

Rumor and Relation

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Forms of knowledge create and reinforce relationships. This knowledge and thus relationships themselves depend on the quality of the relationship and understanding. Lorraine Code's essay gives us a way to examine this in some detail and I can only add my agreement and some examples of how narratives and particularity can complexly interact. I begin a bit cautiously, knowing that I am telling a narrative that comes from someone else's experience. A friend of mine would get together with her family every holiday after their father died and left them without the relative comfort they had lived in. They would quiz one another on the details of their lives before that incident. Where was the can for the drippings kept? What color was the dishcloth that hung from the refrigerator door handle? The answers did not always readily come but the ritual of checking to see if they had had such a life before and coming to understand the difference of their life "after" had the effect of bringing together three people who had had their lives and relationships with one another disrupted. They didn't so much quiz one another on the circumstances around the father's sudden death, and that difficult knowledge framed the comforts they took with testing their memories of easier details. But even using this particular detail to bring a narrative into less mundane issues is part of the difficulty of starting relationships or maintaining them via narrative.

As she stresses the ecological aspects of knowing, Code examines the tensions created by bringing particularities into epistemology and ethics — avoiding the potential for particularity to devolve into individualism but also making sure that the differences in relational encounters do not go missing in the attempt to know and relate well. In other work, as in this essay, she also ably demonstrates the degree to which not-knowing or intransigence structures encounters with difference. Noting that attention to particularity highlights the "the stark invisibility/inaudibility" but also that too close attention to particularity might entail "scattered dissolutions," Code argues that a second person way of knowing might overcome some of these tensions and impasses and that narratives shared with a sense of common purpose, not ones that extort or demand or objectify, are a way into better relations. Sensitive to "the politics of testimony, of asymmetrical social, epistemic positionings of speaker and hearer," Code's attention to the ecology of these forms of knowledge and relation brings time and space into how we think through these relations.

Particularity and attempts to understand difference through narrative are strategies crucial to maintaining relations of difference. In my own work I approach understandings of queer youth knowing full well that their age, experiences, definitions, and so on are all quite significantly different from mine. And as Patti Lather points out, we all make mistakes.¹ Some misunderstandings come in the very act of trying to relate, in essentially hailing students — "hey you, queer kid" — as potentially interested in a project about queer youth and trying to forge an

intergenerational sense of queer identity in a context that has really largely provided them with either a distanced historical relationship with other generations or a potentially paternalistic mentoring relationship defined through social work professionals.² So the potential for misrecognition about what would constitute a relationship is a problem here, as it is in any attempt to create, negotiate, and sustain relationships. I see the problems with first and third person but fear the potential for misrecognition in a move to second person. I would like to hear more about it and it may, of course, turn out that my worries are already taken care of in the way the second person is defined — one assumes all people in the relationship are talking together, not that one person is hailing or describing others. But, the attempt to understand and act as if in relation can be part of the problem, if the assumption on the part of the one speaking or acting is that they know enough about their relations with others to be confident they are already thinking and acting as if in a relationship.

In pedagogy and research we do forge relationships in the sense that the teacher or researcher thinks they are in relationship; but that institutional power structures already frame the way we know our students or our research subjects — even if we try to have them be research collaborators. We work through the hope that we are thinking in relation but we are often wrong about our students and wrong about our research subjects — and they too are wrong about us. Thus we are forging relationships in the sense of counterfeiting closeness. To overcome these potential errors in understanding requires a fair bit of checking on things that are really quite difficult to check on — I cannot trust my suspicions of student posturing or exaggerating and they cannot trust my hopes for what the research will do for teacher educators or other queer and ally youth. Those issues may go beyond the time and place of our interactions and so there is no way to confirm our ideas. Our relationships are often not sustained outside of particular times and spaces so what constitutes knowledge during a particular relationship may shift into the sort of nostalgia to which my friend's family returned.

Sometimes the ways we come to know one another are strategically situated outside of more permanent or recognizable ways of knowing. The very registers in which we speak to one another work against thinking about what we say as official versions of what happened to them, how they would like to represent that to me, and how I might represent that as research. They invite me into their confidence by telling stories or suggesting intriguing possibilities about their relationships with one another or speculation about other students, in a way frustratingly when the tape recorder is turned off — so what they say is literally “inaudible,” when particular parts of research protocols are set aside and when they clearly want to make a connection on their own terms, not on terms I or the Institutional Review Board set out to ensure ethical research practices.

So shifting to speculation and rumor interrupts the tiresome conventions of telling the truth about school life or reciting a formulaic coming out story — even if they are telling their coming out story to someone who may have also, quite tiresomely, volunteered her own. I do think the shift to rumor is meant as an

acknowledgment of the possibility of intergenerational knowing in queer cultures, that the students are in a way denying or obstructing official research across age categories and instead resetting the ground of knowing by categories that do have salience for all of us, even if I do not perhaps usually gossip with high school aged youth, except for family members. But as much as this kind of interaction may help to create relationships, it does not translate into research — it may be a process whereby we bond but the institutional context we both inhabit means that it is not an official communication. This sort of interaction is flirting with research, moving into interest about official knowledge but also maintaining a distance from the kind of vaguely validated information of particular interview protocols. In a way, we all defer judgment on how we relate or what we say by shifting to these informal ways of talking and relating. But what the students are also doing, and what so much of queer theory is interested in as well, is knowing and relating while maintaining unintelligibility, that is, not making intelligibility part of the prerequisites for justice, instead acknowledging alterity is not always something to be worked beyond but also recognizing the ways that people do want to be recognized in some way, however tentative, based in intrigue with possibilities. I am interested in how this flirtation with research and knowledge may help to foster relationship, but I am still concerned about how to judge and how to avoid misrecognition, knowing full well that misrecognition is strongly linked to unintelligibility and alterity. Even understanding that particularity of the youth with whom I work may push beyond categories and forms of knowledge that I can negotiate, I can only try to avoid mistakes with the inevitable translation that I will do. Collaborative writing seemed a good idea but numerous students have pointed out that writing is first of all, what they do for credit in school, so enough of that, and second of all, it is what I do for a living, so I should be the one doing it. We are not going to get over my problem with misrecognition by having them do more work, they say. What a researcher sees as egalitarian, then, research collaborators see as shifting too much responsibility onto them. By trying to overcome institutional barriers, one can miss the other structuring features of the interaction. I do not show this “tentativeness” and “temerity” in order to have someone suggest that I give the kids cameras or have them keep journals — these are not issues solved by technique, they remain philosophical and methodological quandaries that point to the limits of knowing in relation.

Code keeps the impossibility of fully knowing another a part of this ecological relationship, something I see as related to what Tim Dean calls “intimacy” without “subjectivity.”³ Dean’s work pushes against conventions of assuming that knowledge about others structures intimacy and so provides a model of relationality that decenters the kind of certainty about subjectivity that we are problematizing here: intimacy comes in acts that need not require a deep understanding of background information about particular people and their subjectivity, intimacy may emerge through acts and relationships. If we are too bound up in needing to “know the whole story” that we think might define the people with whom we engage, we potentially attempt mastery of who they are at the expense of actually having the chance of

becoming connected to them. Narratives are one way in, but they are limited. Getting caught in the structure of narrative, itself potentially a formalized engagement where one might know the subject, presume to follow the trajectory, and impose a conclusion if one were to assume that narratives have purpose and closure — characterizes “an entrenched imaginary.” Given that we live immersed in narrative conventions that do suggest mastery, any shift to talking about narratives that installs these conventions implicitly structures how we read our engagement with others.

As we caution against attempting mastery in our knowledge of particularity, we also need to be cautious about the possibility for laziness and lack of interest in relational knowledge. This might require avoiding the problems of cultural competency, where a concretized version of cultural background, artificially stalled and out of relation with others, becomes an object of knowledge that brings false mastery back into the relation. If we do take seriously how the relationship itself is a kind of knowing, then who we were going in will change — as all subjectivities change moving through time and space, we all either find ways to keep up or move on.

1. Patti Lather, *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double(d) Science* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

2. Kim Hackford-Peer, “Mentoring the Imagination: LGBTQ Youth Engaging in Mentoring Often in the Absence of Mentors” (PhD diss., University of Utah, in progress).

3. Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).