

Notes from a *Pretty Straight Girl*: Questioning Identities in the Field

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October 11, 2012, National Coming Out Day

I'm coming out as a bisexual, queer, feminist, monogamist, social scientist. Watch what happens if I change the look of the sentence:

I'm a/bi/sexual/queerfeminist/monogam/ist-academic

I am: bi sexual queer-feminist Mo(nag)m ist academic

Though I'm still working the hyphens and run-ons, I'm not as evolved as two Facebook friends who choose polyamorous and pansexual. The most interesting thing to me today is that I don't write anything in my own status update, not even a haiku about my mental crush on Jennifer Baumgardner who writes things about bisexuality like, "It doesn't imply abnormal flux as opposed to normal fixed identity, but rather a human being's singular and emotional evolution" (52). I just click the "Like" button for others' coming out declarations. Why can't I finish this essay about being queer, sketching out the places and times I feel disconnects between my personal labels and imperfect enactments of them? I'm wedged into the crevice of an identity gap, stuck in the winter of fieldwork, as M. Christina González would call it (Faulkner and Hecht).

July 26, 2012, American Association of University Professors' Summer Institute, Chicago

"Can I tell you something without offending you—no wait, I shouldn't," Rob asks and unasks in one breath, leaning close to my right ear to be heard. We are drinking in what I think is an Irish bar close to the Palmer House Hilton in Chicago. We found no empty seats or tables, so we are standing by the dark wood door and clover-green banners advertising beer with some of my colleagues from Bowling Green and members of the AAUP national office.

"Go ahead. I won't be offended," I say, and take a gulp of my Manhattan to indicate my goodwill. When I walked into a conference workshop late a few hours earlier,

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I recognized Rob four rows back. It was as if we were still office mates at Penn State, kvetching about finishing our dissertations. Though now we are both grievance officers in our universities' faculty unions, growling about the state of the profession.

"My wife thought you were a lesbian," Rob said out of the corner of his mouth, arching his eyebrow. We were just an afternoon into the reunion and had not exchanged the 12-year timeline of life events, just the expected soccer picture of his boy and the pre-school picture of my girl.

"I'm not straight!" I shout. My tone is inappropriate, but I'm frustrated. Rob's statement about sexual proclivities makes my petulant, adolescent-self puff out, ready for a knife fight. I started dating Kathryn after Rob and I left Penn State with completed dissertations, but then there was the 15-years-older-than-me man I lived with for a year, followed by my husband. I can't unravel the pattern when my sexual identity is a question, when it's important to tangle or unravel the non-linear graph of whom I sleep with and what and why I love. Why do identity markers hinge on who is my partner at a particular moment rather than on me, the bisexual person (Baumgardner 6)?

May 19, 2000, Girl Bar, West Hollywood

It takes me two warm-up laps around the block and a quick coke in a dirty diner to work up the courage to stumble into the club alone. My flight impulse makes my stomach sour; waiting for my ID to pass inspection in front of the club feels like a lesbian ID card check. I joked earlier with Jo, a volunteer at the Mazer Lesbian Collection, that I needed to show her my card to be a legitimate visitor. Jo informed me that the card joke circulates, but she never asked me, "Are you a lesbian?" This question I have been asked both explicitly and implicitly through *the look* or *flirt test* too many times to remember. She showed me the personal lesbian history tucked away from the rooms that hold more public newspaper clippings and novels without comment or question. Only the real lesbians get to see these letters and love notes.

After I pay the dance club's entrance fee and get the stamp on the back of my hand, I make my way through the steel-gray carpeted lounge area to the bar. I'm meeting Mila here at the Friday night *Girl Bar*, the revolving lesbian dance space at the Factory club in WeHo. She asked me if I would meet her for a drink after I nosed into her conversation with a clerk about girl bars yesterday at the LGBT bookstore. Because I was four days into a two-week ethnographic study of lesbian space, I knew *all* of the gay hangouts. I expect Mila to appear around 11, so I have time to write notes about the scene. A metal cage in the center of the room divides it into three sections: comfy chairs and couches, dancing cage surrounded by stools, and the bar. This place reeks of eroticism—the cool décor with dove grey walls, pearl grey pleather overstuffed couch, low barrel tables, steel support beams and ceiling tiles, tiny lights on curvy metal rods, heavy grey velour curtain dividing the lounge and dance spaces—as do all of the women in it. I step around the steel-rod bars to the shiny counter, tugging my too-short lace top over my black rayon skirt with the too-high side slits. I

think the lacy t-shirt looks like a box of crayons vomited on it, but when we were cos-tuming for the night at the Motel 6 my classmates convinced me that it radiated hot club vibes. I had to take a shopping trip for field clothes, since my suitcase was full of my usual uniform of cut-offs and striped boy t-shirts. *How could I have predicted what I would need for this immersion ethnography class back in North Carolina?* I hadn't considered what I would study or know what participant observation meant here in the land of lipstick lesbians, as the queer researchers Van Gelder and Brandt deemed it.

When the bartender asks what I want I order a coke, not a beer, because I'm working. Alcohol would soothe my anxiety, but I need to be sober Sandra, the earnest, fresh-out-of-graduate-school communication researcher. "Would you like a cherry? A lime? A lemon?" The bartender wears a black chiffon turtleneck with a black lace bra underneath and black jeans. As she pours my coke into a glass, I discover all of the bartenders are women dressed in the same uniform.

"No, thanks," I say to the hot bartender. All of the bartenders are hot, of course.

I want to get away from this interaction, away from hot bartender #1 and her straight, raven-black hair that gleams under the TVs suspended above the bar, which are playing geometric patterns, swirls, lines and squares of color in slow motion. I feel as if I will be laughed at, turned away, and punched in the arm by the bartender and everyone else in the club because I'm not gay or pretty enough. Going to a bar alone, especially a woman-centered one, frightens me more than my first day in graduate school, more than the first class I taught as an assistant professor, more than telling my friends that I hooked up with my new female colleague. Maybe I'm not ready for all of the raw eroticism. I can't walk down the streets in Greenville, North Carolina, and hold my girlfriend Kathryn's hand. How can I act suave and sophisticated when it requires pretending I see this many attractive women who are openly into other women every day?

There is a female couple making out against the wall to the right of the bar. My new outfit purchased for tonight does not work. I do not blend into the lipstick land of WeHo. And it isn't just because I wore the Danskos Kathryn bought me, which are comfortable and decidedly unsexy. I laugh about feminist scholar Suzanne Pharr's notion that "lesbians look like all women and all women look like lesbians" (20). Most people in college assumed I was gay, especially the men I refused to suck face with at parties while I danced with my female friends during slow dances. "*Are you a lesbian? I hear you date (read: sleep with) your roommates.*" The price was lesbian baiting, being called lesbian or dyke or feminazi when I didn't act straight enough, didn't flirt appropriately, and when my behavior threatened male privilege. The goal is to push women back into subordinate positions. Using lesbian to label a woman acts as a control for all women in that no defense is possible. The refusal of male authority and approval means being perceived as lesbian, to lose heterosexual privilege because of unacceptable behavior. Because sexual identity is often (in)visible. I was not dating women then, but my crimes were independence and mouthiness, refusing to be a straightforward subordinate flirt. I got dates with men by making fun of their clothes (the Russian Scientist), their religion (the Jesuit School Student) and their problems

with feminists (the French work abroad student in London) and traditional gender roles (the older artist). Insults meant I left with phone numbers or their hands down my pants. It is difficult to prove sexual credentials. In the food line at a house party, I told the Scientist I knew he wasn't from the US because of the stitching on his loafers. We argued about the relevance of empiricism for the study of relationships once we got past the "what do you study" small talk. "The boiling point of water does not matter!" I remember yelling, so that other conversations around us stopped, pissed that he was insulting my interpretive research approach. I got his phone number on a paper napkin. I left our five-year relationship to date Kathryn. In the closing relationship arguments, he accused me of sleeping with my best female friend in graduate school, yet his last words were, "You're not a real lesbian."

August, 2012, West Hall, Bowling Green State University Campus

My 40-year-old self still wants to be asked to the gay prom. I have returned to my field notes, digging inside my moldy office to find the manila folder with the descriptions of conversations, phone numbers and playbills from my earlier (2000) ethnographic experience. I read in spiral bound notebooks about my annoyance when I got asked about being gay, a lesbian. I still don't have a working definition of lesbian, though social psychologist Charlotte Chuck Tate thinks that everyone else can't break it down, either. "...a new insight appears nearly every four years, but these insights rarely result in overarching, workable, detailed models of how to broaden the scholarly understanding of 'lesbian identity'" (17-18). These questions about my status as lesbian were all asked in lesbian spaces when I was dating a woman. I smirk with a little thrill at the collection of numbers, though. And the memory of getting bitten twice by two different lesbians in two different bars. I remember the awkwardness (and not the skill) in playing the novice researcher.

There are also the other moments in fieldwork when implicit questions about my identities necessitated the creation of an explicit script. Recruiting interviewees for the narrative study on LGBTQ Jewish American identity I completed with my postdoc mentor, Michael Hecht, required: "I'm gay. He's not. He's Jewish. I'm not." I identified with the bisexual lesbian; a label she chose to honor her past relationships with men and signal a shift in desire. Identity labels are political by necessity, even as experiences swim (drown?) in the Sea of Flux. Funny how now the people I meet usually perceive me as queer, how I have ended up an officially unofficial mentor of women who love women: four graduate advisees, a roommate, a research assistant. I note the raised eyebrows or mouth twitch when my male partner and child become apparent. I guess it is like the ethnographer Tony Adams' claim that coming out is a process, a life-long series of decisions about how to perform as bisexual or semi-straight or queer-straight or anything but just another married chick with a kid and a dog. To me, I have made the queer choices that on the surface reflect traditional norms. Always, I must explain that I'm not straight, that my younger self never planned to be married or to parent. That my current relationship is based on equality and not misogyny. And

that's hot. Yes, I have a male partner. Yes, I have a biological child with said male partner. But who and what I get to be with a lover is more important than genitals. The generalized other looking down and wanting to lasso desire creates a need for all of this talk and impossible explanation. I can't describe the feeling and memories of my fist inside another woman, the pinnacle of my woman-identified woman-loving embodied experience. (Thank you, Susie Bright, for explicit tutorials on the art of fist-ing!)

10:35 PM, Waiting for Mila, Girl Bar, WeHo

Mila emerges from the subway-like tunnel that carries people from the front entrance of the club on Melrose up some industrial stairs to the bar area. She's early. Her mocha skin blends with the dusty rose v-necked T-shirt tucked into her dark blue jeans. She walks past me and enters the dance area to the right. When she re-emerges from the dance room, she spots me and walks over. Her maroon tinted lipstick stays on my cheek after she greets me, and she rubs at it with two fingertips. I smell the garlic she must have eaten for dinner on her breath.

We settle in to lesbian watch. "That woman is straight," I say to Mila as a woman with a silver lamé tube top walks past our perch on the couch in the room next to the dance floor. She has stick-straight, long, honey-colored hair and is walking beside a stylish man. I am not sure why I know this, so I ask Mila. "Why do I know that woman is straight?"

Mila informs me that the woman dressed in lamé is not with a gay man, while most of the other men visible in the club are gay. Also, she is not scoping out any of the women present, like Mila and I are; no appreciative or speculative glances. I recount the number of men we have seen and their appearance. Mila told me earlier that she thought it was difficult to tell, outside of clubs, whether women were lesbians or not. When she wasn't in a lesbian bar she was afraid to ask women to dance in case they were straight and would be offended by her request. "Sometimes it's hard to know. I don't look like a lesbian and most people don't know." Mila tells me she wants to ask someone to dance as we check out suitable partners.

"Did you ever notice that lesbians are all alcoholics? They all drink too much and have sex on the first date. I would *never* have sex with a man on the first date. I would take time to get to know him for a few months at least," Mila says. I don't tell her that my pattern is the opposite when it comes to men and women and sexual decision-making. While she preaches, we watch a woman by the bar who makes no secret that she is prowling, bottle of beer lazily grasped in one hand and arms hooked on the bar counter behind her as she scans the room like a hawk.

"Lesbians go home with someone and have sex," Mila says and finishes her beer in one gulp. Mila prays her ex-girlfriend does not walk in because she wants to meet some datable women in peace. We agree then to each ask someone to dance before we can leave the bar.

May 20, 2000, *The Palms, WeHo*

The woman smoothly sidles up to the seat beside me, reminiscent of an actor in an old cowboy movie. Her feet do not roll from heel to toe; rather, she plants them flat in order to allow room for the cell phone clipped to her pocket. We are in the middle of a conversation that I can't recall beginning. I noticed her at the other end of the lacquered wood bar with two beers in front of her (*MGD and Bud Light! Why do lesbians drink such crappy beer?*), and now she and I are making bad poetry.

"I like you. You are so pretty," Krrrrrla says to me again and again. She makes fun of my inability to roll my r's, presses her right knee into my left leg, caresses my ankles and legs with her fingers enough to notice I need to shave, kisses my neck (but not my lips after I say I've got a girlfriend I want to keep). I get her to promise to try a Heineken next.

"Do you like gay and lesbian people?" Karla asks as she swallows a mouthful of Miller.

"Are you asking me if I'm gay?" I say, and think this is a strange question to ask in a lesbian bar. *Aren't all the women here gay? Would you ask that in a straight bar?* I pause, not wanting to answer. Do you have to be a lesbian if you date women? Can you be gay if you don't use the title lesbian? Think about that T-shirt slogan—*I'm not a lesbian, but my girlfriend is.*

Karla points to my clothes, that stretchy long black skirt with the side slits and black camisole underneath the periwinkle silk shirt (this time), when I ask the reason for her question. As I struggle with the best way to sit on the stool to make my skirt cover my legs, I ask, "How do you know if someone is gay?"

"I just know if someone's gay," Karla replies, tapping her chest with her right hand to emphasize her skill. "I just know. I always know." She leans over and bites the top part of my right thigh, exposed from that damn skirt slit. I shoo her away with a limp gesture, not certain of my playful reaction. If a man touched me as much as she has been touching me, I would stop it with a stinging hand slap and an insult. *Is it the newness of gaining access to the world of women flirting with women? Or maybe it's my neophyte negotiation of what participant observation means I can do and say and feel.*

"But *how* do you know?" I am insistent because of the contradiction between her question and her boasting—The question, "are you gay?" And the confident, "I know, I always know." *Look at your clothing and the way you stand* she says nonverbally by pointing at me, yet she isn't certain. We are playing the pickup game.

Karla jumps from the stool, pushing it back with her right leg. She grasps her beer bottle, ignoring the napkin stuck to the bottom. She takes a drink while holding out her pinkie, and a man's silver link watch slides down her arm. "Gay men," she says.

Then she shakes her hands to begin a new demonstration, and I feel as if we are playing charades. Karla places one hand in her navy tailored pants pocket and the other one on her hip as she props one leg on the brass runner under the bar. She takes up room, lots of room.

“Lesbian,” she says.

I wonder why I am being asked these questions again, now? What does this mean? In the past, men asked this question about my sexuality. This is the first time I’ve been faced with this question since I began dating a woman, and a woman is doing the asking in an explicitly lesbian bar. Is my behavior again unacceptable? And why is behavior *the* marker? And why are these girly clothes not working me into a femme lesbian look (Walker et al. 91)?

May 26, 2000, Return to Girl Bar

When I return to the *Girl Bar* the next Friday, a woman with black bra straps showing under a black tank top talks to me. She props her black Doc Martens on the barrel table holding her vodka and tonic, looks at me, and asks, “What are you doing here?” Her jean-shirted arm sweeps around the muted gray interior and points at my notepad. I explain my interest in lesbian spaces.

“That’s a good line.” She laughs. Her voice vibrates with sarcasm. “That’s the worst line I have ever heard.”

“No, really,” I say.

“Are you gay?” she says. She looks into my eyes. I avert my eyes, though I am dizzy from smelling the scent of her shampoo and want to reach out and grasp the khaki leg touching mine.

“Why?” I ask, not sure how this became a question.

“Why would straight people study lesbians in their natural habitats?” I think too late that this may have been an invitation, but I don’t get a chance to ask her to dance because I see a group of women from the lesbian support chat group. They wave me over to order beers and talk about the predatory lesbians at the *Girl Bar*.

May 27, 2000, VIP Lounge at the El Rey

Mika and I lean against the railing talking about “lesbian looks” while we wait for a *Bar Mitzvah* to be cleared out of the space, so the dance party *FUEL* can begin. We talk about whether butch, soft butch, and femme accurately describe lesbian appearance (Walker et al. 91-92). She points out rocker chicks for me to admire. Mika, my key informant and *complicated friend* of my former graduate school roommate, has been telling me that I will fall into a lesbian look, stop looking “too soft.” This reminds me of when Kathryn also told me at the airport baggage claim in Madison, Wisconsin that straight men still looked at me, read me as heterosexual, but that would go away. When? When I become more lesbian? When I claim to find the *category of “women”* attractive? Attraction for a woman and being attractive to women differs from being attractive to men. Why are they conflating my sexuality with the label lesbian? I don’t tell Mika that most of the women I have talked to in the past two weeks eschew the lesbian label. Chew it up and spit it out.

A woman approaches wearing a black lace bra under an unbuttoned aqua work shirt with “Gail” sewn in Miami Dolphin orange. She talks to the woman on our left. Eventually we introduce ourselves, since we are sharing the same spot in the lounge. Gail asks me if Mika and I are buddies. A less ambiguous question follows.

“Are you gay?” Examining my breasts, which are encased in a paisley print low-cut strappy dress, must not have provided Gail with the nonverbal answer she was seeking.

“Why?” I feel insulted and angry, as other women around me have somewhat exposed breasts. I look like them. I see halter-tops and bras.

“You look like a pretty straight girl.”

December, 2012 or 2017, Bowling Green, Ohio

When I workshopped and received reviews of previous versions of this essay, a common response was “Where is the emotion? Why care about labels?” My peers recognized the missing desire replaced with a sanitary ethnographic voice. Forget my claim that this was all about lesbian space. I forgot about “epistemological vulnerability” that “somewhat disconcertingly, fieldwork requires researchers to deliberately abandon their certainty and expertise” (Lindlof and Taylor 134). This imagining and reimagining of what bisexual desire means and where a bisexual social scientist with a tangled trajectory fits in various spaces feels too Sisyphean. Describing desire is like trying to describe that perfect pink drink you had on vacation and can never recreate in your own bar. Describing how you enact important identities is an escaping analogy. Perhaps part of the problem is fixed spaces and identities—a fixation on lesbians being lesbians in lesbian bars (Mingé and Zimmerman 189). The sexologist Lisa Diamond has made her career interviewing women about sexual desire, identity, and who they love, and has discovered that women loving women is common. And also changeable, malleable dependent on life circumstances, often accompanied by no identity labels. Being a lesbian can mean identifying at this moment or be part of a life-course coming out trajectory (Tate 24). The label is bound with gender identity, though gender identity and sexual desire for particular sexual behaviors fluctuates across lesbian labels (Walker et al. 102). In other words, what we call ourselves and what we do and desire are not inherently related.

Can I tell you what this all means now? I still get annoyed when read as a straight girl, though as an ethnographer I categorize and label others for a living. I battle the postmodern police and myself over the claim that labels are simply tools for understanding patterns of behavior. Is calling out individuals like Rob and the Scientist who (mistakenly) label me hypocritical, even if the response stems from my fears of not being queer enough? Paaige Turner writes that the flux of embodied experience may best be presented in flashbacks and flash forwards in order to carry the past and the future into the present: “Using both folded and linear notions of time expands the notion of context to include all temporal contexts that provide meaning within a situated experience, particularly within a situated bodily experience” (766). Thus, the es-

say that took 12 years to write represents the back and forth roller coaster of understanding and embodying identities. Reading Jeanine Mingé and Amber Zimmerman's ethnography of sexuality in Los Angeles, specifically the chapters on WeHo, concretize the need for labels as political action at the same time that experiences of love, sexuality, and gender slip and slide from dance floor to work desk to bedroom (183). Mingé's tale of feeling out of place and awkward in lesbian spaces in WeHo resonated with me and reminds us to remember the layeredness of identities. As ethnographers, we desire understanding of when and how to use labels, recognizing the political implications of visibility. That is why in this version of the essay I write my experiences and desire into the narrative with less reservation and more verve (Krizek 147). The only way to make any sense of these labeling practices is through the personal story, the reflexivity of the researcher then and now and later projected like a holograph on a dirty dance floor.

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