Of my research participants, she was number sixty-three and she was tired. The nurse administering her rape kit heard I was a Women's Studies professor and said 'Of course.' She meant, “Of course, you know about sexual assault.” Depressingly, the nurse wasn’t wrong. It was not my first time helping a student but this person was no longer my student and I was done with data collection. Whatever we now were to each other, she called and I answered – an example of my ‘poor boundaries’ with students, research participants and when framing my academic work. How did my personal life, research and activism get so entangled? Why is it so commonplace for marginalized scholars doing work on marginalized communities to find their lives and research bleed into each other in ways that seem peculiar to other researchers? Below, I trace my scholarship for specific queer ruptures that not only shaped my health and wellbeing, but also had a significant effect on my sexuality and life as a scholar-activist.

In my second year of study, when building a syllabus for my Introduction to Women’s Studies class, I wanted to include a lecture on catcalling and street harassment because it was an infuriating part of my life on the streets of New York City. When I was 12, I asked my mother why I could no longer walk down the street in peace. She said, “That’s what their eyes are for,” implying that men are simply hardwired this way. And when I replied, “What are my eyes for?” she was silent. Not much changed in my twenties, after children, marriages, and many degrees. Right across the street from my graduate school is a hotbed of catcalling. Once, passing two women on 34th street and 5th Avenue, a guy selling City Sights tours said something to the younger one as he checked out her ass. The second, much older woman, stopped dead in her
tracks, turned to him and said, “I know she's beautiful but this is NOT how you communicate with people.” The guy stammered and laughed, "I just said she is beautiful, it's just a compliment, lady." I turned around and said, "You know, I agree with her. Saying shit under your breath isn't working.” As he laughed at me, he said, “Okay, okay, you are also beautiful. All of you are beautiful. Calm down.” “And you're never going to get it,” I replied, on my way to a Women’s Studies class.

Walking away, I thought of the thousands of catcalling incidents and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) – directed street harassment in my own life. Often, men refused to understand why I would react with frustration, cursing, and anger when they said something ‘complimentary’ about my body. I should feel flattered, they’d say. They’re just being nice, they’d say. The catch is, I believe it – some of them are just being nice or ‘just being men,’ if raised to be ‘the aggressive sex’ when pursuing women. What’s worse is that not only are men raised to be entitled to women’s bodies and emotions on the streets, but they are also unable to take ‘no’ for an answer, often escalating their assault to stalking, physical attacks or murder. Yet, it seemed, not many in academia took it seriously. Back in 2011, and things have improved some now, there were not a lot of resources on the topic so I decided to explore it for my graduate ethnography class.

That was a frustrating experience because none of the required texts mentioned feminist methods or how to do ethnographic work with a critical eye on the research process. In *Queer Methods and Methodologies*, Browne and Nash explain that “Research ‘methods’ can be conceptualized as what is ‘done,’ that is, the techniques of collecting data…By contrast, methodologies are those sets of rules and procedures that guide the design of research to
investigate phenomenon or situations” (Browne and Nash 2010:10). For me, a distinctly feminist methodology was too much of a ‘special topic.’ I was told to ‘beware of mesearch,’ dismissed for my scholarship on a topic that was part of my daily life. That kind of resistance surprised me since I thought sexism would be harder to find in sociology – I was naive. In a later class on qualitative methodology, I expanded my project to include street harassment experienced by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) people, understanding that in my body alone existed a person that others catcalled because they thought I was a woman and harassed me for being LGBTQ, sometimes in the same breath.

Keeping intersectionality, postcoloniality, Transgender Studies, Women’s Studies, and race, class, and space in mind, I set out to write up a dissertation proposal that would satisfy an Institutional Review Board (IRB). I knew that the IRB wanted a project that posed no significant threats to the human participants but it was also rumored to be sensitive when it came to sexuality research. I kept my descriptions short, never disclosing my own self in the process nor the actual reasons behind my research – what if cisgender heterosexual men looked it over and responded poorly and defensively, as they often do, and it affected my ‘go-ahead?’ In addition, nowhere in the IRB application was there space to discuss any significant threats posed to the researcher because of their work. Saying that I would interview both catcallers and recipients of catcalling or men that enact LGBTQ – directed street harassment and recipients of such harassment ignored overlaps and distinctions within these groups.

My interaction with catcallers, who very often also enact LGBTQ – directed street harassment, was quite different from my interaction with women and LGBTQ people, groups that obviously overlap. As a new graduate student, I did not know that conducting research as a
queer (label I used at the time), woman-perceived individual (I identify as agender) would make my research experience far more complicated and precarious. When it came to catcallers on the street, having them talk to me after a catcall posed a significant risk to me – getting ‘into it’ with catcallers about their behavior tends to escalate to verbal or physical harassment, sometimes being followed and any number of unwanted consequences – trying to talk as ‘a researcher’ in ‘an interview’ does not make that go away. When I felt safe, I would talk to men that catcalled me on the streets and spent several weeks with men hanging out in Washington Square Park, notoriously known for their catcalling. What was special about that site was that these catcallers stayed there throughout the day and evening, involved in activities other than catcalling. Coming into this environment as a young, white woman-perceived individual resulted in a lot of data on race, class, gender, sexuality and space.

Certainly, many of the men looked at me with suspicion. Others took pictures with me even if we did not talk because they wanted to share my coming by with their friends, as if it was something newsworthy. Of the men that did speak with me, every single one wanted to know if I ‘had a man,’ was into women or ‘freaky stuff.’ I was open with my responses because the interaction required it – gaining their trust or an answer to my questions was not going to happen if I was not forthcoming and direct. It was also important that I looked non-threatening and acted ‘nice and sweet’ but flirty as well, because interviewing with me not only impressed their friends but made them wonder if they could have sex with me – I gathered that would score them major points with the other guys, because I was such an ‘unusual catch.’

It is hard to describe how it felt to be objectified by so many men at once, but I played it like it did not bother me, lied and said my views on catcalling were rather neutral. Sometimes, I
would say that I find it unfair how some women think catcalling is a form of sexual harassment. Other times, I would start the conversation by asking if only black and Latino men catcall, which is a pervasive and harmful stereotype. Since many of my subjects were black men and men of color, that question got them talking and provided insight into race and sexism on the streets of New York. I would also pretend to enjoy catcalling women after revealing my queer identity, which was a dangerous ‘coming out,’ as it made many of my participants hostile and they would stop interviews and switch into a homophobic stance. At the time, because of my conventional gender presentation, I could also play it ‘straight’ and ‘like a regular girl,’ if I did not feel safe.

All the misogyny and deception left me feeling dirty and unwell but I brushed it off for the sake of data. Mine was the kind of data that impressed others as they shook their heads wondering why and how I would even interact with catcallers on the street. In denial about the effects of my research on my own sense of self and wellbeing, I would say that when it gets hard, I would take breaks and work with feminist literature or anti-street harassment organizations just to counteract some of my negative experiences. But whom was I fooling? It was not just the fact that I was sexually objectified or could not express my anger at catcalling and LGBTQ – directed harassment in the field. It was the sudden realization that despite my position as researcher, once I stop collecting data, nothing would change in my daily life – men would continue to interrupt my day, sometimes multiple time a day, and my research would be relegated to some marginalized corner of academia where feminist work goes to die. Over the years, the more I got catcalled, the angrier I got. I would think, ‘Don’t you know who I am? Don’t you know what I research?’ in response to their words and gestures. Soon enough, I was not as able to interview catcallers or men that harassed me for ‘looking queer’ or being with women as it got far too personal and painful, in part because I made it my topic.
After the mini-ethnography at the Washington Square Park site, I would create field notes while observing men in the subway or catcalling women on the streets and record my interactions with random catcallers. As I went through a deeper engagement with my agender identity, changes made to my appearance would result in greater LGBTQ – directed harassment. In addition, the fact that I was seen as a part of an interracial lesbian couple (even if I did not yet identify as a lesbian) now that I was dating a black woman made any and all harassment that much worse. It was starting to look like an auto-ethnographic component was essential to my work and to my own gender and sexual transformations, an example of reflexivity that is “the means – the action, the movement, the performance – by which we engage a personal and queer scholarship” (Adams and Jones 2011:108). And while it was important for me to deepen my understanding of how catcalling and research it may have changed me at the core, I came to realize that I wanted to know less and less of the meaning making behind catcaller actions and aggression. In the past, when my fury was small, I thought it mattered to speak to your various research subgroups equally and to ‘represent’ everyone’s voice. At some point, I no longer cared what men thought, even if it would add to the general knowledge of street interactions to have me interview them. This shift was an attempt to protect my emotional health, reflecting other shifts in my work and life, from engagement with men to a focus on women and transgender people that identified as LBQ or any number of labels beyond heterosexual.

It helped that I had stumbled into the work of feminist and queer geographers when looking for insight into how space shapes not only our identities but upholds structural inequalities when it comes to gender and sexuality (Binnie 1997, Knopp 2007). Then I saw Jen Jack Gieseking map the disappearance of lesbian-queer women’s organizations and physical spaces within New York City at his presentation for Queering the Quotidian: Differential and

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1 For Gieseking, lesbian-queer describes people who self-identify as ‘lesbian or queer’ (Gieseking 2013b).
Contested Spaces Within Neoliberalism Symposium (Gieseking 2014) and felt a tremendous sense of loss. “But I’m here now,” I whispered to the lesbian spaces of a different time. In a slide spanning twenty-five years (1983-2008), I watched dots representing lesbian-queer women’s efforts in New York City light up and die out, like stars across a clear night’s sky that is getting darker and more solemn.

I knew that the contemporary landscape of lesbian-queer women’s lives is being extinguished, evidenced by the disturbing pattern of lesbian bars closing down across the nation and the fact that lesbian-queer specific activism is not privileged in mainstream gay politics. But, it is clear now that my then deep sense of nostalgia for a ‘more lesbian’ time and space was also a reflection of my own internal conflicts. I was married to a cisgender heterosexual man and had struggled with not being read as queer, when out in public with him and my three children. I was never heterosexual and being perceived as heterosexual was a painful experience, an erasure I came to hate, whereas before I would just shrug it off and speak vaguely about context. As mentioned, when out and about with my female partner, courtesy of my polyamorous relationship, we would get a lot of LGBTQ–directed harassment, a phenomenon I welcomed because it made me visible and that made me whole. I should have known that my longing to be seen as a lesbian was partly because I was a lesbian and did not realize it and that my seeking lesbian spaces had to do with my own developing sexual identity, in addition to being a part of my research, activism, and practicing a new form of resistance.

By resistance, I do not only mean refusing to accept daily heterosexist and transphobic policing of our lives. By resistance, I mean to consider seriously the queer project suggested by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner where we “support forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through
collective activity” (Berlant and Warner 1998:562). As I worked through my own sexual identity, I kept asking: what part of the public sphere is even accessible to lesbian-queer women and people? If my definition of ‘lesbian-queer’ also includes bisexual, pansexual, asexual and otherwise labeled people, are there ways to signal those identities in public? How can we sustain a memory and a collective history across generations and outside of the archive? What does being a lesbian-queer woman or person have to do with forming feminist collectives? Bolstered by Jen Jack Gieseking’s call to queer space and spatialize the queer, I began to explore the extent to which my own work was about queer geographies yet unmapped (Gieseking 2013).

Recent work around lesbian-queer ‘neighborhoods’ addressed the need of lesbian-queer women to form their own ‘territories,’ however loosely they are built: “What is most important about this looseness is recognizing how the sense of lesbian-queer neighborhood assumed an eternally fleeting or devolving dynamic […] The precarious political and economic position of women, LGBTQ people, and the double jeopardy of being lesbians and queer women makes these women’s spaces fleeting and fragmented” (Gieseking 2013b:191-194). I saw words like ‘fleeting,’ ‘ephemeral,’ and ‘fragmented’ a lot and it made me angry. It seems that if we, as lesbian-queer women and people at all endure, we endure through the already constantly vanishing moments in time, piecing together our queerness and our sex, some through encounters over the Internet, others through quick meet ups at the park. Many of us experience sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in other spheres of society, like at home, school, and the workplace, which is made worse by racism and poverty.

These experiences tied into with my work on cat calling and LGBTQ – directed harassment on the streets of New York City because when we cannot exist in private, the public is no place of refuge. No matter how hard we try to redefine space, place and belonging, I
believe that lesbian-queer women and people in contemporary New York City have next to nowhere to be lesbian, to be queer or to explore their gender and sexuality and come together with others within our fragile communities. Fundamentally, the question I ask is: if we find ourselves in a precarious state of having to survive as sexual agents without a place or space to call our own, how can we survive as lesbian-queer women and people?

One way to survive is to mark certain spaces as lesbian spaces simply because we, as lesbians, move through it (Valentine 1996). I started studying street interactions because they mark me as a woman and a lesbian without my consent, invalidating my actual gender and sexual identities. My actual identities matter little in public, where people in a position of power (be that cisgender men or heterosexual people, many of whom are also cisgender men) are quick to engage in heteronormative gender and sexual policing. All they want to know is whether one is a woman or a man, whether one is straight and worthy of validation or one is not straight and subject to exclusion. This kind of binary thinking erases much of the complexity within our queer communities, making it easy to think that bisexual, transgender, asexual, or polyamorous people, to name a few consistently forgotten groups, do not exist. Not only do street interactions flatten my lived experience, they make the public sphere and unwelcome and hostile space to which I do not belong.

The reason why LGBTQ people are marked by this kind of un-belonging is because public space, like many other spaces, is a heterosexist world (Valentine 1993). But the LGBTQ acronym needs a serious disaggregation, as there are differences in how gender and sexuality are (re)congealed on the streets. For example, gay men are able to build neighborhoods and create families with children much more easily than lesbian-queer women, given their more disposable income and ability to establish specific areas within the city (Castells 1983, Knopp, 1990).
Eventually, though I wanted to sample all the LGBTQ sub-communities equally, understanding inequality within LGBTQ communities helped me make a deliberate shift in my research. Since the public sphere is especially hostile to women, be they heterosexual or lesbian-queer as well as transgender people, even more so for those who are black or of color, that was where I wanted to focus my energy.

In putting together my sample, I did not want to reproduce a kind of heterosexism and whitewashing that takes place when we talk about street harassment. And I wanted to unsettle assumptions about gender and sexuality, so I asked: “Are you a woman that experiences catcalling? OR Are you a person that identifies as LGBTQ and experiences slurs, harassment and microaggressions based on your perceived gender and sexuality when out and about? OR Perhaps you experience both? A doctoral candidate in Sociology is seeking to interview adults over 18 (of any gender and sexuality) about their everyday experiences on the streets of NYC. This project is a feminist, intersectional ethnography that seeks to understand how everyday interactions as well as race, class and space affect one’s gender and sexuality.”

In a short paragraph, I tried to convey three important points at the core of my research and at the core of who I was, as a scholar-activist. First, catcalling, generally analyzed through a gender framework, and LGBTQ–directed harassment, generally analyzed through a sexualities framework, should be seen as related. Second, many of us experience both daily. Three, gender and sexuality are processes influenced by race, class, and space. Because my theoretical approach relied on an intersectional approach, I made a second, carefully-worded, call for participants: “I am looking to round out my participant pool for a dissertation on catcalling and LGBTQ-directed street harassment in NYC. At this point, to accurately capture these experiences, I need: black participants, POC and/or immigrant individuals, disabled individuals,
fat individuals or people otherwise not treated as an autonomous person on the street because of their bodies, gay men, trans men, and women that are sexually harassed when their religion may or may not be correctly identified (For example: some Muslim or Hasidic women). The interviews are anonymous (though face to face), recorded for transcription only and are an absolute safe space for all racial, gender and sexual groups of marginalized experiences. This project is an intersectional ethnography that seeks to explain the impact of catcalling and LGBTQ – directed street harassment.”

It may seem like an odd paragraph but it helped me establish that I was going to engage with difference in a very explicit manner. What is generally missing in social research is a kind of specificity when it comes to creating a sample that accurately reflects one’s environment of study. For example, many white scholars are not willing to explicitly put down that they need black participants because of the general unease that exists when it comes to the topic of race and ethnicity. As a result, research suffers from long-standing omissions in the academy that reflect a racist society.

One of the ways to queer a call for participants may be to re-imagine gender and sexuality in a way that has not been previously considered but, as a matter of challenging existing epistemologies, it is also important to name what is never named. Some of my colleagues feared that having this kind of approach might offend people but it helped me successfully put together a sample of sixty-seven participants that is not only ‘statistically representative’ of New York City’s racial and ethnic demographics but also gets at ‘hidden populations,’ which should be suspicious of engaging in research studies. That final caveat about having the interview be a safe space made a significant difference in attracting vulnerable participants who would otherwise not be willing to go on record about their experiences. What I
do want to point out, however, is that simply putting that in the call for participants is not enough – snowball sampling, where participants tell other participants to engage in a study, should be part and parcel of the recruitment process. A recommendation from a person within marginalized communities that the researcher is ‘in the know’ about gender, sexuality, race or other lived experiences makes a significant difference.

Part of ‘being in the know’ when it comes to gender and sexuality is to make a serious effort to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity. That process begins with making a case to the IRB that you do not need written consent for all research participants if there is a possibility of risking their wellbeing and safety as a result of research being made public. When it comes to catcallers and men that engage in other forms of harassment on the streets, their resistance to giving their name speaks to not wanting to be identified as a ‘bad guy.’ A completely different situation exists with people on the receiving end of the harassment. For many in the LGBTQ community, providing their real name and signature continues to pose a significant risk, which is why all names have been changed in my work, as well as any mentioned school or work locations. Even though it appears that strides have been made towards equality, “to go public – through a recording – with the memory of one’s and others’ erotic bodies continues to be a challenging position to take” (Boyd and Roque Ramirez 2012).

Another way of ‘being in the know’ is to understand how crucial it is to be able to self-identify when it comes to demographics. I would ask my participants to give me their age and provide me with a gender label, a label for their sexuality, their gender pronouns, self-perceived class position and educational backgrounds, as well as their racial or ethnic identification. I would be cognizant of the fact that people take up different labels and identities throughout the life course and that labels change for a lot of different reasons. As a result, my sample includes
participants that are missed when other methods, such as quantitative methods or survey methods, allow for a limited number of options. Of my sixty-seven participants, I could say I have forty-three that fall under the LGBTQ umbrella but I could also say that twenty-one fall under LGB, twenty-two fall under ‘queer’ or ‘pansexual,’ sixteen fall under ‘transgender’ which includes a broad range of identities from trans women to genderqueer people to non-binary trans people to gender non-conforming folks. The diversity is already part of our communities – queering one’s research method simply makes for a more accurate depiction and a more precise scholarship.

In three months, I completed over seventy interviews and was permanently transformed. I did not know it at the start, but I was building a feminist and queer oral history. Reading Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez’ (2012) *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* made me realize that a qualitative study like mine was a part of a larger history, as much a part of other people’s narratives as it is a part of my own life. After all, “the entanglements of methods, lives and research moves beyond ‘explaining’ of the social, making it clear that queer theorizing and social research fields are mutually constituted” (Browne and Nash 2010:14). One of my own entanglements was that I was coming into a lesbian identity after identifying as ‘queer’ for a long time. It was my husband at the time that suggested that I take seriously my jokes about being a lesbian. That one conversation changed my life. Over the course of a few months, he and I were no longer together and my female partner and I entered a monogamous relationship. To be quite honest, after being an LGBTQ activist of many years, teaching courses like Women’s Sexualities and LGBTQ Fundamentals, I found myself at a loss when it came to my own sexual development. It’s one thing to teach about lesbians or to research about lesbians but it’s another to come into a lesbian identity without being able to untangle it
from one’s research or teaching or activism.

All of a sudden, some of the structural issues around poverty, same-sex marriage, second-parent adoption as well as racism touched me directly. The frustration that once marked my life and work on catcalling turned into a kind of raw fury at discrimination around race, gender and sexuality that I could no longer escape as easily as when I was perceived heterosexual. I could not believe that I had once called the term ‘lesbian’ archaic because ‘queer’ was the way of the future, right? Now, when I read the Radicalesbians Manifesto, I understood, “What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion” (Radicalesbians 1970). And even though my agender identity hasn’t changed, identifying as a lesbian had significant effects – that rage transformed me into the person I am today and it made me feel strong and invincible. Slowly working through my own internalized sexism and homophobia has been a revelation, just as much as recognizing that this new place of belonging with other lesbians is a chaotic place. What is different is that the baggage that comes with the word ‘lesbian,’ as well as the history of lesbian movements is now deeply embedded within me as a person and a scholar. Recognizing that this means my lineage is one of exclusion and oppression matters.

Boyd and Roque Ramirez write, “Queer oral historians should be especially cognizant of internal stratification, given that we engage with communities who have experienced and continue to experience multiple challenges around AIDS, racialized gentrification, drugs and alcohol, economic displacement, nationalist exclusions, and different gender phobias” (Boyd and Roque Ramirez 2012:14). What that means is that identifying as part of the LGBTQ community, in my case as a lesbian and an agender person, does not prevent me as a researcher from paying attention to how we differ from our participants, even if I felt more joined to them by common terminology. I echo many of the authors in *Queer Methods and Methodologies* that advise to be
mindful of how for many participants that identify as LGBTQ, their experience of gender and sexuality may not be the most central to their lives whereas, for example, their experience as an undocumented person or a person without shelter would take precedence. Finally, as Browne and Nash point out, “the ‘field’ is a complicated place, made more unstable by the shifting positionalities of the participants (both the researcher and the researched), and by the inherent difficulties in finding a common understanding across sometimes vast political, social, and cultural divides” (Browne and Nash 2010:18).

One of the ways that I addressed such divides was to put it all out there at the beginning of the interview – instead of appearing to be detached or nodding along while taking notes, I would speak to the difference in the room, as I perceived it during the interview. For example, when it came to older participants, I would mention terminology that may be offensive to a different generation and that I would try to be sensitive to the very painful divides that had shaped contemporary LGBTQ politics. If I was interviewing a black woman, I would mention that I would not pretend to understand what it’s like to have an experience of sexism be compounded by racism and that my scholarship was first and foremost anti-racist. When it came to participants that did not feel comfortable being interviewed at an institution, I would meet them anywhere they wanted: public spaces, their homes or mine.

Taking such a ‘subjective’ and personal approach helped me gain the trust of my participants, which helped them to open up and speak about their painful experiences around gender and sexuality. I was not prepared for the amount of trauma that would come spilling into the room, as part of each and every interview, much of which triggered a lot of my own pain, made especially intense by my coming into my lesbianism. Boyd and Roque Ramirez explain that “More so than in the case for nonqueer narrators, women and men who experience same-sex
desire or transgender identities risk opening themselves to vulnerability or trauma during and oral history exchange” and that “forms of collective knowledge that build on memories of disease, trauma, and death have the potential to compound the narrator’s trauma in remembering and also traumatize the researcher in listening, especially as researchers are officially left with the evidence of the affective methodological exchange” (Boyd and Roque Ramirez 2012:8-9).

Nor was I able to process the many stories of my participants or my own anger, which made it even harder to resist ongoing harassment in the public sphere. I had long struggled to describe how I embody the effects of public harassment, as they accumulate over time. Traditional advice says that your interviews are coming to an end when there is a kind of data saturation, but the saturation I felt was contributing to a lifelong fatigue.

According to Boyd and Roque Ramirez, sexual embodiment is a ‘body-based knowing’ that is part of queer oral history methods. Part of sexual embodiment is about sharing pain and vulnerability with your participants, but it “also invites pleasure and the possibility that sexual feelings will emerge during the queer oral history exchange” (Boyd and Roque Ramirez 2012:9). As a researcher, I also took it for granted that sexual feelings would emerge during my work with catcallers and my autoethnography – that erotic equation, to borrow a term from Esther Newton, held a sinister edge, being generally one-sided and rather coercive (Newton 1993). When conducting queer oral histories, I felt safe and secure, able to share my true self in a way that was quite intimate and there were plenty of erotic surprises along the way. But, as Boyd and Roque Ramirez point out, “the specter of sexual impropriety makes sexual feelings (and the intimacies that accompany them) a vital but virtually unspeakable aspect of queer oral history work” (Boyd and Roque Ramirez 2012:11).

If it is virtually unspeakable, what gets lost in our continued silence regarding the erotic?
In her latest talk on queer ethnography, Tey Meadow mentions that researchers “theorize the erotic in a reductive way,” partly because of the fear that doing otherwise would exploit already vulnerable populations and partly because there are institutional constraints. Newton’s ‘erotic equation’ for Meadow means “what we feel for our subjects and that’s different from how we usually think of sexuality: our sexual status and how we disclose, complexity of working on sexualized spaces, and literature on possibilities and dangers of sex in the field” (Meadow 2015). Whatever shapes the erotic takes, Meadow advises to engage, rather than ignore, our erotic subjectivities as a strategy for gaining knowledge, but I was not always sure how to address it. For example, some of my participants asked me to define or label their sexuality, which sometimes meant they would ask me to ‘introduce’ them to the ‘world of women.’ With some queer participants, when describing their sexual preferences, it would become obvious that I fit their criteria. Unlike with catcallers, that kind of announcement in an interview would have vastly different effects, some of which I am only now starting to untangle.

Boyd and Roque Ramirez argue that, because of the many intimacies involved, “queer oral histories are especially productive but potentially risky methodological encounters” (Boyd and Roque Ramirez 2012:9). One of the risks is a presumed breach of research ethics, if a neutral observer and an independent subject are assumed. But when it comes to queer research, Browne and Nash point out that, “the nature of the ‘subject’ of research, previously envisioned as a unified, coherent, and self-knowledgeable individual is redrawn as contingent, multiple and unstable” (Browne and Nash 2010). That also applies to the researcher, not only when they are being reflexive and aware of their position and their shared meaning – making with participants, but also when the researcher is a participant in what they are studying.

Qualitative work of that nature invites questions of being ‘real science,’ which is a
distraction that “allows science to maintain control over qualitative inquiry either through language, objection to interpretation and analysis. […] Qualitative inquiries require a queering – a freeing – that enables and appreciates polymorphous possibilities and kinetic subjectivities” (Ferguson 2013). That kind of freeing came to me in shorts bursts throughout my graduate journey but finally coming out as a raging lesbian scholar has been the greatest sort of unshackling in mind, body, and intellect. For me, as I reflect on my work and lesbianism, one thing is clear: to learn of disciplines, histories, and politics means to become it – whether I was always a lesbian or grad school made me ‘extra gay’ is not all that relevant.

What is relevant is that I no longer worry about my methods not being ‘objective’ or that I’m conducting a lot of ‘mesearch.’ That I’m a raging lesbian scholar with collapsed boundaries between my life, teaching, and academics is why I do good work – no one straight or cisgender can get at the intricacies of our LGBTQ communities with as much deference or as much desire for wanting to preserve gender and sexual difference. If we “as teachers, writers, researchers, activists, humans – try to document, ease or eliminate, and bear witness to harmful social practices, occasions of relational violence, and the trials and tribulations of (desiring) normalcy” (Holman Jones and Adams 2010:148), then I intend to write my own oral history right alongside that of my participants not just for data’s sake, but because we lived, and as lesbian-queer women and people, we survived.

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