

The Makings of a Boyfriend: Doing Sexuality through Parasocial Relationships

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I chuckle at his admission. He doesn't say it directly. He says it with a sound reminiscent of a catcall, "Mmm mmm." It catches me off guard, so I immediately turn around to see if I heard him correctly. It was an unexpected move. He put his cards on the table, and I had no poker face ready to mask my surprise. I am fairly certain he's gay, but I didn't think he had a thing for me.

"What was that for?" I awkwardly ask.

"I'm admiring the view," he shoots back.

What view? I think. I'm fairly thin. Maybe he had a thing for thinner guys.

I joined this guy at the library early that evening. I've only known him for a few months and met him through a mutual acquaintance. We don't have any classes together at the university, but he is a tae kwon do instructor and, as is the story of my life, I am interested in getting into shape. On this particular day, his tae kwon do class was cancelled. I was the only one who had shown up and he said he needed to check out books for an assignment.

"Would you like to accompany me to the library?" he asks.

"Sure," I reply. After all, I have nothing better to do now that class is cancelled.

"I want to unzip your pants and give you a blow job," he confesses.

I snicker again, not accustomed to come-ons as straightforward as this.

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“Quit fucking around,” I tell him, unable to think of a better response. We play this game back and forth for the rest of the evening. We play it back and forth for the rest of the week. By the end of the week, I am running out of awkward retorts. I am nineteen years old, and I am a virgin. His come-ons keep getting stronger and so does my desire.

Sitting in the driver’s seat of my Ford Tempo, he makes another attempt.

“I want to blow you. It will feel good,” he says before reassuring, “I’ve never had any complaints.”

I’m out of excuses, and I’m tired of pretending I don’t want to fool around.

“Okay,” I finally say, surrendering to my desires. Moments have passed since I’ve uttered the words and I still can’t believe I’ve agreed to do this.

“But we have to do it at your dorm room,” I insist.

He doesn’t like this suggestion. “I have a roommate,” he says. “Let’s go to your place.”

He knows that I live with my grandmother. My grandmother’s house sounds like the last place I’d want to have my first sexual experience—too many pictures of dead relatives. The thought of some guy wrapping his lips around my cock while dead ancestors look down from Heaven in disapproval doesn’t put me at ease. He puts his hand on my leg and starts sliding it upward. This puts me at ease. After all, my grandparents probably aren’t home. My grandfather works a late night job, and my grandmother is likely at church. I drive to her house, and my suspicions are correct. Nobody’s home.

After I park at my grandmother’s house and turn off the car, I lead him to the front door and pull out my keys. My hands are shaking so much it takes a bit of effort to turn the key and unlock the door. We go in and there’s no time for foreplay. I lead him straight to the spare bedroom.

“Just get comfortable. I’ve got to go check on something,” I tell him. I hurry to the bathroom and grab a wash cloth.

What the fuck am I doing? I don’t want to go to hell. Religious sermons play back in my mind. I see Jerry Falwell pointing his finger at me in contempt as he calls me a sinner. Fuck Jerry Falwell. I dampen the wash cloth and clean myself. I’ve never done this before, but this seems like a nice gesture.

I return to the spare bedroom, and my heart races. He’s not in the mood to waste time. I want to talk. There are so many things I want to say. By that, I mean there are so many things I want to ask: How many times have you done this? Are you sure we’ll be finished before my grandmother gets back? Should I let you know when I’m about to cum?

I can tell he’s ready. I unbutton my Girbaud jeans and slide them with my underwear down to my knees. Before I can even sit down, he has me inside of his mouth. With him working on my body, I lie down and look up at my grandmother’s walls. Dead relatives look down on me, surely judging me for engaging in a sexual act with another guy.

This isn’t how it happens on TV. I think of Dennis Quaid frolicking with Ellen Barkin in *The Big Easy*. His pants popped off, revealing a very fit backside, and in a moment of passion, they embraced in an unadulterated act of pleasure. I had masturbated to that scene so many times that it wasn’t hard to imagine Dennis Quaid while my friend attempted to gratify me. This wasn’t *The Big Easy* though. The complexity of the moment prevented the type of pleasure you see in the movies.

I think he thinks I am straight. I think he thinks he has conquered another straight guy, something he seems to enjoy bragging about when we talk about sex on the way back to his dorm room. On my ride back home, I question my actions. I feel bad for tainting the sanctity of my grandmother’s house. For the first time since our rendezvous, I also think about the possibility of having contracted a sexually transmitted disease.

I could have AIDS.

I pray.

“Dear God, please forgive me for what I have done. Please don’t let me have any STDs. Please keep me from ever doing it again. I promise that if I ever mess up and do something like that again, you can...you can...you can damn my soul to hell.”

That will solidify it. I will never risk going to Hell. I only hope that God will forgive me and that I can get back on the “right” track again.

I swear to God as John Michael Montgomery sings about his own vow on the radio. My mind is made up.

I’m never going to have sex with another guy again.

* * *

As long as I can remember, growing up in a small city in West Texas, God has been present in my life. My family—a Hispanic family that placed a high degree of importance on religion—transitioned from Catholicism to Southern Baptist around the time of my birth. My first memories include my grandmother telling me stories about Jesus and about how my great-grandfather was instrumental in bringing the word of God, according to the Southern Baptist religion, to a large population of Hispanics in our community. God has been present in my life from the beginning.

I have also felt different than other boys since an early age in my childhood. I did not gravitate toward athletic sports. Instead, I played with *Star Wars* action figures and stuffed animals. I remember being attracted to certain figures on the television screen in my parents’ living room. Harry Hamlin, doing his best to keep up with Sir Laurence Olivier, appealed to me in *Clash of the Titans*. As a teenager, I was more enamored with Rob Lowe than Demi Moore. Teenage heartthrob magazines also caught my eye, especially when bare-chested male celebrities graced the cover of such publications. This feeling of difference and these uncommon desires propelled me to keep certain things to myself, a decision I made early on in my childhood.

My family felt like a typical family. We went to church. My parents worked hard to provide enough income to support a middle class way of life for my brother, sister, and me. My grandparents lived with us—my grandfather finishing up a thirty-three year military career as my grandmother looked after us. I learned from their example. I understood their messages. It was clear to me: grow up, find a pretty girl, get married, have children, go to church, and continue the traditions my family had passed down to me. I had a role to follow.

I accepted the role, against my own desires, and performed it well. I am both blessed and cursed by a performance that appeases dominant societal preferences. My entire life, until recently, has been a façade. I appear masculine enough to walk the thin line between what I feel is expected of me and what I secretly desire. It's a feat of maintaining my balance while steadily moving forward on a tensioned rope. I know that being gay comes with certain struggles in society. I am just as aware that concealing one's sexuality may provide a guise of safety, but might never truly provide personal satisfaction. I want to be out—living life the way I see fit. It is so easy to fill the chamber, but not as easy to pull the trigger. How freeing it would be to simply pull back the trigger and release. The dark clouds would be lifted. I would be free. However, my friends and family, in the aftermath, would be left not understanding why I did what I did. They'd wonder why I threw heterosexuality away.

In this autoethnographic account, I retell personal struggles with same-sex desires, call upon personal fantasies with distant others, and problematize choices that prohibit one's personal desires in favor of performing heteronormativity. The decision to deny personal desires prevented intimate relationships with actual same-sex partners. Instead, I chose another path. I sought intimate relationships with celebrities on television and characters in books. These one-sided, mediated relationships, or parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl), provide enough emotional attachment to partially satisfy certain needs, but fail at

providing the intimate relationship I secretly crave. They are deficient in emotional feedback.

I use two types of narratives in this article: stories created from memories of experiences—current reflections of moments that can never be fully recaptured (Adams, “Mothers, Faggots, and Witnessing” 623; Ellis 303)—and stories created from fantasy—a confluence of interpretation and construction. Through these stories, I consider the struggle with both unrequited passions and unfulfilling public performances of heteronormativity.

I organize my narrative as a layered account (Rambo Ronai 396). The layered account interweaves story with literature, aesthetics with epistemology—the double bind of autoethnography (Gingrich-Philbrook 302). I tell my story as a way of forming a relationship, connecting my story with larger stories circulating within the culture at large (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 32-33). My discourse joins a space where multiple discourses add to cultural understandings. In retelling my story, I hope to provide a narrative that might encourage others to follow their hearts—to form relationships with others despite any deviations from socially constructed norms of behavior (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis 35-36).

* * *

I maneuver through the aisles of the movie theater to find a seat toward the middle of the row. My spirits are up because it’s the last day of school and I have two and a half months to spend however the hell I want to spend them. I’m 25 years old. It’s my first year as a public educator—not a particularly good year. I’m happy to have my mind off of school and this cinematic screening will give me the release I need to get back into summer mode—a welcome transition back to my “real” self instead of pretending to be the morally sound, dressed-up schoolteacher I had become for the past nine months. I didn’t pick the movie, but I had seen a lot of buzz about *Pearl Harbor* (2001) on the E! network. The movie was

chosen by my fiancé. In a few weeks we are going to walk down the aisle and become husband and wife.

* * *

Holy shit, Josh Hartnett is hot! Why can't I find somebody like that? I bet he would be an awesome boyfriend.

* * *

My fiancé squeezes my hand as we glance at each other during a pivotal scene in the movie. I quickly turn back. I can't miss another moment. Josh Hartnett has dropped a bomb on me. It's a day that will live in infamy!

* * *

Parasocial relationships are one-way relationships between individuals and characters or celebrities from various forms of media (Horton & Wohl 215). These relationships deviate from traditional interpersonal relationships, which are often characterized by the exchange of information between two or more relating parties. In a parasocial relationship, the person engaged with the media feels a real and meaningful connection to the character or public personality (Horton & Wohl 217-220); sometimes the person places their life "into a text" (Manning). It can be a simulation reminiscent of Baudrillard's conception of the simulacrum, in which what initially stood merely as a representation of the real gains a life of its own and threatens to overwhelm the real (Abbinnett 77-78).

Although parasocial relationships have increasingly become an important part of many people's lives due to the pervasiveness of media, there are many shortcomings of such a relationship. Relationships with characters from television, movies, or books seem intimate despite the distance between the relating parties. Eyal and Cohen contend that this type of one-sided relationship is limited in "social and emotional functions" and follows similar patterns to interpersonal relationship dissolution (504-505). The simulated interaction only goes so far, but the emotions feel real. If emotions are not reciprocated, thoughts of depression

can materialize. For all of the same reasons that one feels depressed when an interpersonal relationship ends, a relationship with a distant other—one that feels real through a strong parasocial connection—can motivate depression; it can become a problem if I start to have strong feelings for the guy on TV and he doesn't love me back.

* * *

“Do you think I'm too old to become an actor? I didn't really have a good first year of teaching and I'm not sure if I want to do it again. I know that I'm moving from the fourth grade to the first grade, but what if I dislike first grade even more?”

“What are you talking about?” my fiancé interrupts.

“Acting. I could start doing some stuff at the community civic theater. I really enjoyed the teacher talent show, and I always have a great time doing dramatic stuff in front of people, once I get over my initial panic. Maybe I could be good at it,” I reply.

“I don't want to hear this anymore,” she complains.

“Why not? I'm talking about something very important to me,” I plead.

Actually, I think I want out of the relationship. I'm having strange feelings for Josh Hartnett right now that are weirding me out, but I can't get him out of my head. I read old interviews he's done online. I watch entertainment news shows with the hope that he'll be featured in a story. Hell, I even bought the fucking VHS of *Here on Earth*, that shitty movie with him, Chris Klein, and Leelee Sobieski. I think I've got it bad.

There's this scene in the movie where his heart is broken and he starts crying. It's fucked up, but I really connect with him during that scene. It makes him hotter.

“You don't want to get married, do you?” she argues.

“What? What in the hell does wanting to become an actor have to do with not wanting to get married. I mean, if I get really good at it, I could

maybe move to L.A. You'd come with me though. This isn't about not wanting to get married," I assure.

Tears well up in her eyes. "I don't want to hear this anymore."

I end the conversation. I rarely bring up acting again. I continue to fantasize about Josh Hartnett. He provides the relationship I wish I had, as I proclaim the relationship I actually have in front of friends, family, and God.

Newlywed life is fairly good. The honeymoon is nice. Summer ends and first grade gives me more happiness than fourth grade. I don't watch much of Josh Hartnett after a while. He was a good boyfriend, but my job and my married life got in the way. Ten months later, *40 Days and 40 Nights* comes out. There's a scene where Josh Hartnett sort of drops his towel before catching it after getting out of the shower.

Holy shit, Josh Hartnett is hot!

* * *

I replay past conversations in my mind as I sit on his couch, waiting for Josh to get out of the shower. Sometimes it seems like he's just as into me. Sometimes I feel like he's not interested at all, that he's just a friend. I'm confused.

It's been a month since we've seen each other, but something in his voice sounded different when he called and invited me over for dinner. I've had an attraction to him for a long time now. I figured that I'd continue to like him from a distance, while being envious of the cavalcade of girls that came in and out of his life. This time, *he* called *me*, and his voice sounded urgent. There was that thing that happened the last time we saw each other. While watching *Signs* (2002) at the movie theater, he put his hand on my leg. I thought it was a mistake at first, but he kept it there for a minute or two. Maybe I'm being foolish. It's just wishful thinking.

I'm bored with the show he has playing on his TV. I get up and nosily look at the pictures on his wall. I'm jealous of the girl kissing him in the first photo I see. I look away. His DVD collection is impressive. I start

thumbing through them to see if he likes the same kind of movies I like. Despite his affinity for action films, we're a match. I think it's strange that he owns *Trash*. That's not a movie straight guys typically watch. The water stops. I hear him getting out of the shower. He comes into the living room, wearing only a towel.

"I'm sorry I'm running late. Feel free to change the channel on the TV if you want. I'll be ready in a second. Oh, and if you want something to drink, help yourself," he offers. "I have a bottle of wine over there," he says as he points in the direction of his kitchen countertop. When he points, he loses his grip on his towel. He tries to grab it before it drops, but he misses. He's fully exposed. He's also fully aroused. There's a long silence.

I look into his eyes. He doesn't look away. It wasn't a burning bush, but it was good enough of a sign for me.

I walk toward him and, without talking, grab his erect cock and enclose it with my lips. With my other hand, I reach around and grab him from behind. I like the feel of my hand pressed against his skin. Against my desires, I stop to ask him if I should stop. Maybe I came on too strong.

"No, keep going," he says. He looks down at me and grabs the back of my head.

Now that I know that he wants it, I take pleasure in playing with his body. He barely makes a noise, but every now and then he moans to let me know when I'm doing what he likes. I've wanted to do this for a long time. I also worry that this might just be a one-time affair. Sex is great, but I have feelings for him. He grips my head tighter. He breathes heavier. I feel him grow closer to climax.

He finishes. He gives a few grunts as I complete the act. Before long, he's calm again. He loosens his grip on the back of my head. I let go of him. I didn't want to let go of him. I slide my hand toward his. I want to grab his hand, but I hold back and just rub my fingers against his. He grabs my hand. This is what I wanted. He looks down at me. He smiles

and says, “That’s been a long time coming. I started to think we’d never get together.”

Together. I like the sound of that. I want to be together.

* * *

These fantasies run through my mind constantly. Josh Hartnett seems like a perfect match for me. I can relate to his demeanor. Like me, he seems quiet and reserved. In movies, he gets his heart broken. I want to comfort him. He’s full of emotion. It draws me closer to him. He has a sensitive side. He’s caring. He has all the qualities I look for in a partner.

He can’t be my partner though. I’m married. In front of family, friends, and God, I made a vow to be faithful to my wife. I desire a companion like Josh Hartnett because he seems to possess the qualities I look for, but also because he possesses many things my wife does not—including anatomical features such as a penis. My religious upbringing comes into play. I’m ashamed I want to kiss his lips. I’m ashamed I want to play with his body. I’m ashamed of all the things I want to do with him. I want to have sex with a man. That is not the will of God.

* * *

Certain acts of sex have historically been shamed in political, cultural, and religious contexts (Foucault; Warner). Society constructs understandings through social consciousness that position certain acts and behaviors as favorable, influencing how individuals act and live (Nicol & Smith 669). Foucault contends “sex became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses” (26). The politics of sex have rendered the practice subject to regulation (Altman 25). As one form of sexual behavior attains privilege, variant forms of sexual behavior become marked as deviant (Rupp; Sullivan; Warner). Sexual behaviors marked with such a stigma are positioned as detrimental acts that harm morality, health, and family (Bauermeister, Giguere, Carballo-Dieiguez, Ventuneac, & Eisenberg 680; Brewer 174; Landau 82-89).

The shaming of these acts makes inclinations toward sexual behaviors that deviate from social expectations difficult. On one hand, behaviors associated with marriage, heterosexuality, and fruitfulness are considered good. Behaviors with different associations (e.g., sex outside of marriage, same-sex relationships, sex for pleasurable purposes) are labeled as bad (Warner 25-26). Numerous facets of society try to advocate the “good” and restrict the “bad.” In addition, individuals who partake in such bad behaviors can become stigmatized (Coates 537).

Religious convictions create difficulties for individuals characterized by stigmatized identities (Trammell 1). Biblical texts position same-sex behaviors as against God and subject to eternal damnation (Brooks 330). Many religions go further and focus attention on stigmatized individuals rather than shamed acts (Ketrow 6; Smith 3). Through stigmatization, contempt shifts from “the sin” to that of “the sinner.” Religious individuals with gay identities might make several choices in seeking to justify both God and self: staying in the closet, abstaining from sex, and even fostering thoughts of suicide (Trammell 3-10). In my particular case, I shifted back and forth between all of the obvious choices. My religious convictions prevented me from engaging in same-sex acts. An alternative presented itself. I constructed a one-way bond with media celebrities and fictional characters. I could still do sexuality through parasocial relationships.

* * *

I’ve wanted to see this movie for a long time now. I decide to go jogging early, so I’ll be home and showered in time to watch the HBO debut of *500 Days of Summer*. I jog, which is made difficult by the fact that I’m jogging earlier than normal and it’s a blazingly hot summer day. I shower just in time. The movie is about to start. The HBO feature film theme song that used to beckon me from far-away rooms during my childhood house begins playing. Regina Spektor belts out ponderings of “Us.” Then it

begins. Over the course of the movie, I start to become increasingly attracted to Joseph Gordon-Levitt, who plays Tom Hansen.

* * *

Joseph Gordon-Levitt? What the hell is wrong with me? Isn't he the kid from 3rd *Rock from the Sun*? I mean he's cute, but he's not uber-hot or anything. Plus, his body isn't much more defined than mine. Why am I starting to get feelings for this guy?

* * *

All summer long, Joseph Gordon-Levitt haunts me. I join hitrecord.org, his online film collaboration site, with the goal of one day getting a response from him. He goes by the handle of RegularJOE. I like the idea of calling him Joe. I watch Peter Travers's rolling stone interview with him on YouTube repeatedly. Damn, he looks good in a suit. But he's kind of a regular-looking guy. Why am I so infatuated with him? I mean, he does have gorgeous dimples – but, beyond that, he doesn't look much like a Hollywood heartthrob.

* * *

The New York Times has this thing on YouTube called Screen Test. It's black and white, which makes him look even more handsome. I set my male gaze (Mulvey 20-21) upon this video, in its monochrome beauty, as the ghost of Montgomery Clift seems to possess Gordon-Levitt. He uses a French accent to prove that men aren't as sexy as women when using the language of love. I disagree. During this Lynn Hirshberg interview, Joseph Gordon-Levitt answers questions about his likes and dislikes. He tells stories. Looking deep into his eyes, I feel like I am getting to know him better. He looks better unshaven. I love the sound of his voice.

* * *

I bet he would make an awesome boyfriend.

* * *

It's getting bad. I think of Joseph Gordon-Levitt from sunrise to sunset. I cannot talk to anybody about it. I can't divulge my secret desire for the

male body. My happiness is seemingly dependent upon emotions I feel he is stirring up within me. Still, I can't let others know I like him. "He's a cool actor," I tell others instead of what I'm really thinking. "He dresses nicely," I say instead of "I want to undress him." I keep these thoughts to myself. It is only safe when I communicate with him in my mind. I must perform for others. I must, like Joseph Gordon-Levitt, portray a role—a heteronormative role. I pay close attention so that I refer to the movie as funny, instead of romantic. I comment on how pretty Zooey Deschanel is, instead of how attractive I find Gordon-Levitt. I do my best to play straight until nighttime. At night, I can fantasize some more. Nobody can hear what I tell him before I go to bed.

* * *

Heterosexual behaviors are positioned as normal, resulting in heteronormativity (i.e., the construct that situates heterosexual behavior as normal/natural) (Yep). Jackson defines heteronormativity as "the numerous ways in which heterosexual privilege is woven into the fabric of social life" (108). The concept of heteronormativity, through reification, gains a universalizing distinction (Butler 24). Individuals, thus, feel the pressure to perform heteronormativity (Hensley 57). Every instance in which heterosexual behaviors are given approval and every act that contributes to such understandings reifies the premise that heterosexuality is normal. In contrast, behaviors in which members of the same sex engage in sexual acts are cloaked with shame (Warner 24-33). Acts of sexual others are marginalized and erased through discourse (Yep 19). Politically, culturally, and religiously, these acts are scrutinized (Fejes & Petrich 401-402). Moral judgments prevent alternative sex acts from gaining equal footing with acts associated with heteronormativity. So abject and contemptible, these acts suffer from public shaming.

I felt shame when I gave in to my impulses. Whether it was masturbating to a shirtless guy on a soap opera or getting an erection while gazing at the ripped guys on *Baywatch*, I felt ashamed of my desires.

Perhaps a quick prayer after a shameful act could wash away my sins again. As ashamed as I was of my desires, I certainly could not act upon them. It was safer to fantasize about the guys on TV. I could be the dutiful husband by day and the lustful sinner at night. It was easier to ignore reality and instead embrace the fantasy. Heteronormativity, for me, lacked compassion and fulfillment, but it also provided safety.

* * *

He laughs as I admit again that I've never done that. He has a sexy laugh. "Why are we even playing this game?" he asks. "You apparently haven't lived life much."

"We don't all have people falling all over us," I tease.

"Oh please," he says. "Next question. Have you ever worn clothes to cover up a hickey?"

"Nope," I answer. "I can't say that I have. Have you?"

"Well, one time," he answers, "but it was cold out anyways, so I would've worn the extra layers even if I didn't have the hickey."

"It must constantly be cold outside for you," I jest. "My turn," I say while picking up the next card. "Have you ever played strip poker?"

"Wow. No," he says. "That's something I've never done. Should I even ask if you have?"

"Well, actually, that I *have* done," I admit. "It was at a church lock-in. I was new to the church and apparently this was the way certain members of the youth group initiated new youth into the church."

"How blasphemous," he says while laughing. Again, his laugh turns me on.

I defend myself and say, "It wasn't in the actual church. It was in the fellowship hall, and we didn't go all the way. Nobody got completely naked. Looking back, it was a stupid thing to take part in."

"Well, maybe you won't go to hell after all," he suggests. "I'm surprised you can finally admit to doing something naughty. I guess

there's a first time for everything." He picks up the last card and asks, "Have you ever had a crush on your best friend?"

The room grows silent. I hesitate because we both know that he *is* my best friend. Do I tell him the truth or do I keep my feelings for him a secret?

* * *

"*500 Days of Summer* is such an amazing movie. I wish I could be a part of something that creatively impeccable," I say for what seems like the tenth night in a row.

"I'm tired of hearing about *500 Days of Summer*," my wife responds.

"I know. I can't get over it though. I think Joseph Gordon-Levitt is the best actor under the age of thirty in Hollywood today," I affirm.

"I'm especially tired of hearing about Joseph Gordon-Levitt. I wish he would fall off the face of the Earth. That's all you talk about now. I'm tired of hearing about him," she confirms.

I stop talking, but I don't stop thinking about him.

By this point, I'm beyond infatuation. Joseph Gordon-Levitt is the boyfriend I want but can't have. Maybe I'm so into him because he's such a great actor. Maybe I am attracted to the character he portrays in *500 Days of Summer*. Maybe I like him because he is so ordinary. To borrow a line from the movie, he's "better than the [guy] of my dreams. [He's] real." Regardless of why I'm attracted to him, it's starting to affect my happiness. I'm no longer happy in life. I realize that I'm in a relationship I don't want to be in. I yearn for a relationship I can't have.

"I'm not really happy. I don't know what's wrong with me," I say.

"I think you should see someone. It would be good for you," she insists.

My wife frequently looks out for me. She always attempts to keep me happy, even at times when my desires are in direct opposition to her own. She provides companionship when I am depressed and need somebody to talk to. I am not always good at paying back the favor. My nurturing skills

are no match for her. I recall making her stay at my parent's house to finish a movie long after she was ready to go home. When she is sick, I continue life as normal. When I am sick, she quickly takes up the task of helping me get better. I do not deserve her. She's always been good to me. I wish I could be good to her.

* * *

In turning to various forms of media to satisfy particular needs, individuals can execute agency by choosing which forms of media are going to help attain specific goals. Ball-Rokeach and Defleur's media dependency theory posits that the more a person becomes dependent on a certain form of media, the more influence the media will have on a person's life. Comparably, if one turns to media for romantic connections that are not present, these parasocial relationships become preeminent in one's momentary lived experiences. Media dependency theory does not merely situate relationships of need as the act of an autonomous self. Rather, cultural influence and social conditions are simultaneously at play through an audience-media-society tripartite relationship (Maxian 275). A spiritual upbringing, suggesting that certain behaviors are immoral, gave me certain cultural understandings about same-sex desires that preceded alternative understandings later developed from the culture at large.

Likewise, discourses that support procreative sex under the holy umbrella of wedlock create an atmosphere where transformative discourses are met with struggle (Trammell 2-4; Yep 19-26). When certain desires are constrained by social constructions of "right" and "wrong," parasocial relationships offer avenues through which needs can be met while simultaneously conforming to societal demands. However, one might begin to question: do parasocial relationships fulfill the desire to connect with a relational other in a meaningful way?

* * *

"The other night when you told me you had a crush on me," he says, "I didn't know how to take it."

“Don’t worry about it,” I say. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I know you like girls and it’s cool just being your friend. You don’t have to worry about me hitting on you. I rarely make the first move,” I assure.

“It’s not that,” he says. “I was kind of scared. I, uh, I like you too...a lot,” he admits. “I just don’t want to ruin our friendship. I mean, if we changed the dynamic of our relationship, we might destroy the good thing we’ve got going here. But I can’t stop thinking about that night. I don’t know what to think,” he confesses.

I stare at him in disbelief. He admitted to having feelings for me.

“Well, say something,” he pleads.

I say nothing. I quickly lean in and press my lips against his. He doesn’t pull away. For a first kiss, we go at it like we’ve done this several times before. We probably have, in our minds. At least, I know I have.

When we stop, he looks at me with concern.

“Are you sure we’re ready for this?” he asks.

I don’t answer him. I lean in again and we continue just where we left off. I reach down and start unbuttoning his jeans. I pull off his shirt, and he helps out by kicking off his shoes. In a couple of minutes, we’re both only in our boxer briefs.

“Wait. I’ve got protection and lube in the bedroom,” he urges. I wonder what he’s trying to suggest, but don’t stop to ask. I follow him into the bedroom. He opens the drawer and pulls out a condom. After ripping it open, he slides down my underwear. He looks up at me and says, “I want you to do it.”

I know what he means. He applies the condom and comes up for another kiss. I start to shake in excitement.

“Are you nervous?” he asks. “If you don’t want to...”

I push him onto the bed and slide off his boxer briefs. I kiss his body while he applies the lube. With concern, I look at him, but he assures me again that it’s okay. He puts his hand against my chest when I lift his leg and slowly slide in. A few minutes ago, we were laughing at an episode of

Friends. Now, we're trying to keep our balance as we walk along that line between friends and more than friends.

When I cum, I go in for another kiss. It's a deeper kiss. We've graduated to tongue.

I look at him and tell him it's his turn. I've never done this before, but I want to do it with him. I turn over and lay on my stomach as he prepares me for what I've never experienced. "Tell me if I need to stop," he demands. I can feel him entering me, but it's not really that bad. I wonder if he slipped out, but then I feel it—an intense moment of pain. I think of asking him to stop, but I want to do this with him. I relax, and after a while I feel good again. Something about knowing that he is inside of me turns me on. I'm equally ashamed to be giving in to such desires and excited to be finally participating in the type of sex I've always fantasized about.

Later that night, I shower and put on my pajama bottoms. I head toward his bed and start to climb in. He turns off the TV and turns over to kiss my neck. He starts to laugh—that sexy laugh—and puts his finger on my lips.

"What was that about you rarely making the first move?" he asks.

* * *

I didn't go see a psychiatrist. I didn't think I needed to. The school year began again and, after a while, Joseph Gordon-Levitt and *500 Days of Summer* no longer controlled my mind like a parasitic equivalent to the leucochloridium paradoxum: the flatworm that transforms a snail into the duplicate of a caterpillar so that the circle of life can be completed once the snail unwittingly crawls to higher vegetation, is swallowed by a predatory bird, defecated by the bird, and digested by another unsuspecting snail.

The truth is, I was scared to see a psychiatrist. What if she detected something about my sexuality? A psychiatrist wasn't necessary. Besides, at this point, my parasocial obsessions with Josh and Joseph are not as strong as they once were. Yet, I'm still not completely content with life. Josh

Hartnett and Joseph Gordon-Levitt represented boyfriends who I desired to know and love. The only problem was they didn't love me back. Time passed and their grip on me loosened. They were not meant to be—the odds were not ever in my favor. Then came Peeta Mellark.

I am interested in seeing *The Hunger Games* (2012) at the movie theater, but think I should read the book first. I mention this to a colleague of mine, and the veteran school teacher reveals that she has a copy of the book I can borrow.

It's a carefree Saturday. I'm waiting for my car, taking advantage of the lifetime oil change stipulation that I bargained for when purchasing my vehicle. It might have been a bargain, but that doesn't mean the process is prompt or pleasurable. This time, I have something to help pass the time. I turn to chapter one. "When I wake up, the other side of the bed is cold," it reads (Collins 3). Instead of waking up, I enter a dream. I'm engulfed by an immense attraction to the boyishly handsome Peeta Mellark, a love interest for the protagonist in the story. Peeta is sweet. His love is undying. He puts the interests of his beloved before his own. Peeta is funny and sexy. Peeta is sensitive.

* * *

I bet Peeta would make an awesome boyfriend.

* * *

Before I know it, I'm deep in depression because all I can think about is how nice it would be to be in a relationship with someone similar to Peeta. The love he ultimately shares with Katniss Everdeen, the story's heroine, was something I have never experienced myself. I've either been in positions where I'm in love with someone who doesn't reciprocate—those bastards!—or somebody loves me and I don't feel the same way—what an ass! I hesitate before reading the subsequent book in the series because I'm afraid to fall even deeper into this spell. I forge ahead. I cry a bit when I read the final words of the last book in the series, *Mockingjay* (Collins

390), because Peeta is now out of my life. He was real while there was still story left to be read. Now, he exists only in the past.

* * *

I have to see somebody. I have to stop playing these games. It's getting bad.

* * *

Although parasocial relationships are rewarding, they still leave plenty left to be desired. A relational illusion is achieved through this form of distant relationship. The relationship becomes rewarding through "moments of aesthetic wholeness," (Baxter 187) in which certain "experiences," being either dream-like or imagined, provide a person with an emotional attachment or the fulfillment of desires. These "experiences" transcend toward a fleeting mutuality, in which there is a completion of self through the *imagined* other (Baxter & DeGooyer 3). During the fleeting aesthetic moment, the character or celebrity figure becomes realized to a degree that when the two relational parties share a personal connection, they move toward a "cosmic oneness" (Bolen 142). The "experiences" shared, while often mundane, take on epic proportions for the meaning of the relationship. These rewards, however, can be misleading.

Parasocial relationships, being unidirectional, do not offer the same rewards that can be achieved through interpersonal relationships (Horton & Wohl 225-229). You cannot lie beside this romantic partner and talk about life before both succumbing to the night. You will not be getting flowers from this romantic entity, and you will not embrace with a kiss after coming home from work. You will not be able to *love* a character you only know through media in the same way you can *love somebody* with whom you share an intimate relationship.

* * *

Tears well up in my eyes as I tell her what I never wanted to tell her before, "I love you. I will always love you. But I'm not passionately in love with you."

“I wish I could have the you back that I was married to before, the you that I fell in love with,” she whispers as tears roll down her cheek.

“I was never the person you thought I was. I wish I could say differently. I’ve always loved you, but never in that way. I know that it was horrible of me to make you believe otherwise,” I confess.

* * *

My experiences within the larger culture have value for an understanding of relationships and sexuality (Adams, *Narrating* 159-163). The turn to narrative allows me to connect my personal lived experience with the larger culture (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 26-27). In doing so, I present my storied account to others within the culture that might have similar experiences (Foster 447). My understandings become meaningful through personal relationships, through social influence. In this way, my autoethnography is not unique (Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis 21).

Through praxis, my story informs the culture while the culture simultaneously informs my story (Spry 709). I aim for reflexivity in hopes of understanding how my experience represents: (a) a moment in time/space, (b) an inaccurate account subject to my own personal biases and recollections, and (c) an attempt toward ethical considerations.

Ethically, my standpoint is biased. My research grants me a position of power. My representation has potential to repress. In my account of my past histories with my wife, I struggle with the ethics of storying her in ways that misrepresent, omit, and invade (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 11-14). I also ponder questions about audience. As Ellis points out, the story can change depending upon perceptions about the intended audience (219). For instance, would I have written this piece the same way if I were writing specifically to my wife or to members of her family? I want to be fair to her. I want to story her in positive ways. I feel guilty about her position within this story. I think of happier times.

* * *

I hop over the patio fence. My heart races. The cold wind, ushering in a new year, pushes against my cheek as I knock on the back door of her apartment. She opens the door to find me kneeling with a ring in the palm of my hand.

“Will you marry me?” I ask.

She pretends to think about it and then says “yes.” I go back into her apartment to think about the magnitude of the moment. “More Than Words” plays on MTV’s New Year’s Eve show. It’s not the quintessential version by Extreme, but some live cover performed by the British boy band BBMak. We vow to spend a lifetime together. I love her.

* * *

I love her, I tell myself. Isn’t that enough? I love her. It’s not enough. It takes more than just words.

* * *

According to Holman Jones, Adams, & Ellis (2013), “autoethnography creates a space for a turn, a change” (21). Autoethnography can bring about transformational change for persons struggling with the marginalization of specific identities (Adams, *Narrating the Closet* 129-144), the loss of a relative or intimate other (Holman Jones & Adams 1), and people involved in bad relationships with partners or family members (Rambo Ronai 405-406). Alternate contemplations for how to do relationships emerge. Not only can relationships extend beyond dualistic interpersonal relationships, but any form of relationship can be reevaluated through stories to seek a better way of living (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis 32-34). Autoethnography helps me recount my steps and consider new trajectories that may diminish the problems of my current socio-cultural location. I transcend, I spin reflexively, which helps me to see “who [I] have been and who [I am] willing to become” (Berry 223). I have shifted in my outlook, no longer feeling shame for personal desires. Who I love is no longer a source of personal discomfort. I embrace my same-sex

desires. Like a comic book character throwing off a costume, I can shed my heteronormative disguise and emerge as a new self.

Autoethnography helps me understand how the stories of others contribute to the meanings I construct for my story (Spry 710). Together, our stories seek change. I turn from the limitations of today's story and seek a story that may provide a better way for doing relationships, for doing life, for doing sexuality. Parasocial relationships are only *one way* of relating.

* * *

I don't fantasize about Josh Hartnett or Joseph Gordon-Levitt right now. Peeta Mellark doesn't control every waking thought. Maybe some other guy on TV will be next. I leave it open to possibility. Maybe it won't be somebody who only appears to me through my television screen. Maybe, just maybe, it will be *somebody* else.

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