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Who the Hell Was *That*? Stories, Bodies and Actions in the World

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## Abstract

In this article I explore what I take to be a two-way relationship between stories and the experiential actions of bodies in the world. Through an autoethnographic approach, I present a series of interlinked story fragments in an effort to show and evoke a feel for the ways in which stories, bodies, and actions influence and shape each other over time. I offer some reflections on the experiences the stories portray from the perspective of a social constructionist conception of narrative theory and suggest that while stories exert a powerful influence on the actions of our bodies, our bodies intrude on or 'talk back' to this process because bodies have an existence beyond stories.

*Keywords:* autoethnography, embodiment, identity, gay, bisexual, narrative, story

## Who the Hell Was *That*? Stories, Bodies and Actions in the World

According to Lori Neilsen (2008, p. 95), “the flesh of language and experience are mutually constitutive.” I share Neilsen’s view and, along with several narrative theorists (e.g., Frank, 1995; McLeod, 1997; Crossley, 2000), consider that complex but significant relationships exist in the spaces between stories and bodies, narratives and experiences. I also share Brett Smith’s (2007, p. 395) perspective that

bodies perform, do, create, and are created by narratives. For instance, they do what a story has shown them how to do and given them cause to do. Yet, bodies are not determined by narrative. Likewise they cannot be reduced to narrative or theory. Bodies are lived *and* biological; they think, feel, bleed, betray us, destabilize us, are emotionally expressive, and socially shaped and shaping.

While the developments of narrative theory in recent years offer valuable insights into the ways in which stories and experiences shape each other, the ways in which the body is involved in these processes have been less thoroughly explored. Carol Thomas (2002, p. 76) suggests that there is currently a need to develop “an understanding of the way in which the biological reality of bodies is shaped by, and impacts back upon, social and environmental processes and practices.” In a similar vein, Smith (2007, p. 395) calls for “an *embodied* rather than a *disembodied* narrative inquiry” which works “across disciplinary boundaries to connect theories of embodiment with the empirical, lived, fleshy body in material, social, historical, and political contexts.”

These calls underlie the aim of this article: I want to explore what I take to be a two-way, bidirectional relationship between stories and the experiential actions of bodies in the world. To do so, I choose an autoethnographic approach to present a selection of stories

which originate from a place where my own biography intersects with both culture and politics (Denzin, 2003). Through this approach, I turn the focus of my narrative enquiry away from others (e.g., Carless, 2008; Carless & Douglas, 2008, 2009), towards myself and my own experiences as “a political and ethical act of self-reflection” (Frank, 2000, p. 356). I do so in the understanding that valuable and important psychological insights can be developed when researchers “connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social” through privileging “concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix).

In the terms of Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2000), autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness. Through the autoethnographic process, they suggest, researchers vary their gaze back and forth, “first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations” (p. 739). Stacy Holman Jones (2005, p. 765) characterises autoethnography as “setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connections among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation” before “letting go hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives.” These descriptions guide my approach in this article and underlie other autoethnographies which have provided unique insights into psychological processes (e.g., Sparkes, 1996; Smith, 1999; Adams, 2006; Douglas, in press).

The core of this article is a series of seven interlinked story fragments which I present in the form of a layered account. I share these stories with the reader with the specific intention of exploring and illustrating the ways in which narratives, bodies, and

actions can come to influence and shape each other over time. Woven into my account, are some reflections and interpretations on the stories and the experiences they portray which I offer from the perspective of a social constructionist conception of narrative theory.

## 1

James wasn't out that night. In fact, he didn't come out that often because his Dad would only let him go to the under-eighteen club nights in town once a month. But for me, there was always something special about those times when we *did* get to go out together. We'd laugh together on the fringes, a part of it all but also apart from it all, maybe taking turns to swig from a half bottle of cheap Spar whiskey which James hid in his coat pocket. So tonight, although I'd come to the club with a bunch of others from school, without James I felt like I was on my own. It seemed that everyone, even the people I'd be friendly with by day, became something else once inside the club. I couldn't grasp why someone I'd consider a friend at school would, in the revelry of the club, seem to ignore me. I didn't get why everyone seemed to compete with each other to hang with one or two girls or boys who were somehow deemed to be the sensation of the moment. So, I was drinking gassy beer and getting bored, mooching between the bar and the dance floor, and jumping around to U2 and The Smiths.

It was close to kicking out time, after the lights had been turned up, that I made eye contact with a guy on the stairway. I didn't make much of the short exchange – the beer had made me feel vague, disconnected and distant. I wasn't even aware that I was looking or focusing at all. As they sometimes would after a few drinks, my eyes wandered with no real purpose, no particular need to see. I had watched – through a haze of alcohol – this closing time routine plenty of times before and never stopped to think that, as my eyes wandered,

they might actually be looking *at something*. Perhaps I was naïve in letting my eyes rest on pretty much whatever they would.

When I got outside the club into the drizzle and the cool I realised that I'd come out apart from the other folks from school. Nothing new there, I'd just wander back home through town on my own – it was no big deal on a Wednesday night. I was just a few steps away from the club when everything happened at once. It was the guy from inside, with three or four others. I looked at him again, in a second trying to focus and pull myself out of my meandering thoughts and back into the present. He said something – I didn't catch it but started to back off instinctively, still slightly disconnected and drifting from the effects of the alcohol. A punch to the face brought me right back into the present and the effects of the drink disappeared in a moment as I reeled, staggered, and backed away some more. I could feel my face hot, wet, as I looked around for what was next. Nothing more came. I heard some more words, hateful sounding words, and kept on backing away. Dozens of people were coming out of the club but nobody seemed to have seen a thing.

By now I was acting without thought, on automatic it seemed. I fell into the back of a taxi and, somehow, the taxi pulled away in the right direction. I leant forward on my knees in the back seat, holding my face, hoping I had enough money for the fare, hoping the driver couldn't see me in the rear view mirror. My face was wetter now; blood in my mouth and from my nose. I swallowed a mouthful, wiped my face with my hands and wiped my hands on my jeans. The driver drove. I told myself that I wasn't crying.

Everyone was in bed when I got home. Good. I knew in the morning that my Dad would see my swollen face, would want to know what had happened and that he'd want to find whoever had done this. But I couldn't be bothered with it. It wasn't as if it was a gang

– shouldn't I have been able to stand up for myself? I would just play it down, wouldn't say any more than I had to about it.

I lay on my bed and tried to work out what I'd done to make him hit me. I tried to make sense of what had happened; I tried to understand. Maybe short hair made me look aggressive – as if I was somehow 'asking for' a fight? OK, I'd keep my hair long from now on. Maybe it was the way I looked at people? I couldn't do much about the *way* I looked but I could try to avoid eye contact, especially when I was out in town. I wondered if some people saw something in me that they didn't like, that they wanted to destroy or to silence. Maybe I was just an easy target being on my own so much of the time? Eventually, I gave up trying to understand the events of that night. What was there to understand? There were too many *maybes* and I needed to lean on things that were more certain. I knew I couldn't fight – I didn't have the skills, the size or, more than anything, the motivation. What was the point? I didn't want to run; to run and run and keep on running is no way to live, that wouldn't be my way. All I could think to do was hide. I had to hide. Although I knew I couldn't, I wanted to disappear a little, to become, for a while at least, invisible. If I couldn't do that then I must keep myself – or parts of myself – out of sight. To screen off, to hide away, to shield and protect those bits that couldn't stand anymore punches. I must become opaque. And I must become so for a long time. To no-one in particular I scribbled some lines on a notepad: "You will never know/You will never know me/Nobody will know me."

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John McLeod (1997, p. 43) observes how "In everyday life, the existence of numerous social taboos against expressing certain kinds of feelings in public leads to different kinds of stories being told." One example of "certain kinds of feelings" which can

be difficult to express in public, especially for young people, is homosexual or bisexual feelings. This is particularly likely to be the case within cultures and social settings where homophobia or heterosexism is prevalent. The culture of sport is one setting which has been described by Eric Anderson (2005) as homophobic and by Brendan Gough (2007) as heterosexist. Among physical education students, Andrew Sparkes (1997) suggests, gay men are effectively invisible. As a result, the kinds of stories which circulate and dominate within this culture, a culture in which I have been immersed, act to inscribe and re-inscribe heteronormative values and attitudes and, as Sparkes (1997) suggests, silence alternative stories regarding sexuality.

Giancarlo Dimaggio (2006, p. 103) writes that “individuals use storytelling to give meaning to their experience, negotiate the meaning of events, make choices in the social sphere, and build up an identity.” However, as McLeod (1997) reminds us, we are never entirely free to tell our own story independent of the culture in which we exist. In his terms, “even when a teller is recounting a unique set of individual, personal events, he or she can only do so by drawing upon story structures and genres drawn from the narrative resources of a culture” (p. 94). Through these processes, personal stories may be shaped, reinforced, modified, or even silenced as we are taught which of our experiences are acceptable ‘story material’ within our particular socio-cultural environment. Straying beyond – through either words or actions – the scripts of these ‘acceptable’ stories can result, as in the preceding story, in consequences which may be of a wholly embodied and forceful kind.

Numerous scholars have shown that when stories of personal experience are neither created nor shared, identity and sense of self is compromised (see McAdams, 1993; McLeod, 1997; Crossley, 2000). In James Valentine’s (2008) terms,



Being able to tell a story, and having the language to talk about yourself, can give you confidence and a strong sense of identity. Where you lack the words and the confidence to tell your story, you can feel as if you have lost your self. Telling your story may even be a matter of life and death. If you cannot name and narrate your identity, you may lose a sense of who you are, what you are doing and why it is worth continuing. (Paragraph 1)

Culture can be critical to the potential success of this process. As McLeod (1997, p. 100) describes,

The culture we live in supplies us with stories that do not fit experience, and experience that does not live up to the story. It may also fail to supply us with appropriate arenas for narrating whatever story it is we have to tell. The common theme across all of these circumstances is the experience of silence, of living with a story that has not or cannot be told.

This explanation rings true to my experience: that strongly heterosexist cultures, such as within sport and physical education, make the development and sharing of alternative stories of one's experience difficult or even impossible. From this position, two possible outcomes exist: either a 'default' heterosexual story or silence. Narrative theory would suggest that both of these outcomes are likely to result in identity and sense of self being foreclosed or underdeveloped among (potentially) homosexual or bisexual identifying individuals. In other words, without alternative (non-heterosexist) narratives, creating and sharing gay stories – and, therefore, developing a coherent gay identity – will be problematic.

The gym, as usual, is full of partially unclothed bodies. Mostly male bodies, mostly moving bodies. Muscled bodies, overweight bodies, white bodies, tanned bodies, huge bodies, slight bodies, agile bodies and awkward bodies. Bodies coming, bodies going. Bodies moving between machines, between benches and bars, between different rooms in the gym complex. Most bodies I don't really notice. To some I nod "hello". With some, I briefly converse. Some I help lift, while some help me.

But who the hell was *that*? Who the hell was *that body*? Longish strawberry blonde hair, 5'10" or a little more, lean, muscled, smooth, graceful, quiet and seemingly self-sufficient. But this body is talking and looking at no-one – it's wearing earphones and locked in a private universe.

How long is it safe to look at this body? Turn away! But there are so many mirrors in this place that wherever I turn I see him. I have a line of sight via reflections from one, two, even three different mirrors. It's impossible to *avoid* seeing him. I see him from the front, from the side, from the back, from the other side. But he never looks up. He never, ever looks. Our eyes never meet.

## 3

I stand aside at the door to the locker room as three or four damp-haired men walk out with their kit bags chattering about the game.

"Cheers mate," says the last as I hold the door open.

"No problem," I say, but they're already gone.

As I walk in, I can hear the hubbub of conversation from the other side of the second door. I hate it when it's this crowded, there's no privacy at all. Plus there's too much impossible-to-believe man-talk, too much bragging, too much bullshit for me. Eyes turned down, I search for a spare space on a bench to dump my bag so I can get changed. I

try to imagine I'm somewhere else. I swing my backpack onto the bench and look up to hang my coat. As I do, I feel a *thump* in my chest. Then another, and my pulse is racing. *He* is right beside me, hair still wet, pulling on his shirt. He's less than two feet away and I feel like I'm trembling and shaking, trying to look anywhere but at him. "David! Control yourself! Think about computers or something!" I tell myself as I work to stay cool, to keep a grip, to suppress this sensation that feels like ... *really living*. What would happen if, for once, I just went with these feelings ... *and acted*?

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McLeod (1997, p. 27) writes that "the task of being a person in a culture involves creating a satisfactory-enough alignment between individual experience and 'the story of which I find myself a part.'" In this statement, McLeod draws attention to how achieving "a satisfactory-enough alignment" depends upon negotiating the space between the cultural *narratives* that are available to the individual and the individual's personal *experience*. In other words, when one is able to align one's experiences in the world with a culturally available story, identity and sense of self are likely to be developed and sustained in positive ways. Conversely, when one's experiences are at odds with the cultural story, alignment will be difficult or impossible and identity and sense of self is likely to be compromised.

It is easy to fall in line with the dominant narratives within our own culture, to tell and re-tell the stories we hear day in and day out. Yet in stories two and three, the experiences I recount are at odds with the hetero-normative narratives in sport and 'jock' culture. I think it is significant that, in the stories, it is *bodily* experiences (of physical desire and attraction) which make it difficult for me to create even a vaguely satisfactory alignment between my experiences and the dominant heterosexual story. Put another way,

my embodied experiences directly intrude upon and challenge the dominant narrative within sport culture regarding sexuality. As a consequence, any fit I *may* have created between “individual experience and the story of which I find myself a part” (McLeod, 1997, p. 27) is disrupted. In this sense, bodies are more than stories because, at any time, our bodies have the potential to interrupt, disrupt, dislocate, or totally derail the stories we or others tell of our lives.

The processes illustrated in stories two and three provide an example of the kinds of embodied experiences that can derail a personal story and, by implication, challenge culturally dominant narratives in a most explicit and direct manner. Thus, when it comes to stories and narratives, as Smith and Sparkes (2008, p. 228) have observed in the context of disability studies, “the materiality of the body, contra to some poststructuralist, constructionist, and postmodern stances, *does* matter.” This perspective has similarities with Chris Shilling’s (2005, p. 18) description of a phenomenological approach to the body-society relationship where the emphasis is on “the determining rather than determined nature of our embodiment” and attention is given to the ways in which society is *shaped by* bodies. It is from this perspective that Nick Crossley (2007) argues for embodiment to be understood as the basis of our consciousness. In his words:

My body is not merely the perceptible material that you can see, smell and touch, nor even the internal organs that medical science can measure, weigh and monitor. It has another ‘inside’ that surgeons and neuroscientists cannot access; an inside comprising lived sensations which form the coherent and meaningful gestalt structures that are my consciousness of the world. (p. 82)

It is from this kind of body, I think, that the impulse – or need – for a same-sex union might usefully be understood to originate.

Writing these stories has helped me to understand that the process of coming to identify as gay (or, for that matter, bisexual) originates in wholly embodied experiences. The embodied experience of same-sex attraction and desire will challenge any story that tries to deny it. It is, I think, experiences which are closely tied to one's material body which contravene and intrude in a most direct manner on the contours and plot of the normative heterosexual narrative. Ultimately, these kinds of experiences simply make the maintenance of a heterosexual story (and, therefore, identity) impossible. Thus, I see homosexuality and bisexuality as being more than a story, as something more than a social construction.

## 4

It's a cold wind for October. I pull my jacket round me as I hurry down the street to pick up some lunch. And here *he* is, crossing the street from the gym, walking directly towards me. Jeans, trainers, t-shirt and a light jacket, a small backpack, his earphones on as usual. He's put on some muscle since last year, he looks in great shape. I look towards him, trying to look friendly but not overly familiar. He doesn't look up. Our paths intersect as he reaches the pavement and falls into stride *right* beside me, walking in the same direction, shoulder to shoulder. I cautiously look towards him as we walk. He's looking at the ground, lost in music or thought. I want to speak but feel I need to make eye contact, I need just the barest flicker of recognition or acknowledgment to authorise some words.

We walk 150 yards side by side. I can't believe this, this is ridiculous. Say something David! "Look out of yourself!" I silently urge him. "*See me!*" He doesn't. We stop, simultaneously, at the roadside and wait to cross. He looks up and down the road for a gap in the traffic. He looks everywhere but at me. We cross together and resume walking, matching stride for stride. This is crazy! Another 100 yards and we both turn left down the

hill, though a busier street. He continues to look down at the pavement in front. I continue to glance towards him, unable to make eye contact.

Finally, we reach the bustling main street. He turns left and disappears into the crowd. I stop and stand on the corner, wondering what to make of our five minute walk – together but apart.

## 5

It's my last summer as a student before moving away for my first proper job. I stand talking with Sian on the busy pavement outside the sports centre, waiting for Carly to finish work and join us for a drink. After a few minutes Carly walks through the swing doors towards us with, as usual, a huge grin on her face. I smile too, I can see she's already shaping herself up for some *serious* hugs and cuddles. When she's six feet away from us *he* walks through the corner of my vision, in a blur, towards the doors to the gym and right past Carly who's walking in the opposite direction.

“Hey, gorgeous boy! How've you *been*?” Carly booms, grabbing me and smothering me with a bear hug and three or four powerful, noisy kisses. “How is your sexy little body holding up without any of my lovin'?” she shouts, exploding in laughter as she pinches my ass hard. I beam and hug her back, in as unbridled a manner as I can muster. She drops me and starts the same treatment on Sian. As they're hugging, I look up towards the gym doors, towards where he's just walked. He has stopped just outside the doors and turned around. He's looking, now, right at me. All other movement around me seems to stop. Time stops. Everything goes silent. We are eyeball to eyeball, at a distance of forty feet. Him and me, the only things in the world which are in focus and clear. Everything else is blurred, chaotic and uncertain.

As Carly and Sian grab an arm each and march me off to the pub, I look back and see him turn and walk into the gym.

## 6

Today will be my last visit to this gym. Its been over two years since I first saw him so, assuming he's done a three year course, he's probably about to move away too. I wonder where he'll be heading. What kind of a job will he begin? Will he be moving away from friends too? Will he be in the gym today? I haven't seen him for weeks but speculatively look around the crowded gym in between sets. I do a few exercises in each of the rooms. But I don't see him here.

I'm done and head out into the corridor to leave. I pause for a long drink from the water fountain. When I stand up, I see him there at the other end of the corridor, just arrived. He seems to be looking right at me, from a distance of maybe thirty feet. He has stopped, frozen it seems, in the middle of locking his stuff away, as people walk to and fro between us. He holds the locker door open with one hand and he holds his backpack with the other. And he is – he's looking *right* at me. But I can't seem to make myself move. I am, it seems, frozen too. I don't know what I should do. I don't know what is right for me and I don't know what is fair to him. Seconds pass. He's too far away to just say hello, yet we're too unfamiliar, it's too busy, and perhaps too much is at stake for me to simply walk right up to him Carly-style, right here, right now. We've never spoken. I don't even know his name. I settle on lifting my right arm to my side to gesture a wave – a friendly and clearly visible yet, I hope, dignified and unthreatening wave. He slowly spins away, shoves his backpack into the little locker, and turns the key.

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In previously stating that bodies are more than stories, I do not wish to suggest that stories do not affect the experiences or actions of bodies in the world. Stories four, five and six illustrate how the *absence* of a shared (in this case, gay) storyline or plot can preclude *any* kind of action between two bodies. In the context of the story, *he* was unable to even look at me for a year or more, *I* was unable to even initiate a conversation. This story sequence portrays the ways in which, in line with a social constructionist conception of narrative theory, a dominant cultural story (in this case, hetero-normativity) can impede the actions of bodies in the world.

Reflecting now, it seems to me that the male bodies in the preceding stories may be considered *monadic* in terms of their relationship with each other. In Arthur Frank's (1995, p. 36) terms, a monadic body understands itself as "existentially separate and alone." Smith and Sparkes (2008, p. 224) write that,

when living in chaos, the body on occasions is *monadic* in terms of relating to other bodies, including those of loved ones and friends. In other words, the individual body is closed in upon itself and isolated rather than connected and existing in relations of mutual constitution with others.

I would not suggest that the male characters in the story were living or telling a chaos-type narrative in the terms described by Frank (1995). However, as Frank notes, "If narrative implies a sequence of events connected to each other through time, chaos stories are not narratives ... these stories cannot literally be told but can only be lived" (p. 98). In this light, I wonder about the extent to which the *absence* of a shared homosexual storyline (i.e., the lack of a narrative script which 'fits' bodily experience) may have similar effects to a chaos narrative on the basis of an absence of plot or structure. Within the preceding stories it seems the absence of a shared and mutually acceptable narrative script contributes to the



creation of a monadic body. In other words, I understand the *inaction* between the two bodies in the story to be a direct result of the absence of an accessible narrative which provides a plot for a male-male relationship.

In contrast, the embodied interactions between Carly and myself (in story number five) are markedly different. Here, a different story quite literally exists as a result of Carly and I being a different gender. Between us, as female and male, physical expressions of emotion and affection could be made openly and publicly without the risk of contravening the accessible and dominant heterosexual storyline. In McLeod's (1997) terms, the heterosexual story appears, on the surface at least, to 'fit' our experience and embodied interaction and relationship is scripted, occurs, and is unproblematic.

McLeod's (1997) identification of both personal (embodied) experience *and* culture ('the story of which I find myself a part') being important to identity and development suggests a way by which the monadic impasse described in the story may be negotiated. Namely, through entering a different cultural setting, otherwise difficult (or, it often feels, impossible) actions may be legitimized and facilitated. In short, changing the culturally available narrative in which one is immersed has the potential to authorize actions and behaviours which more closely 'align' with one's embodied inclination. In the final story I try to show this possibility in action. This story tells of a 'blind date' with an individual I call Al who I came to know through a dating resource. As a necessary prelude to us making contact, we had both self-identified as gay: we had both – symbolically perhaps – ticked the gay orientation box on the dating resource questionnaire. In this story, personal embodied inclination and experience broadly fits a homosexual story that has now become available, serving as an explicit pretext for our meeting. Thus, there is no significant tension between experience and story. Any narrative tensions that remain concern whether or not gay

experience and behaviour ‘fits’ with the dominant cultural narratives outside gay subculture.

## 7

I’ve spent five days in various stages of excitement – dreaming, wondering, and waiting for this first blind date to come around. I have enjoyed the wait – it’s been nice to have some possibilities on the horizon.

“You still up for a drink? Al” is the text message at five pm that starts my nerves jingling for real. The message sounds a bit terse.

“Hey Al. Yes! I’ve been looking forward to it all week. Look forward to seeing u at 7.” I reply, trying not to mask my enthusiasm through a text message.

“Cool. I’m gyming 1st ... Might look really wet. LoL” OK, that sounds friendlier.

“Thats alright with me – now i’m looking forward to it even more! ;-)” I try to give the impression of a humorous dirty chuckle, but it’s hard to achieve in a text.

“Ok. Don’t scare me. Leave it as that. C ya later” Woops, a little too much by the sound of it – I’m giving a far more confident picture of myself via texts than I could ever do in person. But he seems sensitive, that’s reassuring.

The bus arrives 15 minutes late and after riding barely 300 meters we stop and sit in traffic for ten more minutes. Shit! There is no way I’m going to make the Harbour Café for seven. At 6.39, another text beams in:

“Mate I m 30 mins late can you hold horses for that long? How would I know who you are?”

“That’s cool Al – bus was late, now stuck in traffic so i’m late too! I’ve got longish brown hair and an orange T – if that fails gimme a call or txt”

I'm riding the bus with six or seven girls, 17 or 18 at most, all shrieking and giggling, done up for a night out on the town. To my surprise, I warm to their antics and excitement, and feel jealous of them being able to share this moment with each other. Sat on my own, a few rows behind, I feel like a kid myself – insecure, naïve, nervous – as I try too hard to smile, to be calm, to relax. The girls are last to leave the bus before me, laughing and chattering as they swing off together down the street. I sit for five more minutes, just me and the driver, before getting off at the last stop.

I find the Harbour Café by 7.30 and a waiter shows me to a window table. I've brought a book so while I wait, or if he doesn't show, I can avoid looking like I've been stood up. Pretty soon, I start getting the feeling that he isn't going to show. I catch glimpses of a guy hanging around across the street and looking towards the window. That *could be* Al – he seems to be looking my way occasionally. The next time I look up, he's gone. Maybe that *was* Al? Did he bottle it or did he not like the look of me? At 7.39 I send him a message:

“Hey Al, i don't think u r here yet, but if u r i'm sat in the window. I like the place!”  
No reply. Uh oh, this doesn't look good. I try to read but can't focus on the book. I read and re-read the same paragraph over and over, while the couples and groups chatter around me.

At 7.52 my phone lights up and rings at the same time as a young guy, smiling, looks in at me through the window. He's holding out a lit up mobile that reads “*Calling... David.*” I think I manage a smile. I put my book away.

I can tell immediately that it's going to be OK. We say hello, shake hands. He offers me another drink and goes to the bar, speaking to some folks at another table on the way, and sending a text to someone. We talk and laugh – easy and relaxed – about surfing, Cornwall, broken cellos, songwriting, gigs, orchestras, life as a med student, school-boy

love affairs, bodies, London, mixed-race kids, the gym, near-marriage, and sushi. Around eleven, the bill shows up and he suggests we head off so I don't miss the last bus home.

"I already have," I laugh, "but its OK, I'll get a cab from the station."

"Cool, then I'll walk you to the station." We wander, chatting easily, laughing, through the streets and pedestrian arcades. We climb a concrete stairway. Suddenly we're there, under the bright lights of the station forecourt, beside a long line of waiting taxis.

"Can I have a kiss goodnight?" he asks.

"Yeah, of course," I find myself saying. One quick-but-slow kiss on the mouth, half an embrace, some eye contact, another kiss: as easy and as simple as that.

"Good night."

I walk on a few steps, turn around, and look behind. He's gone. Back home, I lie on the sofa with headphones on for six or seven songs. After, another text has arrived:

"Hope you made it home ok. Thanx for a nice night out. See you soon. Al x"

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So what have been my aims in telling these stories? Where do these stories leave us? What kind of identity or identities have I created or shaped through presenting these stories here and now? What might be learnt from this work?

First, through representing and reflecting on moments from my own life story, I want to move away from culturally and historically prominent stories which portray being gay as being deficient, a social outsider, a victim of discrimination, silenced, alone, as living in a monadic body. I have tried to show how these negative stories inhibit bodies and damage lives. As Ronald Pelias (2007, p. 948) observes of the story and film *Brokeback Mountain*:

*Brokeback Mountain* shows us two cowboys having a deep loving relationship and we of a liberal persuasion applaud. It also reminds us that if we choose to have such a relationship, our fate, like theirs, will be either violent death or loneliness. There are many ways to control bodies, to break backs.

These were the kinds of stories which surrounded me in my youth. It is time they were replaced.

While in some quarters more hopeful stories have become available, Peter Chadwick (2009) notes a continuing absence within psychology of positive narratives concerning any form of sexual orientation other than heterosexuality. In his words, “it seems it is almost implicitly forbidden in the human sciences to say anything actually unambiguously positive about behaviours that are not sanctioned by the general cultural order of the state” (p. 140). A similar situation exists in sport where, Sparkes (1997) and Anderson (2005) suggest, men’s experiences of homosexuality are shrouded in silence. By telling my stories here and now I want to help counter this silence and ‘stand with’ a small number of other writers (e.g., Amaechi & Bull, 2007; Anderson, 2005; Owen, 2006; Tewkesbury, 2006) who have published stories and explorations of same-sex relations among men in sport. I hope that the sequence of stories I have offered, while not shirking the issues, might stimulate dialogue and contribute to building a more optimistic portrayal of gay and bisexual identity which foregrounds the possibility and reality of an open relational orientation with others of the same sex.

Second, I want to point out that the stories I have told are, of course, partial and situated. No story can tell the whole story. The stories I have chosen to share here focus on a particular aspect of gayness – attraction and desire – with the explicit intention of exploring relationships between narratives, bodies, and our actions in the world. Other

stories remain untold. In making these strategic choices, I have omitted to explore what may be the most important characteristic of gayness. This characteristic is the love of another person – who happens to be of the same sex. The experience of love also intrudes on (and prompts me to question) the dominant heterosexual story in the kinds of ways I have discussed here. While I am unable to explore these experiences in this article, I am exploring ways that I might do so in future work.

Third, in writing these stories I have become acutely aware of how the way we write about a phenomenon shapes how we understand it (Richardson, 2000). The *process* of writing in the short story form has led me to new insights and understandings concerning sexuality, narrative, identity, and embodiment which had not been previously apparent to me. Shilling (2005) and Crossley (2007) suggest that much can be learnt from the lived and subjective nature of embodied experience, yet I am simultaneously aware that, in the context of this article, lived experience has been no more than a necessary starting point for my understanding. The narrative processes involved in creating stories of those experiences have been a central to my developing understanding. As Laurel Richardson (2000, p. 923) suggests, writing is itself “a way of ‘knowing’ – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable.” On this basis, as Chadwick (2001) suggests, alternative and creative approaches to writing (such as short stories) have much to offer psychology.

Finally, through the stories and my reflections on them, I have tried to generate some insights into the ways in which bodies are closely involved in the relationship between stories and experience. It is *this* that I have come to appreciate through reflecting on my own experience: that the personal stories we tell, based as they are on broader narratives that circulate in our culture, exert a powerful influence on the actions and inactions of our

bodies in the world. Our bodies, however, ‘talk back’ to this process because bodies have an existence beyond stories. Embodied experiences have the habit of intruding, and then intruding again, on the personal stories we create of our lives. In this sense, bodies are more than the stories we tell of them and, therefore, our bodies have the potential to serve as a kind of personal ‘check’ or ‘test’ of the stories we tell about them.

In the preceding stories, perhaps through some kind of ‘checking’ or ‘grounding’ process, my embodied experiences alerted me to a failing (heterosexual) narrative. I want to be clear that it was my *body* that served as the impetus to create an alternative story and identity. To be able to do so however I needed, in some ways at least, to immerse myself in a different cultural setting in order to gain access to alternative narrative scripts which more closely aligned with my experiences. Reflecting on these experiences and stories now, I understand that the opportunity to re-write a failing story has the potential to change the very real experiences and actions of our bodies in the world – sometimes in the most profound ways.

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