraph. In Bella, I saw myself. A brown eyed, brown haired girl who tripped over everything. Someone who checked off "reading" as one of her biggest hobbies, who never thought herself good enough for someone as radiant as her otherworldly boyfriend.

Bella wore her low self-esteem like an old sweater she found in her grandma's attic. So did I. It itches. It's too warm. I want to take it off. But I can't. I can't because Dee is right beside me and one of the employees is looking at me and all I want to do sink into the racks so that no one can ever look at me again.

But I don't.

"This is cute," Dee says of another shirt she's picked out. She wrangles it from the overcrowded rack and holds it up to her ample chest. Another area where we differ in all too drastic ways. "I know you hate it because it's yellow, but … I dunno, I like the design."

"It'd look good on you," I offer, heart speeding up at the sight of one of the employees heading toward us. He's probably a couple years older than we are. Floppy hair, artfully torn jeans, a shirt with the store's logo on it. He's what Dee would call hot. He's fine, I guess.

Despite my indifference toward his supposed hotness, I still find myself wanting to be cool around him. I put my hand on my hip in an effort to appear casual, keeping

my arms close to my body so he won't see how much I'm sweating through my shirt. Dee looks up from her perusing and immediately smiles her wide, inviting smile.

"How ya doing over here?" The employee asks, matching Dee's smile.

"Great!" Dee chirps. She's good at attracting the attention of men, whether she means to or not. Some sort of superpower, I think. I don't realize how troublesome that could be until much later.

"Fine," I mutter. I angle myself away from the guy, afraid he'll be able to smell me if he gets too close.

"Good," the employee says. He's looking at Dee. Of course he is.

Dee flips her platinum hair over her shoulder and asks the employee a question about the shirts. I don't hear what it is. I'm not paying attention, concentrating much too hard on my shoes. My signature shoes. Scuffed Chuck Taylors, black. Emily the Strange would definitely approve.

"Lex," Dee's voice cuts through my concentration.

I look up, blood rushing to my cheeks. *You're such an idiot,* my anxiety whispers. *You've embarrassed yourself in front of this guy like you always do.*

"What?" I manage to croak.

"Do you want to try anything on?" The employee asks. I shake my head, too ashamed to speak. Dee comes to my rescue. Sort of.

"Don't mind her," she says, "Lex kind of hates everyone."

I look down at my shoes again, stunned.

Dee and the employee share a good laugh at my expense.

A dark feeling cuts through my anxiety, claws raking my stomach. Suddenly, I hate myself in this moment. I hate my frizzy hair. I hate my sweat, I hate my crooked leg, my big teeth, my total lack of interest in makeup.

Most of all, I hate Dee.

FRIENDSHIP WHILE FEMALE

In the weeks that it has taken to write this piece, I've struggled to apply academia to it. A creative writer by trade, I had no problem plucking memories from the bowels of my brain committing them to type, but the *critical* part of critical storytelling evaded me time and time again. How could I dissect my longest and most complicated friendship into something fit for a scholarly book? How could I gut these memories and fill them with citations, statistics, quotations? It didn't seem right. It still doesn't, if I'm being honest, which is why I want to begin with something simple. What *is* friendship?

Friendship, as defined by Merriam-Webster's English Dictionary, is simply "The state of being friends." Using that definition alone, we now have to wonder what a *friend* is. Merriam-Webster's has the answer: "One attached to another by affection or esteem." Now, let's put these definitions in the context of a movie like *Heathers.* The main character, Veronica, is "friends" with a group of girls all named Heather. Unlike Veronica, the Heathers are varying degrees of mean. They're mean to other

girls; they're mean to each other; they're mean to Veronica. Their cruelty knows no bounds, and they don't appear to be "attached to one another by affection or esteem" in any sense of the definition. The same could be said for the main characters in *Mean Girls.* The only outlier is the character of Janice Ian, who befriends the main character all the while being ostracized by the other girls for supposedly being a lesbian.

Though these may be fictional examples of how Western society views female friendship, they're still indicative of certain stereotypes that pervade and poison relationships between women. They're nothing new. The "mean girl" is such a staple in popular culture that she has become an expectation—not just in the movie theatre, but outside it as well. What does that mean for the girls who watch these movies?

Admittedly, *Heathers* is one of my favorite films. The first time I watched it, I strongly identified with Veronica and oftentimes felt that my friendship with Dee veered dangerously into Heather territory. Veronica was so different from her friends. She had dark hair, like me, as opposed to her friends' blonde hair—like Dee's. Veronica's wit was rooted in cleverness while the Heathers thrived on male attention.

I am Veronica, I thought. *Look at how different I am from other girls.* I othered myself deliberately. I forged a gulf between myself and Dee because I thought my version of femaleness was somehow superior to hers. *I am not like other girls,* I would say. Over and over again until I believed it. Movies like *Heathers* only solidified my views and validated my need to feel like I was better than other girls my age. I did not engage in traditionally feminine activities. I did not wear makeup or dresses. I read books, not gossip magazines. I derided other girls who did not present the way I wanted them to, and this is called "internalized misogyny," or "internalized sexism." "Internalized misogyny," according to Cultural Bridges to Justice (2011) is "the involuntary belief by girls and women that the lies, stereotypes and myths about girls and women that are delivered to everyone in a sexist society are true" (para. 1).

I bought into these stereotypes and myths. I bought into *Heathers, Mean Girls.* I bought into my own self-degradation and I dragged Dee along with me.

THE CRAZY EX

"His ex is a total bitch," Dee says, turning up the dial on the air conditioner. The car smells like stale french fries baked too long under a June sun. I squint against the harsh light, sinking back in my seat. Boxes at my feet, scuffed by the soles of my old shoes. Dee never cleans out her car. Passers-by probably think she lives in it. "Have you ever met this girl?" I ask.

Dee makes a noise, a cross between a laugh and a disgusted scoff. "I don't have to," she says. "I've seen the text messages."

I feel myself sinking again, bogged down by the weighty discomfort in my gut, the block of ice in my stomach. I've known Dee since the first grade. We don't fight.

About anything. Not necessarily because we agree with one another about every facet of our lives, but because my cowardice too often overpowers what I really feel.

With strangers, I can stand tall. Put my foot down and say, "No, you're wrong." With Dee, all I feel is that ice. We've known each other since the first grade. I don't want to disagree. But I don't want to condone her mindless hatred of a girl she's never met, either.

"Just because you've seen text messages doesn't mean anything," I say quietly, so quiet that my words almost get lost underneath the country song crooning on the radio. Being quiet is better than staying silent, right?

Right.

Dee doesn't take her eyes off the road. Cornfields pass us by in flashes of rushing green, the winding ribbon of asphalt stretching into the eons of Midwestern livelihoods. Another summer day, another drive to nowhere. We drive. We talk. We eat. We do not disagree.

"He *told* me she was a bitch," Dee says, still insistent on defending her newest boyfriend. She's gone through a lot of them and none of them are ever good enough for her. She never sees that until it's too late. "Like, okay, she won't let him see his kid! She's totally crazy."

How many times have I heard this story? Different people, same plot line. Dee starts dating a guy. His ex is always crazy, because of *course* she is, and maybe there's a kid involved. Crazy ex is crazy. That's it. That's what I'm supposed to take at face value.

Dee *is* my friend, after all. My best. The constant line between support and disapproval is a contentious one, one that I must walk like a circus performer in order to get to the other side.

The fact of the matter is that the ex probably isn't crazy. There is only one story being told, one narrative being weaved out of whatever this guy wants Dee to hear. I tell her so, couching it in passive language so that she won't think I'm attacking her.

"I don't know, I don't really like guys who are constantly trashing their exes," I say. I mumble it between country songs again. Quiet, not silent. It's a start

I can feel Dee glance at me. She's quiet, too. Silent. *Maybe*, I think, *she's considering what I say.* She does that. Sometimes. Always telling me I'm that voice in the back of her head, telling her to do what's right. What's responsible.

Someone has to do it. Might as well be the boring one of the pair.

However, when Dee opens her mouth, I find that I'm once again disappointed. "I still think she's a bitch."

I sigh, relenting to defeat. Like always. *Sorry,* I think to the ex I've never met, to the girl who likely does not deserve a stranger's scorn.

I tried. Just not hard enough.

FINDING FEMINISM

I discovered Margaret Atwood when I was fourteen, teetering precariously on the cusp of adolescence. There was something in me, some spark that hungered to break

out of the small town boundaries I was accustomed to. Where I came from, girls had their first boyfriends by thirteen, their first marriage by nineteen, and their first kid by twenty. We had a very strict schedule to adhere to and deviance was not favorably looked upon. I didn't want to kiss anyone, however. I didn't want to get married. I didn't want kids.

I wanted to read *The Handmaid's Tale.* It was *the* seminal text in my realizing that I was a feminist. I read it cover to cover multiple times, equal parts horrified and fascinated by Atwood's dystopian future where women existed only to be incubators for children. I was so horrified that I immediately pushed the book on Dee. *Dee*, I said. *You have to read this.* She read it. And she was just as horrified as I was.

I felt some sense of accomplishment at getting her to read the book I loved so much. From then on, I pushed feminist text after feminist text on her. bell hooks, Sylvia Plath, Audre Lorde. Without realizing it, I was once again forcing my own agenda on Dee. I was trying to mold her into the type of girl I thought was acceptable. I was trying to make her conform to a rigid set of standards without her approval or consent. I was still trapped in the bind of internalized misogyny. Any girl who did not subscribe to my precocious brand of womanhood was just sadly ignorant and not worth my time. I had forgotten bell hooks (2000), who wrote that "honesty and openness is always the foundation of insightful dialogue" (p. 189).

Yet, in my earnestness to be honest and open about my newfound feminism, I created another barrier between Dee and myself. I identified as a feminist. She did not. After she failed to read Plath's (1963) *The Bell Jar* like I wanted her to, I realized that I couldn't make Dee be me. I couldn't define her, no matter how much I wanted to. The push and pull that has defined our friendship from the very start only got harder as we got older. Our physical, personal, and ideological differences grew that much more pronounced, leading even more people to ask, "How are you friends? You're exact opposites!"

Our opposites, it seemed, were also our strengths. A dialogic complication that just so happened to work in our favor. Leslie Baxter writes about such tensions in her article "Problematizing the Problem: A Dialogic Perspective." Baxter (2007) writes that studies in communication often privilege unity over difference, and that a more interpretive approach to communication leaves more room for difference, "celebrating the unique 'strangeness' of particular communities and situations" (p. 120). Would my friendship with Dee perhaps be easier—mentally and socially—if we were more similar, as communication theorists might suggest? Maybe. Do our inherent differences cause us problems? Of course.

In the long run, do any of these problems actually matter?

It's hard, even after fifteen years of friendship, to know.

SCENES FROM A FARMHOUSE

There are at least ten different deer heads staring at me from their hallowed places on the wall. At first, I found them creepy. I'd cringe away from their false gazes

and titter nervously to Dee about the possibility of reanimation. One deer looks particularly pensive. He's huge, neck thick as the trunk of an ancient tree. His eyes gleam like coals in his head and his antlers are massive. Sixteen "points," maybe. I don't know the terminology very well. What is the measure of a deer? It doesn't matter. They're not why we're here.

Dee shoves the movie in the DVD player. Boxy and silver, it sits in between stacks of hunting videos. They're busy gathering dust.

"Is this the one about the ghost hunters?" I ask, settling on the floor in front of the TV. Dee has pushed the coffee table to the side of the room. We need ample movie-watching space.

She nods, then retreats to the little kitchen to fetch the package of Oreos we bought at the gas station. She brings a couple of mason jars, too. Milk sloshes at the top. "Yeah. It looks really bad. It's gonna be awesome." I agree.

Dee passes down the Oreos and mason jars to me, needing free hands to wrap a blanket around her shoulders. It has a deer on it. Of course. Properly cocooned, she settles next to me. We press *play* on the DVD. Ten minutes later, we're laughing at the screen. "Did that guy seriously just shoot himself in the foot?" I wheeze through my laughter. I nibble at yet another Oreo, our ritual snack. Every summer weekend, here we are in front of this old boxed television, eating from a package of Oreos and clutching our mason jars to our chest.

Dee shrieks into her jar, milk running down her chin. That just makes her laugh even harder. I grin so hard that my face starts hurting. I like it when Dee laughs. *Really* laughs, as opposed to the nervous giggling she usually utters. Only here, in this farmhouse, does she ever truly let her guard down. There's no one out here but her dad, the corn, and the cows. No pretenses. No prying eyes. No expectations. We are allowed to simply be. It's a rare moment in time, a sort of Midwestern cryogenesis.

The movie plays on. Second-rate ghost hunters bumbling their way through low-budget scenes. Roger Ebert wouldn't have bothered lifting his thumb for this one. And yet, by the time the credits roll, we are perfectly content. Dee shoves the last of the Oreos at me. "Here," she says through her own mouthful. Still wrapped in her blanket, she pushes herself to her feet. The deer-shaped clock on the far wall reads midnight. "I'm gonna go make some oatmeal."

"What?" I ask, thinking I must have misheard her.

"Oatmeal," she repeats with a laugh. "It sounds good!"

I get up and join her in the kitchen despite my misgivings about midnight oatmeal. Her dad won't be waking up to catch us any time soon. Bear sized with the same general temperament, he sleeps so deeply that even a tornado wouldn't rouse him. A few clanging pots won't matter.

Dee grabs one out of the sink. It's one of exactly three pots her father owns. She puts it on the coils of the gas stove, retrieves her oatmeal, and gets to work. I stand there all the while, quietly giggling to myself about the absurdity of my current existence. Here were are, in the middle of nowhere, making oatmeal at midnight just because it "sounds good."

We sit in the long silence, listening to the crickets chirp from unseen corners. It isn't until Dee opens the silverware drawer that I'm roused from my trance.

A spoon comes just short of my feet, clattering to the floor. I stare at it. Then I stare at Dee. "Did you just throw a spoon at me?" I ask.

She starts laughing again. Straight from her belly. As usual, I follow her lead. We laugh so hard that, by the end, our stomachs hurt. Dee wipes tears from her eyes. Ten different spoons litter the floor. I've gotten my exercise for the night.

"*Woo*," Dee says. She takes a moment to catch her breath. She goes to the stove, still chuckling to herself. Her oatmeal is done. A lumpy gray mass in a decades-old pan. "You know," she says. A pause. "I don't think I'm hungry anymore."

"Oh my god," I put my head in my hands. The laughter starts anew. My shoulders shake. "You decide you want oatmeal, throw spoons at me, then decide you don't want your oatmeal anymore? Seriously?"

Dee shrugs. I mutter another half-hearted *oh my god.*

We return to the living room, our differences obscured by the dark. One o'clock in the morning, a little farmhouse thrown out into mile after mile of farmland.

We aren't blonde. We aren't brunette.

We aren't bubbly. We aren't shy.

We aren't extroverts. We aren't introverts.

We exist, one farm weekend at a time. And that, for me, is enough.

The next morning, Dee's dad wakes up.

"Why are there spoons all over the damn kitchen?!" He hollers.

Dee looks at me.

All we do is laugh.

A CONVERSATION WITH ADRIENNE RICH

"People probably think we're lesbians or something," Dee said when we were younger. *"Let's just get married. I'm sick of guys."*

We laughed about it then. Neither of us thought about the implications hidden behind those words. We didn't think of how devalued our friendship was outside of one another. We, like too many other young girls, had been exposed to images of who we should have been, who we needed to be, but not who we wanted to be. Because we did not operate in spheres of outright cattiness, we lingered on the edges of honest friendship, unsure of whether or not we were being friends the "right" way.

As I've said throughout this story, the popular media wants people to believe that girls are not supposed to be best friends without *caveat*. We're supposed to hate one another. Any love that exists between two women must automatically be met with suspicion. Surely they're lesbians. Surely they really just hate one another.

You should be careful, people tell me. Usually in hushed tones, so no one else can hear them gossip. *Someone might think you two*—me and Dee—*are together. You know, in a lesbian way.*

Poet and writer Adrienne Rich (1996) would argue that *of course* people think Dee and I are lesbians. It's only natural, and a *good* thing. In her essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich describes a sort of "lesbian continuum" on which all women exist, and explains that not all love between women has to be romantic, despite the Sapphic suggestion that lesbianism equals romance. It was a radical idea at the time of its writing, but as I ruminate on the idea now, I can't help but think Rich was onto something.

Adrienne, I think. *I really like your ideas on love between women, but I don't know where I stand on your "continuum."*

I love my friends. I love the camaraderie that comes with befriending other women. It has taken me many years to get to this point, my love a hard-won prize earned through a great deal of soul-searching and self-actualization. I love Dee in a way you can't help but love a person you've known for fifteen years. I still don't know where Rich would put me on her proposed "continuum," but I'm glad to be there regardless.

My feminism is larger now, thanks to women like Adrienne Rich. It is larger than it was when I was fourteen, enraptured by Atwood's (1986) *The Handmaid's Tale.* It is larger than Sylvia Plath, larger than the United States. It has enriched my life in every possible way, allowing me to realize that it's *okay* for Dee to be different than me, and that it is perfectly acceptable for her to present the way she wants to present. Our friendship would not exist without our differences, and for these differences, I am grateful.

I don't have to be Veronica. Dee doesn't have to be Heather. We can *be*, in a culture that rewards girls for hating one another; and that, perhaps, is our greatest victory.

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BECKY FALLS

21. MY PERSONAL HELL

Becoming a Hardened Machine at Hardee's

INTRODUCTION

What follows is a snapshot of the living hell that I've been through as a dehumanized, scorned, mistreated fast food employee at Hardee's, a fast food corporation that spends more money claiming good deeds to their employees and their community than it actually does. My personal experience, mixed with statistics and stigmas described in the literature, shows that fast food chains are mostly focused on profit, putting their workers' needs on the backburner of their hot money-making oven, which feeds off of customers' every desire but at the expense of the workforce of underpaid, and brutalized servants.

ONE SUNDAY MORNING

6:00 a.m.

It was going to be a typical day at work, or so I thought. I walked my usual route to Hardee's, clocked in, and received a "warm" greeting from Melissa, who told me I should be smiling; she was so happy to see me. This morning wasn't different than any other. There were pretty much the same customers, ordering the same food, and even using about the same amount of money each time to pay for their meal. All normal transactions, normal procedure. I can't tell you how many times I've asked customers if they want any ketchup or jelly, before telling them to have a great day.

7:00 a.m.

Melissa left me alone to tend to the customers myself so she could count her drawer, telling me to yell for her if I needed her. I looked around the store. The cooks snuck out the back door, where they took a smoke break and talked for over ten minutes. Overhearing them say I am slow and calling me "turtle," I brushed it off, because I knew I was working hard and at a good pace.

I was constantly moving: stocking, changing the sanitizer water, making shake cups, and wiping down counters. When Melissa came up front to count the safe, she

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 117–128.

told me that I'm one of the sweetest people she knows, adding, "You don't have to do that for me, that's my job." I laughed and told her that it's my pleasure to help her. She is a great manager, makes excellent sweat tea, always calls people "Hun," and is just a pleasant person to be around.

8:00 a.m.

Two more team members showed up to work right as Melissa announced she was going home to go to bed. This Sunday, those members were Amber and Shinka. Amber, the assistant manager, has a way of letting everyone get away with doing things that go against company policy. She lets us take or make food for ourselves and not pay for it, goes out on several 10–20 minute "smoke breaks," and allows people to complain about customers and employees anytime they want. Talking smack in private is one thing, but she takes it out of hand by arguing with customers and instigating drama.

A back-line worker named "Freddie" arrived late, again, at 8:30 a.m. He went into the manager's office, sat down at the computer, and adjusted his hours so that it seemed like he was there at the time he was supposed to come in, 7:00 a.m. This action steals money from the company and is unethical, especially to his fellow workers, whom he wasn't there helping. Then he started making sandwiches, "dropping" (frying) hash-rounds, and performing other normal back-line duties, but he always likes to make his day interesting, most of the time at the expense of his coworkers.

That day he told me, "Don't even call back for sandwiches." I was a little put off, especially since I needed to know if he was making the sandwich for drive through. Freddie has a tendency to forget he needs 2–3 of a certain sandwich, so he only makes one. Also, when I called back to see if he had more hash rounds down, he scoffed and told me to go put them down myself. This unprofessional behavior takes time away that I can use to help customers.

I ran to the back and was hit by the sickening smell of grease. I looked at the fryer, filled with little tag-alongs that were left behind by cooking hash-rounds. I took a strainer and scooped up the majority of the crusties, and threw them into the trash. If I would not have done that, who would have? There were only three people on back-line at the time, and none of them cared about that small detail that means a lot to the quality of the food.

9:00 a.m.

I was put on biscuits. Jennifer is the normal biscuit maker, but today she was busy making sandwiches, so Amber asked me to go make them. Just learning how to make biscuits the other day, I was excited to show my stuff on the table. I partially enjoyed being back there, mostly because I didn't have to interact with any grumpy morning customers. I got out the ingredients: biscuit mix, flour, and buttermilk.

Next, I mixed the biscuit ingredients with the milk, floured the table, plopped a big handful on the table, pushed it, folded it, and pushed it again, then rolled the dough out to be cut into biscuits, making sure to add a little flour at each stage so the dough wouldn't stick to the rolling pin or table.

After making about fifteen trays of biscuits, loading them in the oven, setting a timer, taking them out, buttering them, and putting them in the appropriate station, I was working up a sweat. Biscuit duty was not my job, but machines can't complain.

10:30 a.m.

We were trying to get ready to change over to lunch. I was relieved; it was about time for me to go, because I was tired (I was scheduled until 11:00 a.m.). I put the rest of the trays into the cooler under the station, and as I was cleaning the table off, I heard someone yelling.

"I told you to stop messing with me! You're not going to make me lose my job!" came from the front of the store. I looked up to see Shinka yelling at Freddie, who was bent over laughing. He had thrown a hot fry, fresh out of the fryer, at her, and after his constant harassment from earlier in the morning (saying hurtful and even sexually inappropriate things about her), she flipped her lid. Next thing I knew, Amber sent Shinka home, and Jennifer went to the front to help her with orders. Jennifer said, out loud, that she wasn't doing prep or dishes, her normal duties, and that the biscuit maker had to do them. I, being the one who made biscuits *for her*, was given that duty, even though I had never done either job, and I was supposed to get off at 11:00 a.m.

So I took what I was dealt, but I told Amber I wasn't doing dishes. There were way too many dishes for me to do, and I was supposed to get off at 11:00 a.m., which was not going to happen since I had to complete all of her prep-work. So Amber went to the front and told Jennifer that I wasn't going to wash the dishes, and she scoffed and said that she wasn't going to either.

After the task was tossed around the store, everyone in front and back-line declining to clean the pile of breakfast dishes, Amber came back and screamed, "NOBODY ON BACK-LINE IS LEAVING UNTIL THESE DISHES ARE DONE!" I laughed to myself and kept doing prep work. I didn't have time for the dishes when they were asking for tomatoes and shredded lettuce on the table. I cut up tomatoes, lettuce, and two kinds of onions, which made my eyes water and burn from the juice. Jennifer finally gave in and came to the back where she did the dishes. I tried to help her by cleaning the sink and putting some of the dishes away, but my help was met with an icy stare.

2:30 p.m.

After coming to the front and restocking the drive-thru, I told Amber goodbye and got out of there before she gave me more work to do. Because I was scheduled from

6:00 a.m. until 11:00 a.m., I wasn't given a break, even though my work lasted from 6:00 a.m. until 2:30 p.m., so I ended up working 8.5 hours without a break. I'm sure they will probably adjust my hours so it seems like I got a lunch break though, so they avoid getting in trouble. Nobody would want that, right?

After work, I was drained. Nothing happened because nothing could happen. My feet, swollen and in pain, were not able to carry me anywhere other than to my bed. I couldn't even stay awake to watch a movie, and I was in no mood to do the homework waiting for me on my desk. I slept the rest of the day and most of the night. I was an exhausted human being treated as an untiring, unfeeling machine.

JUST ANOTHER MANIC MONDAY

5:00 a.m.

I got up from my bed and had to drag myself into work, the sky still dark. I clocked in and Melissa's smiling face greeted me as she handed me the headset. I took it willingly, because I knew she had it on all night and was most likely sick of the "Bing" that it makes when someone pulls up, or the agonizing back-and-forth that plays out when prying an order out of someone. I was relieved, knowing I wouldn't have to do biscuits, dishes, and prep, because the old horse who'd been there 20 years, Mrs. Von, always does those things on weekdays.

7:00 a.m.

After Melissa went to the back to count her drawer once again, I got rather busy taking orders, filling them, and cashing people out for both the front line and drive-thru. Mrs. Von came to the front to help me out. She is old, bitter, and gets away with unethical deeds that she plays off as just doing her job right. I've seen her ring someone up for a plain biscuit ($1), then give them a full meal with a drink, a sandwich, and hash-rounds. I've had customers come in and either yell for Mrs. Von or refuse to let me ring them up because they want the "deals" she gives them when they come in to eat.

I wonder to myself how many times she's done this kind of stealing from the company over the 20 or so years she has worked here. It really benefits someone to befriend Mrs. Von. She'll ring them up for a three-piece and give them eight, give them a free large hash round when they order a small, or even just blatantly give one customer in particular a free burrito every time she comes in, claiming we owe her a free one because her last one was "cold." *I'm sure the last four times the burrito was cold too, right?*

I'm not sure whether my distaste is for Mrs. Von as a person, or the work environment that enables her to be this way. She seems like a well-rounded, Jesus-loving woman, so how has she become bitter and stress-inducing? Is she like this at home? How do other people see her? Working here twenty years can change a person,

because the stressful environment of fast food labor can take a toll on anyone. Has Hardee's dehumanizing work environment turned her into the hardened, unethical, uncaring woman she appears to be at work?

Almost every worker has let the stress get to them, has wanted to leave, has reached their breaking point, or the point where they don't care about anything anymore, because Hardee's has sucked the life out of them. I've seen so many workers go against company policy. Comments like, "I've worked here long enough, I deserve some free stuff, and so do my friends" is a common refrain among the workers, possibly due to low pay and a lack of free meals during lunch break. Maybe they think the prices are too high, or maybe they get satisfaction in making the company lose money on a transaction. Maybe they want to try to get a one-up on the system that has got us all down.

Mrs. Von's idea of "helping" is different from mine. Instead of helping (by bagging my orders while I cash the customer out and fill drinks), she bags the order and sets it on the fry station for me to retrieve. If I don't notice she put the drive-thru orders there (it's out of view from where I stand), she utters a backhanded comment about how she put it there and that I need to come get it because I'm holding up the line.

8:00 a.m.

At this point, I was getting irritated because, just like every Monday, the same lady came in and stood next to the counter, got a free hash round, and chatted with Mrs. Von for over 45 minutes about church, work, and other mindless banter. Sometimes I even hear Mrs. Von talking mad crap about the other workers to customers, which isn't very team-friendly, because if she is talking bad about a worker, the customer will think it's okay to talk smack about them and disrespect them as well.

Another front line worker clocked in, then went in the back to talk about how she was drunk the night before. While over by the window, ready to cash out the drive-thru, I had the drink ready. I pushed the button, but Mrs. Von hadn't sent the order over, so I wasn't able to even see the transaction; nothing out of the ordinary. It's not unusual for a worker to forget the last order in line on the screen, but it was definitely regular procedure for Mrs. Von.

I asked her politely, "Can you please send over the order?" Nothing. She was leaning on the counter, six inches from the register where she'd entered the order, talking with her buddy, wasting the company's time, being lazy, not stocking, not cleaning (which, by the way, I have yet to see her do since I've been there), *just leaning* on the counter blabbing on. "Can you PLEASE send down the order?"

By this time, I knew they could hear me and they were purposefully ignoring me. There's no way she can't hear me. After asking three or four times, I just decided to walk over to the register across the store and send it down to myself. I looked at the witch and thought *retire already old lady,* but I swallowed my words due to my respectful demeanor towards my coworkers and other people in general.

Then, as I got to the register, she looked over and said, "Oh, you should have just yelled at me to send the order down." I rolled my eyes and thought *I did*, as she handed me a bag with one sandwich in it, saying it still needed a hash round, but I should give her a medium because "she doesn't want that small bag" … *then why did you ring her up for a small?*

By now, I was rather frustrated at the fact this woman was the person on front-line with me, and how she hadn't helped much, but rather talked to her friend. When I was scooping the hash rounds, I must have raised my arm up too high, because one second I was grabbing the scoop, the next I was grinding my teeth and dropping the metal scoop with a clang. Tears filled my eyes as I drew my hand back to observe two bloody burn scars on my wrist.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON MY JOURNAL SNAPSHOTS

The fast food industry demonstrates its dangerous lack of concern for the workers it employs. After searching the Hardee's website, liberally searching for *something* on how they feel about their workers, I was able to locate a few lines about their employees. What I found laced into the over-exaggerated lines about how they offer great opportunities and respect for their employees (even though I know people working there for years and only making 25 cents more than minimum wage) was numerous advertising lines about how you'll be involved in the commercial buzz.

If you've ever seen a commercial from Hardee's, it tends to be a little … crude. Lewd, even. Actresses such as Heidi Klum, Nina Agdal, Paris Hilton, and playboy model Sara Jean Underwood practically make out with big juicy-looking burgers, letting bits fall onto their half-covered body and sucking the sauce off their fingers like porn stars. I'm ashamed to have any association with a company that lets such commercials air for families to see. To me, it's obvious the fast food industry executives spend more on marketing than on upholding policies that support or value their employees.

My life is not as important to management as the work they want from me. They desire to draw all my energy from me. To make me an empty carcass, only able to do my job, go home, sleep, then come back to start my day again. Even with going to school full-time, I am working full-time, so even on days that I have class, I usually work before or after class. The hours have negatively impacted my schoolwork, but at the same time, I had to pay $863 for rent per semester because that was what financial aid wouldn't cover. Even though I worked hard and long hours, 2/3 of my paychecks would go towards rent alone.

I would cry every time we got paid, and *you might too* if, after working 30–40 hours a week, you were left with $50 for yourself. As if my schedule at school did not matter. If I told the General Manager (GM), Glen, I was out of school at 2:00 p.m. he'd schedule my shift to begin at 2:00 p.m. Am I able to teleport? Am I willing to

leave class early so I can get to work on time? No. My education was more important to me, but was seen as insignificant in comparison to the fast food sweatshop that employed me.

Corporations assume their workhorses (the undervalued employees) will pick up any slack and keep the smile on their face. Just like a phospholipid in a bi-layer, the upper management suspects that if one worker is unable to work, other workers will push harder to keep going like nothing happened or "fill in any gap." This happened twice in the situations recorded above: First, Freddie didn't come in at his scheduled time, so we had to all work harder so we could make up for his absence; then, after Shinka was sent home, the team changed rolls, leaving me with work that I had never done and forcing me to work after my scheduled time. During and after this situation, I received no credit for my drudgery. I've never received credit for my outstanding performance, probably because all the workers there like to take credit for someone else's work and talk smack about you behind your back. They've laughed about my size, said I eat too much Hardees as it is, called me "turtle" and other derogatory things, but little do they know I always keep busy, even when I see other workers slacking off, chatting with their friends, or talking on the phone for prolonged periods of time.

Two months after I started at Hardee's, we received a trophy for Best Drive Time in the region, and I believe I had something to do with it … but even after I leave and the trophy disappears, they won't put two-and-two together, or believe I was worth anything, because I was just a low caste worker—gum on the bottom of the corporation's shoe. I've called the Hardee's corporate office and complained about the management and working conditions, but I haven't gotten very far.

My hand now has permanent burns on it, and when I was burned there were no Band-Aids or burn cream to sooth and protect my scars, so I had to put mustard on them, covered them with a damp cloth, and went back to work. The company's lack of concern or preparedness brings up issues of ethics and the abuse of employees. As Michel Foucault (1984) notes in *The Body of the Condemned*:

> The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination. (p. 173)

Especially at a jobsite, our bodies are put to the test to track our strengths and limits. As workers, anyone who is in an entry level job, or is a part of a company that is more quantity- and sale-oriented, employees are more likely to be seen as a tool rather than a person. Workers are asked to stay up overnight, scoop and carry heavy ice buckets, clean toilets, work in extreme heat as well as frigid temperatures, and we're expected to meet a quota. And we are reprimanded if we are not able to produce the numbers in the time they are looking for.

When my arm was burned, I was not sent home or to the doctor to heal, but instead made to push through my injury and continue to work. Employees suffer from sleep deprivation from working rotating shifts (what is known in the medical community as shift work sleep disorder) (WebMd, n.d.), or are forced to work through personal, mental, and other types of trauma and abuse. The customers seem oblivious or unconcerned about the people who make their food or take their order. Just as the corporation sees us as machines, so too do customers who think we should operate flawlessly in our work. There are many things that can affect a laborer and possibly make him/her mess up a detail about the job, but with that said, the GM never fires anyone. Do you want to know why? Because he knows anyone fired will be able to receive unemployment in a heartbeat, so he works them hard, puts them with unbearable people, and cuts their hours so they end up quitting. Every single time.

There is a culture in this type of business, and many others that enable cruelty to fester in the wounds of my arm, as well as the lives of any employee of a company that does not care about its operators. I and a few other employees have brought up the different problems that happen in the store, but the GM doesn't pay it any mind. He says if he is not there to catch it, or if they aren't on camera doing the act, there's nothing he can do about it. Thing is, he will never catch them because they know where the cameras are, and I've seen them stealing when he is right there. If he is not vigilant enough to see the problems himself, the bad habits will never improve. One employee tried to record the assistant manager smoking weed in her car and skipping out on work when there were a lot of customers in the store. That employee's hours were cut drastically, and I didn't see him there much longer. On his way out, he attempted to alert the GM to what he was missing and notify him who the "real problem workers" were, to no avail.

Online reviews, stories, and even personal encounters probably won't change the mindset of a big fast food management team, since they have already had numbers and thoughts embedded in their brains since the first hamburger patty was dropped and the first machine powered on. Government regulations have been the only deterrent to the mistreatment of workers. According to The United States Department of Labor (n.d.), employers must pay at least minimum wage, pay overtime for anyone there over forty hours a week, and may not employ anyone under the age of fourteen (some states may have higher age requirements). The Department of Labor (n.d.) has specific mandates for employers, such as equal opportunity in selecting, testing, and hiring qualified applicants; job accommodation for applicants and workers with disabilities when such accommodations would not impose "undue hardship"; and equal opportunity in promotion and benefits (para. 2).

As I've looked for a different job, I have found myself straying from the fast food industry, mostly due to the average 150% turnover rate (Bebe, 2016) or the unethical work environment a lot of workers are put through while still being told to smile and take their borderline poverty-line paycheck. Having a decent amount of experience, and working on my business management degree at Millikin University, I received a good amount of attention from hiring managers. After starting at Hardee's, I had to

turn down three job offers. I had already settled because the job was within walking distance from my school, and "good enough" to pay off what I owed for living expenses that year. I knew it wasn't permanent, but I didn't have a car to get me across town to other prospective jobs, like Aflac and/or Menards. Now, turning back to the drawing board, I am applying for the same offers I had originally turned down. All I can do is apply and pray my application is seen by a manager who thinks I would be a good fit.

After applying for a grocery store in town three times, I finally got an interview. I was excited; I was finally going to get away from Hardee's. I went in early for the interview, wore appropriate business attire, and answered the questions thoroughly and promptly. I didn't understand what went wrong when I received an e-mail, four days later, saying they chose another applicant "who better meets the needs of our company." I've heard this line far too many times. Why were managers not hiring me? I had all the qualifications, had ample availability, and was even open to work in different departments of the store if needed. My close friend, who was about the same size as me, mentioned that they may not hire me due to my size. He said that companies that offer benefits like insurance would be more likely to decline my application due to my size, because they see me as less healthy, and more of a risk to hire. I was shocked, but sadly, this rang all too true to me.

IMPLICATIONS: DEFICIT DISCOURSE IN A WORKING WORLD

Even though I am just as likely to visit the doctor as the next person, if not less likely, due to my size, hiring managers may see me as a potential hazard to hire. There is stigma attached to being fat: assumptions follow that one is unable to control oneself, sloppy, slow, and not as productive or caring as someone with a "healthy" figure. Even though this is not the case, my appearance flags, for others, that I "may not be as qualified" as a person who has a lower Body Mass Index (BMI).

I was appalled as I pursued research on the topic and discovered more confirmations that weight discrimination happens in today's society just as much as other forms of discrimination. The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) (n.d.) reports that more than two-thirds (68.8 percent) of adults are considered to be overweight, more than one-third (35.7 percent) of adults are considered to be obese, and more than 1 in 20 Americans (6.3 percent) have extreme obesity. The Minnesota Department of Human Rights (2013) reported on a recent study from Yale University that concluded plus-sized applicant are less likely to be hired, and if they do get the job, are likely to earn less money and are left out for promotions, because they are seen as "lazy" or lacking in self-discipline (para. 1). A *Forbes* article (Dusen, 2008) reiterates that size matters, saying that, on average, when a woman gains 64 pounds, she takes a 9% pay decrease (para. 6).

At Hardee's, my weight is used as a joke by some of my workers, specifically the ones who have been there the longest and think their job is secure. They freely

criticize and harass workers like me, who try their best to hold back remarks because they're decent people. Being the "bigger person" doesn't require you to be plus sized, but it takes a lot more work when you are big in size *and* you force yourself to swallow a retort to their verbal attack, because you want to keep your job and stay on good terms with the rest of the crew. There are several things worse than being fat, and I would love nothing more than to call a *certain bully* a stinky-crotch troll, but I'm not the kind of person who likes to fight, even though I hold a black belt. In training, my martial arts sensei always taught self-discipline and respect. I was to only use force when being attacked, and avoid fighting unless it was the only option.

I think a lot of industries have unhealthy obsessions with body size: modeling, coaching, sports, actors/actresses, theatre, real estate, and even waitressing. Bigger people don't want "an easy ride in life"; we just want to be considered for jobs that we are capable of doing, without having the hiring manager take one look at us and only see insurance prices and liability. Yes, I have become the size I am because of a lifetime of "bad decisions" but that doesn't mean I don't deserve a good job or a lower role, less pay, and less opportunity because of my weight.

Even though 68% of Americans are seen as overweight and 36% are obese, there are no rules (except in the state of Michigan) that forbid firing or not hiring someone based on weight. While some people claim that discriminatory attitudes towards race, gender, sexuality, and other characteristics have improved over the years, the discrimination against overweight people has gotten worse. From my lived experience and research, it seems like in today's society, the only people that one can openly make fun of, and not seem like an asshole, are fat people. There is a cruel deficit discourse being perpetuated regarding public perceptions of "normal" weight and how to manage it. I know many people that think they can diagnose the problems or fate of bigger people. Beard (2013) defines deficit discourse as a social construction based on social and economic standing of individuals and groups in society, which "allows the education system to predetermine the outcome of the individual, in a social and economic sense" (para. 1).

Many argue that even having these discourses in the first place creates the very problems that are thought to arise from these discourses. According to Nieto (2010), "Assumptions, biases, and prejudices are often unexamined manifestations of economic, political, and social power of people belonging to dominant or privileged groups" (p. 36). In my research I've found many scholars who describe how people assume all these things about a heavy-set person and automatically jump to a deficit evaluation, especially if they are one of the people in "the upper-hand" because of their lower BMI.

An empathetic consideration (what some call "political correctness") is severely lacking when it comes to bigger people because of the stigma that *we did this to ourselves*—as if obesity is a personal and moral failure; because we can possibly change our weight, we're given scorn and ridicule. Managers usually hide their biased opinion of overweight people, but most of the time they are seen as lazy,

lacking self-discipline, and not as competent as their thin counterparts. As the obesity epidemic increases our waistlines, the fight for size equality burns brighter, but it is still socially acceptable to treat someone as an inferior based on their size.

I have had multiple phone interviews, which lead to in-person interviews, but when it came to meeting face-to-face, I did not get a call back for the job, even if I had more than all the qualifications and open availability. Employers put a harsh price tag on obesity. According to a study conducted on more than 11,000 employee health records at Duke University, bigger workers supposedly pursued twice the number of workers' compensation claims, had seven times the medical costs, and had thirteen times the amount of work missed due to injury or illness, compared with slimmer employees (Østbye, Dement, & Krause, 2007). Yet, if employees judge their decision based solely on medical expenses, they may not take into account what that person might bring to the company, such as experience or knowledge. They may hire a thinner person who meets the needs of the current job but, like the grocery store did with me, may not hire someone with managerial potential like I have.

The problems addressed here can only be solved with the decency of humankind. As a child, I thought it was common sense to love one another as if they're your kin, or to treat others the way you would want to be treated; but some people put themselves on a pedestal and forget about the feelings of others and what obstacles they may be able to overcome or have already overcome. Some people have a hard time seeing others' points of view, and see the world with shuttered vision. There may be ways that we, as bigger people, can fight this discriminatory behavior from employers and the rest of the population. Regulations may change what employers can legally do, but people will only change if they are raised to practice empathetic ways of understanding and relating with people. That's how we become less like machines and more like human beings.

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EMMA HASTINGS

22. COMING UP FROM THE DEPTHS

Dealing with Depression, Anxiety, and Eating Disorders

Surrounded by water in all directions, I watch the bubbles trail up toward the distant surface. Sinking down toward the unknown depths of the ocean, I feel my lungs begin to burn, reaching for that distant light, struggling, silently screaming as my only salvation slowly fades to nothing more than a speck of hope in the darkness that encompasses me. I claw at the water, fighting to reach the surface in order to take just one breath of the clean fresh air. I long to see the stars and fly away into the distance. I visualize, tasting the sweet fragrance of opportunity, and open my mouth to laugh, before reality plunges me back into the dark depths, leaving me choking on the regrets and insecurities that keep me caged below the surface.

After what seems like forever, I drag myself to the surface, gasping for air, heart leaping in my chest. I'm there; I reach the finish line and a dazzling smile breaks out on my face. The waves are gentle, sweeping past as they travel across the ocean. Feeling the breeze caress my face, I look up to see that the sky is not empty but filled with birds, swooping across like gravity can't hold them. I stare, longing and envy shattering the ecstatic expression that had once graced my face, replacing it with a twisting frown. A wrinkle forms in between my brows as they draw together in confusion. Why do I want to be up there, soaring through the clouds when I am free to swim and breathe the air that I longed for so greatly?

Suddenly a soft touch to the shoulder makes me flinch, and for the first time I notice wings that have formed on my back. Hesitantly, I reach towards them as if the smallest touch will cause them to crumble and leave me alone to watch the birds fly out of reach forever. Reverently, I touch the delicate appendages, and suddenly I feel a rush of determination to no longer be alone. Surging upward, frantically I flap my wings. Pushing into the air, a grin blooming on my face before gravity takes hold and I find myself crashing back into the water. Disoriented, I spin…

Lunging upward, I take a deep breath and open my eyes.

I find myself safe in my room, only the sound of my breath to fill the air. This is not the first time I've had a dream like this. In fact, it has become a regularity. I often find myself waking up screaming, hands clenching sheets, gasping frantically, trying to reach the surface of water that is no longer there. My heart pounds as my eyes fly back and forth, searching for a danger that is not there. Unable to sit still, I drag myself up until my back presses against the backboard, and I desperately try to calm down.

N. D. Hartlep et al. (Eds.), Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times, 129–136.

Anxiety attacks are not fun; in fact, they are downright terrifying, and I have been having them for a long time. Slowly, I count my breaths down from ten, desperately trying to stop the shake in my fingers. I tug the chain of my lamp, wanting to escape the darkness. Once the room is no longer filled with the shadows of the night, I finally allow my body to collapse back onto the mattress.

Minutes (or hours) later, when my heaving breaths become quieter and my death grip on the sheets has lessened, I allow myself to think about the dream and what it was about. Relapsing—it was about relapsing again. My greatest fear as a recovering anorexic is going back to the place that I was admitted to last year. It terrifies me when I look at how far I've come and realize that in one day, one meal, I could end up back where I was or worse. This has kept me awake for nights on end, causing dark circles under my eyes with frequency. It haunts my dreams.

After leaving the hospital, my greatest fear was no longer eating itself, but going back to those empty halls and locked doors. Waiting for the visiting hours to see my parents' disappointed faces. There is a part of my mind that knows that they will love me no matter what, even if I do have to go back, but that overwhelming doubt remains. It's irrational and it terrifies me.

I toss the sweaty blankets to the side and shakily stand and shuffle toward the kitchen. Stumbling through the hallway, I edge towards the fridge. It's almost humorous how I can still end up colliding with some piece of furniture, despite having lived here for years. I jolt back into myself as my knuckles graze the side of the countertop, sending a zing of pain up my arm.

Pain is a centering feeling for me. Even before the ward, it was something that could kick me out of my anxiety attacks and keep me in reality. It was not a healthy habit; in fact, it was one of the worst I've ever had. At some point during those hazy days, I realized that hurting myself was the only thing keeping me going. I never cut myself with a knife, but the taste of blood had become normal, as I slowly but surely gnawed my way through my lip.

The need for clarity became a curse, as it escalated from simply biting my lip, to leaving bleeding crescents in the palms of my hands, whenever I felt disconnected or afraid. I glance down at the dull edges of my nails. Keeping them dull and short was the only way to stop the actual bleeding. Now, as I look at my hands, I see only imprints of my nails left behind. Those same hands tremble as they reach for the second drawer down next to the sink.

While many people turn to drugs or alcohol, my fix was tea. There is something about a good cup of hot tea that can chase away any nightmare. This I had discovered during my stay in the hospital, not for my normal nightmares but with the one I was living. Sadly, hospitals don't exactly offer fancy English Breakfast, Chai or Earl Gray, and so I was introduced to the honestly *awful* Black tea bought in bulk at the hospital, but promptly became addicted. Thankfully, once released, I found myself back in the world of stores with rows upon rows of different teas to try, but sadly I found myself reaching for the plain package that proclaimed simply Black tea. It was a comfort that I found myself indulging in more and more on nights that I suffered

night terrors. *Nights like tonight, actually,* I thought vaguely to myself as I drew the small container out of its box and promptly popped it into the Keurig.

As the machine began to rumble, I found myself robotically reaching for a mug, placing it at the spout and trudging to the refrigerator for some milk. The thought crossed my mind that in the last few months I have become a creature of habit, predictable. As I clumsily climbed up onto the countertop and waited for the tea to appear in the glass, I stared blankly at the opposing wall, lost inside my own mind. When it finally did, I shook my head to clear the fog, reflexively grabbed the mug, dumped some milk in, hopped off the counter, shoved the gallon back in the fridge and headed for the living room. Another routine stop on my nightly sojourn.

As soon as my back hits the couch, I become a puppet whose strings have been cut. My body really relaxes, and for the first time all night my muscles aren't pulled taunt ready to launch me away at the first sign of danger. A burst of cool air hits my sweaty body and goosebumps spring to life across my arms and legs. I shudder as my damp clothes lose all their heat and cling to me like I had just completed a marathon (or more realistically for me, a mile). Shivers run through me, and my teeth begin to chatter, as I reach for the mug and bring it shakily to my mouth to take a sip. The bitter liquid leaves a burning trail before it spreads and glorious heat blossoms in my stomach, sending warmth racing through my veins. With this, my whole being lets out a sigh of relief and my brain finally begins to come down from its hypervigilance. Even now, I can tell that tomorrow is going to be rough. I'm exhausted. Every ounce of adrenaline that circulated through my body has left and I have become one with the couch.

A glance at the flashing numbers that decorate the microwave reveals the scant hours I have before the sun comes knocking at the door, and I allow my head to grace the pillow behind me with its presence. I am going to be a mess tomorrow. This brings forth a brief burst of panic, and I shake my head to clear it of what will happen then and focus on relaxing.

Breathe in, breathe out, in, out; count to ten and you will be all right, I tell myself. Instead of zeroing in on my panic, I try and think of calming things as I complete the breathing exercise. It was one that they had recommended in the hospital, and, when I looked into it, I found that it was actually one of the most successful self-treatments for hyperventilation and panic attacks. Breathe, breathe now, come on, in, out, in, out.

A flash of a memory passes behind my eye.

*I'm sitting at a table with a nurse and a tray of food in front of me. The nurse smiles and sets a timer in front of me as she says, "Now Emma you have forty-five minutes to finish this food. If you don't, you won't be able to see your parents today." Breathe, in, out, in, out, a scream as four nurses carry a struggling six-year-old past and towards the room with the white padded walls. In, out, in, out. As I continue, my mind wanders to some of the lyrics of a song that I had played so many times in the ward that I could hear it playing in my head...*You're in control. Rid the monsters inside your head, Put all your faults to bed… *I had first heard it in something the hospital called "Musical Therapy," basically an hour or so a day that they made*

all of us patients sit in a room and listen to "uplifting and inspiring works of art." While most of us took it as an opportunity for an afternoon nap, the day this song was played I was so hyped up on adrenaline there was no chance of falling asleep, and with nothing better to do I found myself actually doing the assigned exercise and trying to see how the lyrics apply to me. As I listened I realized that I had actually found a song that worked. The song lyrics to "King" by Lauren Aquilina (2012) put into words everything I had been telling myself for years:

> You don't get what all this is about
> You're too wrapped up in your self-doubt
> You've got that young blood, set it free. (Aquilina, 2012, para. 3)

I am not a hopeless mess no matter what I tell myself. People care about me. I have friends and family that love me. This song reminds me, reassures me, that "You've got it all/ You lost your mind in the sound/ There's so much more" (Aquilina, 2012, para. 2). A John Newton (2009) quote, one of my favorites, also gets me through some of my dark times:

> We can easily manage if we will only take, each day, the burden appointed to it. But the load will be too heavy for us if we carry yesterday's burden over again today, and then add the burden of the morrow before we are required to bear it. (p. 336)

I have so much to live for, so much to look forward to. The fact that I need a little help getting there isn't something to be ashamed of. But this realization doesn't always make things better in the here and now.

A small growl of frustration escapes my lips as my brain churns trying to remember the tune and failing miserably. Grumbling, I haul myself up and off the couch, proceed to dump my mug in the dishwasher and trudge back down the hall and into my room. As soon as I have secured my position in the nest of blankets and pillows that I prefer to sleep in, my eyes close ready to sleep, only to promptly open them a minute later as the words of that song spin around in my mind like an itch that can't be reached. Bolting upright I reach for my Kindle and momentarily blind myself. After a few minutes and a few non-repeatable exclamations, I successfully find the elusive notes and drift off to sleep thinking about how true it is for me at this time in my life.

It had been a rough morning, and at that point I could already tell that it was going to be an even rougher day. It's not like I wasn't expecting it after last night, but you can still hope. Breakfast had been awful; my Mom had made me an egg sandwich, a personal favorite of mine, but when I sat down this morning all I could do was smell the grease and egg, causing my throat to close up and my mouth to clamp shut. Forcing my mouth open I take a bite and start to chew, but I can't swallow; my jaw is locked. Slowly I reach for a glass of water and gulp it down like I'm taking a pill. I look down at the rest of my breakfast, only five more bites left. I can do this, I can

do this, I can do this; I'm almost done; after this there is six hours till you have to eat again.

Twenty minutes later, stomach gurgling and rolling as my car hits another pothole on the old county road, I don't care how long it's going to be just how long it has been. With only three hours of sleep under my belt, my head is buzzing and my eyes strain to stay focused on the tarmac in front of me. I grumble over how much of a hell-hole school is going to be today before with another lurch; my focus is back to avoiding potholes if only for the sake of my stomach as my mind returns to the hospital I had left behind. Suddenly, a flashback hits me.

I blink blearily out my window searching for any hint of dawn. Nope, the sky was just as pitch black as it was yesterday morning. My door is pushed open, bringing with it a stream of blinding light as the nurse's cart rolls in pushed by one of the kindest people that I had ever met, Ms. Claudia. She was one of the first shift nurses in charge of taking blood pressure every morning. Despite the fact that she clearly was every bit as unhappy as me to be up at the crack of dawn, she gave me a gentle smile as she started to unwind the equipment. Resigned, I rolled up my sleeve to give her better access to my upper arm to find out where my blood pressure was on the health chart today. Once lying down, once sitting, and two times drowsily on my feet, I continued to go through the routine asking what the weather was like today, if anything exciting was going on in town, how was the puppy she had rescued feeling, before the rip of Velcro signaled the next step in the day. The lock on the bathroom door clicked open, and I trudged toward the toilet; bathroom trips were important to the next step, weigh-ins. As I stepped on the scale I could hear Ms. Claudia walking around the bathroom making sure I had done nothing but use the restroom; my face flushed with mortification as she stepped out writing on her clipboard. After she had recorded my weight, I was gestured to the bathroom and hurried into it quickly, flushing the toilet and starting the shower. Ms. Claudia stuck her head in as I started to undress. "Someone will be by in fifteen minutes to lock the door, breakfast should be here by eight," and with that statement she was gone off to the next room and the next patient. See, that is why I like her so much; like all the nurses she is friendly, but unlike some of the others she sees fit to keep my embarrassment to a minimum. She had never told me that I need to drink more water or use the bathroom more. Of course I wasn't using the bathroom whenever I had to; it's not exactly fun to have to ask for the door to be unlocked or to have to use the restroom with someone standing outside the door waiting for you to finish. Now, none of them mean anything by it; it can just be embarrassing to have such little privacy. As I stepped under the hot water, a particularly nasty memory of a male nurse, shower time, and forgetting the time limit came to mind. I shut off the water and stepped out, hurriedly toweling dry and rushing for the bed determined to use what little warmth was left in the blanket to its fullest. As I curled in on myself, I spared a glance toward the clock and burrowed deeper and closed my eyes when I realized that breakfast (the worst meal of the day) was still an hour away.

By the time I had made it into first period, I had stopped swallowing, and had my arms wrapped protectively around my stomach like they were a barrier to stop both physical and mental attacks. The thing is that even if I somehow got hit in the stomach, nothing would happen because I had no food in there. It was a proven fact, according to the doctors, that there was nothing wrong with my organs themselves and that all the pain and discomfort came from a shrunken stomach and anything else was all my imagination.

My mouth automatically quirks up into a smirk; well my imagination sure is painful; I wonder if I could physically transfer the pain to Sam, the ass who sits in front of me. The image of him shifting uncomfortably in his seat wondering what he ate makes me choke on air and I bite my lip to stop from laughing. It's never a good thing to be seen laughing randomly when you're not talking to anyone.

As the teacher walks into the classroom, and the class quiets down, the boy behind me coughs and clears his throat making me unconsciously draw my arms around my torso tighter and hunch over. As he continues to cough, a rush of adrenaline surges through me. "What if he throws up?" The question echoes in my mind, bouncing around drawing my full attention away from the teacher who had begun to drone away at the front of the room. "He's just coughing, he's not sick," I reassure myself, attempting refocus on the lesson. One more particularly nasty cough, and I'm gone off into a swirl of fear and distress.

I bet you're wondering, "Why is an anorexic afraid of throwing up? I thought they did that all the time on purpose?" That's bulimia not anorexia, plus officially I have *Anorexia Nervosa*, meaning my problems with eating are mostly that I make myself sick when I eat, with just my emotions. Yeah, that's possible; I would compare me having to eat to a normal person eating while watching the bloodiest movie you can find or watching a documentary on giving birth (whichever you find more disgusting).

Me and food are like a vegan and a rack of ribs or any sane person and liver (yuck). The whole fear of throwing up stems from a horrible case of food poisoning when I was in the fifth grade. After spending eight hours bent over a bucket every five minutes and a trip to the hospital, I still turn green at the mention of Subway. Eventually, that fear became a phobia, and five years later it's pretty obvious that it has gotten out of hand.

I spend my days trying to convince myself that no one, including myself, is going to throw up, during school, in the store, and mostly at restaurants. Going out to eat is torture. I spend every second of the meal jumping at the smallest sounds and attempting to eat enough to make the plate look sufficiently empty. Usually, I can handle it, but when I can't, the only place you will find me is curled up by a toilet having an anxiety attack.

The bell ringing jolts me out of my panic, and I blink and slowly come out of my catatonic mind. A whole class period, and I hadn't heard a word that the teacher had said. A girl passing leans over to her friend and loudly complains about a test.

"Test, what test?" I blurt out.

She stares over at me and says, “The one that we’re getting over everything we talked about in class today.” She shakes her head. “Geez Emma, how are you passing any of your classes? You never pay any attention, plus you missed a whole month of school at the beginning of the year.”

I want to tell her that I can’t help it, that I’m not lazy or anything.

“You had pneumonia or something, and got laid up in the hospital, right?” she asks with mock concern.

My reply is a shrug of the shoulders as heat floods to my cheeks. I don’t want to lie to her after she bothered to remember the excuse that I had given for my long absence. I want to tell her that, in fact, the pneumonia had only kept me in bed for a week; after that I was in the hospital for other reasons, mainly an eating disorder.

But as I open my mouth, my mind produces an image of her staring at me in disgust, asking, “Did you really think starving yourself would make all your problems go away? That we would like you any more?” The phantom words echo in my mind and my mouth halts before the words can make an appearance. As I flounder for words, she gets tired of waiting for an answer and turns with a snort to her companion and says “Whatever, it’s not worth it.” *It’s not worth it*. The words turn over and over in my head until they gradually shift into “She’s not worth it” and I let the crowd drag me away to my next class, “not worth it” repeating over and over as my heart shrinks and then cracks. All while the world goes on around me unabated.

Why do they hate me? Am I so horrible that no one wants to spend time with me, or am I impossible to befriend? The smirks, smothered laughter, and quick glances make it obvious that I’m not simply forgotten by everyone. But they don’t approach me; I’m an untouchable. I feel like bugs are visibly crawling on my skin. No, I don’t feel disgusting; I *am* disgusting, my inner voice sneers. Why would any of them want to be around me—all I could do was drag them down, deep into the depths of solitude. After all, misery loves company and I am miserable.

“It’s my own fault I’m alone,” I often lament. When I first got sick and stopped eating, I gave some of the other kids my lunch money. After everyone suddenly wanted to be my friend, I realized that they were all using me for my money. But I told myself I didn’t care, that they had a better use for it than me. I was the one lying to my parents about eating in the first place. Who was I to judge them when I couldn’t even appreciate the money my parents spent on me? Eventually, I couldn’t stand to be around food at all, and I retreated to the library, where there were no cafeteria smells and no one to question why I wasn’t eating (not that anyone noticed anyway). So it was my fault for not reaching out to them, and I realize that now, but at the time I hated them for it. “*Why, why am I all alone, why am I always the last one?”* These thoughts recur, but make me stronger when I remember how strong I am and how much I’ve been through.

I won’t let myself fall back down into that dark place I lost myself in for so long. I am better than that, even if I have a hard time believing it sometimes. When my

outlook hardens, I recall the hard work of many people (including myself) to help alleviate my anxiety. These collective efforts will not go to waste.

> Glass half empty, glass half full
> Well either way you won't be going thirsty
> Count your blessings, not your flaws. (Aquilina, 2012, para. 1)

Being a teenager is hard enough, without having to deal with all of these other problems that keep popping up in my life. I'm not the only one: one in every four teen girls suffers from some sort of eating disorder and one in ten boys. Twenty percent of teens suffer from some sort of anxiety disorder, and according to the teen help website "I Need a Lighthouse" (2008), between ten and fifteen percent of teenagers have some symptoms of depression at any one time. Depression increases a teen's risk for attempting suicide by 12 times (para. 1).

These statistics are not acceptable. The chances of you knowing someone who is suffering from one of these and many more ailments is so large that it's a guarantee. A study shows that half of all the Americans with major depression go untreated, and only 21% of treatment is considered up to standards (Rettner, 2010). We as parents, children, friends, and fellow human beings need to do something about all the people who go untreated and remain alone in this world. Please, reader, if you know someone who is suffering, extend a hand. That is all it can take. Reaching out, if only to say "I'm here" can save someone's life. If you yourself can relate to my story, please remember that there are people who can and will help no matter how much it may seem like you are alone.

My eyes close and I drift back into the depths. I find myself floating in the wide open sea. As the waves gently rock me back and forth, I relax with the motion and enjoy the feeling of the sun shining down on my face. I may never be able to get to the point of soaring through the sky and that is a horrible thought, but for now, I am content to simply drift along on the surface and see where the current takes me.

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