Handbook of Autoethnography

Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, Carolyn Ellis

Revisiting “Bobcat” on the Eve of My 25-Year High School Reunion

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Ragan Fox
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On more than one occasion, a student has revealed that they spotted me on campus and unsuccessfully tried to make eye contact and greet me. How can I explain in a casual conversation before class that they witnessed the aftershocks of sustained anti-gay bullying I experienced in high school? At Cy-Fair High School, my eyes locking with another boy’s might result in a punch to the chest. “What are you looking at, faggot?” Moving from class to class felt like maneuvering through an obstacle course. I’d tell myself, “Keep your head down. Walk fast. Avoid jocks. Do not make eye contact.” The repetition of that dance defines my movement today, as I trek from class to class at California State University, Long Beach.

I wrote “Tales of a Fighting Bobcat” a decade ago, although I first got the idea for the project in 1999 after reading Susanna Kaysen’s (1994) memoir Girl, Interrupted. Kaysen narrates her 1967 stay at a psychiatric hospital. The book juxtaposes her recollection of events against official documentation from the institution. Kaysen includes artifacts like her official discharge records, typed diagnosis, letters from her psychiatrist, and medical chart. Kaysen’s personal account complicates the psychiatric narrative foisted upon her by doctors convinced that her femininity is symptomatic of so-called borderline personality disorder. After reading the autobiography, I called my stepmother Joyce, who was primarily responsible for collecting and storing my childhood memorabilia. I described Kaysen’s work and told Joyce I wanted to use the relics she saved to write a story about homophobia I encountered in Texas schools. “Bobcat’s” seed was planted that summer, but I did not yet have the professional expertise to see it blossom.

Four years later, I walked into Tom Nakayama’s graduate seminar covering the works of French philosopher Michel Foucault. Foucault and Kaysen are kindred spirits. Both attempted suicide and used writing to challenge the grammars of psychiatric discourses. Both authors question how medical professionals objectify marginalized people to assert their own mastery/superiority. Similar to Kaysen, Foucault unearths and showcases ephemera in History of Madness. He questions psychiatry’s master narrative by revealing the discipline’s lost artifacts, like an anonymous brochure from L’Hôpital Général, a list of daily rules in the House of Saint-Louis de la Salpêtrière and inventories of “mad” men and women in Paris. Once-forgotten artifacts enable Foucault to tell untold stories about the culture from which they came. I left Tom’s class with the scholarly tools I needed to share the unstoried tale of my madness/homosexuality in the context of Cy-Fair High School.

TALES OF A FIGHTING BOBCAT

Being there: September 10, 1990

I sit across from Mrs. Pryor, my ninth-grade guidance counselor and try to explain why I want to be moved into a new English class. Her thin, red lips force a smile that spans the lower half of her chubby, pink face. She listens to me complain about problems I endure in my fifth-period class.

“Other students call me names and throw stuff at me. The other day, Marc Gonzales called me ‘faggot’ and punched me three times,” I screech.

“Ragan, I’m not going to change your schedule. We can always call bullies into the assistant principal’s office and have a group meeting with them.”

“Having me confront them will only make the situation worse. Please help me!”

I hang my head low as I leave Mrs. Pryor’s office. I need an advocate, a person who empathizes with my struggle. Mrs. Pryor does not seem to understand that I endure something categorically different than...
run-of-the-mill bullying. My peers target me because they think I am gay. How will I survive four years at Cy-Fair High School, “home of the fighting bobcat”? First, I have to make it through fifth-period English and the terrible halls of screams, scowls, and punches that lead me there.

**Being Here**

I wish students at my high school had a gay mentor. Chauncey (2000) argues that gay teachers positively change how students interact with and conceive of lesbian and gay people. Gay teachers challenge the unfounded and unfortunate myth that gay people seek to seduce children. Their presence transforms the “social imaginary of gay teacher as child molester into gay teacher as cultural worker” (Pryor, 2006, p. 69). Openly gay teachers and administrators were, unfortunately, nowhere to be found at Cy-Fair High School.

Gay autoethnographers are uniquely positioned to critically interrogate how educational systems constrain and enable young gay identities. Artifacts from high school may be used to enrich autoethnographic reflections. Educational artifacts are “sites/sights of identity negotiation. They are sites of both my learning and my learning to teach” (Brogden, 2008, p. 855). I am fortunate enough to have “packrats” for parents. My father and stepmother collected many significant documents from my childhood and stored them in large Rubbermaid containers. After my father died and my stepmother mailed me the files, I spent days sorting through old report cards, disciplinary write-ups, and high school photos. These artifacts help me perform a mode of autoethnography I describe as “auto-archaeology.”

**THE ROLE OF ARTIFACTS IN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY**

I characterize this form of autoethnography as “auto-archaeology” for two reasons. First, the term “archaeology” is a citational reference to Michel Foucault’s critical studies of disciplinary structures. For Foucault (1994), “archaeologies” explain the principles of ordering and exclusion in discursive systems. Archaeologies also demonstrate how institutions constrain and enable identity by way of communication networks (Foucault, 1994, p. 218). Power at the “home of the fighting bobcat” is not fixed but pulses through various institutional arteries. For example, high schools, like Cy-Fair, subject organizational members to a “hidden curriculum” (Lee & Gropper, 1974), or heterosexist agenda, that ignores gay themes in history, encourages teachers and administrators to ignore bullying of LGBTQ students (Douglas, Warwick, Kemp, & Whitty, 1997), and forces LGBTQ educators to remain in the sexual “closet” (Atkinson, 2002). Many gay-identified teachers “fail to advocate for gay and questioning youth because they fear showing support for these students places their jobs in jeopardy” (Mayo, 2008, p. 1).

Second, archaeological metaphors foreground the role that artifacts play in helping researchers interpret cultural practices. The “sociotechnic artifacts” (Kipfer, 2007, p. 18) that I display and discuss in this chapter act as synecdochical traces that represent more wide-scale cultural attitudes about gay people. Some of the artifacts that I rediscovered in my father’s Rubbermaid boxes also reveal how, in moments of improvisation and ingenuity, I responded to and resisted the school’s grammars of compulsory heterosexuality. I, therefore, question how the presence of my gay body affected a specific “network of power relations” (Foucault, 1978, p. 95): Cy-Fair High School.

In the following sections, I report the findings of my “auto-archaeology.” I first reveal some of the ways in which my young, gay body was disciplined at Cy-Fair. I then focus on artifacts that exhibit the interventionist role gay students may play in high school.

**A BLUEPRINT OF HOMOPHOBIA**

Several of the artifacts that I rediscovered in the Rubbermaid boxes document how my gay body was disciplined at Cy-Fair. “Discipline” implies that bodies are made docile by specific structures that coerce and supervise individuals. Cy-Fair High School constitutes an “enclosure” or a “protected place of disciplinary monotomy” (Foucault, 1977, p. 141). Artifacts from the institution paint a picture of the school’s disciplinary structures, both official and unofficial.

Additionally, Cy-Fair, like most educational settings, is a learning environment that comprised multiple disciplines. Disciplines provide students and educators with a sense of place and purpose. Fields of academic activity also aid in an individual’s identity construction and maintenance. Disciplinary affiliation is as embodied as it is ideological. If, for example, administrators establish policies that give student athletes broader access to gyms and weight rooms, one might rightfully expect them to develop more muscle mass. Disciplines also produce “ideological bodies” that provide a “generative conceptual metaphor for critiquing how schools reproduce gender, ethnic, and
economic injustice by schooling bodies” (Pineau, 2002, p. 42).

The first disciplinary artifact that I analyze is a map of Cy-Fair. The map pictorially represents how individual bodies in the school are partitioned. “Partitioning” describes divisions and distributions of disciplinary space. “Each individual has his own place;” Foucault (1977) argues, “and each place its individual” (p. 143). Using personal narrative, I interpret my tactical maneuvering through the school’s architecture as an embodied response to institutionalized homophobia.

**Being There: January 14, 1991**

Navigating the halls of Cy-Fair is no simple task for a gay bobcat. At the start of each semester, I map out intricate paths to get me from class to class. Some routes are littered with spitballs, shoves, and screams of “Queer!” and “Fairy!” Other roads are quiet, even friendly. To get from second-period science to third-period debate, I avoid the large, pillar-laden hallway that cuts through the center of the school. Fewer students walk outside and take the south corridor to move from the southwest end of campus to the center of the school. The path takes longer to traverse, but I feel safer walking this route. Each semester, I utilize a calculus to determine the desirability of individual paths from one class to the next. Homophobia divided by time and distance.

I am particularly frightened by the northern sector of the school. The north end of Cy-Fair is home to gymnasiuems, weight rooms, tennis courts, the stadium, metal and wood shops, the farming and agriculture departments, and parking for student athletes (see Figure 36.1). The school’s northern sector represents a paradox for me, a young, gay bobcat. Hallways in this section of the school are filled, pectoral-to-abdominal, with boys featured in my daydreams and sexual fantasies, boys who call me horrible names. I want to lick lips that spit the word “Faggot!” The salty scent of sweaty boys lingers in the air, coaxing me to enter the northern quadrant of Cy-Fair, to validate the impulses of my body; but the threat of clenched fists and gay jokes repel me. Like gay studies scholar Patrick Horrigan (1999), I live the unenviable life of a young, gay teen who is overwhelmed by my physical attraction to pretty, muscular boys who call me “faggot” (p. 13).

A few months ago, a boy in my science class hit me four times in the chest. I was initially shocked and outraged by his violation of my body. Weeks later, I sat on my bed and began to fantasize about how his bulbous biceps stretch the sleeves of his cotton shirts. I arched my chest into empty air, hoping to recapture the feel of his hand on my undeveloped pectoral muscles. I want to feel the force of his masculinity inside me, in places his fist failed to hit the last time our flesh became enmeshed. I have spent more than a few hours in Physical Science hoping he would find it in his heart to hit me again. I flinch whenever he walks into a room, because I am afraid my fantasy will become a reality. When push comes to shove, I do not want to be pushed and shoved. How do I reconcile being attracted to a boy who is mean to me? Am I attracted to this beautiful hunk of meat because he hits me? Is my desire the result of post-traumatic stress? I avoid the northern portion of the school because I am afraid of the lived experience of violence.

I have spent the last fourteen days avoiding the long, narrow, and dangerous hall that takes young bobcats from the cafeteria, past the auxiliary and performance gyms, to room 9008, the location of my sixth-period health class. Students at Cy-Fair are required to take one semester of health before they complete their sophomore year. I dread health class, in part, because it is composed of freshmen and sophomores. The boys and girls a year ahead of me are particularly cruel and homophobic.

When the bell for the sixth period rings and young men and women rush into their respective classrooms, I feel a sense of relief. I travel the halls of the school without much threat of having my head thrown into a locker. For fourteen days, I have skipped health and walked the halls of the school, like a stray. I know that I will eventually be caught. Sooner or later, I will be called into the assistant principal’s office and asked why I have not been attending health class. During bouts of truancy, I sometimes sit in a bathroom stall, smoke Marlboro Lights, and contemplate how I will answer the question. Is “frightened” a compelling excuse? I hate to admit that my peers frighten me. The confusion only bolsters the idea that I am less of a man.

Days later, one of the assistant principals calls me into his office, where I claim to have “no reason” for skipping class. I spend a week in on-campus suspension. Four weeks into the spring semester, I make my first appearance in room 9008. I sit down and am shocked when nobody in the class picks on me. Weeks go by, and nary a jock, cowboy, or sophomore says a single nasty word to me. My expectations have been defeated in the most glorious and unexpected of ways.

Cy-Fair’s overall environment of homophobia structures my projected expectations of individual classes and their respective inhabitants. Institutionalized homophobia at the school helps to govern my internal process of “narratization” (Allison, 1994),
Figure 36.1 Map of Cy-Fair High School
which, in this context, is a process whereby expected homophobia paralyzes me with fear and is used to justify foolhardy decisions, like skipping class. In other words, I pull from past homophobic experiences at the school to narrate future suffering.

I earn a 36% in the first six-week period of the class. The grade is emblematic of my own self-sabotage. The “F” also symbolizes how Cy-Fair, as a dynamic structure of relations, fails some of its gay students. Cy-Fair’s lessons in homophobia are as diverse as they are plentiful. The absence of gay themes in course materials, for instance, suggests that LGBTQ people and their concerns should remain invisible.

In health class, we watch numerous “after school specials” that theatrically depict subject matter relevant to adolescence. One film features a beautiful cheerleader named Heather, who is date raped by her hunky boyfriend. Most of the movies contain overt displays of heterosexuality, even in its most graphic and violent forms (e.g., rape). When heterosexuality is not explicitly stated, “textual essentialism” incites students to assume that “all characters in a film are straight unless labeled, coded, or otherwise proven to be queer” (Doty, 2000, p. 3). The only mention of gay people in any of Cy-Fair’s textbooks causally links gay men to the AIDS pandemic. The connection sets the groundwork for a dangerous game of “performative metaphysics,” in which homophobia is reinforced by discourses that assume gay men are HIV+ and responsible for the spread of HIV and AIDS (Fox, 2007, p. 9). Including favorable gay themes might help LGBTQ students feel less isolated, challenge scary and stereotypical images of gay and lesbian people, and “send a message to straight students about the school’s stance on homophobic and sexist teasing” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 172).

Exclusive teachings of heterosexuality leave me hungry to learn about the complex dynamics of my sexuality. How do gay men have sex? How do lesbians? Given so many of my peers’ intent and relentless focus on my perceived sexuality, I know that other students at Cy-Fair have an appetite for the same knowledge. Interest in LGBTQ people cannot be contained by absent themes in curriculum and “closeted” educators and administrators. Taboo treatments of “homosexuality” only spark the curiosity of Cy-Fair’s student population. Silence spark. Absence spark. When I walk to room 9008, I feel burned by the ember of a million flickering neurons.

“Faggot!” Spark.
“Wanna’ suck my dick, gay boy?” Spark.
“Hey, flamer!” Spark.

Foucault (1978) speaks to the paradoxical phenomenon of sexual repression, arguing that, “What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret” (p. 35). Nobody escapes the failed mechanics of repressed non-normative sexuality.

Most teachers at Cy-Fair seemed to think that I was the cause of my bullying. School officials urged me to cut my hair, “tone down” my feminine mannerisms, and do my best to “blend in” with the crowd. When gay students tell school officials about bullying, they are routinely asked to change their behavior, style of dress, and way of being. This systemic response to homophobia and bullying shifts the blame of physical and mental abuse onto the object of suffering. The communicative and performative act suggests that LGBTQ youth do not have a right to be safe at school. These reactions to homophobia may also explain why education experts argue that many “gay, lesbian, and bisexual students hesitate to seek support from school professionals” (Elze, 2003, p. 227).

Lucky for me, I was a resourceful, creative kid, who was determined to celebrate my individual identity and fit in with the bobcat “pack.” The following section of my auto-archaeology chronicles the last two years that I spent at Cy-Fair. I rely on artifacts of affirmation to “flesh out” the performance-related survival strategies I utilized to earn the respect of my peers, teachers, and administrators and eventually graduate from the institution.

ARTIFACTS OF AFFIRMATION

By my senior year, I won leads in several of the theatre department’s productions and served as the captain of the speech and debate team. Morning announcements at the school regularly featured my name. A rotating list of Cy-Fair’s assistant principals announced when I qualified for state in a speech event. They also read my name when we advanced in one-act play competitions. The more involved I became in extracurricular activities, the less I was bullied. I remember overhearing one of my peers say to a friend, “Did you see Ragan in Into the Woods? He may be gay, but he sure is funny.”

Figures 36.2 and 36.3 attest to my scholastic improvement. Figure 36.2 is a copy of my ninth-grade report card. The document includes several failing grades and inconsistent evaluations of my conduct, ranging from “unsatisfactory” and “improvement needed” to “occasional infraction” and “excellent.” My senior year report card (Figure 36.3) features exceptional grades and a unanimous endorsement...
of my superb conduct. The significant improvement I made is largely due to my involvement in theatre, speech, and debate. I never discussed my sexual inclinations with any of the teachers who oversaw me in speech and drama classes, but I suspect my performance teachers were more adequately prepared to interpret and respond to my young, gay identity.

Like many gay teens, I embedded myself in the homosocial space of theatre, because it was a “safe space” where I could explore identity-related possibilities. Nobody batted an eye when I dressed in drag for a cabaret performance. At speech competitions, I performed monologues from Torch Song Trilogy, and even advanced to the final round of dramatic interpretation portraying Jean Brodie from The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie! Performance environments affirmed and cultivated my identity. Like my friend and mentor Frederick Corey (1998), “My fascination with the theatre was a search for identity. I used the theatre as I explored the question any teen might ask—Who am I?” (p. 249). Nearly twenty years later, my heart breaks for gay teens who do not find a safe space in high school, especially when they attend institutions that castigate LGBTQ students for having the audacity to be.
Being There: September 22, 1993

Today, students nominate people for homecoming king and queen. Six of us contemplate why we should participate in the futile task of nominations. “The same sort of people get nominated every year,” I complain. “Jennifer Brumfield’s parents had ‘Homecoming Court, 1993’ tattooed on her ass the day she was born.” The six of us roll our eyes and giggle.

“Wouldn’t it be cool if some of the theatre and speech people could be nominees,” my best friend Bradley asks.

The question sparks a fire in all our eyes. Sitting on the wooden stage of the school’s theatre, we concoct a plan to poach two homecoming court seats.

“We’ll get all the theatre, speech, and debate people to nominate Ragan,” my friend Cori proposes. Cori’s request is one of performative disruption. Cy-Fair’s flaming queen could be king for a day! “I’m in,” I exclaim.

Two weeks later, Ms. Christian’s Texas twang booms from the school’s speakers. After proclaiming that chicken-fried steak will be the main course at the lunch line, Ms. Christian cheerfully says, “We’d like to take a minute to congratulate members of the 1993 homecoming court. Boy nominees include Josh Davis, Dana Decoster, Clint Feese, Ragan Fox, Mike Miller, and Ryan Knight” (see Figure 36.4).

My friends and I disrupt chains of iteration that place normative performances of gender and...
sexuality at the center of the school. Individual pictures of homecoming court members sit at the center of the school bulletin board; nominees sit center stage at the homecoming pep rally; we will be ushered onto the center of the football field during halftime. I realize that several people at Cy-Fair interpret the theatre nominations as a joke, but many others enjoy how we have thrown a cog into the school’s performative machine. My nomination functions as “antirhetoric,” that is, a rhetoric that always simultaneously promotes and disavows itself—renouncing its intent even as it amuses audiences and advances agendas” (Gilbert, 2004, p. 12). My nomination disrupts the school’s repetitive display of heterosexuality. My presence on a homecoming float alters the significance of Cy-Fair, both as a public place and as an institution of education. Placing my gay body at the center of a celebration of the school’s ethos is, in itself, an educational, performative act.

Being Here

On the night of homecoming, Jodie Smith, the school principal, placed the king’s crown on Ryan Knight’s head. My bid for homecoming king proved unsuccessful by conventional standards; but, as Schriner and Nudd remind performer-activists, intervention productivity defies the simple logic of a “success”/“failure” dyad. Intervention success is better measured by a continuum that “moves from a simple awareness that some type of disruption has occurred to effective media coverage to a fundamental change in current policy” (Schriner and Nudd, 2002, p. 203). I am confident that my homecoming court disruption incited people at Cy-Fair to think about the performative ramifications of who and what the school celebrates in its ceremonies. In the spring of 1994, my peers named me “Most Unique” at prom. The distinction was, for me, a symbol of affirmation and appreciation. What a long, rewarding journey I had at Cy-Fair!

Even in the darkest, most homophobic corners of Texas, light emerges for gay teens and men and women who are perceived to be gay. Performance may empower students who endure experiences similar to the ones I review in this chapter. Because they are not employees and their time in high school is limited, many gay students are uniquely positioned to challenge heterosexism. By engaging in playful, performative acts, brave LGBTQ students may alter the significance of their high schools. Diana Fisher (2003) connects tactical moments of gay performance to transformation of place, when she explains that:

Here, space is created, used, and customized by active “poachers” who remake it to be what they need at any given moment and according to each situation. Inhabited by those who have no “place,” space is an opportunistic site filled with tactical movements that can subvert and divert the dominant [social] order.

Bobcat Fight Never Dies (p. 182)

Every school in the Cypress Fairbanks Independent School District has an official slogan. Cy-Fair’s catchphrase is “Bobcat fight never dies.” Fifteen years after graduating from the institution, I see truth in its motto. High school students internalize the disciplinary structures of their respective institutions. My experiences at Cy-Fair shape how I perceive and interpret my identity, heterosexual people, and communication between gay and straight individuals. Discourses that I learned at the “home of the fighting bobcat” continue to live through the repetition of my communicative acts.

Reflecting on my experiences as a Cy-Fair student and college professor, I propose two ways that schools may address institutionalized homophobia. First, school officials should revoke policies, both explicitly stated and implied, that punish LGBTQ faculty and administrators for disclosing their sexual identities. If administration and faculty promote LGBTQ visibility and mentoring, high schools might become safer environments for gay people and others who are perceived to be gay.

Second, steps should be taken to include gay themes in course content. Making room for LGBTQ-inclusive curricula requires rethinking the current constitution of literary, historical, and scientific canons. LGBTQ history, for example, is regularly treated as knowledge that is unique and only relevant to lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and transgendered people. Gay history is not the exclusive purview of LGBTQ people.

Increased acceptance of homosexual people in the 1920s, the Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement, the Stonewall riots of 1969, Harvey Milk, ACT UP protests of the 1980s and 1990s, and the struggle for marriage equality are events and people significant to world and U.S. history. Absence of gay-affirmative work suggests that its presence might contaminate children. This logic ignores the vast “scope of institutions whose programmatic undertaking is to prevent the development of gay people” (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 42). As a result, high schools are “structured by an implicit, trans-individual Western project or fantasy of eradicating [gay] identity” (p. 41). Absence of LGBTQ themes in high school curricula erases
positive contributions of LGBTQ people and, by extension, suggests that gay high school students, faculty, and administrators should remain unseen and unheard.

NOTES
1. The next sections are revised excerpts from Fox (2010).
2. To help distinguish between reconstructed moments of the past presented in situ (“being there”) and instances of scholarly reflection (“being here”), I borrow Tami Spry’s (2001) “being there”/“being here” sequencing from her essay “Performing Autoethnography.” Spry’s organization is an adaptation of Clifford Geertz’s (1988) celebrated distinction of “being there” and “being here.”
3. To ensure the anonymity of my peers and educators, pseudonyms have been used throughout the chapter.

REFERENCES