Reconstruction: Being LGBTQ and Jewish

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THE JEWISH QUESTION

Never, no matter what kind of crisis I was going through, did it ever occur to me to be anything but Jewish. Or to be nothing. D. Rogoff (in Petsonk, 1998, p. 129)

Rabbis sigh, throw up their hands: How are gay Orthodox Jews part of the solution, they're part of the problem? Abe says, I'm not that Jewish, locks himself in a double closet, shut away from religion shoves identity into different boxes, passes for parents as a devout (but not queer) Jew when in shul;

others, like Mike, tear their hair, can't be anything "but," at shul, in the store buying bread with their gay partners, being nothing not a choice, even if their parents eat ham sandwiches on Yom Kippur. For them, the dusty rope that binds culture and religion was never severed. The different ways of being a Jew,

such as queer Havurot that celebrate being Jewish and gay, dykes with boas at Seders, make old-school rituals seem like mules next to reform religiosity where you can chant: I'm sexy, I'm queer, I'm gay. This coming out song a religious duty for those who find the right moment to sing, apparent
in a car to band practice; a drive to parenthood
collides with Jewish renewal. Leigh claims her child a Jew
because all the Christians at work, they
breathe in sin with horror, hold it. But at shul
her child will see what Jewish is, know that gays
like her wife perform mitzvot with pride for religion.

Reconstructionists ask: Is this homecoming, love and religion?
Rachel keeps her name, her nose, though her parents
never sent her to shul, like snow in July, her core gayness
more than a small sigh. Religious Jews unnerve her, but she’s a Jew—
and a lesbian, teaches by example—out at school.
Still, she grips a secret, hopes to halt judgment they
could sentence. In private, she’s not Jewish enough, though they
would say Jew, you’re family, this is no religion
like Catholicism. We stopped difference in schools
with Christians after fleeing dark ghettos with parents
who said no, yes, and why not assimilate? Our Jewish
modernity, a secular and religious stew, but being gay
brings no salty certainty, because we ask them queer
questions, the teachers and schools, religious parents
who hang our gay curtains in some new sewing room.

* * *

The Jewish Question, which opened this piece, is a sestina I use as a
literature review to introduce a narrative study on LGBTQ (lesbian, gay,
bisexual, transgender, and queer) Jews. The poem incorporates research
texts on LGBTQ and Jewish American identity, as well as voices from
thirty-one narratives about being LGBTQ and Jewish I collected with a
focused yet flexible interview guide (Patton, 2001). During interviews,
conversations, and emails with participants and in the texts I studied about
being Jewish and gay, I noticed repeated words and phrases. The sestina
is a form that capitalizes on such repetition. During the course of the poem,
the playful repetition builds around a pattern of six repeated words at the
end of thirty nine lines, so that “in the end the sestina becomes a game
of meaning, played with sounds and sense” (Strand & Boland, 2000, p. 22).
Gay, they, Jewish, religion, parents, and school: These words I witnessed in
the interviews and conversations, read, and experienced again and again.
The use of repetition mirrors common speech, the fact that individuals tend to repeat themselves in everyday conversations (Strand & Boland, 2000), and repeated words become themes that circle back onto themselves, questioning meaning and becoming variations, representing the literature and narratives as more contested, uncertain, and in motion than a prose presentation (cf., Richardson, 2002).

This sestina, then, presents important questions about being LGBTQ and Jewish and the means of (re)presenting identity as Hornreich (2001) notes:

What does it mean to be who I am? ... It changes from place to place, situation to situation, mood to mood. Identity is messy; it is changing experiences, the uniquely shifting degrees between labels. Can I be both gay and straight? Can I be both masculine and feminine? Can I be both agnostic and religious? The answer is yes. There is no right or wrong way to be—but we certainly know when things don’t feel right. (p. 45)

How do LGBTQ Jewish Americans manage multiple, and perhaps, at times, competing or conflicting identities? To what extent do LGBTQ Jewish Americans decide to conceal or reveal their identities? Or perhaps, more simply, “What does it mean to be who I am?” These questions provide the impetus for examining the communication processes of LGBTQ Jewish Americans’ identity negotiation through the presentation of poetry about their identity narratives which I collected in urban and college town settings in Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey with a balance of social situations.

Narrative accounts show us an individual’s actual thoughts-in-context about LGBTQ and Jewish identity as human thought, behavior, and experiences are at least partially based in narratives (McAdams, 1993). Individuals tell stories to others that reflect how they see themselves and want to be seen making the examination of narratives a useful method for the study of identity (Riessman, 1993). More than thought, narratives are a meaningful form of communicative behavior that externalizes conceptions of identity (Hecht, 1993; McAdams, 1993). A narrative approach to the examination of LGBTQ Jewish American identity reveals how participants make sense of or provide coherence to their identities within their cultural and social worlds (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). In many cases individuals create narratives of particular life experiences where there has been a breach between “ideal and real, self and society” (Riessman, 1993, p. 3), such narratives may reveal the ascribed stigma of being LGBTQ and Jewish (Herek, 1998).
I use poetry to present participants' narratives, as poetry may be the closest representation of the way that people talk, their language use, and patterns of speech; I want to privilege and recreate these patterns, syntax, words and rhythm in ways that prose representations can not (Madison, 1991; Richardson, 2002). Poetry may be a better choice for presenting individuals' identity narratives than other forms of writing because as Hirshfield (1997) articulates, a good poem can never be fully entered and known. ‘Poetry can do what other forms of thinking cannot: approximate the actual flavor of life, in which subjective and objective become one, in which conceptual mind and the inexpressible presence of things become one’ (p. 32). Because poetry defies singular definitions and explanations, it mirrors the slipperiness of identity, the difficulty of capturing the shifting nature of who we are and want to be and resonates more fully with the way identity is created, maintained and altered through our interacted narratives.

I present a layered or ‘pleated text’ (Richardson, 1997) that weaves in with poems that represent individual narratives, and poems that are an amalgam of participants' narratives, and weaves out with presentation of the decision making or writing stories about poetic forms that display my thematic analysis of interviews. The discussion of decision making demonstrates my attention to, and understanding of, craft and what poetry has to offer research writing through attentiveness to form, comprehension and aesthetics (Faulkner, 2005; Percer, 2002). All of the poems I present have been work shopped in poetry classes and with poet colleagues, and undergone, at minimum, seven revisions each as part of what I call poetic analysis; poetry that presents themes, narratives, emotions, and the tone of research at the same time it works as poetry. After the initial construction of poems, I transcribed the audio-taped interviews and gave them back to participants to respond to and correct in an effort to represent their narratives as they wished (Patton, 2001).

My goal is to translate and reinvent Soniat's (1997) vision of poet as archivist into poet as archival activist (e.g., Hartnett, 2003), that is, I want to use poetry to question and alter traditional representations of identity, to provoke emotional responses in readers/listeners, and create a sense of connection by ‘critically traversing the margin and center . . . opening more and different paths for enlivening relations and spaces’ (Madison, 2004, p. 471). And as the former US Poet Laureate, Billy Collins (in Stewart, 2004), said, “Poetry is an interruption of silence.” This work breaks the silence by adding to the representation of LGBTQ Jews.

What follows is a fusion of research and interpretive poetry that I constructed after conversations and email exchanges with participants, listening
to tapes of interviews, and reading my research journal; research poetry references poems that utilize a participant’s exact words in a compressed form, whereas interpretive poetry includes the researcher’s subjective responses for a fusing of perspectives, researcher and participant (Langer & Furman, 2004). The mix of forms highlights participants’ narratives of identity and my own identities as researcher/participant (Krizek, 2003). I presented my own identity stories transparently throughout the research (for method poems see Faulkner, in press) because “when researchers are open about their own personal stories, participants feel more comfortable sharing information, and the hierarchal gap between researchers and respondents formerly embraced in ethnographic work is closed” (Berger, 2001, p. 507).

The next poem, for instance, demonstrates the end of the interview where I asked, “Are there any questions that I should have asked you but didn’t?” This time can be the most illuminating in regards to research methodology and the focus/content of the research project; frustrations of the researcher and participants become extremely transparent, conversation may become freer given the “formal” part of an interview is over, and the “real” focus of the research project emerges. Because I wanted to convey this sense of freedom and a break from the rules, the poem is free verse. Free verse represents a loosening of traditional poetic rules that allows a poet to create her own rules for how a poem should look on the page, how she wishes to represent individual thought and breath patterns (Padgett, 1987). The details in the poem include participants’ words and questions, my engagement with participants, what they learned about me as a person and researcher, and the social structures that contribute to and constrain our identities. I use this poem to close the “methods” section and introduce the remaining poems.

* * *

ONE MORE QUESTION

I.

This time at the end of the interview, dark with confessions of what I didn’t ask

(but interviewees wanted me to):

Gender + Sexuality + Jewish = what?
What about the others? Do they want to marry
someone Jewish, raise their kids Jewish?
Everything Jewish? Another question
I should have asked,
(but didn’t): What about
the Jewish imperative to propagate?

II.

Another question that never happened
(but I wish I’d asked): What do you think
of this shiksa researcher? Things we didn’t say
loop off the end of the tape,
voices fade into some dusty tomb
like unobserved family rituals.

III.

Next good question I’m asked: Where do
you meet the others? I hear her say
she needs a date. But combine Jewish with lesbian—
she pauses, leans forward—it’s a double whammy.
Tell me, where are the lesbian Jewish bisexuals?
I say we could start a dating service,
something like a gay J-Date-dot-com.

IV.

Participants ask me,
Where are you going with this?
Good question. I sweat with purpose,
say things I can’t remember,
their questions like acid rain
make indelible marks in my researcher mind.

V.

Describe yourself? I ask.
Funny. Gay and Jewish.
I suggest that maybe those things
aren’t as central as her sense of humor.
But, she says, you have to have had
this whole suffering
blah, blah, blah,
to actually be funny. I snort,
inhal the water she poured me
at the dining room table
and ignore her question:
Anything surprising to you so far?

VI.
Then, the one question that splintered
my pressed and tucked categories
because I heard it so often:
Am I a typical Jew?

VII.
Where are you going to publish this?
I should say anywhere I can
(but I don't): Instead
I think of advice from another interview—
You only go around once
so any day you feel pain
is a day you could have felt differently.

VIII.
Did you understand all these Jewish things I said?
Because, he tells me, it's difficult
for me to pick out certain nuances
or behaviors because I'm Jewish or because
my family is Jewish. I nod, think about
his question: How many Jews have participated
in progressive political movements?

IX.
Q: Are there any questions I should have asked but didn't?
A: Do you think your study's important? Where are you going with this?
    * * *

LGBTQ JEWISH IDENTITY

The extent to which LGBTQ Jewish Americans conceal or reveal their identities, the reasons for disclosure, and how they experience themselves
as gay and Jewish vary according to factors such as personal and community support, how someone regards herself, how he wants others to regard him, and how she feels her actions represent herself (Golden, Niles, & Hecht, 1998; Hecht & Faulkner, 2000; Shneer & Aviv, 2002). Such processes are particularly salient in Jewish American identity management because being Jewish and gay are closetable or concealable identities (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). That is, these identities are not always easily ascribable and typically become known through a disclosure process that is inextricably entwined in a boundary management process that involves the risk of anti-Semitism and homophobia (Gross, 1993). For some LGBTQ Jews, assimilating and passing as Christian and heterosexual has been a way to contend with stigma. However, Schimel (1997) argues that passing as heterosexual, in particular, is dangerous:

Jews would continue to be Jews even in the absence of anti-Semitism. . . . The existence or possibility of a similar gay invisibility, in contrast, is a myth in our current culture, since the possibility of being closeted or passing is not some mythical haven but a cessation of identity and existence. (p. 166)

Many believe that Jewish law condemns homosexuality as something contrary to natural order and a rejection of the covenant between God and the Jews (Orbach, 1975-76), therefore, for those sharing these beliefs, particularly among Conservative and Orthodox congregations, it is imperative to hide being LGBTQ in order to remain a part of the community (e.g., Anonymous, 2001). Rogoff (cited in Pelson, 1998) and others (Brown, 2004; Cohen, 2002), however, feel that being out is actually a religious obligation because being closeted is like “putting stumbling blocks before the blind. It’s withholding the fruits of one’s life, which one is supposed to give over. It’s conspiracy to grand larceny” (p. 133). The relationship between being LGBTQ and Jewish can be one of bifurcation rather than integration, having to choose between being Jewish or gay depending on what area of the country one resides in and the kind of Jewish and/or LGBTQ community present (Shneer & Aviv, 2002).

Some LGBTQ Jewish Americans, however, no longer experience pressure to leave their Jewish communities and feel comfortable integrating gay and Jewish identities into their personal and community lives, especially given that the Reconstruction and Reform community is moving beyond tolerance as seen in the performance of same-sex unions and the ordination of lesbian and gay rabbis. Organized movements of lesbian and gay Jews that began in the mid 1970s helped this fight for integration (Cooper, 1990).
For example, in 1972, Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC), a gay synagogue, formed in Los Angeles (Balka & Rose, 1989), and despite national controversy, the BCC was admitted to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC). Five years later, the UAHC passed "The Human Rights of Homosexuals." In 1974, the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot created a policy that supported gay and lesbian rabbinic ordination, and in 1993, they passed new resolutions that welcomed gay and lesbians into their congregations, urged congregations to address heterosexist biases and affirm the right of Reconstructionist rabbis to perform same-gender commitment ceremonies (Rose & Balka, 2002).

In addition to a more open environment within Reconstructionist and Reform congregations, recent work such as Shneer and Aviv's (2002) edited volume, Queer Jews. Alpert, Elwell, and Idelson's (2001) collection of lesbian rabbis' stories, and Angela Brown's (2004) edited collection, Mentsh: On Being Jewish and Queer, attempt to transform culture through the eclectic representation of LGBTQ Jews. Shneer and Aviv (2002) ask, "What have been the experiences of individual queer Jews who are re-creating our communities and culture to make rooms for ourselves? What are the stories, struggles, and triumphs of queer Jews seeking to make Jewish community more inclusive and to create new forms of Jewish life? (p. 4)." I situate this work beside these questions, asking whether it is possible for queer Jews to reach out to other groups, become more pluralistic, and move beyond the "traditional dilemma of bifurcated selves" (p. 4) and the choice to leave or stay closeted within their Jewish communities (Rose & Balka, 2002).

FRAMEWORK

The Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) provides a theoretical framework for this research because interaction is placed centrally in the process of identity formation and management; identity is considered to be a communication process consisting of four layers or frames of transaction, personal, enacted, relational and communal, in which messages are exchanged (Hecht, 1993; Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). The personal layer frames identity as a characteristic of the individual (i.e., their self-concept, self-image, self-esteem) while the enacted layer of identity is manifested in social interactions. Thus, an individual's view of him or herself (e.g., I am gay; I am religious) falls within the personal layer while the expression of those attributes (e.g., attending gay pride festivals to show your support of
the community; attending religious services) is the enactment of those identities. The relationship layer involves those aspects of identity that are invested in social relationships as well as the relationships among various identities (e.g., girl/boyfriend; Jewish and gay). The final frame, the communal layer, involves identity as it exists in relation to group identity. The theory suggests that communities hold collective identities in addition to the individual identities mentioned earlier.

Approaching identity from this standpoint allows for a multi-faceted and process oriented understanding of identity. Identity is layered because at any one time all four frames are present and, in a sense, a part of one another. Hecht and colleagues (2002) demonstrated that a communal representation of Jewish Americans in the television show Northern Exposure influenced how participants’ personal, enacted, and relational identities are played out. For instance, the common assumption that all Jews are New Yorkers, expressed at various times during the series, bothered some participants in the study because they felt that many people ascribe a “New York” identity to them because they are Jewish. Some even felt “less Jewish” because they were not from New York. The interpenetration of communal identity (media messages in which only New York Jews are shown) with the relational identity (ascription by others) influenced personal identity (feeling less Jewish). This demonstrates that identity consists of many layers, though individuals may not always experience these layers. Adding another dimension, LBGTQ, to the examination of Jewish identity can provide further insight into the communication process of identity by portraying the reality of multiple and intersecting identities and differences in negotiation as the next poem articulates.

* * *

RECONSTRUCTIONIST

She thinks it’s different now, and asks me how
I find the rallies, picnics, police, gay
lovers with youth who walk in open now.
She found no path, no help with the labels,
the parties of conservative newspapers
that print Jewish activist lesbian
as if boxes can contain her labors
to make Seders and new year with new kin.
Now she tells mom, keeps a job, says enough and buys a house with oaks and shaded jade, makes a minyan and trims a holly bough with a Christian woman. The years they’ve made, are like the book club books read together for 12 years when they had nothing better.

* * *

An English sonnet is traditionally a 14 line (three quatrains followed by a rhyming couplet) love poem written in iambic pentameter. The modern form flirts with tension between lyric and narrative forms, suggesting “narrative progress through its sequence structure, while, in single units, it is capable of the essential lyric qualities of being musical, brief and memorable” (Strand & Boland, 2000, p. 58). This flirtation in Reconstructionist shows the story of isolation, stigmatized identities, and the promise of love represented in the poem; in essence, it is love story that illustrates persistence and the search for acceptance of identities despite a tumultuous struggle in the absence of wide social support.

The poem suggests, according to CTI, that communication externalizes identity, and identity is formed through interaction (Hecht et al., 2003). The depiction of enactments of new and different Jewish rituals affirms queer and Jewish identities by rewriting them into compatible identities. This creation of new rituals, such as a lesbian Seder, adoption, or gay prayers, were ways that many participants contended with conflicting Jewish and gay identities in an effort to affirm and integrate them all. Modern Jewish identity, for many, has become untied from religion to create a secular Judaism that requires a need to hold onto something Jewish, such as a nose or food (Jervis, 2000). For others, the connection between religion and culture is closely bound and should remain so (Cohen, 2002). Many find Reconstructionism to be relevant for a modern multi-cultural world because it retains elements of traditional Jewish ritual concomitant with a connection to a secular world making it easier to connect religious and secular life (Bowen, 2000). The choice of a Jewish or non-Jewish partner demonstrates these beliefs; participants who felt a strong connection between Judaism and religious observation insisted on a Jewish partner and those who felt more culturally or secularly Jewish didn’t care or even preferred a non-Jew “because they would have a different neurosis.”

* * *
INTERVIEW #6, AFTER SCHOOL AT THE TEACHER’S ROUND CLASSROOM TABLE

How does being Jewish fit into your romantic relationship? 
It’s ideal because my partner’s not Jewish.

Gay. Jewish. Is one identity more important to you than the other? 
That’s such a weird question. No. I mean, I was born both.

Do you have any stories where being gay is really relevant to who you are? 
I’m just not sure what that question means.

Do you attend synagogue? Day of Atonement, that’s it, and then I atone for all the other times I don’t go. I’m Sedered out. Enough Seders already.

And so, in terms of fitting in the Jewish community here? 
I don’t fit, dear.

How would you describe the gay community around here? Tough question. I find the professorship community closeted, in hiding, the student groups a little bit shrill.

What would you like to ask me? Where are you going with this? What do you hope to find? We all have similar buttons, similar neuroses that escalate each other.

What did I leave out? Sandra, did you understand all these Jewish things I said?

* * *

There are those interviews when you feel as if you missed one another, stayed too close to the surface. You feel frustrated, ineffective and think, "terrible interviewer, get a new career.” You wonder if the feeling was reciprocal and dread listening to the tape again, to rereading your notes because you know... Well, this interview did work out in ways that were not readily apparent. When I listened to the tape again, heard the participant’s serious tone, re-read the transcript, and considered how she called back three times to set-up and reschedule a time to meet, I recognized her patent desire to be a part of this work. I also saw the things that didn’t get said about identity and the things we don’t know that are left untested. Notice my question about being gay or Jewish, the attempt to separate out layers of identity according to CTI, the assumption that multiple identities
may compete for salience embedded in the question and in the theme of the poem.

The poem is what can be called a found poem, that is some piece of writing that was not intended to be a poem but becomes one when the writer declares it one, having paid close attention to “exceptional uses of language or sharply presented, telegraphic stories that create a poetic effect or an emotional response as strong as that made by a poem” (Padgett, 1987, p. 82). Or as Hirshfield (1997) argues, art arises from a heightened attention and craft-sense, and such concentration allows for the artist and others to see things that were previously unavailable and difficult to see. Founded poems come from newspaper articles, conversation, notes, and lists, for instance. In this case, I culled material from an interview transcript. The couplets are intended to stand alone; that is they can be read as independent of one another as in a ghazal (a Persian poetry form that uses two-line rhyming stanzas), but each line adds to the whole thought like notes in a music score. It is appropriate given the context and essence of this narrative interview; it allows the participant to speak most directly to you and shows the tone and discovery present. The context of the interview is represented in the title.

* * *

I WAS TO BE AN ORTHODOX RABBI

When I was 3, I knew I liked boys,  
the interest and feelings I always carried  
like ancient Hebrew script on scrolls  
you could find in caves along the hills of Jerusalem.

The interest and feelings I always carried  
with crushes on friends that blushed with love  
in caves along the hills of Jerusalem,  
relics of Judaism lying in dust.

and crushes on friends that burst into love.  
I left the orthodoxy at 13  
relics of Judaism lying in dust.  
I had many questions I wanted to ask
as I turned from orthodoxy at 13,  
mom's dream of me in black hat, soaked with sin.  
The many questions I needed to ask  
my therapist at 14 who told me to find women  
made mom and dad's dream of me return like sin  
until I found the Reconstructionists and moved.  
My straight best friend at 17 showed me women.  
I traveled with one, backpack and all, to see if I could.  

When I found Reconstructionism and moved  
I became a professional super Jew and super Dad  
backpack and all, traveled with wife and child, like I could ignore my thoughts that men like men.  
I became super Jew and super Dad  
with no time to think of males with lust,  
I ignored my thoughts that men like men  
with hair like bears and worked out thighs.  

On the Jersey turnpike, time to think of males with lust,  
I discover at 50 at a silent retreat, thoughts  
with hair like bears and worked out thighs  
can make me move and renovate my love.  

These thoughts in silent retreat I discover  
like ancient Hebrew script on scrolls.  
I move my love and reconstruct memories,  
because when I was 3, I knew I liked boys.  

* * *  

In some narratives, I heard repeating lines and stories, different variations of the same theme throughout. A pantoum is a Malayan poetic form that capitalizes on repetition through the use of quatrains; the recurring lines can be hypnotic as they weave in and out of one another creating surprises as they work together in novel ways (Padgett, 1987). It is a slow form because a reader takes four steps forward and two steps back making it “the perfect form for the evocation of a past time” (Strand & Boland, 2002, p. 44). I find this form enticing to represent the fact that most narratives are not straightforward, that individuals often end up back where they started working through identity issues in an anti-narrative pattern.
because identities change in our relationships and communities over time (e.g., Cohen, 2002). The poem also represents how some participants felt forced to choose between their personal level of identity (being LGBTQ and Jewish), their relationships (e.g., by being in a straight relationship), and how they enacted their identities (e.g., being closeted at work, not attending gay cultural events) because of others’ ascriptions about being LGBTQ and Jewish based on communal representations of these as incompatible identities.

* * *

**OY**

A man walks into a bar. You think that’s some kind of joke?
Actually he runs in, to get out of the freezing weather.

—From HA in *Tell Me* by Kim Addonizio (2000)

Two lesbians and a gay man—all Jews—walk into a bar.
You think that’s anti-Semitic? No wait.
A researcher with a recorder
rushes in after them, notices that one
woman wears a Lambda encircled
by a Star of David. The other woman
laughs so loudly the researcher decides
to stay, buy her a tall pink drink,
ask “What?” She’s a (lesbian) Hebrew
Shul Principal—the emphasis on Hebrew.
The two women embrace, order the usual
diet with lemon and reach for the basket
of pretzels. You may wonder why
the man walked in with them,
two feet behind, but they pull out three stools,
hang his coat on a peg by the bathroom
because he’s gay and not from school.
They all ask the researcher, Why do we need
this special bar? What happens
when you want to say I’m gay and Jewish?
Or simply, I’m gay? The researcher orders
an espresso because she’s working,
though she really wants the stiff stuff,
wants to fall in love like these women.
The man shifts from one stool to another,
crunches the ice in his glass,
claims most of his friends are Jewish.
But he doesn’t date Jews
because they embarrass him, like his parents.
Just now he discovers this pattern,
considers how to tell his therapist.
Anyway, the principal asks, what do you get
when go to a gay bar? Three Jews on barstools
asking the researcher questions? The woman
with the Lambda says her ex-husband introduced
her to women, but she met the principal
at this small bar, in this small town.
The researcher wonders why it matters
to be both things now, tips the bartender
as they pile out the door into the noon sun
and walk in opposite directions.

* * *

Oy was inspired by Kim Addonizio’s (2000) poem, HA. Her poem flirts
with the format of a joke, but it manages to convey the pain of loneliness,
the need for connection and understanding, surprising the reader into identifying
with the narrator’s emotional state. The narrator also represents the
researcher and the myth of detached observation, how it can be important
to show the intellectual and emotional connection between observed and
observer (Behar, 1996). My poem begins with a variation of Addonizio’s
first line and is based on three different participants’ narratives. I wanted
to show through the poem’s format how Jews are often stereotyped as
being funny (Hecht et al., 2003) and the conflation of Jewishness with
humor as mentioned by many participants to ultimately complicate and transform these conceptions. In addition, the joke format portrays the use
of humor as a mechanism for contending with negative cultural portrayals—
getting someone to laugh with you or being able to laugh at them (Bloom,
2003). The intent is to surprise the reader into identification with three
different stories of identity and to "make fun" of the traditional research
interview where the researcher is supposed to be removed and omniscient about the meaning of the work (Richardson, 1997).

* * *

WHAT IF I DON’T QUALIFY?

When I was little, my family was communist. Different from the other families. Kids threw pennies at my grandmother’s stepfather in Philadelphia, pulled his beard; they threw apple cores at her as if she were a stray, starved dog. A dog. My father’s parents were born here. My mother’s parents were born in Europe. But, I felt as if I was even more unusual, like a person who doesn’t fit into their own minority group. I wasn’t sure what it was, but I remember that feeling. You know when you whisper in your own head? I thought, “What if I’m a lesbian?” I always remember that feeling, a naked face in a crowded room. And then, it would just kind of go away.

I don’t remember not knowing that word. But I knew it was the worst thing you could be. Like a communist. In junior high, I had a sense I can’t explain, like intuition, that I had some friends that were different than other friends. From then on, I had a different kind of interest in certain friends than other friends.

My mother has worried about me ever since I was really little. I mean, she made my father stop playing football with me because I might get confused. And he did. He stopped. She made me take ballet. It. Was. Like. Torture. I was in my 30’s before she stopped. She finally gave up with a sigh as heavy as a linebacker.

My God, I still dream about Jewish girl’s camp. My girlfriend and I communicated with two other girls who were together. We were together, and they were together. A little lesbian group. Nobody knew. Chris told, but then she untold. Since Chris, none of my girlfriends have been Jewish. And always, there’s this sort of break-in period which is about finding out if I can trust them. It’s hard sometimes to feel like you don’t even fit in with your own minority groups. I know I have the same feeling when everybody (the lesbians) starts doing the goddess thing and drumming. I liked it better when everyone was doing the Rape Crisis Center, you know?
Then, my girlfriend in high school said, "I'm not gay, I just love you." Reminds me of that T-shirt—"I'm not a lesbian, but my girlfriend is." I said nothing. Because I couldn't say that, I couldn't say, well, I am. That would be like mixing cheese and meat in a kosher kitchen. So I just didn't think about it. I didn't say anything. And then, when I came to college, pretty quickly, like a month or two after I came here, she broke up with me. She broke up with me to have a boyfriend. Her mother loved him, and she hated me. She said because she couldn't do that anymore. But actually, she was doing it with somebody else. And then that year, my freshman year—I slept with boys.

The next year some friends and I got an apartment. One of the roommates and I, we fell in love. And we were like instantly lesbians. You know, it was okay. It was yes, I am, and oh, My God. This is the greatest that could possibly be, lesbian feminists in the mid 1970s. If I wasn't a lesbian, I would be a completely different person—I would be somebody else.

I'm glad you told me, "if you're Jewish and a lesbian that's fine." Because I didn't want to say anything that would disqualify me from your study. See, I'm not your typical Jew. I never even attended Hebrew school. Sometimes it's hard. There's a certain person who makes me go "eew." And it's something about their Jewishness. As a secular Jew, I don't fit in the Jewish community. Don't feel like them. But they have Shabbat services once a month. And they'll have a party to build a Sukkot, and then we'll have a Sukkot brunch, do the prayers. And, I'm like "phew." Jews and lesbians, they're always trying to claim people.

* * *

The prose poem exists in an "in between" state betwixt prose and poetry. On the page, it appears to be prose, but it reads like poetry (Padgett, 1987). Some argue as to whether prose poems are truly poetry, and this contributes to some of the fun with the form. For some participants, the communal representations of being Jewish and being LGBTQ conflicted with personal and relational constructions within their families and close relationships, constituting what Jung and Hecht (2003) call identity gaps. These gaps represent the interpenetration of identity layers, when personal and relational layers or personal and communal layers conflict and contradict, for instance. The fear of not fitting into the gay or Jewish community, of being in between groups, of not being a "real member" because one
is too secular or too religious seems best represented as a series of moments in a prose poem that questions the idea of form as above.

Cohen (2002) presents a similar argument by observing that queer and Jewish marginal identities create internal and external conflict for individuals and communities on a repeated basis. “The imperfect personal and communal means available may sometimes be insufficient for us to form enduringly integrated queer Jewish identities, relationships, and communities. Perhaps provisional, imperfect, and somewhat compartmentalized moments of integrated identity may be more reasonable goals” (pp. 174–175). The previous poem summarizes the experience of these conflicts through the voice of one participant and demonstrates the slipperiness of trying to box in identities.

I argue through all of the poems presented that the interactions and difficulties of the personal, relational and enacted levels of identity are particularly notable. The idea of a communal level of identity didn’t resonate with many participants as seen in the integration continuum of being Jewish and LGBTQ. Some participants considered Jewish and gay as separate and non-competing categories where one identity was more salient to who they were; Some considered being Jewish a secular, cultural designation that didn’t influence being LGBTQ, often they did not think of being Jewish on a daily basis; Some saw a conflict between a religious Judaism and being LGBTQ as they worked to integrate them, whereas others absolutely integrated Jewish/LGBTQ as in a gay Havurot and couldn’t separate the identities. There wasn’t agreement on a communal layer of being Jewish and LGBTQ, instead the communal was often reacted against because it conflicted with personal and relational layers of identity.

In the poems presented thus far, the connection between my own identities and the participants certainly exists, but the last poem, Letter to Sol after the SSSS presentation, demonstrates this connection explicitly by rooting my position in my own standpoint and history (Denzin, 1997) to show how our everyday shifting positions influence understanding and embodiment of identities. Krizek (2003) and Behar (1996) urge us to tell the stories in our research of when the most important parts of ourselves intersect with others’ personal narratives. Stories of a researcher’s identities intersecting with participants can help a reader understand a cultural event and illuminate it by showing a connection at a “basic level of human understanding.”

The letter or epistle poem explores how my identities and enactment of identities as white, bisexual, researcher, southern, teacher, and poet emerged, collided, and generally became salient in formal conference and informal, on the street, presentations of this research. Like a letter, this
poetic form uses plain language to discuss ideas of love, philosophy, religion and morality (Padgett, 1997). It allows me to adopt a friendlier, informal tone and directly address readers. Specifically, the poem addresses how multiple identities can conflict and compete in the research process and the layered influences on the enactment of identities or communication style. Participants, at times, had a difficult time articulating what they did to enact identities, unless an explicit ascription, such as being “outed” in a newspaper, in a child custody lawsuit, and at school forced them to contend with the issue of enactment. This reflects a need to explore the issue of choice in the enactment frame of CTI (see Orbe, 2004).

This final poem then demonstrates when my identities intersected with the frequently occurring implicit and explicit questions participants and I asked each other: “Am I Jewish enough? Am I gay enough?” I show this questioning and what I perceived to be others’ queries of my identities as researcher, educator, and bisexual, whether I am a “real researcher,” “gay enough,” and flexible enough in the enactment of these things. It reflects how identities can conflict and compete at times because of others’ ascriptions and communal understandings of what it means to be Jewish, LGBTQ, and a researcher. Most participants experienced conflict between being LGBTQ and Jewish at some time in their lives because of ascriptions that froze what these things meant, creating situations where they felt forced to choose which part of themselves to honor. Some worked through the competing identities and were able to integrate competing frames into LGBTQ/JEWISH/EVERYTHINGELSE, whereas others ignored and/or denied one part of the personal identification because of the ramifications of stigma.

* * *

**LETTER TO THE SOL AFTER THE SSSS PRESENTATION**

Dear Sol: I felt ensnared between that coffee table littered with miniature bran muffins, squares of butter in silver foil, and the textbook table display of the hottest vibrators, dildos, and educational videos when you found me. That shot of coffee I poured I needed before my talk on gay Jews. My head hurt. Too much smiling and small cups of caffeine (Why do those pretty scrolled ivory things hold 3 ounces?). Too much advice taken. My Jewish
grad school advisor tells me I look mean when I think.
Smile, Sandra, she tells me. Maybe that's why you waited
to approach. That and two students with comments
about theories of identity. I remember you sat
on my right, 6 rows back or so, in the middle.
Do you think there were about 40 people? Masses
for a panel composed of new faces. But, then again, gay
topics are like hot sauce right now. That one and a half
years spent driving around New Jersey, on the subway
in New York, and in diners with margarine toast
and faux cream, I boiled down to 15 black and white
transparencies. That unnerved me. I'm still figuring
it all out. And, 15 pieces of plastic just lay there. Silent
and mind-numbing. Let me tell you, unofficially, I abhor
public speaking. Yes. I teach it when I must, but I loathe
that hot and tired wave of nervousness. I admit, I
checked out who looked gay in the audience. Sure,
it's not supposed to matter, but what and who you
are slinks in like a six-pack in the balcony.

So, there was no where to go when you approached,
muffin in hand, to say, "I'm a liberal Jew. What the hell
were you talking about with those different affiliations?"
Your question stung, made me forget if you even
introduced yourself or asked this question with muffin
in your mouth. I was like a 1st year graduate student
lost in a master theory class, face flushy pink. Havurah
got you, foreign to your British ears, a liberal Jew
would know such groups you implied. I should talk
about this. Not just throw up these terms, skim over them,

You know, people dress questions in different fashions.
This aggressive style, the one where you throw sticks
at me, agitates my southern soul. My adopted Yankee
persona only gets aggressive driving and direct
invitations. And she doesn't emerge at conferences.
Too anathema. If she did, she may have told you,
too bad so sad, stop whining just because you didn't
do your homework. Things and people exist outside
of our small vision, bless our hearts. Thank God, I swallowed that response with the bran muffin. My shrug meant here it comes, the story. Honey, the one I told you consisted of terrible time constraints and research procedures, how I let them label their own identity. 

_Havurot rose in the waves of the 70’s consciousness groups, many gay Jews felt welcome and centered themselves there. Did you smile, walk away? Did we shake hands? Later, when you greeted me with _Shabbat shalom_, handed me your lottery ticket for luck at the research fundraiser, I got it, the other story (but not the toys or videos). We ascribe identities like address labels because we need them. I held back about the street fair in my new neighborhood, what locals call _The Westcott Nation_. You assumed I was Jewish, right? Well, so did the rabbi. I sat at his table with the on-line _Yom Kippur_ cards because he smiled; I needed that to reconnect to this study. He needed my name as I left, no cards purchased. With white girl shame, I mumbled that not Jewish last name, an out-group label. His eyebrow became a question mark that dismissed me, though I fared better at the public radio table. The cute woman there described the stations’ women’s programming, the lesbian voices program the previous week. Do you get it? I had on khaki cargo pants, tight T-shirt that read _I Will Not Kiss the Boys_, and a _Girls Rule_ hat embossed with a rainbow flag. Maybe I’ll find the address and mail this letter to you. For sure, next year, the lottery ticket is on me. Dr. Faulkner Sandra

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ENDNOTES

1. Shul: (Yiddish) synagogue or temple.

2. Havurah (pl. Havurot): a Jewish spiritual cooperative; leadership is shared, and spiritual authority comes from the group. This movement began in the 1960s based in a desire to build something more than massive protest marches; the idea was to form small creative alternative institutions that were more enduring.


4. I interviewed 31 individuals, ceasing recruitment when saturation was reached. I purposively talked with participants who possessed a range of experiences, were willing to discuss their experiences and had reflected on them (Morse, 1992). When individuals expressed interest, I set up meeting times and places (e.g., homes, diners, offices) that were convenient, comfortable and desired by them through phone calls and e-mail exchanges. I ensured confidentiality throughout the research process and obtained informed consent before interviews began.

The participants ranged in age from 19–73. Seven participants have children. One participant identified as transgender, 4 identified as bisexual, 1 as bisexual lesbian, 10 as gay, and 15 as lesbian. The participants are highly educated: sixteen have postgraduate degrees, 8 have a BA/BS/BFA, and the remaining participants have some college or some graduate school experience. The majority of participants
grew up in PA, NY, and NJ. During their childhoods, 11 participants reported being affiliated with Conservative synagogues, 10 with Reform synagogues, while 1 participant was affiliated with Modern Orthodox, 1 with Orthodox, and 1 with Reform and Conservative synagogues. Current affiliation with synagogues was varied with 7 participants reporting not being affiliated, 1 affiliated with a Havurah, 1 with a Havurah and Reconstructionist congregation, while 17 participants were affiliated with Reform, 2 with Conservative, and 3 with Reconstructionist synagogues. About half of the participants attended synagogue 1–3 times a month, for events, and for the high holidays.

5. Contacts in two communities in these areas helped me recruit participants. I also posted announcements on LGBTQ community list serves in PA, NJ, and NY and through J-BAGL (a Jewish gay, lesbian, and bisexual association) in PA in addition to attending events in local communities (e.g., public lectures) to recruit participants and gain access and trust. Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, central NJ, and New York City offer an urban population, whereas central PA has proportionally few Jewish individuals. The New York area has many Jewish and openly gay individuals. Non-student populations were sought through a purposive snowball sampling procedure (Patton, 2001).