

Once Upon A Time: Looking to the Ecstatic Past for Queer Futurity

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“Once Upon A Time” The Script

Once upon a time,
I went to an academic conference.
It was an ordinary conference—
name badges, nervous smiles, break-out sessions.
I attended a very unordinary panel.
“Sex, Sexuality, and Disability”
There was only one panelist.
The topic of her paper was devoteeism.
Devotees are sexually attracted to disabled bodies.
Some use the word fetish.
Her paper was well written and delivered.
She was calm and soft spoken,
She looked rather ordinary,
short brown hair, typical conference costume.
A very ordinary person,

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a very touchy topic.
Disability fetishes are controversial.
After her presentation we walked to the elevator.
She said someone once asked her an odd question.
“Why are you researching devoteeism?”
Seemed like a fair question to me,
typical conference question.
She said it was a personal question,
that should be discussed over drinks.
It hit me,
she was a devotee!
I responded,
“I like drinks.”
Soon we were at the bar.
The usual conference conversation.
I noticed her gazing at me.
I asked,
“What?”
she said,
“Your hair is so beautiful.”
“Oh, oh, thanks.”
“No really, where do you get your hair cut?”
“I need to get a hair cut.”
“No, your hair is so beautiful.”
Her cell phone rang.
It was her husband.
Her daughter was missing her mommy.
Reality check.
The conversation moved from my hair,

To the gendering of little girls.
Pink clothes, princess parties, two-piece bathing suits.
Dinner time interrupted our conversation.
We ate with queer feminist disability scholars,
She was rooming with two of them.
Apparently, they had a cuddle pile last night.
She said,
“You should join the cuddle pile.”
“Me?”
“You should stay with us.”
“What?”
“Yea, you can sleep in my bed.”
Loving her delightful directness,
I stumbled and politely declined.
We finished our meal over conference talk.
Walking to the bar, the subject of marriage came up.
She said marriage doesn’t necessarily mean monogamy.
They could be polyamorous.
All right.
At the bar, our conversation continued to get better.
Not only was she polyamorous,
but she had a paraplegic boyfriend.
I asked,
“How does your husband feel about your boyfriend?”
She had the best answer ever:
“He wants me to be happy.”
We did not talk about them anymore.
We talked about sex with women.
She had made out with a few straight women,

Never went the full nine yards.
She stressed frustration with straight flirtation.
Welcome to the family.
It is a right of passage.
She had it bad.

I took it upon myself to ease some of those frustrations, so I leaned in for a kiss, and after a few long, passionate ones, she proposed we go back to my hotel.

I accepted.

She asked if I had a room to myself. I said,

I do.

One thing I especially appreciate about drunk lesbian sex is that women tend to take off their own clothes, quickly, and we did not waste anytime getting completely naked, and she did not waste anytime going down on me. It was like she was waiting for this moment for a long time and had all this pent-up excitement.

I came.

It was alright.

There is something to be said for experience and alcohol.

She said she was ending, and I said, no problem, I have magic hands. She laid on her back, and I sat between her legs staring up at her naked body, as I slowly started working my magic hands, I could sense her openness, newness, and history. She had a deep red scar that stretched from above her navel down to her hairline, making her body seem fragile, vulnerable. The contrast of the scarlet scar on white skin that staggered down her abdomen marked a space of invasion. My eyes continued to work up her body. Her breasts were perfect; then again, I have never met a pair of boobs I didn't like. I adored her big, beautiful breasts, eloquently leaning to either side of her body. Continuing my gaze, I could not see her face for she had her hand over her eyes, and the big fat rock on her wedding ring captured my attention, instantly flooding my body with guilt. Oh my gosh, I am breaking the holy bonds of marriage, the matrimonial commitment, till death do us part, in sickness and in health. Wait a minute, she got permission. He wants her to be happy, and I am making her happy.

Fuck you, marriage!

Then I thought about her daughter who doesn't wear pink and misses her mommy and realized I had never had sex with a mother before. Looking at her body differently, her body felt different, her anatomy took on new meanings, which brought new meanings to my body interacting with hers. I realized my fingers were in the birth canal, the place where life begins. Her breasts were more than just objects, more than just another set of boobs, they nurtured her child; they were the first site of mother-daughter bonding.

And now I am a mother fucker!

But wait just a hot second, she is a devotee, and she saw me present a paper on a dyslexic way of knowing. Am I being fetishized? Does she find my cognitive disability hot? Holy fucking shit. She arched her back and tilted her pelvis down and her long deep scar glared back at me. I became mesmerized by her body's ability to open and close, to heal, to persevere. I reached out and gently ran my wet hand down her scarlet scar as her body moved uncontrollably with pleasure. Maybe I am the devotee? In this moment, maybe I am the devotee?

Her back arched up and down and my hands thrust faster as I helped her to orgasm. A surge of energy came down her body to my hands. Pulsating, she no longer seemed fragile, she no longer seemed vulnerable, as the power of her orgasm moved through me, drawing me closer, I leaned over and gently nibbled on her inner thigh, she finished.

We hugged. We hugged tightly. We laid on our sides, embraced, gentle kisses, warm legs entangled, as my hand moved up and down up and down the small of her back. I remember thinking, "She is so soft, I could rub her skin for days." We talked. We decided it would be best for her to sleep in her own bed, due to our reputations with her conference friends. After all she is married, and I am a big dyke. We made out intermittently while slowly putting on articles of clothing. One last embrace, one long kiss.

I walked her down stairs.

I watched her disappear into the wind.

The next day, business as usual,

conference panels,

the last plenary.

I took the train home.

A young man sitting in front of me
asked to use my phone,
to call his friends to pick him up from the station.

He tried to make conversation.

“Want to go to the bars with us tonight?”

“Oh no thanks.”

“I am just moving to town.”

“Cool.”

He moved to the seat across the aisle.

“What are the good bars here?”

“Are you 21?”

“No, 20, but my friends get me drinks.”

“I go to old people bars.”

“How old are you?”

“32.”

“Are you married?”

“No.”

“Do you have a boy friend?”

“No.”

He genuinely felt sorry for me.

“Don’t worry, you’ll find a husband”

“Thanks?”

I’ll never forget his next line.

“You will find a nice blond-haired, blue-eyed guy.”

Puzzled, I looked at him.

He was a blond-haired, blue-eyed guy.

He was referring to himself.

I smiled.

He smiled back.

Do I tell him?
Do I tell him I only have sex with women?
I hate the sexualization of lesbianism.
Do I allow myself to be bombarded?
Bombarded with ignorant questions?
Do I risk potential violence?
Anyone could be listening.
Trapped on the train.
There is always a threat of violence.

My mind floods with visions of big beautiful breasts, soft silky skin, the deep scarlet
scar, mother fucking devotee sex, identity shattering sex—I walk differently in this
world. I am invisible.

In this moment,
on this train,
do I tell this kid,
I only have sex with women?
Not this time.
Not this time.

Artist's Statement

Queerness's ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world.

— José Esteban Muñoz

The sexual situation I reenact in my performance is not a regular occurrence for me. This identity shattering sexual encounter was my first entry in my “fuck journal.” I started writing this story on the train ride home from the conference, which was what I was doing when the young man sitting in front of me asked to use my phone. It was almost like he could sense what I was writing and wanted to help me trouble the fluidity of identities, marriage, heteronormativity, and the visibility of sexuality.

I sent the performance script to the woman with whom I shared this experience. Her only response was that it was weird to hear the story from my perspective, and that she did not mind if I pursued performance and/or publication. Sadly, our frequency of communication via online chatting suddenly and drastically declined. I question telling this story. From an autoethnographic and queer approach, why is this story simultaneously compelling and troublesome for me to publically articulate? What performance theories and techniques work to frame and communicate my personal narrative? How does this performance enter into the conversation of queer futurity? These are the questions I grapple with here in my artist statement.

I turn to Tony Adams and Stacy Holman Jones' essay, “Telling Stories: Reflexivity Queer Theory, and Autoethnography,” to help make sense of the complexities of writing queer personal stories. They argue that queer theory and autoethnography share a core tenant, to disrupt dominant ideologies.

Autoethnography—a method that uses personal experience with a culture and/or a cultural identity to make unfamiliar characteristics of the culture and/or identity familiar for insiders and outsiders—and queer theory—a dynamic and shifting theoretical paradigm that developed in response to a normalizing of heterosexuality and from a desire to disrupt insidious social conventions—share cooperative ideological commitments. (110)

This passage helps me reflect on the importance of publicly articulating queer women's sexual autoethnographic experiences to help make sexual identities more familiar for insiders and outsiders. The performance calls into question the normalizing of heterosexuality, including dominant cultural assumptions about motherhood, marriage, and monogamy; professional conference behavior; queer temporalities; as well as what counts as public and private space. The desire to disrupt, trouble, and destabilize dominant notions of gender and sexuality compels me to write, rewrite, and perform this story.

Additionally, Adams and Holman Jones argue that there are always risks in telling our (queer) stories and remind us of autoethnography and queer theory's commitment

to reflexivity. In performing this story, I risk moralizing judgments, homophobic responses, accusations of insensitively “kissing and telling,” objectifying women’s sexual experience for (hetero) male consumption, and so on. It is with trepidation that I write about an intimate encounter and with reflexivity, understanding the norms that influence storytelling; understanding how we represent ourselves and others in our (re)telling of experience; and, the one that I struggle with the most, understanding how others in the story might feel about their lack of ability to respond or contribute to their representation (especially the young man on the train). I find solace and reassurance in ambiguity, “offering up multiple interpretations of nonfoundational, wavering, becoming identities” (112). For example, I question if I am the devotee. It is through “embracing the texture of knowing without grabbing on to sure and fast answers” (114) that helps me justify telling this story.

The next question is *how* I tell this story. I argue that conceptualizing my sexual encounter in a framework of time is a useful means of theorizing queer experience, and I draw on performance theories to construct an overarching framework of time for my performance script. Judith Halberstam argues that “queer time, in that it shifts our attentions away from discrete bodies performing their desires, offers an alternative framework for the theorization of disqualified and anticanonical knowledges of queer practices” (quoted in Dinshaw et al., 182). For me, Halberstam is asking queer scholars not to focus solely on (re)telling the sexual acts of discrete bodies, but to turn our attention to *how* we tell our sexual stories. More specifically, I understand Halberstam to be asking for a queer framework of time to express disqualified queer sexual acts and knowledges. I attempt to address Halberstam’s call for a queer framework of time by drawing on performance theories geared toward performance practitioners that address general questions of time during the script writing process.

I turn to Marion L. Kleinau and Janet McHughes’s call to think about notions of condensed, suspended, and equivalent time when creating performances. In “Once Upon A Time,” the entire performance is representative of condensed time, for the performance is approximately 10 minutes but describes three days of events from beginning of the conference to the train ride home. Equivalent time is another term for real time, and it allowed me to represent specific conversations, capturing both the welcomed flirtation and the unwanted advances. In a performance, suspended time is longer and more detailed than equivalent time, and I use suspended time to narrate my self-perceptions and thought processes during the sexual encounter.

My writing and performance choices vary in pace and duration to mark the differences between straight and queer time and place. In his text, *Cruising Utopia*, José Muñoz makes a distinction between “*straight time*” (22) (heteronormative reproduction in terms of kinship and capital) and “*queerness’s time*” (25) (“a posterior glance” at moments, objects, and spaces that may offer emancipatory images of queerness, 22). In my performance, conference time, or *straight time*, is represented by a staccato style, or short lines interrupted by jarring head movements, and the hotel room scene, or *queerness’s time*, is marked by suspended and flowing vocal and physical choices. I mark the hotel room as queerness’s time, not only due to the acts of ecstasy, but also per-

formed through extended description, sentence structure, prose style, and pronunciation of the words. In the performance, queerness's time and space is distinctly different from the formal, staccato straight time of the conference space to visibly delineate these spaces. Additionally, my body movements help communicate the different times and spaces. When delivering the short staccato lines, my hands are (bound) behind my back to represent the social restrictions of this public professional heteronormative space. In the hotel scene of suspended time, or queerness's time, my hands burst out from behind my back and my movement in the scene resembles traditional jazz technique.

My artistic choices to delineate time and space are an effort to contribute to theories and possibilities of queer futurity. According to Muñoz, queerness is always on the horizon, and we seek queerness as something that is not yet here. Capturing moments of queer ecstasy through storytelling may illuminate a "queerness to come, a way of being in the world that is glimpsed through reveries in a quotidian life that challenges the dominance of an affective world, a present, full of anxiousness and fear" (25). My artistic performance choices that delineate queerness's time and straight time attempts to communicate Muñoz's notion that, "queerness's time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time" (25). It was important for me to mark that queer time and space was away/distinct from the conference talk, conversations about little girls wearing pink, the plenaries, marriage, the hetero advances by young men, and so on and so on.

Queerness provides hope for queer futurity and an ephemeral release from the formality, abrupt pace, and physical restrictions of the present. According to Muñoz, queerness is always on the horizon; queerness is the ideality. He writes, "We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future" (1). He argues that we must struggle through the reality of the here and now to think and feel a *then and there*. For me, the unexpected moments of queer ecstasy and their reflexive (re)telling hold a special place of possibility, of queer futurity, of an ideal that is not yet here.

In queer autoethnography, the (re)telling of queerness opens up possibilities for questioning identities, making the unfamiliar familiar, and disrupting heteronormativity. Additionally, queer autoethnography and their ecstatic performances have the potential to destabilize academically acceptable forms of knowledge production by bringing the peripheral—the taboo, the visceral, the private—to the center of academic conversations. My "fuck journal" isn't just about fucking, in the literal, embodied sense. Rather, it also does the work of destabilizing acceptable forms of scholarship. This story is the only entry in my "fuck journal," but I do not think it will be the last. The future of queerness or queerness itself is predicated on looking to the past, taking the risk, and telling our queer stories of ecstasy.

Works Cited

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