

Navigating Reproduction: Queering *How to Shop for a Husband*

Meggie Mapes

“Hope along with its other, fear, are affective structures that can be described as anticipatory” – José Esteban Muñoz

Studying the grooves and intricacies of queer theory has led me to become an introverted subject, to question the lines on my palms, how I read them and how others may; to scrutinize identity politics, to understand my politic, the intersectional play of identity and politic, and the unraveling of my static identity. Do not read this confession as though you are a priest and I a sinning subject, disclosing for the sake of redemption. No, instead read this as a revelation that is happening simultaneously between you and me, the reader and writer, the audience and performer. This script is neither a launching pad nor a landing strip; it is something beyond these expectations. This something beyond is why I fell and continue to fall for queer theory, hard. It is as though our eyes connected from a cross a dark room at just the right time, we were just what each other needed or, it was just what I needed.

It was September, 2010. I was an MA student, newly arrived from the middle of Minnesota to begin my career at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. The short month I had been living in Carbondale was filled with new acquaintances, beginning classes, and the horrible humidity that was swallowing the small town whole. I had been told that I should consider participating in a graduate spotlight hour, a performance hour where new or continuing graduate students could “show their stuff” and let the program know who they are as performers. I resisted at first but slowly decided to perform a script about an abortion I had a few years prior. After performing the piece, I felt anxious and a bit regretful about my decision to disclose something so personal about such a controversial topic early in my SIU career. I did not want to be labeled “the girl who did work on abortion.” A few days passed and while wandering the halls between classes I ran into a faculty member, Dr. John Warren. I expected to say hello and continue on our way when John unexpectedly thanked me for my performance and encouraged me to continue the much-needed endeavor into issues of reproduction. I was taken back and shocked; however, those were the encouraging words I needed to continue to critically reflect on my abortion experience. John’s

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support as a mentor and faculty member was key to my continued work on abortion. Thus, deciding on a topic to write about and submit to a special issue devoted to John became clear. Reading John's own writing and reflecting on his hallway advice led me to a place of honesty and risk, a space I know John both encouraged and lived in his own work.

This decision led me to autoethnography as the purposeful method for this script. As Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner describe, "autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning" (433). I worked for weeks toward "sense-making" as Ellis describes through studying her own work on abortion (Ellis "Revisions") alongside other autoethnographic pieces; however, I seemed to be writing and re-writing the same words of nothingness. Rather than trying to figure out some "sense" from my experiences with termination, I began embracing the "loss of meaning" portion of Ellis' description as I grappled with the ways queer theory could help speak back to my experience with abortion. I asked myself, "how does this relate to queer theory?" or "is this supposed to contribute to queer theory?" and "is abortion queer?"

After weeks of pondering these impossible questions, I determined no such answers exist. The script instead embraces an ethos of question asking rather than creating definitive answers or distinct, concrete connections for the reader. By connecting or questioning the relationship between queer theory, abortion, and heteronormativity, the goal of the script is not to make universal statements regarding how every woman who has terminated is read or what identity markers they inhabit but rather to look at how certain performative acts, in my experience, may ask meaningful and important questions when discussing abortion, queer theory, and the links or lack of in between. John's work with Scott Gust guided me: "At the heart of our trope is a purposeful distribution of narratives and notes that require you as a reader to make an unusual effort to collect and assemble what it is that we (there it is again) believe ourselves to know and be, in and as a result of these personal (although probably not extraordinary) experiences" (116).

This questioning is ultimately present in the script by using short narratives to map how I have been placed and replaced, scripted and reminded how to orient in my body. For example, as a child, I was scolded for playing football with the boys. As a woman, my "straightness" is affirmed again and again by peers after disclosing I had terminated a pregnancy. My goal is less about discussing my own orientation and identity as it relates to my sexuality and more about the way others hail and interpolate their reading of my identity through certain performative acts. John Warren and Deanna Fassett's discussion of Audre Lorde's mythical norm helps clarify. "The mythical norm is a metaphor for those who occupy positions of power in society; that they are 'the norm' or even average or typical is a myth" (Warren & Fassett 68). In other words, the script examines how the mythical norm of straightness is perpetuated via everyday performative acts. My own sexual identity is null and void in relation to how others read my body and sustain the norm of heterosexuality.

The hum of John's own work on performativity and identity whispers in my ear as I make sense of the performative acts narrated in the script below. John writes:

It is the reward and punishment system of gender that compels one to adhere to the gender system. Indeed, I would extend [Butler's] work to say that it is the multiple identity markers that we claim (and are claimed for us, with or without our knowledge or consent) that are fashioned in this way--we are products of the repeated messages we have been inundated with over time. How can I even imagine my own desire for gender without the discursive frames that precede my birth? I was a boy long before I had any say. And so, for Butler and I, identity is constituted through the acts that the subject undergoes ("Performing Difference").

In the context of the script, the text examines abortion as a site where, through repetitive performative acts, a body or, more specifically, my body has and continues to be read as heterosexual and the disciplining mechanisms that have occurred. I am not straight because I had an abortion. Abortion is not contingent on one's straightness; however, my sexual identity may have no bearing on one's reading and subsequent hailing of my body as straight after disclosing termination has taken place. After all, to be pregnant is to have reproductive privilege, a privilege held in high regard within certain heterosexual relationships.

These connections are complicated and the lines are not straight. Feeling trapped in the cycle of performativity, I hope that by asking the ways connections are made between reproduction and queer theory may be beneficial for both future research and relationally. The script is unable to and falls short of answering all the ways abortion solidifies gender norms, heteronormativity, issues of race and whiteness, etc.—all issues important for understanding how termination impacts female bodies. But, as John taught me, we will always fall short. It doesn't mean we should give up. He writes, "much is gained by spending time and effort to really understand social structure, even if one is only examining part of it" (Warren "Performing" 291). Thus, understanding how abortion links to communicative practice of straightness through my own narration with termination is but one avenue I wish to examine.

Specifically, this avenue teases out how temporality is connected to reproduction. Attempting to contribute a complex understanding of Edelman's idea of reproductive futurity, I trouble how abortion or termination fits into or out of that particular theoretical frame. For example, if the hegemony of heteronormativity is upheld through reproduction and language surrounding it, how does eliminating the call for reproduction "fit" into that structure? The content of my script draws from personal narrative with a theoretical grounding to questions of reproductive futurity and temporality. Particularly, this performance maps my memories of "learning" about how to orient toward a future and how reproduction figures within that dynamic. By using discussions on queer temporalities, I want to explore, through performance, the way society performatively constructs progress as linked to reproduction. It is also an exploration of abortion within these contexts and its relationship to reproduction. Complicating these theoretical frames is again accomplished by questioning the placement of abortion.

The theme of “complication” carried with it the purposeful and reflexive decision to use props. I have always had an uncomfortable relation to props. Their inability to be completely predictable has, in the past, caused me to avoid using objects within my performance. This specific script, however, required the use of props. My philosophy on inclusion of an outside object within a performance is one of thorough thought. What I mean is, inclusion of an object must be explicitly related to the text and has a thought-out place on the stage with me. I see objects as working with, not against, the text or performer, and I feel more comfortable if I am able to articulate their place on stage as a specific performance choice. This articulation will take place in this textual space.

Words failed me within the performance. This is not to say I am not comfortable or do not attempt to ask important questions in the script via language. On the contrary, those difficult questions I attempt to ask are beyond the ability of words to operate or at the very least, beyond the ability for me to operate them as I imagine. This “lack” between language and myself led me to rethink and reconfigure my relationship to props and objects on stage with me. The specifics of each object choice are highly relevant to the discussion of the script and performance.

The script references a book I received as a gift some years ago, *How to Shop for a Husband*. Still owning the book, I questioned the necessity of the book to physically “be there” for audience members to see. The decision to bring and display the book for audience members was less about them being able to see it as “proof” that I did, indeed, receive this book and more so to invite audience members to interact with the book and with me. In essence, my body responded to the book and that response was a necessary space to share with the audience.

Vocal rhythm, specifically the pace at which I spoke, was also an embodied performance choice. Because I find myself moving with and against the normative grain, at times stagnant and at times scattered, the pace of my voice demonstrated that movement. Often, I deployed an easy to comprehend pace with which each audience member is accustomed to hearing, while other sections of script I performed quickly and with varying emphasis. My changing relationship to norms, emotion, and others’ connections to my decisions and actions are in constant motion and in a constantly unpredictable state. Altering my pace and vocal variety helped utilize my body to illuminate this space of confusion where language has failed me. These vocal changes are marked within the script but were also partially improvised.

The struggle to find words, accept they cannot be found, struggling once more, and moving to use aesthetic structures changed me as a performer. Difficulty in script writing is why I write scripts. The down and dirtiness of the writing, the risks of disclosure, the writing and erasing and writing and erasing have and will continue to change and shape me as a performer. This script is why I perform. Because, as Tami Spry so eloquently narrates, “performing autoethnography has motivated an intense shift in the shape of my life. It has been a vehicle of resistance and emancipation from cultural and familial identity scripts that have governed the size and shape of my body and identity personally and professionally” (88). Within these questions, I hope my

script contribution pushes the boundaries of queer theory, performance, and abortion research. With that, I give you “Lines on a Script: On Learning ‘How to Shop for a Husband.’”

“Lines on a Script: On Learning ‘How to Shop for a Husband’”

[Located on stage is chair situated by itself and a table with no chair. On the table is a book, unidentifiable to the audience, a towel, and a bowl of clear water with various cups of died water surrounding it. Near the chair, a football sits. The performer begins seated in the chair facing the audience. The chair is situated stage right. This opening narrative situates the complexity of disclosure as the foci and overarching meta-narrative of the performance. Through this complexity, the narrative attempts to open a space of negotiation with the audience as opposed to a talking at and disclosing to. Without initially looking at the audience, the performer begins.]

It is difficult to disclose. I used to believe that disclosing things about myself meant having to give something away, a part of myself, like the shedding of the cells on your skin, an uncontrollable shedding. Disclosure meant feeling the pulses of that shedding; feeling myself shedding the constructions I had made for myself, worked on for years, as someone so in control, so put together. Disclosure meant losing control, even in the controlled act of disclosure.

It is difficult to disclose, to native the space of memory, relationship, self. But I guess navigating supposes that I have somewhere to go, some ends and the disclosure is the means, as though I can check off a box of “accomplished” after I share something in this moment as though this is a moment at all. I mean, how can I ask you to make sense of the me when I’m still in limbo about this, self, Meggie or whoever Meggie is.

Maybe I need to reconfigure how to navigate, what it means, how it’s done, and who it’s with. So, this is not a disclosure, it’s a navigation with me in the movement between time to figure out what the fuck we are and escaping the pressure of being something now because as Munoz states, “The here and now is a prison house” (1).

There is irony in this navigation, of asking you to discount an ends, to escape the confines of time and its pull toward a something by starting with a story engrained in a moment, in minutes. Or, maybe it’s perfect. Maybe this type of navigation needs just that, a jumpstart to remind us the now is not the now, it’s just a reoccurring back then; that we can transcend the clock in our head [*Performer’s pace quickens*], the constant ticking reminding us that we have one more thing to do, that we’re not where we thought we’d be at this age because, of course we are.

[Standing, the performer moves across to stage right where a book lies on a table. She picks up the book, examines its contents for a moment, and shows the title to the audience. This short story shifts

the focus of larger questions of disclosure to a particularized experience with an acquaintance. The mood oscillates between introspective, reflexive, and angry.]

After disclosing to a friend that I had terminated a pregnancy, she gave me the book, *How to Shop for a Husband*. When someone buys you a “how to” book, it’s usually saying something. You know, “how to cook,” or “how to play poker.” At first, I laughed at this absurd gesture of a gift. Maybe it was just a joke, you know? Maybe my friend knew me enough and listened to my comments about relationships, knowing that it was not part of my life plan at the time or maybe the gesture was just a coincidence. *[Performer pausing, looking at the book.]* If I learned one thing from my shitty undergrad methods class, it was that just because one thing follows the other doesn’t make it causation, just a possible correlation. But then I stopped and thought, how to shop for a husband...

[Performer moves in front of the table to stand while contemplating, still holding the book.]

Had I already failed at one of my life-long duties? Was she reminding me that there was still hope if I only found that man? How did she even know I wanted to marry a man? Was she assuming my abortion took place because I didn’t have the support, financially and emotionally of a significant other?

No, that couldn’t be it. But...

This book, given from the same friend who approached me between finding out I was pregnant and going to the clinic to say, “Meggie, I talked to my mom because I was upset when I heard *your* news. Luckily though, she has a friend in Florida who is a great guy, attorney, and has a nice wife. They have been wanting to adopt for years. It would be in great hands.”

This family, I suppose, marks *the* family, the kind where we all collectively applaud when they announce on Facebook they are “expecting.”

[Pace quickens.]

2 days earlier I went to dinner where a separate friend announced to the restaurant, “This is Meggie, she’s pregnant!” in an exciting and inviting declaration of my worst nightmare.

Have you ever felt the beginning of a feeling within you but beginning isn’t accurate because you can’t define the beginning or the end? I’d like to say these moments created a feeling of guilt that had a beginning, middle, an end. As though I could mark the progression of shame because at least through this marking there’s knowledge of the end; knowing that it will end. There’s no beginning, no half way.

And it never looks the same,

or feels the same,

or tastes or smells the same,

because every pulsation is a little something of this and a little something of that....

I was told, “Well at least you know you’re fertile!” As though, in the glass half full kind of bullshit, my abortion had proven something, had been a moment of foreshadowing where my female fertility was solidified for future use.

The absurdity of the comment made me laugh while simultaneously disciplining, shaming.

“What if I don’t want to have kids? What if I don’t want to be fertile? What if that realization is where my feelings of horror come from? What if I don’t want a husband?”

[The performer takes a small cup of water dyed a color of their choice and places it into a larger bowl. This is repeated throughout the performance. The dyed water represents the relationship between affect and various temporal and spatial locations. Such combinations of affect are rarely predictable or repeatable.]

See, it never looks the same.

It takes on a new form, a new face every time.

[After examining the newly colored water, the performer spots a football near stage right, and picks it up.]

I remember my mom gloating, “The teacher says you play well with the boys.” I don’t know if it was gloating because how the hell did I know what gloating was at 8? At 8, though, it felt empowering, like I could move between the lines of gender, the boys playing football and the girls on the jungle gym. Not me, I was unstoppable.

3rd grade, age 8. One afternoon I decided to encroach on this distinction between boys and girls in a particular way, I asked to play football with the boys on the grass at recess.

[Performer begins to throw it up and down, up and down.]

Well, I didn’t ask. I was an 8 year old sassy pants: I told. The specific details of the play, if such a thing was occurring at that time, drifted from my memory years ago; however, somewhere in between the throwing and catching and running and falling I intercepted the ball. I caught that damn ball with all my might and I knew, “I will go down in history for this. The girl, 8, playing with all the boys, intercepted the football. I am faster and stronger and ‘smarter,’ and I will go down in history for this.”

But, *[throws football off stage]* I didn’t. I didn’t even get invited to play again and was asked to leave the field if I approached.

I was on the wrong team. I didn’t belong.

I'm 24 now and after 17 years, I am proud of that interception, proud but I felt shameful and embarrassed for crossing a line I wasn't suppose to cross.

And then I received, *How to Shop for a Husband*, the same disciplining, reminding of where I belong, not to deviate again, and hailing me to straightness. Now, let's get something clear.

Yes, to get pregnant requires some specific biological factors to conjoin so, yep, I had sex with a man. Sure, I still have sex with mostly men but in the moment of handing me that book I had been read and placed.

[Performer begins to pour the dyed water into the larger bowl of water, examining the difference color variations.]

[In an exaggerated voice] "You had an abortion, you're straight, you're on team hetero and your deviation from the team is O.K. because this team is home, it's where you belong and at least we know you're straight, abortion or no abortion but try not to deviate again."

To have an abortion does not mandate straightness, to be heterosexual. The relationship between sexuality, identity, and reproduction is one so complicated, the spider that wove the web gets lost. To have an abortion does not mandate straightness but for me, in those experiences, I was hailed as straight, assumed to be straight because I had experienced, for however short, pregnancy, a staple of heterosexuality.

But I had failed the Golden Rule of team hetero: produce, produce, produce, so how could I fit on a team?

I mean in sports, if you mess up a play you're in trouble. *[Short pause.]*

I wondered long and hard how terminating fit into the call to reproduce as though aborting was a radical escape from my socialized call to have children. Lee Edelman describes this process as reproductive futurity where "the image of the Child polices the horizon of social potentiality by maintaining the ironclad equivalence of sociality, futurity, and reproduction" (474).

If the Child, reproduction, is a policing mechanism, how could my actions place me "on team hetero?" Where is the in-between or the out-between or the no-between of the two teams of sexuality?

It's funny how straight orientation, "straight time" can correct itself, ya know? I was given a pass because I was 20. In college. Single. Having kids at that moment wouldn't really follow the hetero-line of futurity, not really. We wouldn't have contributed much economically. But sometimes, somehow, it was O.K. I'm fertile. I can get right back on the reproductive horse and at least, at least, they knew I was, or rather, assumed I was having sex with men. It didn't matter if I was or even had chosen sex with men, it was that performative act that occurred over and over of reading my body in a particular way. That's why I was placed, am placed, will be placed on team

hetero and rationalizing my body as being on that team, as “fitting,” is what made my abortion sort of O.K. Not for me, for “them.”

By being placed on a team, being read and told how to shop for a husband, I had been disciplined. I'd been told that abortion wasn't radical or placed in a queer politic of rejecting futurity. It couldn't be. I was continually disciplined in my decision, being told that “even though one foot moved off the line you can find your way back because at least you were on the line to begin with.” I felt as though my relationship to my own sexual identity had been marked null and void. After all, the book, the comments have taught my body that if I disclose about my abortion, the assumption becomes one of straightness, that $1 + 1$ will always = 2.

Even though after my abortion my body never felt the same, reacted the same, it changed and changes with every word, I was corrected.

Placed back on the path through the societal rhetoric of futurity through shame, through being shamed.

[Performer places another color of water within the larger bowl. While not looking at the audience she continues.]

Remember going to the local pool? You knew you shouldn't piss in the pool, that was against the rules but, at the same time, you knew the chlorine would eliminate the germs from spreading. It can be contained. And everyone knew it was happening, everyone was doing it, but it was difficult to catch the culprits. Others close to you may know but unless you verbalize it, you can swim away with just a few dirty looks. Most people just swim away and never have a second thought about it.

[The performer frantically puts the remaining colors all in the bowl]

But I, I feel guilty for peeing in the pool because I have chosen to make my urine look blue or red or maybe just yellow but illuminated none the less. It is as though I walked in the gates on a perfect summer day. The slight breeze reducing the sizzling heat on my body and the water just cool enough to allow each step I make into the water one of relief. The pool, although public, not too busy on this particular day but I still have to navigate between the other swimmers also enjoying the water. In that moment, though, I cannot swim away from my release.

I talked about it. And although this pool metaphor may make no sense to you, and maybe it makes no sense to me, but it might be because when you piss in the pool, you feel some warmth on your leg but you can just swim away; there is no stain, no reminisce that reminds you that you did the ultimate taboo. I feel damn guilty for peeing in that fucking pool and damn guilty for talking about it. And there's always the looks.

It never feels the same.

At least next time, there's the chlorine. I should just trust the chlorine, the book, the corrective.

[The performer puts a few drops of bleach in the water and watches as the dye disappears; the water returns to its normal color or lack of color. Before the entirety of the water clears, the performer begins speaking and pace quickens.]

Even in my moments of pondering where I think, "I am proud of my abortion. Proud to finally give the finger to the suffocating expectancies and ideologies that drown my every breath", I stop *[Pace begins to slow]* because even in the thought, the possibility that abortion may have queered reproduction for me, my body remembers its disciplining. Can I be proud of abortion? What does it mean to be proud anyway? To brag, to gloat, to remind, to defend? I defend but because I'm proud or to survive?

Can I be proud and guilty and shameful all together?

Have I moved away from some archaic duty to reproduce or have I reaffirmed my straightness, publicly?

Like I said *[looking back at the now clear water]*, it just never looks the same.

[Performer returns to the chair on stage left. Slowly smiling and contemplating, the performer slowly continues.]

I believed in the moments between sounds where a space exists that holds time by the throat. To be there, in a breadth, a sound, a nothing; my own horizon, utopia.

I wish I could lean on those moments but really, I wait. I lean on time, lie next to eat, bathe with it, break bread with it. My body pulses with every moment that time takes from me. There's no escape--you're either in it or waiting for it but time defines me either way. It only took one moment, one breath, one choice. Now I live in a space. A space with only time, a space with question marks, a space with tears and feelings and strength, a space to *find myself a husband...*

I believed in the moments between sounds and now, I wait and wonder when the fuck my future is gonna get here. I wait and try to waste time but I don't know how.

[The performer sits silently for approximately 5 seconds before continuing]

Maybe this is just a disclosure. Maybe I do want to navigate, with you, to an ends where I understand where abortion "fits."

As Calvin Thomas explains, "Heteronormative sex is teleologically narrativized sex: sex with a goal, a purpose, and a product. The ends—children—justify the means" (33). But I had rejected the ends and really, just enjoy the means. So, is just "doing"

sex for the purpose of liking it queer? (See Calvin page 33). For rejecting this, in my mind, horrible call for a child as the ends?

Or, had I just engaged in attempts to “prove” my heterosexuality? By proclaiming I had aborted, had I, in some pathological engrained form of heteronormativity, tried to say, “I messed up BUT, at least you know I’m straight!” Is that how I’m read even if it’s not my choice? Thomas also indicates that: “precisely because there is no final “proof” of heterosexuality, heterosexuality must constantly set about trying to prove itself” (28). Was that what the book, the comments of fertility were? A form of dissipating proof that we can never escape yet continues to re-create itself, pointing to cultural phenomena and saying “that makes you straight, good!” Or had I just tried to craft a new form of argument, created a new type of proof to outline my heterosexuality, as hollow as it may be for evidence?

It just never looks the same.

Because, after everything, all I wonder is, have I queered reproduction or has not reproducing straightened me?



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