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Opening a Can of Worms: A Duo-Ethnographic Dialogue on Gender, Orientation, and Activism

Darren E. Lund & Rachel E. Evans

Darren: I think this is the official start of the dialogue¹ we've been talking about for a few months. Maybe we should set some guidelines and agree on how to start. If we're being really honest and casual, like in typical email forms, will we be comfortable seeing these words in print someday? The idea is to learn more about something by talking about it with another person, a newer methodological stance that has been called *duo-ethnography*. I learned more about it at an academic conference earlier this year (Sawyer & Norris, 2005) and have since begun to explore the notion further. I acknowledge Bill Pinar's explorations of understanding self, expressed as *currere* and extended by Rick Sawyer and Joe Norris (2004) to notions of our *dialogic self*. In the real world we call it conversation I think! In fact I hope by focusing our dialogue in this way we can begin to move it beyond a discussion. I really like what Carolyn Ellis (1997) asserted about scholarly narrative writing; it can be "emotional, personal, therapeutic, interesting, engaging, evocative, reflexive, helpful, concrete, and connected to the world of everyday experience" (p. 120).

So our topic is growing up with notions of gender and sexual orientation, and how those are played out in our lives in different ways in different settings. I think it could be fun, cathartic and maybe even a bit risky. What do you think?

Rachel: Sounds good. From what I've read it sounds like you're getting a lot of work done and being appreciated for it, too. That's cool. I haven't done much activism since I moved from Red Deer.² Maybe I've gotten lazy or something, but I think it's more the environment I'm in. I mean people on the whole here on Vancouver Island are so much more open-minded and less apathetic. I think in Red Deer I sort of had this feeling that if I didn't get involved in certain causes and put my time in then nothing would happen. Sort of this "if I don't do it nobody else will" kind of thinking. Here it seems that the activist scene is so, well, active, that it's almost more difficult to become involved in—do you know what I mean? Plus

it just seems less dire, because I'm not dealing with the same kind of widespread bigotry on a more or less daily basis.

Darren: You know what? This is something we've been talking about at our meetings here. I'm in Toronto right now writing from my hotel room. I was invited to be on the selection committee for the *Canadian Race Relations Foundation's* national *Award of Excellence*. Remember those folks? We went with your Mom in 2001 to Vancouver when *Students and Teachers Opposing Prejudice (STOP)* won one of their *Awards of Distinction*, and we presented about our program (Lund & Evans, 2001). It's interesting being on the other side now, and getting to review so many good nomination packages and discussing all kinds of social justice issues in substantial ways. The historical and political context of the particular community is so vital in assessing the impact and importance of any social justice project.

I was also talking with some youth activists in London, Ontario last week (I'm traveling way too much) where I was conducting research on school activism. One of the participants was talking about how it's easier to be an activist and mobilize people in a community when there is a tangible oppressive force, much like the "dire bigotry" you talk about in Central Alberta. I agree, as it seems so obvious why we have to do antiracism work in Alberta, so it will raise awareness and stimulate the community people to act. Or is it a convenient excuse for you now? I mean, there's also "activist burnout" that some of my colleagues have talked about, even among young people.

By the way, do you feel comfortable knowing that these words could someday soon be part of a book on narrative method, or queer studies, or something like that? Of course we'll both have the right to edit and revise and approve anything before we sent it.

Rachel: I'm pretty cool with that. It will probably hurt my chances of becoming a nun or a conservative Member of Parliament one day... but I think *Folkporn*³ (2005) probably did that already.

Darren: I look back with pride on the beginning of our *Gay/Straight Alliance* (GSA) group under the STOP program, and I remember you were instrumental in getting it going. As you probably know, it was the first ever GSA program in the very conservative province of Alberta. Since then I've written a few pieces about it (e.g., Lund, 2004, 2005), encouraging other teachers to resist homophobia and try to make their schools safer for all students. What do you remember about why you took the initiative to get it formed?

Rachel: Here's my version: I remember that the whole issue of homosexuality was a hot topic at *Lindsay Thurber Comprehensive High School* around the time that we started it, partly because David⁴ moved here from Ontario and he was the first openly gay person most people had encountered. He was a friend of mine, so it really pissed me off that he was being harassed constantly and that nothing was

being done about it. If I remember correctly, some students even went to [one of the school's vice-principals] about this and he did nothing to stop the harassment. I believe he actually suggested that David should be less open about his sexuality. So there was this feeling that homophobia was something to be quietly tolerated or that the issue of homosexuality was to be left alone, lest we open a can of worms.

I didn't, and still don't think this was the right approach to it. It was to the point that at least one student was being bullied because of his sexuality. I felt that kids all around the school were talking about this issue and meanwhile the staff was trying to pretend it wasn't an issue at all. I felt really strongly that people should be arguing about this and sharing their opinions but I also felt that people should realize that regardless of their opinion, they did not have the right to react to the sexuality of others with harassment or hostility. So I went to talk to you about starting the GSA and you seemed enthusiastic so we did it.

I don't think the meetings really took off the way I had hoped, but at least they happened. I hope there were a few kids who felt supported by its existence. I guess it worked on the principle that it's more difficult to bully a group of people than it is to bully one person alone. Which is sort of one way I look at STOP. I mean aside from being a great activist group, it was a place for all of the "misfit" kids to eat lunch. And I mean that in the most endearing way.

Darren: I never thought of you as misfits, but sure appreciated your "alternative" outlook on life! This account matches up with my memory of how it started, and I remember how you and David really took a leadership role in all this. I think it was you and [fellow teacher and STOP Advisor] Kirsten Spackman who went to see [the school's principal] to get permission for the meetings, and convince him it wasn't a gay sex club or something. It was just about finding a safe place to talk about the discrimination faced by gay students, and of course, those suspected of being gay. I liked how you and David ran the GSA meetings and set out some great ground rules from the start. My inclination would probably have been to go around the room and have people say *why* they were there, unaware of how insensitive that might be. You and David started out by saying that no one had to declare anything about their identities or why they were there, and that everything said in the meeting was confidential. It helped set a trusting tone. I was surprised that we actually attracted a dozen or so students to attend some of the meetings, considering it was probably a pretty risky thing.

It helped that STOP had a good reputation in the school and some national profile, and wanted to tackle this issue. The GSA was formed under that umbrella, as a separate "committee" but members of one didn't have to be members of the other. I remember some of the events we planned, including a movie night where we played some cool and kind of edgy films about being gay. I still can't believe we got away with that in Red Deer. I know the GSA also did a big poster campaign in the school but that may have been the next year.

Rachel: Your recollections of the GSA seem to match my own. Except that I forgot a lot of it, and I forgot to tell you that I have a very poor memory! I don't remember talking to the principal. I seem to think it was David and Ms. Spackman and that other beautiful Latino boy whose name I forget (I remember he looked gorgeous in drag). I do remember the poster campaign, though, because it was super fun and in retrospect, hilarious! I mean, do you remember how silly some of those posters were? And we made tons—totally plastered the school with these crazy homemade posters! I remember that a janitor tore some down, not out of prejudice, but because he had some weird philosophy on stereotypes that he felt the poster refuted. But I also remember that same janitor telling me he could communicate with pigeons...

Darren: Yes, some of the posters I remember said, "Homophobia is so Gay," "I don't care if you're gay, straight, or Australian," and my favourite: "Stop flaunting your heterosexuality" [this one was not approved by the principal].

One great memory I have is of local United Church pastor, Reverend Mark Green, offering to come and speak to the GSA meeting about a biblical message that wasn't hateful or condemning. We invited him back another time, and I think that was the event that got that local "youth pastor" so upset. As you know, his hateful letter to the editor entitled "Homosexual Agenda Wicked" was published in Red Deer's daily newspaper in June 2002. Just about a week later, a homosexual young man was gay-bashed in Red Deer, and it was the tipping point in my decision to file a formal human rights complaint against the reverend, and a separate one against the newspaper.

Rachel: Why don't you tell what happened with those complaints, and the reverend's backlash, to give an idea of some of the anti-gay hostility in Alberta?

Darren: Sure. I actually settled the complaint against the *Red Deer Advocate* newspaper in April 2004. The terms of the settlement are confidential, but after the settlement, the newspaper permanently changed their official letters policy, promising that it "will not publish statements that indicate unlawful discrimination or intent to discriminate against a person or class of persons, or are likely to expose people to hatred or contempt because of race, colour, religious beliefs, physical disability, mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, source of income, marital status, family status or sexual orientation."

That reverend's response to my complaint against his letter was to refuse Conciliation with the *Alberta Human Rights Commission* and, instead, forward his copy of the complaint materials to the media. In December 2002, the reverend launched a defamation lawsuit against me, seeking \$400,000 in damages based on comments I was alleged to have made to a newspaper reporter for an article published in August 2002. The offending comments allegedly drew a parallel between the reverend and other known extremists from the Central Alberta region. The reverend also started a

website claiming he was under attack by a “gay activist professor” and arranged fund-raising events to promote his views and raise money for his lawsuit against me. He continues to post inflammatory writings against me on a variety of websites. I found particularly chilling one warning: “This man, Darren Lund, needs to be stopped.”

My research with other activists has explored a number of sources of resistance to social justice work (Lund, 2006), and I’ve received threats in the past, so this wasn’t exactly a surprise. I hired a lawyer, so besides enduring the ongoing personal attacks, I am now faced with considerable legal bills. My lawyer has generously agreed to reduce fees, but legal expenses have already surpassed \$30,000. There have been a few local fundraisers for me, so it’s been encouraging that I haven’t been alone in this struggle.

In early 2005, the pastor suddenly dropped his lawsuit against me. The human rights complaint against him has been under investigation for over four years now, and will finally be going before a *Human Rights Panel* in the coming months. The pastor continues to post illegal information about the complaint, spread lies about me, and write against homosexuals in a website for *Concerned Christians Canada Inc.*, on a number of other related websites, and on radio broadcasts. I continue to receive numerous hateful emails, letters, and telephone calls about this matter.

Rachel: 30,000 bucks is a lot of money to have to pay just to defend yourself from this obvious attempt to intimidate you. I didn’t realize it was that much! Little does he know that your tenacious spirit and passion for fairness helps you to prevail while he, spiteful and weak-willed, will fall by the wayside. Seriously, I hope the situation improves for you. Too bad the GSA has petered out. It happens I guess. To be completely honest, even I was losing steam towards graduation.

Darren: Thanks. The GSA survived for a few school years, but has kind of dissolved in the past year or two. It takes some remarkable courage on the part of the student leaders, and the teacher-sponsors, to put themselves out there for a program like this, so it’s not too surprising that it has folded, but still very disappointing.

We agreed we might talk about identity. So why don’t I plunge in and ask you when you first started to think about your sexual orientation?

Rachel: It’s hard to say—when does anyone start thinking about it? Puberty I guess. I think I remember being very young, like 10 or something and hearing about gay rights issues on the news and thinking it was absurd that anyone would think a person could choose his/her sexual orientation. I guess I’ve always been a person who follows her heart rather than her head—and to me it just seemed so obvious that love and attraction were things that were sort of beyond human control. Also I think kids have that sort of sense of justice or fairness that adults sometimes talk themselves out of; I remember feeling it was totally unfair that one group of people would have different rights than others. So as a kid the whole queer thing seemed to be more of a fairness issue than anything. Then as I got older I started

to think about the issue more in terms of how it related to me. Even though I was in a very close-minded environment, I was an open-minded, curious kid and my Mom always encouraged me to stay that way.

When I was about 14 my friend, Janeen, and I started to be curious about queer culture. We thought it would be really cool to have friends who were gay or even just to know people who were gay. I think it just seemed that gay culture was so connected to culture at large and an urban lifestyle that we were craving. It was like a novelty to us. Ironically our phys-ed teacher was totally open and comfortable about being a lesbian - but we weren't really interested in her. We wanted a real queen... At that time I don't think either of us was really thinking seriously about the reality of what it meant to be a gay person. We were just attracted to the flamboyant, gay culture that you see on TV.

Darren: Talk about a compelling narrative. Thanks for your candor here, Rachel, and for bringing back a flood of my own recollections about my early years, which were quite a few years before yours. In fact, recollections from when I was 14 are almost 30 years ago! Sounds scary though I'm starting to get used to this aging thing.

Here are some of my thoughts, brought out and probably shaped by yours. I remember being brought up in a home and a neighbourhood where monogamy and heterosexual relationships were the norm, the only option, and virtually all of the homes in my little world had two parents and a few kids. The neighbourhood is now better known for crime and lots of new Canadians, but back then it was a 1960s TV show kind of suburb. Only the widow across the street was an exception, an alternative family arrangement.

So it wasn't a surprise I suppose that I was really encouraged to have a girlfriend as a kid. I think I fell in love with Wilma in kindergarten, when we were just five, and I remember her brother, Johnny, performing a kind of marriage ceremony between us one summer day in the back alley behind the garage. She used to write me love notes as we got older, pledging her love and a promise to marry me when we were both 22 years old. It all made perfect sense at the time, and I never wondered about this early compulsion to pair up.

I found a new love in grade four and spent the next eight years obsessing over LaDonna, finally settling for becoming her safe guy friend in high school. Throughout my childhood I was always strongly attracted to girls as objects of my devotion and attention, and I wonder now how much my family's values were behind this drive to find a female life partner.

At the same time, I never felt masculine enough. My father was this big hulk of a man, an admittedly narrow-minded oil rigger turned city cop known to most people as "Moose." He is still rather homophobic and has often joked about "gear-boxes"—the name he uses for gay men. He loved to impersonate the effeminate voice and limp wrist, and the juxtaposition of this stereotype with his typical gruff,

emotionally distant persona usually made us howl with laughter. But I was not a big kid. Kind of short for my age, I was chubby and had a squeaky voice all the way through junior high school. I remember when my Dad would take me to visit the police station, a typical remark would be, “Are you sure that’s your kid, Moose?” or, directed to me, “What the hell happened to you?” My Mom was more overt with her love for me, and her praise helped to mitigate the rough put downs that my Dad would casually throw at me as we did chores, went fishing, or worked in the garage. “You’re useless as tits on a nun” was one of his favourites, and I remember thinking it was kind of funny at the time.

Even my Mom would help reinforce certain gendered expectations of me. I remember her overhearing me talking on the phone and telling me that my voice sounded “too faggy,” and that I should try to talk with a deeper voice so people wouldn’t think I was a fairy. I think she thought she was being really helpful. My Mom also sat me down for a talk one day when I was in junior high and, already realizing I was almost a foot shorter than LaDonna now, feeling rather insecure about my developing masculinity. “Darren,” she said very seriously, “your father would be very disappointed if you were gay.”

So do you think this last blabber was a bit “confessional” or self-serving autobiographical junk? Reading it again, I’m a bit self-conscious of the tone.

Rachel: I think reading over the intimate/confessional writing that you’ve done makes everyone feel self-conscious. I don’t think it’s self-serving to tell a personal story like that—I actually think it’s the opposite. I tend to believe that it’s very important to try not to hold back when you’re expressing your inner world to another person. In general I think our culture is very self-conscious about expressing itself honestly—and I think our unwillingness to discuss sexuality is probably part of this. I actually found your e-mail touching. It reminded me of how narrow and skewed our perceptions of what it means to be male or female are. I’ve never thought of you as effeminate person—so it’s kind of weird to think that your parents would feel that way. I would just assume that you are a fairly sensitive person who’s not caught up in pretending or proving your maleness. But I would never interpret that as being gay.

It’s sad how ingrained those stereotypes are. When I first met one of my friends out here I thought he was gay because he has a lisp and he’s an artist. How stupid is that? And here I am, the kid who started a club to combat those kinds of stereotypes in high school! It just seems that certain stereotypes become fact in our heads without our even knowing it.

One kind of comical aspect that I picked out of your story was the part about your Dad impersonating a stereotypical gay person, and how it seemed so funny to see such a macho guy behaving that way. Isn’t the juxtaposition or melding of male/female qualities the same kind of humor that many drag queens rely on? So even though your Dad’s intentions were homophobic—he was actually doing a

sort of drag performance—similar to those that queer men have used in the past to make fun of gender stereotypes.

Darren: So, Detective Moose Lund as a drag queen. That's hilarious! I'll have to bring up your analysis at the next family dinner when Dad's ranting about "gearboxes."

I've actually had some interesting experiences over the years with my own drag queen experiences. One Halloween I thought it would be funny to go as a girl. I was about eight or nine years old, put a blonde wig on, lots of makeup and a dress, and went "trick or treating." I was very disappointed in that most of our neighbours said something like, "Laurette, what are you supposed to be." That hurt. Laurette is my sister, older by two years. So I had successfully impersonated my sister. We still regularly get recognized by people who know the other sibling, so I guess there is already a strong enough family resemblance without the help of the makeup!

My next sojourn into cross-dressing came in my first year of university. I was slim then, with longer hair and a baby face, and must have had a rather feminine look about me. My short, hairy buddy, Darrell, and I both dressed up as girls for a Halloween party hosted by the nursing faculty at the University of Calgary. He looked like a gorilla in his too-tight cheerleading costume, with his five-o'clock shadow, broad shoulders and hairy legs making a perfect comic contrast to the stereotypical image of cheerleader. I, on the other hand, had curled and feathered blonde hair, and wore a black strapless dress my sister had loaned me, stuffed with realistic looking breasts complete with erect nipples. I wore the pumps my brother-in-law had worn to a *Rocky Horror Picture Show* party where he had dressed as "Frank N. Furter." Laurette also did my hair and makeup, and looking at the photo now, I have to admit I looked quite feminine and attractive.

When we got to the party, everyone laughed when they saw my buddy in his borrowed cheerleader costume. I spent the night fending off advances by young men sincerely wanting to dance with me. I had some fun with it, and acted really raunchy with them when I spurned their advances. I remember grabbing one of my breasts and saying, "suck this" in as deep a voice as I could muster. I began to feel a bit uncomfortable in how successfully I had become a woman, but probably kind of enjoyed the attention (and free drinks) and seeing the look on guys' faces when they found out I was a guy. So I drank more, which didn't really help. There was an incident when a group of guys followed me into the bathroom and one of them yelled out, "This chick pisses like a guy!" as I stood at the urinal. We later went to a high school party on the way home, and looking back on it now, I remember that no one else was in costume besides us, which makes it an even stranger evening.

I've had another fun night since then while dressed as a woman, about 10 years ago, when my teacher buddy, Geoff, and I dressed as female Safeway cashiers for a college Halloween party. We had assembled very authentic costumes, complete with the vintage official white frocks, wigs, banana hair clips, Safeway lapel pins,

red elastic wrist key holders, white runners, and raunchy names on our official Safeway nametags. He was *Fellatia* and I was *Cunnilinga*. We ended up accepting a ride home with a former student and some of her friends, and at one point late in the evening I remember being chased by her disgruntled ex-boyfriend. It would have been a pretty hilarious sight from the perspective of an outsider.

Rachel: I enjoyed your drag stories. I have a similar story; for an eighties party we decided to dress up my roommate, Marlaina, as our idol (you guessed it) Bruce Springsteen. Marlaina is a pretty substantial girl, so when we squeezed her into some “wiener jeans” and a “I [heart] NJ” t-shirt with ripped sleeves, she made a pretty convincing version of “The Boss.” I actually got a little nervous around her—it felt like Bruce was right there in my cruddy apartment! I’d just gotten a new haircut/dye so we felt I would make a pretty good Robert Smith, lead singer of the band, *The Cure*. I wore lots of eye make-up and pouted all night. (Nobody got it.) Anyway, we went to this eighties party at the college. It was great, we karaoked the night away, drank a little, and had a good time as Bruce and Bob.

Then some other girls convinced us to go to this other more mainstream bar. We got there and realized there were a lot of machismo type guys and they didn’t seem to like our costumes as much as everyone at the party. A lot of the people there seemed really confused. For some reason the idea of dressing up like another gender—even just for fun, totally blew their minds. One guy actually tweaked Marlaina’s nipple! She just grabbed him by the arm and asked, “Would you pinch The Boss’s tit?!” It was pretty funny. But we left right after that—because we were getting way too many weird looks and a feeling like we weren’t welcome.

Darren: I’d have liked to pick up more on some threads of your earlier piece, maybe by asking you some questions. Hope that’s okay. How did your Mom show her open-mindedness to your curiosity? Were there specific instances you can remember where she stuck up for you, or supported you?

Rachel: I can’t think of any specific incident. It was more just an attitude of open-mindedness. She’s always been a person who was very fascinated by other cultures and that sort of thing. She used to make me go to these multicultural days at Bower Ponds in Red Deer where we’d get to eat food from another culture, make some craft, that kind of thing.

I think she was very lonely when she moved from Germany and she always talked about how unwelcoming and homogenized the culture in Red Deer was, which she detested. Maybe that’s when it became really important to her that we would grow up to be accepting of people who were different.

Darren: I noticed you said “make me go” and “have to eat.” Is that wording significant? Did you feel like you were forced to be accepting? What did you think at the time?

Rachel: At the time I thought it was kind of lame and boring. Looking back on it—it was kind of a forced experience and very surface level—but maybe if you're not living in a very diverse place those experiences have to be somewhat forced. I don't think I was being forced to be accepting, though. I was just kind of coerced into spending my Saturdays doing something structured and kind of boring when I probably would have preferred to be running around with friends or something, that's all.

Darren: I ask because I'm always dragging along [my two children] to cultural events or human rights things, and wonder if they'll reject it all someday.

Rachel: I don't think so, not if it's something that they really believe in themselves. I think kids only rebel against things that they don't feel are right for them. Your children seem pretty open-minded by nature.

Darren: I'm so proud that [my 13-year-old son] seems so cool about diversity issues, and doesn't have any hostilities or hang-ups about gay or transgendered people, despite his being in the throes of puberty right now. He's got the cracking voice, occasional zits, and growth spurts (he's already five feet nine!) but seems very secure in his identity and in the "live and let live" approach to others. He recently had to do a project for social studies and was asked to highlight an influential antiracist activist, and actually chose to create a poster on my work with young people. Kind of embarrassing, but I felt proud of him (and he got a good mark on it).

Rachel: It's really cool that he's proud of his Dad. Aren't most kids that age embarrassed by their parents?

Darren: No kidding. So what did you and your friend, Janeen, do to nurture your fascination with drag/queen/gay culture?

Rachel: We watched gay movies like *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. This is goofy: we actually created two imaginary friends who were gay (Matt and Bobby) and then we told all of our school friends about them, just to get a reaction.

Darren: This is hilarious! I love it. What else can you tell me about this? How long did it last? Were you ever discovered to be faking the gay friends?

Rachel: I think it lasted up until high school when we started to meet actual gay people and so there was no longer a need to make them up. No one ever found us out. I don't think anyone paid attention to us actually. It was more just a game we played with each other. Looking back on it, it is pretty funny. One thing I love about Janeen is that she's always been able to imagine a more interesting life than the one she has. I at least try to do the same.

Darren: I've also talked publicly about young people's sense of social justice

and fairness, when I talk about the importance of engaging young people in anti-discrimination groups. What do you think happens to some idealistic young people as they get older?

Rachel: I think for some reason, maybe through the school system or other institutions, as kids get older they lose their imagination. I think imagination is key to acceptance because it allows us to empathize with other people or imagine what it's like to be in their position. Kids seem to do that naturally. Secondly, I think as our brains become more developed maybe it becomes easier to rationalize behavior that is wrong or unfair.

Darren: When you say, "As our brains become more developed" might you mean, "As we get socialized into a society that marginalizes certain groups of people"?

Rachel: Well I guess what I was getting at was the tendency for people, as they grow older, to rationalize all sorts of thoughts behavior which I thought might have to do with Western dependence on the rational or logical. So I suppose socialization is part of that, but what I was getting at more was: Why does society marginalize those groups in the first place? I mean, it has to start with the individual's thought patterns right?

Darren: Good point. Why do you think so many people are hung up on discriminating against gay people specifically, often seeking to allow them even fewer rights than other marginalized groups?

Rachel: I think it has to do with society's ideas about sex and morality—and they're both grey areas—and areas that people might choose not think about if they don't have to. Maybe because they're afraid of discovering that they are an immoral or perverted person! That's a tough question.

Darren: I think you're onto something important here. We have no trouble seeing heterosexual couples kissing and talking about having kids, making their relationship hotter, etc., but when it's applied to gays, suddenly it's too sexual, too intimate, too gross and sick. Something about their love makes it taboo or a flashpoint for people in our society. And didn't you think of yourself as a lesbian at one point? Where are you in your identity formation on the issue of orientation, if you don't mind my asking?

Rachel: In high school I began to identify myself as bisexual, after having romantic relationships with women. People seemed to think I was a lesbian because I was so heavily involved with the GSA and because I never went out with guys. I was also very interested in feminism at the time—reading feminist books and magazines in *all* of my spare time—and through that I became aware of gender roles and stereotypes which I found fun to play around with (which might be another reason people thought I was a lesbian). In any case, I didn't like to deny it because

I felt really strongly that it shouldn't be an issue. Right now I still consider myself bisexual but I'm not very involved in the "queer scene." I'm in a more liberal environment so essentially it doesn't come up very often and it's generally become less of an issue in my life.

I think that period of questioning that I went through was very important to my growth as an individual. For one, I did a lot of reading about sexuality and gender so now I don't feel I have to struggle with societal pressures as much as someone who never thought or learned about those things. I feel I am better equipped to resist the pressure a lot of women feel to be the perfect image of femininity, but at the same time I don't feel like I need to make myself into a kind of walking billboard or statement resisting that. Does that make sense? I feel more aware of the dichotomy that exists and that, like most people, I fall somewhere in the middle of masculine/feminine or gay/straight. I hope that makes sense.

Darren: It makes lots of sense. Thanks for your candor and openness in this conversation. I've really found our reflections enlightening, and each time you've brought up a specific topic or issue it has triggered something for me. I know we didn't undertake this exercise to answer a set of specific questions, but to explore and open up some deeper understanding through a mutual inquiry in to this cluster of ideas. And I hope we've done that.

Rachel: Is that it for self-exploration? It's been kind of fun. I mean, it's not often you find someone interested in listening to you reflect on your high school experiences to that extent. Anyway, I've got to get some work done. May your days off be long and your legal battles short.

Notes

¹ We initiated our writing of this article as an email conversation between friends over the course of three months in the spring of 2005. Darren is the former teacher/coordinator of a high school student activist group, *Students and Teachers Opposing Prejudice (STOP)*, of which Rachel was an active member. Both strived to be conscious of the interplay between their own identities with respect to age, gender, orientation, and social position. The authors have included the text of their email conversations almost verbatim, with minor revisions for clarity and correctness, and the inclusion of references.

² Red Deer is a small city in Alberta, Canada, located at the mid-point between the two largest cities in the province, Calgary and Edmonton. Red Deer's population is approximately 75,000 people. The surrounding region, known as Central Alberta, has suffered from a negative national reputation based on past extremist activities of the *Aryan Nation* racist organization, and the high-profile trials and appeals of James Keegstra, a former teacher and convicted hate promoter.

³ *Folkporn.com* (2005) was a satirical website designed by Rachel and her friends to offer a tongue-in-cheek critique of misogynist pornographic websites while promoting healthy self-image among women.

⁴ A pseudonym is used here for his protection.

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